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Strong "Transformation" and Weak "Cooperation": An Analysis of British Policy on the Mahdi Movement in Sudan from 1900 to 1916

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After the defeat of the Mahdi Movement in Sudan in 1898, Britain and Egypt reoccupied Sudan. The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium government which was under the control of Britain did not exterminate the Mahdists after defeating them during the war. By moderating the relationship between the government and the Sudanese Muslim society, providing good detention policies, re-educating the younger generations of Mahdists, gaining support of the Mahdists through the use of the World War I, and maintaining military advantage over the Mahdists, the British practiced a variety of means to gradually change the Mahdists into a representative of Sudanese Anglophile. Britain's attitude towards the Mahdists was different from that of other Islamic groups in Sudan with a strong purpose. The British intended to cultivate the Mahdiyya into a tool for British rule in Sudan, resist the transmission of Egyptian nationalism and compete with France for African hegemony. The "transformation" policy towards Mahdists promoted economic development of Sudan, intensified Sudan's dependence on Britain, split Sudanese society, and had a negative impact on the political structure of Sudan for quite a long time after her independence. Under this circumstance, the problem of Islamic extremism in Sudan had not been solved, which restricted the development of modern Sudan.

Keywords: Britain, Sudan, Mahdi, nationalism, Sayyid Abd al-Rahman

The Mahdi Movement from 1881 to 1898 was one of the important events in modern Sudanese history. This movement not only drove out the rule of Turkey and Egypt in Sudan by establishing the Mahdi State, but also promoted the generation and development of modern Sudanese nationalism. As a religious and political movement, the Mahdi Movement fought against British colonial rule in Sudan. At the same time, the emergence of Sudanese nationalism behind the Mahdi Movement made the British realize that the Mahdi Movement would enable them to govern Sudan more effectively if they could control the Mahdists well. In 1898, Anglo-Egyptian troops raided Khartoum, and the Mahdi Movement was suppressed by force. Surviving members of the Mahdiyya were either imprisoned or exiled. In 1899, Anglo-Egyptian Condominium was founded in Sudan under de facto British control, and the remaining Mahdi faction was seen by the British as a powerful tool for governing Sudan. In an effort to restore Sudanese social order, a "transformation" of the

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Mahdi Movement, driven by British colonial interests, began, which not only helped realize the social stability and development of Sudan and maintained the British colonial rule in this country, but also affected the political situation of Sudan in the future and her destiny after her independence to a certain extent.

There are many studies on British policy towards the Mahdi Movement. Gabriel Warburg (1971) analyzed British policy towards the Mahdi Movement from the macro perspective of Anglo-Egyptian Condominium of Sudan, and O'Fahey (2008) reflected British policy towards the Mahdi Movement from its origins in Darfur. Moreover, researches relating to such a topic also appear in the writings of British colonists of the time, including Lord Cromer (1908) and Reginald Wingate (1891). In addition, archives with serial numbers of F.O.407/1-237 in the British Foreign Office Confidential Archives covers British affairs in Sudan and Egypt from 1839 to 1958. Among these archives, there is a clear record of British attitude and relevant policies towards the Mahdi Movement. All the documents above, though detailed, are inadequate in terms of changes in British policy towards the Mahdi and their impacts on Sudan. Based on researches and archives above as well as other relevant documents, this paper analyzes the measures, characteristics, and impacts of the "transformation" brought by Britain on Sudan by illustrating the situation after the failure of the Mahdi Movement and how this policy worked towards Mahdists.

From "Suppression" to "Transformation": The Change of British Attitude Towards the Mahdi Movement

After the Anglo-Egyptian joint forces captured Khartoum in September 1898, the Mahdi army was defeated and forced to flee. Khalifa Abdallahi ibn Muhammad fled Omdurman for Kordofan with about 140 emirs (Foreign Office, 1899). The Anglo-Egyptian as well as French troops tried to terminate Mahdists once and for all after Abdullahi fled. The Khalifa and Menelik II, King of Abyssinia (Ethiopia), made contact, and Menelik II offered to send troops to the White Nile to help Abdullahi against the British and French army (Foreign Office, 1899). Although the main Mahdi force was gone, Abdullahi still had a sizeable number of followers, backed by Abyssinia, fighting the Anglo-Egyptian forces in Kordofan and Darfur. The remnants of the Mahdiyya continued to grow in these areas, supporting the Khalifa in military fights.

After defeating the Mahdi army, the Anglo-Egyptian forces retaliated very hard in Khartoum where the British and Egyptian had been forced to leave because of the rise of Mahdism in 1880s. After the defeat of the Mahdi army in Khartoum, the British government believed that the war in Sudan was basically over, and British troops immediately withdrew from Sudan. Herbert Kitchener, who had distinguished himself in the campaign of Khartoum, became the first Governor-General in Sudan and commander-in-chief (Sirdar) of the Egyptian army with the task for post-war reconstruction of Sudan. Kitchener led an unsuccessful attempt in 1884 to rescue Charles George Gordon in Khartoum after the Mahdi army had besieged him. After Gordon was killed by the Mahdists in 1885, furious Kitchener vowed to avenge his death and eradicate Mahdism. When the British troops recaptured Khartoum, Kitchener destroyed the tomb of Mahdi and his men threw Mahdi's remains into the Nile (Foreign Office, 1900a).[1] At the same time, to commemorate Gordon's "achievements" in Khartoum, Kitchener set up the Gordon Memorial College, which later became the cradle for the cultivation

[1] According to Kitchener, he did order the destruction of the Mahdi tomb to remove the spiritual support of the Mahdi forces, and then left Omdurman for Fashoda. He believed the body of Mahdi's was thrown into the Nile without his knowledge, and only the Mahdi's skull was spared. Cromer also defended Kitchener, arguing that the destruction of the Mahdi's tomb and the removal of his body were motivated "on political grounds". See "Viscount Cromer to the Marquess of Salisbury", February 24, 1899 (printed in 1900), F.O.407/150, File No. 7292, No. 123, p. 70.

of British colonial puppets as well as Sudanese nationalists. Even so, Kitchener was not satisfied and pursued Abdullahi with all his efforts. But the Mahdi army proved to be resilient. Even after Abdullahi fled from Omdurman in September 1898, 6,000 Mahdi fighters led by Ahmed Fedil, one of the Khalifa’s emirs, remained in Omdurman, retreating against the Egyptian troops until December 26, 1898 at the cost of 2,000 Mahdi casualties. Fedil managed to hold off Egyptian forces and made it to Kordofan (Featherstone, 1993).

By January 1899, the defeated Mahdi forces had dispersed into Kordofan and Darfur, and Kitchener still made the elimination of the Mahdi remnants an important goal. Therefore, Kitchener asked the British government to redeploy British troops to fight the remnants of the Mahdists, on the grounds that the Egyptian army was too ill and spread out to concentrate forces in the battleground, and that if the Mahdi force was not eliminated, it would be a disaster (Foreign Office, 1900a). However, Britain did not show her sufficient interest in Sudanese affairs before her conquest. As Lord Cromer (1908) argued:

> It was not in the interests of Great Britain to add to its responsibilities, which were already world-wide, by assuming the direct government of another huge African territory…The Soudan should be regarded as Ottoman territory, and that, therefore, it should be governed, in accordance with the terms of the Imperial Firmans, by the Sultan's feudatory, the Khedive. (pp. 113-114)

Nevertheless, with Britain and France in 1898 aggravated the conflict in southern Sudan and the military confrontation in Fashoda, the British realized that the European powers had deliberately made their way into Sudan. Therefore, Britain agreed to have a joint administration of Sudan in the name of Queen of England and Egyptian Khedive. There would be two benefits for the British. One was to prevent the European powers into Sudan and threaten British interests in Upper Nile; the other was to prevent Sudan from falling into the hands of Egypt once again, which would not only stop Sudan from falling into chaos again, but also shield Sudan from the spread of Egypt’s growing nationalism (Cromer, 1908). After much deliberation, the British government decided to send more British troops to Sudan in batches, not to suppress the Mahdi forces, but to stabilize the situation in Sudan and promote the process of joint administration of Sudan with Egypt. Soon on January 19, 1899, *the Condominium Agreement for the Administration of the Sudan* was signed in Cairo. According to the agreement, Kitchener was formally appointed Governor-General of Sudan and commander-in-chief of Anglo-Egyptian forces. With the support of the British troops, Kitchener had the strength and confidence to take on the remaining Mahdi forces again. Disregarding the British government’s consideration of the situation in Sudan, Kitchener carried out intensified suppression on the remnants of the Mahdists.

Under continuing siege by Anglo-Egyptian forces, the Mahdists were cornered and Abdullahi and his men were forced to move from mountain to mountain in Kordofan in March 1899, almost without food (David, 1988). In April, Abdullahi sent an emissary through Cairo on his way to Mecca to try to negotiate with Lord Cromer, proposing that the new Sudanese government be for the sake of the Sudanese people and asking the British to forgive the Khalifa and the Sudanese people (Foreign Office, 1900c). But the British did not respond positively. At the same time, the British government obtained the correspondence between King Menelik II and Abdullahi and gained an advantage in intelligence (Foreign Office, 1900c). The Mahdists were demoralized by continuing famine and military siege. By June, badly outgunned and running out of ammunition, the Mahdists had resorted to raids on neighboring tribes, reducing the number of troops under the Khalifa’s effective control to fewer than 3,000, some of whom were no longer willing to fight (Foreign Office, 1900c). Kitchener believed

a military victory over the Mahdi army would be achieved soon. But the Mahdiyya still posed a threat to the Anglo-Egyptian coalition. In September, the Mahdi forces, led by Arabi Dafallah, trashed Anglo-Egyptian forces and Kitchener was forced to ask for reinforcements again (Foreign Office, 1900b). By November, Anglo-Egyptian forces had the latest advance on the main force of Mahdists, while British reinforcements arrived and routed the Mahdi army in the battle of Umm Diwaikarat on 24 November, killing Abdullahi and his chief emirs. From then on, the siege and suppression of the remnants of the Mahdi forces by the Anglo-Egyptian army came to an end.

The British government took issue with Kitchener’s reckless military campaign against the remnants of the Mahdists. Lord Cromer believed that Kitchener was only fit for wars and had no idea how to govern or run a government (Warburg, 1968). During Kitchener’s tenure as Governor-General of Sudan, little recovery was achieved. More money was spent on military operations and the construction of Gordon Memorial College, resulting in slow progress in post-war reconstruction of Sudan. The campaign against the remnants of the Mahdi forces had stirred up resentment and shaken the foundations of Sudanese society. On December 18, 1899, Kitchener was removed from Khartoum for the sake of stability in Sudan. Then, on December 23, Reginald Wingate, one of Kitchener’s lieutenants, was assigned as Governor-General of Sudan and Sirdar of the Egyptian army. After Wingate took over, he put a positive attitude towards the remaining Mahdists and gradually carried out a policy of appeasement in addition to restoring the construction of Sudan in social and economic aspects. Wingate had a deep understanding of Mahdism. He had studied the importance of the concept of Mahdi in Islam and the Muslim community, and understood the status and influence of Mahdism in Sudanese society. Wingate’s book *Mahdiism and the Egyptian Sudan*, published in 1891, gives a detailed account of the origins and development of the Mahdi Movement in Sudan. The book not only rekindled the British determination to conquer Sudan, but also made the British realize that the Mahdi Movement rooted in Sudanese society was helpful for British governance of Sudanese society. Although Wingate was dismissive of the Mahdi Movement itself, describing it as “the embodiment of terror and evil” (Warburg, 2005, p. 373), the Mahdi forces were too fragmented for a full-scale military campaign to be realistic. In order to eliminate the negative influence of the Mahdism on Sudanese society, Wingate and the Condominium government of Sudan started “transforming” the Mahdists to maximize their use by the British in order to strengthen the British governance of Sudan.

British “Transformation” Policy Towards Mahdi Movement

The British policy of “Transformation” towards the Mahdi forces from 1900 to 1916 contains five aspects.

First, good relationship between the Sudanese Condominium government and Sudanese Muslim community was set to create a moderate social atmosphere.

After Wingate took over the Sudanese affairs, his core task was to complete the post-war reconstruction of Sudan, and the Condominium government of Sudan strived to create a friendly image among Sudanese people. As soon as he arrived in Khartoum, Wingate began to handle civil petitions, sometimes thousands in a year. Meanwhile, Wingate made regular annual visits to learn about people’s livelihoods and social conditions in Sudan, and made frequent contacts with local officials, tribal sheikhs, religious leaders and ordinary Sudanese, building close relationships that continued to grow after the start of World War I (Warburg, 1971). Such move was aimed at strengthening Sudanese loyalty to Britain and Condominium government. Under the control of the British, the Sudanese Condominium government changed the unfair trial system of Mahdi era and

emphasized the efficiency and fairness in a new judicial system. While reducing punishment scales, the government also paid attention to the restoration of the social reputation of the condemned people, and no matter black Sudanese or Arabs, they shared equal punishment with the same crime (Foreign Office, 1906a).[2] For Mahdi prisoners, this strategy could greatly reduce the distrust from the Sudanese society and help them better integrate into Sudanese society after their release from prisons. The government also sent special personnel to Mahdi areas to pardon local Mahdi leaders and guided the integration of Mahdists with indigenous ethnic groups (Foreign Office, 1904). In order to eliminate the misunderstanding of British policy by Mahdists, ease the contradiction between the British and Muslim community, and enable the Condominium government to gain more support, in June 1910, the Condominium government established the Board of Ulema in Sudan to provide more methods for Muslims to participate in politics with government's intension of building cooperative relationships with Muslims (Warburg, 1985). Wingate himself even befriended Sheikh Mohamed Harun, then Grand Qadi (Foreign Office, 1906a). In relation to Islam, Wingate believed that most Muslims in Sudan followed Mahdism at heart (Warburg, 1968). Hence, the government put emphasis on cooperation not only with the Khatmiyya Sufis, but also with Sayyid Abd al-Rahman, the Mahdi's own surviving son, so as to secure the support of other Mahdi prisoners, mainly emirs. Thus, during Wingate's tenure, the Sudanese government maintained good relations with Sayyid 'Ali al-Mirghani, the religious leader of the Khatmiyya while treating Sayyid Rahman as a central figure in uniting old Mahdi aristocracy as well as Mahdi leaders to reform the values of Mahdism and strengthen Sudanese partnership with Great Britain (Warburg, 1978).

Second, the government provides relatively good detention conditions and asylum policies.

After the crackdown of Mahdi State, tens of thousands of Mahdists, including many emirs, were imprisoned in various parts of Egypt and Sudan. For those the Condominium government considered minor crimes, the government would release them after a period of imprisonment, and some were allowed to settle back on their land, while some even had jobs inside the government. In the case of more serious crimes, the government kept them in detention to prevent them from being hurt by their enemies and to encourage them to repent, which helped to prevent the resurgence of the Mahdi Movement (Ibrahim, 1974). At the same time, the government provided Mahdi prisoners with better conditions. In December 1900, the Sudanese government invested 10,000 Egyptian pounds to establish the Administration of Prisons, which was responsible for the management of prisons throughout Sudan. Prisons for Mahdi prisoners in Sudan were spotty, but the government struggled to keep them running. According to Wingate's report to Lord Cromer in 1902, places such as Dongola, Wad Medani and Suakin had high conditions in terms of cell conditions and management (Foreign Office, 1904). In better prisons, Mahdi prisoners were given better rations, an extra blanket to keep warm in cold weather, and their cells were repaired; couples living in separate cells could share a room from 4:30 p.m. until sunrise; in the event of the birth of a child, both parents would receive a blanket and a subsistence allowance of 50 Piastre. There were clinics in prisons staffed with doctors who could treat Mahdi prisoners, and serious cases were sometimes sent to hospitals in Cairo or Alexandria for free treatment; prisoners can also exchange letters with relatives at the government's expense (Ibrahim, 1974).

[2] Under the Mahdi regime, Shari'a was strictly enforced and punishments were harsh. In the case of theft, the right hand would be cut off for the first offense and the left foot for the second. By contrast, criminal laws introduced after the British took over Sudan carried a maximum penalty of three years in prison for theft with warning and fines in most cases. See "The Earl of Cromer to the Marquess of Lansdowne (24. Justice)", March 15, 1905 (printed in 1906), F.O.407/164, File No. 8675, No. 83, p. 188.

Third, the Condominium government carried out re-education programs for the descendants of Mahdi leaders.

The British government, while appeasing the older generations of Mahdi figures, was also committed to training their descendants to become talents needed by the British, so that they could be away from the influence of the purely religious movement of Mahdism. After the failure of the Mahdi Movement in 1898, young descendants of the Mahdi emirs, including Sayyid Rahman, were sent to Egypt for education. They mainly learned agricultural cultivation, field work, basic veterinary medicine, Arabic and arithmetic. Their teachers would regularly submit reports to the government of Sudan on the condition of these children, and their accommodation, education, medical care and transportation were covered by the government; they were also permitted to visit their relatives in Egyptian prisons during holidays (Ibrahim, 1974). But on seeing the influence of growing Egyptian nationalism, most of the Mahdi leaders’ descendants were gradually sent back to Sudan around 1908, with government funding to continue their studies at schools in Omdurman, especially Gordon Memorial College. By the outbreak of World War I in 1914, these children had largely completed their education and were incorporated into Sudanese government posts one after another. Ten descendants were employed in the Sudanese Ministry of Agriculture in 1913 alone, and others in different government ministries (Ibrahim, 1974). Some among them later became the backbone of the Sudanese nationalist movements.

Fourth, Britain used war to win over Mahdists.

After the outbreak of World War I, in order to carry out her plan to dismember the Ottoman Empire, Britain not only launched an uprising against the Ottoman Empire in the Arabian Peninsula with Hussein family, but also kept drawing and using Mahdists in Sudan to participate in such a course. Therefore, Sayyid Rahman suddenly became Britain’s most favorable partner from the Sudanese Muslim community. That the British chose Mahdists and Ansar led by Rahman was mainly due to Mahdists’ strong political will compared with other Sufi orders in Sudan; and Ansar, which detested the Turko-Egyptian rule in Sudan in the 19th century, had long been a strong political demand fighting against Turkey (Warburg, 1985). From 1914 until the outbreak of the Sudanese nationalists uprising in 1924, there was a close partnership between Mahdists and the British. In fact, as early as in 1908 after the Ottoman regime was overthrown, the Young Turks, Turkey’s new nationalism force, came to power, causing the British to worry about Egypt and the Sudan within the scope of the Ottoman Empire would be affected (Foreign Office, 1909). The British government began to set good relations with Sudanese religious groups, especially the Mahdists. This is to establish loyalty of Mahdists to the British government in order to counterbalance the emergence of Sudanese nationalism. As a sign of further forgiveness and understanding for the Mahdi Movement, a number of Mahdi prisoners held at Wadi Halfa and Port Sudan were released by the Sudanese government during the visit of King George V in Sudan in 1912, and by 1916, most of the Mahdi emirs had been released (Ibrahim, 1974). The Mahdists became a Sudanese political group that firmly supported the British during World War I.

Finally, Britain kept necessary military deterrence against the Mahdists.

Although the British government was sufficiently tolerant of the Mahdists, there was no fundamental change in British attitudes towards Mahdism and necessary deterrence was kept. The British believed that, if left unchecked, the Mahdism could wreak havoc in Sudan. Lord Cromer (1908) argued that terrible results ensued from Dervish (Mahdists) misrule: “About 3.5 million were swept away by famine and by disease, notably by small-pox, and that 3.25 million were killed either in the engagements with the British and Egyptian troops, or in inter-tribal wars” (p. 545). The British maintained strong vigilance and control over the Mahdists

after the Battle of Khartoum in 1898, resulting in continued Mahdi rebellions during the “transformation” process. In 1900, ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Karim, a distant cousin of the Mahdi himself, founded a new religious group claiming the prophet Nabi ‘Isa had arrived, reappearing as a variant of the Mahdi Movement against the British rule (Ibrahim, 1979). In the years that followed, there were sporadic but small Mahdi uprisings across Sudan crushed by British and Egyptian forces with some leaders executed. Wingate at one time thought the Mahdism was no longer a threat. But some Mahdi followers continued to resent the British. Another Mahdi uprising led by Wad Habuba broke out in Katfia, Blue Nile province, in April-May 1908. This uprising was larger than the previous ones and attracted the attention of the British. The Commander of Blue Nile Province asked Khartoum for help. Wingate was forced to send reinforcements from Khartoum to suppress the uprising, and sent additional troops to stay in Blue Nile province in case of more rebellions after successfully suppressing this uprising (Foreign Office, 1909). It was a reminder to the British that the Mahdists could not be tamed easily. As Wingate recalled:

> The Mahdi died, or, as many in the Soudan believe, was translated in the zenith of his power and fame, and the iniquities and subsequent fall of his Khalifa by no means impaired the belief of many of his followers in his divine mission… Recent events have conclusively proved that Mahdism, dazed and stunned in 1898, is slowly recovering from the shock and becoming a very real and present danger to the peace and security of the Soudan. (Foreign Office, 1908, p. 5)

After 1908, the Mahdi Movement fell into a low tide again, but Britain kept its military superiority and deterrence to the Mahdists. While carrying out moderate means, Britain took violence as a guarantee to minimize the resistance of the Mahdists.

Characteristics of the British “Transformation” Policy Towards the Mahdi Movement

As one of the important ways to stabilize the situation in Sudan, the British “transformation” method against the Mahdists has distinct characteristics.

First, Britain treated the Mahdists differently from other Sudanese Islamic groups.

The British-controlled Sudanese government, while carrying out moderate religious policies, treated the Mahdists differently from other religious groups. On September 29, 1900, Wingate appointed his right-hand man, Rudolf Carl von Slatin, as prosecutor-general in charge of the implementation of Sudanese affairs. One of Sladin’s prior tasks was to deal with religion issue in Sudan. Slatin had served as governor of Darfur, and was captured for 12 years by the Mahdists in 1882 in a siege. He had profound experience of the Islamic religious movement in Sudan, especially the Mahdi Movement, and had a deep resentment towards Islamic religious activities. Thus, on October 10, 1900, Slatin banned Muslim free preachment in Sudan, and then controlled orthodox Islamic activities in Sudan by controlling the Board of Ulema, installing some Muslim leaders as cronies, appointing Qadis, and denying the status of the Khatmiyya in Sudan (Warburg, 1971). Some Muslim preaching activities were swiftly suppressed by military and police, as Slatin believed that “this was by no means the execution of a well-prepared plan of a religious leader, but simply the unpremeditated action of a lunatic” (Foreign Office, 1906a, p. 173). Slatin, by contrast, was cautious about the Mahdi Movement. He had spent time with the Mahdists during his captivity and was familiar with the Mahdi Movement. Slatin (1896) believed that the Mahdism, whose roots were deep in the religious fervor that linked different tribes, was embedded in Sudanese minds and would not disappear any time soon even if the Mahdi State had disappeared. While limiting the influence of Mahdism in Sudan, the Condominium government of Sudan had to identify the

differences between Mahdists and other religious movements of Sudan, and tried not to use harsh religious policies that would cause rebellions from Mahdi followers. It would be essential to use violence under necessary circumstances only, so that the Mahdists could be taken into British control peacefully and willingly.

Second, the British “transformation” policy was designed in large part to blunt the influence of Egyptian nationalism in Sudan.

Having crushed the Egyptian national movement in 1881 and occupied Egypt afterwards, Britain was quite sensitive to the momentum of Egyptian nationalism, which needed to be contained, especially for fear of its impact on Sudan. Therefore, how to prevent the infiltration of Egyptian nationalism into Sudan had become a problem that the British had to solve when the Mahdi Movement was in full blossom in 1880s. The Mahdi Movement exerted pressure on Egyptian military and economy, which prompted Britain to tighten its control over Egypt and further triggered the growth of Egyptian nationalism. As the Mahdi Movement grew in strength in Sudan, the British considered it a sufficient military threat to Egypt. In the long run, this trend would not only lead to Egypt’s loss of Sudan and vulnerable condition on Sudanese border with Egypt, but also create a situation where the Mahdi Movement could attract some anti-British groups from Upper and Middle Egypt (Tignor, 1966). Moreover, since Egyptian debt had ballooned under Khedive Ismaili’s rule, Lord Cromer (1908) feared that losing Sudan would devastate Egypt’s economy and make it difficult to cover the costs of defending Egypt, which would far exceed the costs of running the Sudan. But faced with the Mahdists’ overwhelming momentum, Britain’s solution would be Egyptians leaving Sudan temporarily and retaking it when there were any chances in the future. In this way, Britain believed that while strengthening the military defense of Egypt, she had to undertake the task of maintaining the economic and social development of Egypt and constantly increase her actual control over Egypt, and the so-called short-term occupation would continue. This situation led Egypt to oppose the British occupation while trying to break away from Turkish rule, and actually encouraged the further development of Egyptian nationalism. After the signing of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium Agreement of the Sudan in 1899, Egypt was forced to fully assume the economic responsibility for the management of Sudan, and gradually lost her voice in the Condominium agreement. As a result, the force of nationalism grew again in 1907.

In the face of such a dilemma, the detente with the Mahdists would be good for Britain to curb the spread of Egyptian nationalism in Sudan. The Egyptian nationalist movement was closely associated with Pan-Islamism in British eyes. In Lord Cromer’s words,

> The two movements (Pan-Islamism and national movement) are merged into each other, and it is difficult to state precisely where one begins and the other ends; but I am very strongly convinced that Pan-Islamism is, for the time being, the predominant partner. (Foreign Office, 1906b, p. 4)

The growth of Egyptian nationalism, therefore, was seen by the British as a continuation of a Pan-Islamist movement that would boost the power source of the Mahdists. Although the Sudanese, long under Turko-Egyptian and Mahdists rule, had distrusted Egypt, a new generation of Sudanese reconnected with Egypt, at least religiously, after the beginning of the condominium, providing very favorable conditions for the spread of Egyptian nationalism in Sudan. This is especially true for the descendants of Mahdi leaders. If the British failed to cooperate with them, the Mahdists were highly likely to become the dominant player of Sudanese nationalism. While the Britain would bear the huge financial burden of Egypt, it would be difficult to effectively manage Sudan under the influence of nationalism.

Finally, the British “transformed” the Mahdi group as a tool to achieve an advantage over European powers, especially France, to have better control over Sudan.

The British “transformation” of the Mahdi Movement was set to meet British interest in Sudan, and ensuring the Mahdists’ “loyalty” to Britain was conducive to guaranteeing British competitiveness with European powers in Africa, especially in the Nile Valley. Behind scenes of Fashoda in 1898 was a struggle between Britain and France for hegemony in Africa. Since 1894, France had been concerned about British upcoming campaign to “recover” Sudan. Once Britain had Sudan, the French plan of colonizing across Africa would be blocked, and Britain could take advantage of the situation to expand into southern Africa. For this reason, Britain and France started several rounds of negotiations on the attribution of southern Sudan since 1895. In these negotiations, the British used the Mahdists as a tool against France. For instance, the British believed Bahr el Ghazal region in southwest Sudan belonged to the Khedive of Egypt before it was occupied by the Mahdists, and now the British had the right to recover this region; with the question of France, the British directly said Sudan should belong to the Mahdi state, and France would have the right to take over Sudan only if she could defeat the Mahdi forces (Stuart, 1921). The agreement between Britain and France was finally reached on April 8, 1904, and the British succeeded in preventing the French attempt to occupy southern Sudan. However, the British did not let down their guard against southern Sudan, and held on to Sudan with the support of the local Mahdists. As one of the first areas that were captured by the Mahdists, Bahr el Ghazal had long witnessed Mahdi activities, with many local sheikhs loyal to the Mahdists. After the collapse of the Mahdi State, the British, on the one hand, pardoned some local Mahdi leaders, and on the other hand, carried out brainwashing re-education of the Mahdists, gaining support of the Mahdists in southern Sudan. The British established an army of hundreds made up of local Sudanese in Bahr el Ghazal and, in the summer of 1904, a conscription commission was set up to recruit local tribesmen and, while building up military defenses, “get into touch with the various tribes” (Foreign Office, 1906a, p. 101). Thus, using the influence of the Mahdists in southern Sudan, Britain built an effective buffer zone to protect the core area of Sudan centered with Khartoum.

France also posed a threat to Britain in Darfur of western Sudan. Britain faced French military pressure on the western Sudan because of the long period of Anglo-French disagreement over the border between Chad and Darfur since 1899. Therefore, Britain intended to use Darfur as a buffer zone to prevent France from entering the Nile Valley. As one of the most important independent Sultanate in Sudanese history, Darfur was annexed by Egypt in 1874 and was an important base of the Mahdi Movement during the Mahdi regime. After the British captured Khartoum in 1898, Lord Cromer argued that Khartoum’s administration of Darfur would be costly, useless and inefficient (Warburg, 1971). The British helped restore the Sultanate of Darfur, led by Ali Dinar, in return for which Ali declared allegiance to the British and Sudanese Condominium government. Such a relationship between Darfur and Britain can be seen in a letter from Wingate to Ali Dinar in 1901:

> I wish to inform you that the Government is not in need for money and assistance, but as this will tend to indicate your loyalty to the Government and submission, and prove your connection with it; therefore, I wish hereby to impose upon you a tax amounting to 100 “kis” (i.e., £E. 5 each, or £E.500), which you will arrange to deliver annually. (Foreign Office, 1914, p. 200)

Although Ali Dinar opposed the Mahdi forces, the movement’s deep influence in Darfur persuaded him to accept its continued existence. The Mahdi Movement had returned to Darfur in a climate of British détente of

Mahdism. Not only did Ali’s army carry on the fighting style of Mahdi forces, he installed Mahdi figures as secretaries, restored Mahdi religious rituals as well as Mahdi mosques and stabilized the situation of Darfur (O’Fahey, 2008). British cooperation with Darfur continued until 1916, during which the British succeeded in mitigating the threat of French to the west through the influence of the Mahdism. It is noticeable that Dinar had little room to say about Anglo-French discussions on border issue, but passively received news from the British and the Sudanese government (Foreign Office, 1914).

The Impacts of the British “Transformation” Policy on the Mahdi Movement

The way Britain dealt with the Mahdi Movement not only stabilized the situation in Sudan and strengthened the British colonial rule over Sudan, but also had profound impacts on Sudan during the colonial period and even after independence of Sudan.

First of all, British “transformation” policy towards the Mahdi Movement promoted the social and economic development of Sudan.

After the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium of Sudan began, the “transformation” of the Mahdi Movement became one of the important means for the economic development of Sudan for the British. For 20 years, from 1899 to 1919, the British tried to increase Egypt’s economic responsibility to the Sudan as much as possible while minimizing Egyptian influence over Sudan. The British government had not been directly involved in Sudanese economy, except in the case of extreme necessity. In order to restore the Sudanese economy, Wingate asked the British government twice to provide direct financial assistance to Sudan before and after World War I, but the British government refused both (Warburg, 1970). Therefore, the Condominium government had to attach great importance to the task of utilizing the internal forces of Sudan to promote her economy to the maximum scale while using Egypt’s economic support to Sudan. However, with the growing nationalist sentiment in Egypt and the dissatisfaction of Egyptians towards assuming the economic responsibility of Sudan, the Sudanese Condominium government under the control of Britain gradually turned to take advantage of the powerful social influence of the Mahdi Movement by regaining the control of Islamic forces in Sudan, and initially realized the social and economic development of Sudan. The Mahdists Ansar, which formed an alliance with the Sudanese government under the leadership of Sayyid Rahman, became the driving force of Sudanese economic development. After the outbreak of World War I, with Sudanese government’s support, Rahman actively engaged in business. By 1926, he had achieved great success in logging, water conservancy and cotton farming, attracting ethnic groups to join him and establishing close economic ties with these ethnic groups (Ibrahim, 1996). The mobilization from Mahdists also alleviated labor shortages in Sudan caused by the abolition of the slave trade. With the cooperation of the Mahdists and the Sudanese government, Sudanese trade grew from almost zero in slave trade in 1896 to 3.5 million pounds in 1906 and 11.111 million pounds in 1927 (Cash, 1931). Britain acknowledged Rahman’s role in Sudanese economy: “He (Rahman) was brought up since youth, under British guidance, is intelligent, and has great influence in Soudan, which he uses in an entirely loyal manner” (Foreign Office, 1920, p. 291).

Secondly, Britain guided the Mahdists to participate in Sudanese politics, which provided the premise for the parliamentary politics of Sudan.

Under the guidance of the British, the Mahdists under the leadership of Rahman also increased their political demands during World War I, and their political power grew with the support of their huge wealth

(Ibrahim, 1996).[3] With the rise of Sudanese nationalism in the early 1920s, Rahman took university campuses as bases, participated in campus political activities and even directly funded university graduates who were affected by Sudanese nationalism, receiving popular support from many intellectuals. In November 1931, Rahman independently led a student strike at Gordon Memorial College. From then on, he led Ansar intellectuals to form a political group along the path of political Islam and published *Al-Nil*, Sudanese first daily newspaper in Arabic, in 1935 (Ibrahim, 1996). Ansar resented the return of Egypt to Sudanese affairs after the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian Treaty. Faced with the trend of Unity of Nile Valley brought by Egyptian nationalism, Ansar under the leadership of Rahman further clarified its political goal, namely to achieve complete independence of Sudan, which became the political basis of Graduates' General Congress founded in February 1938. Such progress also created foundations for the formation of the Umma Party in 1945 aiming at Sudanese independence, and the Ashiqqa (Brothers), later the National Unionists Party (NUP), whose goal was the unification with Egypt, forming the embryonic form of Sudanese parliamentary politics. Rather than stop the rise of Islamist politics in Sudan, the British encouraged the Graduates' General Congress and continued to work with the Sudanese government to quell continuing anti-British sentiment from Egypt (Ibrahim, 1996). As it turned out, such a ruse enabled the Mahdists to continue to gain power in Sudanese politics, eventually becoming a key factor in Sudanese post-independence parliamentary politics.

Third, Sudan's dependence on Britain had increased since the Mahdists came under the British control.

As the Mahdists' political and economic power in Sudan grew, so did Sudan's dependence on Britain. In fact, it was because of the dependence of the Mahdists and the support of the British that Ansar led by Rahman was able to quickly acquire the important position in Sudanese politics and economy. The British allowed Mahdists to establish bases on Aba Island, helping them set up businesses, and even some British officials were close to Mahdi dignitaries, keeping Ansar beholden to the British for much of the post-World War I period. The rise of the Egyptian Wafd Party promoted the rise of Sudanese nationalism. Under the propaganda of Egypt, the idea that "Sudan is part of Egypt" challenged the authority of Britain in Sudan. On 10 June 1924, under British auspices, a meeting was held at Rahman's residence attended by leading Sudanese dignitaries, who "declared themselves in favour of British administration, and against any increased measure of Egyptian control, believing that the Sudanese would attain their aspiration, which was to assume responsibility for their own Government, more quickly under British than under Egyptian rule" (Foreign Office, 1924, p. 136). At this meeting, the rising political Rahman led the Sudanese dignitaries to express their attitude to the British:

> The Sudanese have had the good fortune of experience of the administration of the English people; they were fully pleased with them; they are perfectly contented with the Englishmen; and for these reasons they (the Sudanese) ask of their best free will and perfect accord, with the greatest pleasure and with the fullest liberty and loyally, that the British Government should continue to administer the Sudan's affairs, to reform its conditions and to advance its individuals and classes, until they reach the stage which they hope that they will attain of independence and self-rule. (Foreign Office, 1924, p. 140)

Relations between the Egyptian Wafd government and the Britain declined sharply after the assassination of Governor-General of Sudan, Lee Stack, in Cairo in November 1924 and Britain's complete expulsion of

[3] By 1935, Rahman had become a very large landowner, earning an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 Egyptian pounds a year from farming and other businesses, far exceeding the income of other political actors, such as Sayyid Ali Mirghani, leader of the Khatmiyya. See Hassan Ahmed Ibrahim, "The Role of Sayyid Abd al-Rahman al-Mahdi in the Sudanese National Movement 1908-1956", *Northeast African Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1996, p. 15.

Egyptian forces from Sudan. In order to safeguard the situation in Sudan, the British used the Mahdists as a shield to deter Egyptian attempts in Sudan, in return for continuing to support the Mahdists in their political needs in Sudan. From 1924 to 1936, the British-backed Mahdists became the most powerful political group in Sudan. The British policy of “Indirect Rule” gave local tribal chiefs authority over Sudanese affairs, but the Mahdists had maintained close ties with many of Sudanese tribal leaders and enjoyed broad support among the rural and tribal populations (Warburg, 1985). The growing political power of the Mahdists reflected Sudan’s growing dependence on Britain until independence of Sudan in 1956.

Fourth, the “transformation” of the Mahdi Movement by Britain accelerated the political and social disintegration of Sudan.

The Mahdists participated in the political, economic and religious activities in Sudan in a new form during the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium period, further dividing Sudan, which already had a large number of tribal and ethnic conflicts. Not only had there been protests against the Mahdists from disaffected ethnic groups since the Mahdists came under British control, but other Sufi groups had also attacked the continued presence of the Mahdism and its partnership with the British. The rise of the Mahdism had shaken the dominance of the Khatmiyya, the most influential Islamic group in Sudan during Turko-Egyptian rule in the 19th century. The Condominium government initially restored Khatmiyya and its activities, hoping its influence among northern Sudan could be used to contain the Mahdiyya, but as the establishment of the Board of Ulema in June 1910 and the fostering of the policy towards Mahdists continuously went further, the Mahdists kept growing, and so was Rahman’s political status and his wealth. Hence, the growing sense of imbalance in Mirghani’s mind was that he was the star performer of Sudanese new order, and that Rahman had deprived himself of the privileges he had been entitled to since the first day of the Condominium (Niblock, 1987). The confrontation between Mahdiyya and Khatmiyya led to deepening rancor between Sudanese two main political factions. At the same time, British-backed Sudanese officials emphasized the role of Islam, keeping the south away from Khartoum. While maintaining the Arab-Islamic character of northern Sudan, the British implemented the so-called “Southern Policy” in the south since 1930, restoring tribal rights and traditions, aiming to eliminate the influence of northern Arabs (Said, 1965, p. 34), widening of the north-south separation. In addition, in the face of rising Mahdiyya and continuous Egyptian nationalist propaganda, those young Sudanese intellectuals who were against the Mahdism advocated the Unity of Sudan and Egypt, which was complete contradictory against pro-independence Mahdists who followed the British. This led to the separation of Sudanese political factions, and it had a negative impact on the political stability of Sudan after her independence. The Khatmiyya eventually opted for the National Unity Party, which supported Sudan’s unity with Egypt, alongside secular nationalists led by Isma’il al-Azhari against Rahman’s Umma party. Since it was difficult to reach an agreement on political interests, Sudan had been repeatedly cycling between inefficient parliamentary politics and military intervention since independence, and the slow development of people’s livelihood had aggravated the internal conflicts and social problems of multi-ethnic Sudan.

Finally, British “transformation” of the Mahdi Movement was not complete and did not completely solve the problem of Islamic radicalization in Sudan, which became the inducement for the gradual radicalization of Islamic politics in Sudan after independence.

The fundamental intention of the British “transforming” of Mahdists was her own colonial interests in Sudan and the whole Nile Valley, and the influence of Mahdi extremists in the future of Sudan had not been considered too much. Although the majority of Mahdists was gradually “subordinated” to British policy, there

were still many Mahdi extremists who opposed British rule. The Habuba uprising in 1908 marked the climax of the Mahdi extremist movement against the British. The British military suppression of this Mahdi extremist movement yet did not eradicate it completely. With the agreement reached between the British and Darfur in the early days of the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium of Sudan and the joint hands of Mahdism and Darfur, the Mahdi extremists gained a respite in Darfur. In 1921, five years after the fall of the Sultanate of Darfur, the last uprising led by Abd Allah al-Shhayni took place in Nyala, killing thousands, including two British officers (O’Fahey, 2008). The uprising was subsequently suppressed by the government. Nevertheless, the Mahdi extremists did not disappear but emerged as a hidden radical force among Sudanese ethnic groups, ready to respond to any call for radical Islam. Islamist extremism in Sudan was influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as early as the late 1920s. In 1948, Babikir Karrar founded the Islamic Liberation Movement, which became the leading Sudanese Islamist group under the influence of Egyptian political Islam (Berridge, 2015). In 1954, the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood was founded. Then Hassan al-Turabi, the famous figure of the Sudanese Islamic movement, became the leader of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood, and gradually led the Sudanese Islamic Movement to radicalization. Mahdi extremists and other Sudanese Islamists influenced by Mahdi extremists had influenced the Islamic policy of the regime of General Ibrahim Abboud, and forced Jaafar Nimeiri to have a National Reconciliation with the Islamist oppositions in 1977. Afterwards, the radical Sudanese Islamists followed Hassan al-Turabi’s National Islamic Front (NIF) and ascended to power center of Sudan in the 1990s, when Sudan declared the regime that was under the control of total Islam, and Sudan became the shelter of international Islamic terrorism, resulting in continuous crises in Sudan home and abroad.

Conclusion

The Anglo-Egyptian Condominium of Sudan started in 1899 was built on the collapse of the Mahdi State. But the British took a relatively cautious and moderate approach to deal with the remnants of the Mahdists after the end of the Mahdi State, rather than a full-scale military crackdown. Although this strategy enabled most Mahdists to change from opposing Britain to supporting Britain and promoted the social and economic progress as well as the construction of political system in Sudan, this “transformation” ultimately served the British colonial interests with strong purposes, and it had a series of negative impacts on the development of Sudan after her independence. On one hand, influenced by British bolster the Mahdists, Sudanese politics maintained a relatively close relationship with Britain for a long time after the independence of Sudan. The impacts of colonialism interests reached deep into the Sudanese major political groups, causing constant parliamentary political struggle, the lack of national planning and implementation for development and slow national construction in Sudan since 1956. On the other hand, British policy on the Mahdi Movement was not complete, ending up with the long-time existence of Islamic extremism in Sudan and the Islamic extremism going toward the power center of Sudan. This dragged Sudan into crisis at the end of the 20th century. Under the influence of Britain, the split and opposition of Sudanese political factions not only fueled the growth of Islamic extremism in Sudan, but also caused more inter-ethnic conflicts and social problems, which aggravated the lag of Sudanese national development after independence. The essence of the “transformation” of Mahdists by Britain in the early 20th century was a process of cultivating agents of colonial rule by taking advantage of the religious complex of the Sudanese people. Different from Egypt, which experienced the “July Revolution” of free officers to overthrow the old colonial regime in 1952, the agents of colonial rule in Sudan did not end because of independence, but continued to become an important factor affecting Sudanese national affairs after independence.

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