The Notion of Mahdiyyah in the Thought of Mahdi Ibn Tumart

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Abstract: The African continent has witnessed various revivalism and reform movements or (al-Islah wa al-Tajdid). These movements embarked on purifying Islam from the impurities of innovation and blind imitation. However, some of these reform movements hid under the banner of Mahdiyyah (messianism) to bring about the desired reform and re-establish Islamic state. In the case of Muhammad Ibn Abdullah (popularly known as Ibn Tumart), Mahdism was the backbone and central pillar of his movement. It is the political weapon he used to fight Moravids and overthrow their regime in North Africa. To him, Mahdism is the highest level of Imamah since Mahdi is considered to be the last Imam. This paper discusses and analyzes the notion of Mahdiyya in the thought of Muhammad Ibn Abdullah (Ibn Tumart) in his struggle to establish Almohad dynasty. It concludes by evaluating Ibn Tumart's reform movement as one of the Islamic revolutions in Africa. The research adopts qualitative and analytical methods in discussing, analyzing and interpreting data in this paper.

Keywords: Mahdiyyah, Reform, Ibn Tumart, Africa.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is very difficult to give a clear and comprehensive definition of the term "*Mahdiyyah*" or Mahdism due to obvious disagreement among the Muslim scholars and intellectuals on the actual meaning of the notion. This is because neither the word Mahdi or *Mahdiyyah* is explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an. The whole notion of the Mahdi or the expected deliverer could only be found in some Hadith (sayings of Prophet Muhammad SAW) scattered in the books of Ahmad, Abu Dawud and Tirmidhi. A. I. Adam (2016). Another point of contention is that the notion of *Mahidyyah* is sometimes confused with the concept of Islamic reform, and to some scholars, the line is blurred between the Messiah and the Reformer. However, according to H. A. Ibrahim, (2004), the term "*Mahdiyyah*" refers to the belief in an "expected deliverer" or a "superhuman savior" who will come from the unseen, towards the end of the world to fill it with justice after it had been permeated by injustice and tyranny.

The belief in the Mahdi or Messiah has existed among the Judeo-Christian communities in Europe and the Middle East long before the beginning of the Muslim era. They believed that the Messiah will come "from the unseen" towards the end of the world to fill it with justice after it had been permeated by injustice and tyranny. This version of the expected redeemer of the Judeo-Christian Messianism appears to have influenced Muslim communities, who gave this concept the Arabic term "*Mahdiyyah*", which is derived from the root "*Hada*" meaning to guide, and the Mahdi is accordingly the divinely or rightly guided-one. The notion of the *Mahdiyyah* in Islam is, therefore, seemingly messianic and apocalyptic. H. A. Ibrahim, (2004).

However, it is worth noting that there have been some instances in Islamic history where some Mahdist movements had turned in essence into a new religion, eventually divorcing themselves from mainstream Islam. A clear example of that, according to Timothy R. F. (2005), is the Ahmadiyyah movement or the Qadiyanis founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (d. 1908) in India, who declared himself a combination of the Mahdi, Jesus and an avatar (manifestation) of Hindu god Krishna. It should be noted here that there has never been a single Hadith (even a fabricated one) where such description of the Mahdi is given. Hence, this is a clear deviation from a Mahdist movement, so to speak, to a completely different religious order that aims at attracting followers from all the three religions, namely Islam, Christianity and Hinduism.

II. WHO IS THE MAHDI?

M. R. Al-Ahmadi (2003), upholds that the Mahdi, according to *Ahl al-Sunnah*, will be called Muhammad ibn Abdullah al-Mahdi. His name and that of his father would tally with those of the Prophet and his father respectively. He should be a descendant of the Prophet through his daughter Fatima. In addition to

that, they also believe that the Mahdi will be born towards the end of the time, and that his appearance is one of the eschatological signs of the Doomsday. Contrary to the above interpretation of the *Ahl al-Sunnah*, M. Jar Allah (1955), asserts that the expected Mahdi according to Shiites is one of their hidden or concealed Imams who enjoins spiritual specialties and will re-appear before the end of time supported with miracles. His re-appearance will not only restore justice to the world, but also liberate *Ahl al-Bayt* (People of the House), who suffered humiliation and dehumanization from their enemies.

Consequently, his genealogy, according to the Shi'ah, as presented by M. K. Al-QazwÊni, (2005) is: Imam al-Hassan al-Askari ibn Imam Ali al-Hadi ibn al-Imam Muhammad al-Jawad ibn al-Imam Ali al-Rida ibn al-Imam Musa al-Kazim ibn al-Imam Ja'afar al- Sadiq ibn al-Imam Muhammad al-Baqir ibn al-Imam Ali Zain al-Abidin ibn al-Imam al-Hussain ibn al-Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib. And from his mother's side, he is the son of Fatima, daughter of the Prophe Muhammad peace be upon Him.

In another vein, the extremist sect of Khawarij did not believe in the *Mahdiyyah* as they completely rejected the Shiites assumption of the return of the Imam. Exploring this concept further, M. H. Sa'ad (1953), emphasizes that the latter group of this sect called "*Yazidiyyah*", had somehow accepted the notion of *Mahdiyyah* albeit in a slightly different way, as they do not restrict it to a particular person. Consequently, they believe that the expected Mahdi will be a prophet and messenger of God, who will emerge from non-Arabs (*Ajam*).

However, A. M. Ibn Khaldun (2010), maintains that the expected Mahdi will be from the people of the house (*Ahl al-Bayt*), he will be called the Mahdi, he will support the faith and restore the unity of Islam, and, most importantly, his manifestation will be one of the signs of the Hour (*Ashrat al-Sa'ah*), an eschatological event preceding Doomsday. In other words, the Mahdi is to appear in the world when the planet is filled with injustice and inequity. According to many traditions, chaos will eventually reign on earth and it will be filled with anarchy. This state of disarray is to precede the end of the world. Hence, the Mahdi will appear to restore order to the planet through rejuvenation of faith and religious teachings.

Based on the above views, the difference between *Ahl al-Sunnah* and the Shi'ah on the notion of the expected Mahdi is that the notion is central in the Shi'ah theology, and appears to have been profoundly influenced by Indian, Jewish and Persian thoughts and traditions. This is particularly evident in the concept of *al-Imam al-Ma'sum* (the infallible Imam), *al-Ghaybah* (concealment of the Imam), *al-Raj'ah* (return of the Imam) and *al-Imam al-Gha'ib* (the hidden Imam). Unlike the Shi'ah, *Ahl al-Sunnah* do not consider the *Mahdiyyah* as a basic pillar of Islam (*Usul al-Aqa'id*), but simply a way to return the faith to its original purity free from all *Bidʿah* (innovations). The Mahdiyyah in this sense is almost identical to the very well-known concept of *Islah* and *Tajdid* (Islamic reform and revival). In other words, for the Shi'ah, the Mahdiyyah centers around a "Person", while for their counterparts *Ahl al-Sunnah*, it revolves around the "Book". H. A. Ibrahim, (2004).

III. WHO IS MUHAMMAD AHMAD IBN ABDULLAH (IBN TUMART)?

There is clear disagreement and discrepancy among historians and scholars on the actual genealogy of Abu Abdullah Muhammad Ibn Abdullah, popularly known as Ibn Tumart. H. A. Ibn Qattan (1990), presented four different genealogies for him, namely:

1. Muhammad bin Abdullah bin Abd al-Rahman bin Hud bin Khalid bin Tamam bin Adnan ibn Sufyan ibn Safwan bin Jabir bin Ata' bin Rabah bin Muhammad bin al- Hassan bin Ali bin Abi Talib.
2. Muhammad bin Abdullah bin Abd al-Rahman bin Hud bin Khalid bin Tamam bin Adnan bin Safwan bin Jabir bin Yahya bin Ata' bin Rabah bin Yasar bin al-Abbas bin Muhammad bin al-Hassan bin Ali bin Abi Talib.
3. Muhammad bin Abdullah bin Abd al-Rahman bin Hud bin Khalid bin Tamam bin Adnan ibn Sufyan ibn Safwan bin Jabir bin ta' bin Rabah bin Muhammad bin Sulaiman bin Abdullah ibn al-Hassan bin Ali bin Abi Talib.
4. Muhammad bin Abdullah bin Wajlid bin Yamsil bin Hamza bin al-Hassan bin Isa bin Idris bin Idris bin Abdullah bin al-Hassan bin Ali bin Abi Talib.

However, historians doubted the authenticity of the first and second genealogies presented above on the ground that Muhammad bin al-Hassan bin Ali bin Abi Talib was childless. Having contained up to sixteen generations, the third genealogy is consistent with the time framework of 474 years between Ibn Tumart and al-Hassan bin Ali. Moreover, Sulaiman bin Abdullah bin al-Hassan bin Ali bin Abi Talib had reportedly settled down in Morocco and established a family, thus, it is likely that Ibn Tumart may have this genealogy.

But how can Ibn Tumart claim such genealogy, knowing well that he was known to be from Masmuda tribe of the Berber? A. El-Najjar (1983), argues that it might be possible that Sulaiman bin al-Hassan bin Ali got married from the Masmuda, thus his genealogy got mixed after him with that of Berbers. Moreover, well-known Muslim historians, such as Ibn Khaldun and el-Marrakishi, had presented this genealogy and tacitly approved it.

Ibn Tumart was born in 1080 in Igiliz, a village in southern Morocco of Sus valley, from a middle class and pious Hargalah family of the Masmuda Berber tribe. Though relatively short, Ibn Tumart's life was full of achievements being the spiritual leader and the patron of *al-Muwahhidun* (Elmohads) state, which transformed the whole region. He travelled far and near, east and south in search of knowledge where he studied under some prominent Muslim scholars such as Muhammad al-Ghazali.

At the time of his birth, the Maghrib (Morocco), had experienced, under the rule of *al-Murabitun* (Moravids), chaos and outright deviation from the right path to the extent that some scholars dismissed it as part of *Dar al-Kufr* (abode of unbelief). Morocco was, at this time, ruled by four different tribes. The northern part of Morocco was ruled by the Ghimarah, which originated from Masmudah tribe, the western and central parts were under the Binghuwata and the Zanata respectively, while the southern part was dominated and controlled by some minority Shi'ah tribes, known as *al-Bajliyyin*. A. El-Najjar (1983).

To face the political challenges of the Moravids and tactically defeat them, Ibn Tumart established and appointed hierarchical chains of his followers that superseded all tribal and ethnic affiliations. The first group is called the "people of the house", which consisted of his four close disciples, followed by the "people of ten", the "council of fifty" and then the "council of seventy". These councils, composed of his close associates, were to handle all the socio-political affairs of the movement. R. F. Timothy (2005).

IV.   THE NOTION OF MAHDIYYAH IN THE THOUGHT OF IBN TUMART

Mahdism had been the backbone and central pillar of Ibn Tumart's movement, and was the political weapon he employed to fight the Moravids and overthrow their regime. To him, Mahdism is the highest level of *Imamah* since *Mahdi* was viewed to be the last *Imam*. However, it is very important to note that Ibn Tumart, contrary to other Mahdist claimants, did not openly declare himself the *Mahdi*, but rather, he first drew the attention of his followers to the characteristics and attributes of the *Mahdi* in a famous lecture as reported by A. El-Najjar (1981), where he reportedly said: "Praise be to Allah who does whatever He wishes and imposes whatever He pleases, no one rejects His command and judgment. May Allah's peace and blessings be upon the Prophet Muhammad who gave the believers good news of the redeemer, who will fill the world with justice after it had been filled with injustice and tyranny. Allah will send him to dethrone falsehood and enthrone the truth. He will appear towards the end of Time and his place will be Morocco. Ponder upon his name, his genealogy and his action…". There, his disciples rose and shouted you are the *Mahdi*, because you have fulfilled all the *Mahdi's* requirements, and Ibn Tumart tacitly approved it.

In relation to this, I could not find any statement in the works of Ibn Tumart within my reach, where he publicly and openly declared himself to be the expected *Mahdi*. However, his actions, directly or indirectly, endorsed the title of the *Mahdi* given to him by his supporters, and he worked towards resolving it for himself. Moreover, his indirect claims of the Mahdiship could be inferred from his correspondence with other people. For example, in one of his letters, he titled himself as "Muhammad son of Abdullah al-Arabi al-Qurashi al-Hashimi al-Hassani al-Talibi al-Muhammadi…..". al-Baizaq (1928). Here he claimed to be from *Ahl al-Bayt* (the house of the Prophet), which is a major pre-requisite for claiming the *Mahdiyya*h.

A. El-Najjar (1983), argues that Ibn Tumart knew deep down his heart that he was not the real *Mahdi*, as he did not openly and publicly claim the Mahdiship. Nevertheless, he welcomed to be decorated with the title by his followers, perhaps, because this would help him to gain followers, strengthen the foundation of his movement, and, thus, help in realizing his political goal, namely to uproot and overthrow the rule of the *al-Murabitun* (Moravids). On the same ground, his disciples have tried their level best to defend his Mahdiship through various ways such as write-ups and books e.g. Abd al-Rahman bin Tahir, in his book *al-Kafiya fi al-Burhan ala al-Mahdi* (Sufficient evidence on the proofs of the Mahdi), where he presented some argument based on logic and reason to prove Ibn Tumart's Mahdiship. Ibn al-Qattan (1990).

In the same vein, other scholars such as A. A. Al-Sanhaji (1961), argue that the Maghrib (Moroccan) society had been known for its strong support and profound sympathy with *Ahl al-Bayt* because of the several persecutions and tortures inflicted on them by the ruling elite of successive Islamic regimes. Hence, Ibn Tumart drove to make himself a legendary personality, whose genealogy was linked to Fatima through her first son Hassan, in order to get supporters and adherents to his movement.

On another vein, Ibn Tumart's Mahdist movement was dominated by two key issues that formed the core of his movement, namely the *Imamah* and the *Ismah*, to which we now turn.

i.   The *Imamah*

The *Imamah* is highly positioned in the thought of Ibn Tumart. He gave it a special attention, and thoroughly explained its meaning and dimensions like no other topic except *Tawhid* (monotheism). This emphasis on the *Imamah* might be due to its direct relationship with politics. In fact, the success or failure of any political entity depends on some key factors of which the *Imamah* is one, especially when it comes to the necessity of appointing or electing the *Imam*, and swearing allegiance to him. According to Ibn Tumart, *Imamah*

is to follow, listen, obey, submit and comply with the commands and prohibitions of the *Imam*, and to follow his footsteps in every small and big matter. A. El-Najjar (1981).

From the above definition provided by Ibn Tumart, it seems that the *Imamah*, to him, rests upon blind imitation and absolute obedience to the *Imam* in every single matter and without questioning his authority. This may have probably been motivated by his desire to block any possible challenge to his authority, therefore, consolidating the foundation of his caliphate without fear or hesitation. In other words, by this move, he calculated to eliminate any rivalry to his caliphate by posing himself as the sole authority in the sight of God, who possessed the required qualities to govern and rule his people.

Contrary to mainstream Sunnism, ibn Tumart maintained that the *Imamah* is obligatory in Islamic society, being a pillar of Islam, and went as far as equating it with the religion itself. He, further, argued that there will be no justice in this world without the firm belief in the *Imamah* in every era until the day of judgment. In fact, his attachment of such importance to the *Imamah* makes his own version of it similar to that of the Shi'ah, who consider it central (*Usul al-Aqa'id*), thus dismiss whoever rejects it as an outright unbeliever. A. El-Najjar (1983).

ii. Obedience to the *Imam*

Ibn Tumart had placed high regard to the obedience of the *Imam* which is categorized into various kinds each containing a particular degree of obedience and loyalty to the *Imam*. These are:
a. Knowing the *Imam*: Muslims should have full knowledge of their *Imam*.
b. Believing in the *Imam*: whenever the *Imam* appears and is confirmed, all Muslims should accept him and believe in him.
c. All Muslims must uncompromisingly and unquestionably be loyal and obedient to him.
d. That whatever he judges among the believers must absolutely be accepted.
e. All Muslims should follow him and emulate his action.
f. That every single case or judgement should be referred to him.

iii. Arrangement of *Imams* According to Ibn Tumart

In his book, *Kitab al-Imamah*, Ibn Tumart maintained that nothing will go well in this world without the *Imamah*. As such, the Imamship had never ceased to exist throughout history, from Adam to Nuh, Ibrahim, Dawud, Isa and Muhammad. Thus the *Imamah* after the Prophet Muhammad passed to Abubakar as demonstrated by his choice by the Prophet to lead the prayer on his behalf. After Abubakar was Umar, Uthman and then Ali. However, after the period of the rightly guided Caliphs, the *Imamah* got into confusion, whereby the lives of Muslims turned into darkness and confusion, caprices became rampant, injustice prevailed, and the forces of darkness took over the steers of the affairs. This situation continued up to the time of the redeemer, who will appear in the strange time to support the faith. This is the *Mahdi*, who Allah has deposited in him all the features of guidance, he will restore peace and take people back to the way of Allah. Ibn Tumart (1963).

However, Ibn Tumart's arrangement of the *Imams* was quite unique, and in this respect different from that of the Shi'ah, for his choice of Abubakar as the first *Imam* while they argue that Ali was the one who should have occupied this post. Similarly, his views were different from those of al-Khawarij on the fourth *Imam*, Ali b. Abi Talib, whose Imamship was rejected by them, and for their assertion that the last Imam will come from the *Ajam* (non-Arabs). Equally, his views are quite different from those of *Ahl al-Sunnah* after the four rightly guided caliphs, where they maintain that after Ali the fifth Imam was Hassan b. Ali b. Abi Talib before he surrendered the leadership of the Muslims to Mu'awiyah b. Abi Sufyan. A. El-Najjar (1983).

iv. Knowing the Mahdi

Ibn Tumart asserted that knowing the *Mahdi* is compulsory upon all Muslims. He said: "the appearance of the *Imam Mahdi* has been documented in every place and book as a result of many *Hadith* which reached the level of succession (*Tawatur*) to the extent that he (the *Mahdi*) has become known by Arabs and *Ajams* (non-Arabs) in the villages and cities. As such, whatever is known by the successive *Ahadith* before his appearance, becomes mandatory to know him when he appears, and the belief in him becomes obligatory". Ibn Tumart (1957)

With this assertion in mind, we may infer that knowing the *Mahdi* will be of two categories, namely, believing in the notion of Mahdism in general as reported by several *Ahadith* in Musnad AÍmad, Sunan Abi Dawud and Tirmidhi, and believing in him (Ibn Tumart) as the expected *Mahdi* for fulfilling all the requirements and descriptions contained in those *Ahadith*.

He also maintained that total submission and obedience to the *Mahdi* is compulsory, and that no one is allowed to challenge, oppose or disobey his command. For, in essence, the *Mahdi* has a final say in everything. Ibn Tumart (1963). This insistence on the absolute authority of the *Imam* seems to have been motivated by the desire of Ibn Tumart to boost the morale of his supporters, who faced aggressive attacks by the Moravids, and to

attract and recruit new followers to his movement to withstand this aggression by the presumed corrupt and deviant enemy.

However, a careful scrutiny of Ibn Tumart's version of the *Mahdiyyah* reveals some distinctive differences between it and that of both the Shi'ah and the *Ahl al-Sunnah*. While it did not share the former's concepts of *al-Ghaibah* (concealment) and *al-Raj'ah* (return) of the *Imam*. It, unlike *Ahl al-Sunnah,* viewed Mahdism as part and parcel of *Usul al-Aqa'id* (fundamentals of Islam), and advocated *al-Ismah* (infallibility) of the *Imam*.

v. The Ismah (Infallibility of the Imam)

Ibn Tumart maintained that the *Imam*, or the *Mahdi,* is infallible from falsehood, going astray, and, most importantly, being ignorant. This means his ideas and teachings are pure and free from mistakes, and that he is impeccable from tyranny and governs his people and steers all their affairs with equity. He emphasized that nobody fulfills and implements the laws of Allah perfectly except a just and free from mischief *Imam*. Ibn Tumart (1963). It was for this very reason – freedom from tyranny – that he mobilized his followers to fight the Moravids.

However, unlike the Shi'ah, whose infallibility of the *Imam* was absolute and all around, that of Ibn Tumart seemed to have been restricted only to the above two areas, namely, infallibility from falsehood and injustice. Perhaps, he did so to build confidence in the hearts of his supporters. A. El-Najjar (1983).

Some scholars argue that Ibn Tumart adopted this so-called "restricted infallibility" to include the four rightly-guided Caliphs in the list of the impeccable *Imams*, for he knew that Abubakar and Umar had committed some mistakes that they corrected later. In his writings, Ibn Tumart did not substantiate the shi'ite concept of absolute *Ismah* of the *Imam*, but rather restricted it to its literal meaning, namely to be free from *Batil* (falsehood) and *Zulm* (injustice). To him, the role of the *Imam* is to eradicate falsehood and injustice and spread truth and justice. Consequently, falsehood can only be destroyed by the truth, and likewise injustice can only be eliminated by justice. Having this in mind, the *Imam* must be free from falsehood and injustice for the truth and justice to prevail. In other words, the *Imam* must not fall into falsehood because falsehood cannot destroy falsehood and misguidance cannot eliminate misguidance. A. El-Najjar (1981).

We have sufficient evidence to assume that Ibn Tumart had not, himself, believed in his Mahdiship, but rather seemingly used it to achieve his political ambitions. This may be reflected in the nature of his Mahdism where its political dimension is stronger than the religious aspect. Moreover, his successors did not have one unified outlook towards the *Mahdiyyah*, but were rather categorized into two main groups when dealing with the issue. The first group was that of the absolute supporters of the notion of the *Mahdiyyah* championed by Ibn Tumart's immediate successor Abd al-Mu'min bin Ali, who forcefully argued through his speeches, writings and messages for an extreme stand on the issue. He even claimed that whoever rejects Ibn Tumart's Mahdiship (even after his death) will be considered as an unbeliever. In fact, he went as far as compiling the teachings of Ibn Tumart in a book titled "*A'azzu Ma Yutlab*", and made it a compulsory reading for the people. Conversely, the second group included personalities like Sultan Abu Yusuf, who was rather moderate in his stand towards Ibn Tumart's *Mahdiyyah.* To some extent, he even appeared to have doubted it but left it to continue growing among the people. A. El-Najjar (1981).

V. CONCLUSION

The notion of the *Mahdiyyah* is a well-known concept in Islam, even though Muslim scholars and intellectuals did not agree on its actual and precise definition, largely because neither the words Mahdi or Mahdiyyah is explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an. Consequently, the confusion surrounding the nature and personality of the Mahdi will be difficult to clear. On the other hand, Mahdiyyah has been the crux of Muhammad Ibn Abdullah's (popularly known as Ibn Tumart) movement. However, Ibn Tumart's version of the *Mahdiyyah* reveals some distinctive differences between it and that of the Shi'ah and the *Ahl al-Sunnah*. While it did not share the former's concepts of *al-Ghaibah* (concealment) and *al-Raj'ah* (return) of the *Imam*. It, unlike *Ahl al-Sunnah,* viewed Mahdism as part and parcel of *Usul al-Aqa'id* (fundamentals of Islam), and advocated *al-Ismah* (infallibility) of the *Imam*. His Mahdist movement culminated in the establishment of *al-Muwahhidu* dynasty in North Africa. After his death, his successors continued the struggle under the same banner of Mahdism.

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