

**MU×AMMAD ÑALÔ’S VISIT TO THE SUDAN 1838-1839: A
CIVILIZING-HUMANITARIAN MISSION OR AN IMPERIALIST –
COLONIALIST VENTURE?**

By

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**First draft of a paper submitted to:
European Conference on African Studies
11 – 14 July 2007
Leiden, the Netherlands**

Muhammad Ali's Visit to the Sudan 1838-1839: A Civilizing-humanitarian Mission or an Imperialist – Colonialist Venture?

Students of the 19th Century history of the Nile Valley are aware of a sole visit that Muhammad Ali Pasha, the Ottoman viceroy of Egypt (1805-1848), paid the Sudan, and of an official report issued in Turkish, then the official language in Egypt, on this visit. Both the late Egyptian historian Prof. Muhammad Fu'ad Shukr and the late British historian Prof. Richard Hill¹ claimed that this report was annexed to the issue of *al-Waq'at al-Mi'riyyah*, the official Egyptian gazette, of 21 April 1839. But neither this issue nor all the issues of this gazette for the years 1834-1839 are found in *DEr al-Kutub* of Cairo. Besides this issue in particular is not available in the British museum. Prof. Hill told me that he had personally read the Turkish text, but he could not remember where, and I doubt that Prof. Shukr had consulted it as he based an article that he published on the visit of Muhammad Ali on a French translation on the report that he found in the Swiss archives.² During my numerous visits to the Egyptian archives since its days in Abdin Palace, I could not also find the Turkish text or the official Arabic translation of it.

However, in 1977 I accidentally came across the official Arabic translation of this report in a most unlikely place, the Centre for Contemporary Egyptian Studies in Cairo that caters for Egyptian history since the 1922 Declaration of Independence, where it had apparently been deposited there by mistake.

Dependence on translated material in academic studies is, on principle, unacceptable. But it may be excusable in this case as the original text is still missing. Besides, the Arabic translation of the report under consideration seems to be accurate and comprehensive as it had been translated from the Turkish text itself, and by official and competent translators who were employed by the former Egyptian King Fu'ad (1918-1936) to translate the Turkish documents to Arabic. The authenticity of these translators had, furthermore, been confirmed to me by some former officials of the Egyptian archives. Thus, the official Arabic translation of this report is an important source for the study of Muhammad Ali's visit to the Sudan in particular, and to the Egyptian era in the Sudan in general. But this does not belittle the importance of the Turkish text if and

when found. The Arabic text is also supplementing by a field work that I undertook, and some secondary sources.

The report, entitled “*Rihlat SÉkin al-JinÉn MawlÉna al-KabÉr MuÁammad ÑAIÊ ilÉ al-SÉdÉn*”, falls in about twenty-two pages each with around thirty lines. The report specifies the date in which MuÁammad ÑAIÊ and his entourage left Cairo, 15 October, 1938, but it does not record the date of their return. But since the report mentions that the trip from and to Cairo took five months and four days, it is likely that the Pasha had returned to Cairo on 14 March, 1839³.

The report records that the Pasha took two routes on his departure and return. He sailed from Cairo Southwards passing through many Egyptian towns and villages in Upper Egypt. When he entered the Sudanese frontiers, he passed through Halfa and other northern towns in an apparently very dangerous visit because of the cataracts and the rockets that spread in this region. However, the report overemphasizes, in fact exaggerates, MuÁammad ÑAIÊ’s courage in face of these dangers. While those who accompanied him panicked and strove to jump from the boats, the Pasha had reportedly remained steadfast, and refused all appeals to leave the boat defiantly saying “leave me to my experiences”. However, the Pasha traveled southward until he reached Khartoum, and from there traveled to al-Rusayrs through Medani and Senner till he reached to Fazugli region. On his way back, the Pasha sailed from Fazugli to Khartoum and Abu Hamad. Rather than continuing his travel across the Nile, the Pasha went this time from Abu Hamad by road across the ÑAtmour desert till he reached Kursiko in a very difficult Journey that took one week. From Kursiko, the mission sailed on the Nile until it reached Cairo. Thus, during this visit MuÁammad ÑAIÊ had followed different routes which gave him a chance to visit and be acquainted with different parts of the Sudan.

The Objectives of the Trip

According to many Egyptian writers, for whom historiography is almost always an expression of patriotism, the prime, if not the sole, objective of the Pasha’s visit, and the entire over sixty Egyptian rule in the Sudan (1820-1885), was the wellbeing of the Sudanese people. Prof. ShukrÉ maintained that the Pasha took the trouble and the risk of

traveling at the age of seventy along the Nile up to the remote Ethiopian borders to popularize what ShukrĒ called “*Nazariyyat al-Khulu* (the theory of the vacuum)” that confirms Egypt’s historical and legal rights in the Sudan, and to use it to establish an eternal and united state in the Nile Valley for the welfare of the Sudanese and Egyptian peoples⁴.

But the Sudan was not in “state of vacuum” as ShukrĒ has claimed, as the Sultans of the Fury and the Fur Sultanates were sovereign of the territories under their rule, which compromised a sizable part of the present Sudan. Besides, Muġammad ĆAIĒ himself was under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Emperor in whose name the conquest itself was undertaken. Thus, if any, the Sudan after the conquest had become under the sovereignty of the Ottoman Emperor, not the Viceroy of Egypt. We should also mention that after the collapse of the Funing Sultanate its Sultan, Badi VI, surrendered his authority to the Caliph of the Muslims, the Ottoman Emperor.

But a close study of the report under study, as well other wide range of archival data, demonstrate that this visit, as well as the entire activities of the Pasha and his grandson Khedire IsmĒĆil, were closely related to their grand design for independence and hegemony. By then European powers had frustrated their design to expand at the expense of the “the sick man of Europe”, the Ottoman Empire, and perhaps replace the Emperor altogether⁵. Hence was their drive into the interior of Africa to build for themselves an African Empire, and to acquire the presumed rich African human and economic resources. The study of this report reveals that the primary objective of this visit was in line with this strategy that aims at exploiting Sudanese resources. This is clear from the reports emphasis in different places on the excavation of the gold, iron and other minerals, and on the development of Sudanese crops to export them to Egypt. The timing of this visit may have also been closely related with the development of Muġammad ĆAIĒ Pasha struggle with the Ottoman Emperor, where large amounts of money were needed to persuade the Sultan and his entourage to grant him privileges and concessions. This was clear from a message, dated 6 August 1838 that the Pasha sent to the Russian consul in which he said that if I returned from Fazughli with huge amount of gold, I will settle all my disputes as I wish and without the help of anybody. For if there is money, friends will easily be found⁶.

To facilitate the transport of Sudanese products to Egypt, and to achieve Mu'ammad NAIÊ's earnest desire to discover the sources of the Nile, the report gave special attention to the development of navigation across the Nile. It spoke in particular of the removal of the cataracts and of maintaining law and order for tourism and tourists. During this visit, Mu'ammad NAIÊ had ordered preparations for a mission that he intended to send to explore the sources of the White Nile. Immediately after his return to Egypt, he issued a directive on 6 November, 1839 that asked the Egyptian Captain Salim QabudÊn to undertake this duty. Between 1839 and 1842, Salim made three trips along the Nile that had all failed to discover the sources of the Nile⁷. Nonetheless, they dismissed many of the views about this issue and facilitated the mission of future European discoverers who succeeded in discovering the real sources of the White Nile.

Mu'ammad NAIÊ's visit to the Sudan and the entire Egyptian drive in the interior of Africa was largely unsuccessful in attaining its basic objectives: exploitation of African wealth, expansion of Egypt's domain deep into the interior of Africa, and the immediate suppression of slavery and slave state. Egyptian rule, though not so disastrous as some critics have suggested, was oppressive, corrupt and incompetent. Nevertheless, Ottoman Egypt left behind a legacy that can not and should not be denied or ignored, particularly in that part of Africa which became known as the Sudan.

Apart from politically uniting the Sudan within frontiers approximating those of the present republic, the Ottoman regime in Egypt had also started the process of modernization. The chief technological innovations, firearms, steamers and the telegraph, that it introduced in these territories were instrumental in the centralized administrative system established by the Egyptians and inherited by future regimes in the 20th and 21st centuries. Egyptian centralism "had gradually imposed on the heterogonous peoples of these diverse regions a greater uniformity than they had ever previously known".⁸

The Egyptian opening up of Central Africa and the Nuba Mountains and Darfur offered new opportunities for Arab traders and Muslim *duÑÊh* (preachers) to extend the frontiers of Arabic and Islam deep into Africa. But the policy of the rulers to establish a secular state in Egypt, and subsequently in their African domains, in which Islamic institutions would have a minimal role, mainly in personal matters, had sharply reduced

the power of the local religious rulers, and was instrumental in the outbreak of the Mahdist revolution in 1881.

The process of modernization in these African territories was accompanied and fostered by an increasing numbers of foreigners⁹, both European and North American, who came in different capacities – travelers, traders and missionaries, as well as technical experts and employees of the Egyptian administration. They, no doubt, had an impact on the African societies, but their ignorance of the peoples' culture and religions had nurtured tension and instability. Moreover, the regime's excessive employment of foreigners in posts for which they were usually unsuited in provoked resentment and xenophobia, particularly because they were accused of serving Europe and Christianity, rather than Africa and Islam. The Mahdi's declared intention of freeing the land from alien and Christian control therefore found ready support from the populace.

ENDNOTES

¹ Hill, R. *Egypt in the Sudan* (London, 1955), p. 66.

² ShukrÊ, M.F.: “Saffáh min Ta’rÊkh al-SËdËn al-×adÊth, Rihlat Mu’áammad ÑAlÊ Pasha ila FazughlÊ wa Nashr JournÉl al-Ri’láah”, *Kulliyyat al-AdÉb*, no. 8, vol. 2, December, 1946.

³ For a detailed study of this report, see Ibrahim, H.A.: *Rihlat Mu’áammad ÑAlÊ Pasha ilÊ al-SËdËn*, 15 October 1838 – 14 March 1839 (al-TaqrÊr al-RasmÊ), Khartoum University Press, Third edition, 1994. This article is largely based on this study.

⁴ ShukrÊ, M.F.: *Mi’r wa al-Sudan* (Cairo, 1958), p. 13.

⁵ Ibrahim, H.A., “The Egyptian Empire, 1805-1855”, in Daly, M.: *Egypt*, vol. 2, pp.204-210.

⁶ Ibrahim, H.A.: *Ri’láat*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁷ See MaqÊr, N.: *Al-BikbashÊ al-Ma’rÊ Salim QabudËn wa al-KashfÑan ManÉbiÑa al-Nil al-Abyal* (Cairo, 1960), and Hill, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-70.

⁸ Holt, P.M., “The Islamization of the Nilotic Sudan”, in Brett, M. (ed.), *Northern Africa: Islam and Modernization* (London 1993), p. 19.

⁹ RifaÑa RafiÑa al-TahÍÉwÊ, one of the pillars of modernization in Egypt and the entire East, spent a few unhappy years in Khartoum (1849-1954) in