Saints of the Desert

Aspects of Puritanism among the Bedouins

BY A. M. HASSANEIN

A

ny story of the Libyan Desert would not be complete without some consideration of the Senussis, the most important influence in that region. The subject is a complicated one. Justice might be done to it if an entire volume were available, but within the limits of a sketch only the important points of Senussi history can be touched.

The Senussis are not a race or a country or a political entity or a religion. They have, however, some of the characteristics of all four. In fact, they are almost exclusively Bedouins; they inhabit, for the most part, the Libyan Desert; they exert a controlling influence over considerable areas of that region and are recognized by the governments of surrounding territory as a real power in the affairs of northeastern Africa; and they are Moslems. Perhaps the best short description of the Senussis would be as a religious order whose leadership is hereditary and which exerts a predominating influence in the lives of the people of the Libyan Desert.

The history of the brotherhood may be roughly divided into four periods. In each it took its color from the personality of the leader. These were respectively Sayed Mohammed Ibn Ali el Senussi, the founder; Sayed Mohammed el Mahdi, his son; Sayed Ahmed, the nephew of the latter; and Sayed Idris, the son of el Mahdi, the present head of the brotherhood.

Sayed Mohammed Ibn Ali el Senussi, known as the Grand Senussi, was born in Algeria in the year 1202 after the hijra, which corresponds to 1787 in the Christian calendar. He was a descendant of the Prophet Mohammed and had received an unusually scholarly education in the Kairwan University in Fez, and at Mecca, where he became the pupil of the famous theologian Sidi Ahmed Ibn Idris el Fazi. He developed an inclination to asceticism and a conviction that what his religion needed was a return to a pure form of Islam as exemplified in the teachings of the prophet.

At the age of fifty-one he was compelled to leave Mecca by the opposition of the older sheiks, who challenged his orthodoxy. He returned through Egypt to Cyrenaica and began to establish centers for teaching his doctrines among the Bedouins.

At this point an explanation of the meaning of three Arabic words will elucidate the text. They are zawia, ikhwan, and wakil.

A zawia is a building of three rooms,
its size depending on the importance of the place in which it is situated. One room is a school-room in which the Bedouin children are taught by the ikhwan; the second serves as the guest-house in which travelers receive the usual three days' hospitality of Bedouin custom; in the third the ikhwan lives. The zawia is generally built near a well where travelers naturally stop. Attached to the zawia is often a bit of land which is cultivated by the ikhwan. The ikhwan are the active members of the brotherhood who teach its principles and precepts. Ikhwan in Arabic is really a plural form, which means "brothers." But the singular of the word is never used, ikhwan having come to be used for one or more. A wakil is the personal representative or deputy of the head of the Senussi.

The Grand Senussi found the Moslems of Cyrenaica fallen into heresies and in danger of rapid degeneration not only from a religious, but from a moral, point of view. Some small examples may serve to illustrate this point.

At Jebel Akhdar, in the north of Cyrenaica, certain influential Bedouin chiefs had established a sort of Kaaba, an imitation of the true one at Mecca to which every believer who could possibly do so should make his pilgrimage. These founders of a false Kaaba tried to establish the theory that a pilgrimage thither was a worthy substitute for the haj, the authentic pilgrimage to the central shrine of Islam.

The keeping of the month of Ramadan as a time of abstinence and religious contemplation is an important tenet of the Moslem faith. The Bedouins used to go before the beginning of Ramadan to a certain valley called Wadi Zaza, noted for the multiple echo given back by its walls. In chorus they would shout a question, "Wadi Zaza, Wadi Zaza, shall we keep Ramadan or no?" The echo of course threw back the last word of the question, "No—no—no." Those who had appealed thus to the oracle would then go home justified in their own minds in their desire to forego the keeping of the fast.

There were also prevalent among the Bedouins remnants of old barbaric customs, such as the killing of female children "to save them from the evils which life might bring," which stood between them and their development into worthy exponents of Islam.

In such circumstances what the founder of the Senussi brotherhood had to give, in his teaching and preaching of a return to the pure tenets of Islam, met a poignant need.

§ 2

Sayed Ibn Ali el Senussi founded his first zawia on African soil at Siwa, which is in Egypt, close to the western frontier. From that point he moved westward into Cyrenaica, establishing zawias at Jalo and Aujila. He traveled westward through Tripoli and Tunis, gradually spreading his teachings among the Bedouins. His reputation as a saintly man and scholar had preceded him, and he was much sought after by the Bedouin chiefs, who vied with one another to give him hospitality.

On his return to Cyrenaica in the year 1843 he established at Jebel Akhdar, near Derna, a large zawia called el Zawia el Beda, the White Zawia. Until this time he had no headquarters, but led the life of a
wandering teacher. He settled down at el Zawia el Beda and received visits from the leading Bedouin dignitaries of Cyrenaica.

The Grand Senussi preached a pure form of Islam and strict adherence to the laws of God and His Prophet Mohammed.

His teachings may perhaps be best illustrated by a passage from a letter to the people of Wajanga, in Wadai, the original of which I saw at Kufra and translated. The passage reads as follows:

"We wish to ask you in the name of Islam to obey God and His Prophet. In his dear Book he says, praise be to him, 'Oh ye, who are believers, obey God and obey the Prophet!' He also says, 'He who obeys the Prophet has also obeyed God.' He also says, 'He who obeys God and His Prophet has won a great victory.' He also says, 'Those who obey God and the Prophet, they are with the prophets whom God has rewarded.'

"We wish to ask you to obey what God and His Prophet have ordered; making the five prayers every day, keeping the month of Ramadan, giving tithe, making the hajj to the sacred home of God [the pilgrimage to Mecca], and avoiding what God has forbidden—telling lies, slandering people behind their backs, taking unlawfully other people's money, drinking wine, killing men unlawfully, bearing false witness, and the other crimes before God.

"In following these you will gain everlasting good and endless benefits which can never be taken from you."

The principal concern of the founder of the Senussis was with the religious aspect of life. He did not set out to be a political leader or to grasp temporal power. He counseled austerity of life with the same enthusiasm with which he practised it. He taught no special theological doctrines and demanded acceptance of no particular dogmas. He cared much more for what his followers did than for any technicalities of belief. His only addition to the Moslem ritual was a single prayer, which he wrote, and which the Senussi use, called the hezb. It is not opposed to anything taught by the older theologians, nor does it add anything to what is found in the Koran. It is simply expressed in different language. In the letter to the people of Wajanga, which I have quoted, another passage described his mission, which God had laid upon him, as that of "reminding the negligent, teaching the ignorant, and guiding him who has gone astray."

He forbade all kinds of luxurious living to those who allied themselves with his brotherhood. The possession of gold and jewels was prohibited, except for the adornment of women, and the use of tobacco and coffee. He imposed no ritual, and only demanded a return to the simplest form of Islam as it was found in the teaching of the prophet. He was intolerant of any intercourse not only with Christians and Jews, but with that part of the Moslem world which, in his conviction, had digressed from the original meaning of Islam.

In the year 1856 Sayed Ibn Ali founded at Jaghbub the zawia which eventually developed into the center of education and learning of the Senussi brotherhood. His choice of Jaghbub was not haphazard or accidental, but a demonstration of his wisdom and practical sagacity. He conceived it to be of the first impor-
tance to reconcile the different tribes of the desert to one another and to bring peace among them. One more quotation from his letter illustrates this point:

"We intend to make peace between you and the Arabs [the people of Wajanga to whom this letter is addressed are of the black race] who invade your territory and take your sons as slaves and your money. In so doing we shall be carrying out the injunction of God, Who has said, 'If two parties of believers come into conflict, make peace between them.' Also we shall be following his direction, 'Fear God, make peace among those about you, and obey God and His Prophet if you are believers.'"

Jaghbub was a strategic point for his purpose. It stood midway between tribes on the east and on the west who had been in constantly recurring conflict. With his headquarters there, the Grand Senussi could bring his influence to bear on the warring rivals and carry out the command of the prophet to "make peace among those about you." From a practical point of view Jaghbub was an unpromising place in which to set up such a center of educational and religious activity as the Grand Senussi had in contemplation. It is not much of an oasis, if indeed it can be called an oasis at all. Date-trees are scarce there, the water is brackish, and the soil very difficult to cultivate. Its strategic importance, however, was clear, and without hesitation he selected it as the site of his headquarters. The raids made upon one another by the tribes to the east and the west were brought to an end through his influence. He settled many old feuds not only between those tribes, but among the other tribes in Cyrenaica.

Sayed Ibn Ali lived for six years after establishing himself at Jaghbub and extended his influence far and wide. The Zwaya tribe, which had been known as the brigands of Cyrenaica, "fearing neither God nor man," invited him to come to Kufra, the chief community of their people, and establish a zawia there. They agreed to give up raiding and thieving and attacking other tribes, and offered him one third of all their property in Kufra if he would come to them. He could not go in person, but sent a famous ikhwan, Sidi Omar Bu Hawa, who established the first Senussi zawia at Jof, in Kufra, and began the dissemination of the teachings of the Grand Senussi among the Zwayas. He also commissioned ikhwan to go into many other parts of the Libyan Desert, and before his death all the Bedouins on the western frontier of Egypt and all over Cyrenaica had become his disciples.

He died in the year 1859, and was buried in the tomb over which rises the Kubba of Jaghbub.

The Grand Senussi was succeeded by his son Sayed Mohammed el Mahdi, who was sixteen years old when his father died. Despite his youth, his succession as head of the order was strengthened by two circumstances. It was remembered that on one occasion, at the end of an interview with his father, el Mahdi was about to leave the room, when the Grand Senussi rose and performed for him the menial service of arranging his slippers, which had been taken off on entering. The founder of the order then addressed those present in these words: "Witness, oh, ye men here present, how Ibn Ali el Senussi
arranges the slippers of his son, el Mahdi.” It was realized that he meant to indicate that the son not only would succeed the father, but would surpass him in holiness and sanctity.

Then, too, there was an ancient prophecy that the Mahdi who would reconquer the world for Islam would attain his majority on the first day of Moharram in the year 1300 after the hejira, having been born of parents named Mohammed and Fatma and having spent several years in seclusion. Each part of this prophecy was fulfilled in the person of el Mahdi. The choice as successor to the Grand Senussi fell upon him.

When Sayed el Mahdi reached his majority, there were thirty-eight zawias in Cyrenaica and eighteen in Tripolitania. Others were scattered over other parts of north Africa, and there were nearly a score in Egypt. It has been estimated that between a million and a half and three million people owed spiritual allegiance to the head of the brotherhood when el Mahdi became its active head.

He saw from the first that there was more scope for the influence of the brotherhood in the direction of Kufra and the regions to the southward than in the north. In the year 1894 he removed his headquarters from Jaghbub to Kufra.

His going to Kufra marked the beginning of an important era in the history of the Senussis and also in the development of trade between the Sudan and the Mediterranean coast by way of Kufra. The difficult and waterless trek between Buttafal Well, near Jalo, and Zieghen Well, just north of Kufra, became in el Mahdi’s time a beaten route continually frequented by trade caravans and by travelers going to visit the center of the Senussi brotherhood. “A man could walk for half a day from one end of the caravan to the other,” a Bedouin told me.

The route from Kufra south to Wadai was also a hard and dangerous journey in those days, and el Mahdi caused the two wells of Bishra and Sara to be dug on the road from Kufra to Tekro.

Under the rule of the Zwaya tribe of Bedouins, which had conquered Kufra from the black Tebus, that group of oases was the chief center of brigandage in the Libyan Desert. The Zwayas are a warlike tribe, and in the days before the coming of the Senussis they were a law unto themselves and a menace to all those who passed through their territory. Each caravan going through Kufra north or south was either pillaged or, if lucky, was compelled to pay a route tax to the Zwayas. These masters of Kufra were induced by el Mahdi to give up this exacting of tribute. He realized the importance of developing the trade of the oases and of the routes across the Libyan Desert from the north to the south. He strove to make desert travel safe, and in his day, Bu Matari, a Zwaya chieftain, told me at Kufra, a woman might travel from Barka (Cyrenaica) to Wadai unmolested.

El Mahdi also extended the circle of influence of the Senussis in many directions. Ikhwan were sent out to establish zawias from Morocco as far east as Persia. But his greatest work was in the desert, among the Bedouins and the black tribes south of Kufra. He made the Senussis not only a spiritual power in those regions and
a powerful influence for peace and amity among the tribes, but a strong mercantile organization under whose stimulus trade developed and flourished. In the last years of his life he undertook in person to extend the influence of the brotherhood to the southward. He had gone to Geru, south of Kufra, when his death came suddenly in the year 1900.

The sons of el Mahdi were then minors, and his nephew Sayed Ahmed was made the head of the brotherhood. He was the guardian of Sayed Idris, who, as the eldest son of el Mahdi, was his legitimate successor.

§ 3

The new head of the Senussis made an abrupt departure from the policies of his predecessors. He sought to combine temporal and spiritual power. When the Italians took over Cyrenaica and Tripoli from the Turks, Sayed Ahmed attempted to unite his spiritual power as head of the brotherhood with the remnants of temporal and military power left by the Turks. Then the Great War broke out, and he allowed himself to be persuaded by Turkish and German emissaries to attack the western frontier of Egypt. The effort was a complete failure, and Sayed Ahmed was compelled to go to Constantinople in a German submarine.

The third of the Senussi leaders saw things differently from the Grand Senussi and his great son. They realized that a spiritual leader cannot be beaten on his own ground, whereas if he takes the field in quest of temporal supremacy, it requires only a few military reverses to destroy his prestige. The power of Sayed Ibn Ali el Senussi and Sayed el Mahdi lay in themselves and in the spiritual influence that radiated from them. Sayed Ahmed surrendered this influence to rely upon arms, ammunition, and circumstances. When these failed, there was nothing left.

From the hands of Sayed Ahmed the Senussi leadership fell to the lineal successor, Sayed Idris. He derives a considerable part of the prestige which he undoubtedly possesses from the fact that he is the son of el Mahdi. But even without that advantage his own personal qualities would be an adequate foundation for success in the important position to which he has been called. He combines gentleness of disposition with firmness of character to a high degree. He has the loyal allegiance and support not only of the Senussi ikhwan, but of the people of the Libyan Desert.

In 1917 an agreement was entered into by the Italian Government with Sayed Idris, as head of the Senussi brotherhood, by which his right to administer the affairs of the oases of Jalo, Aujila, Jedabia, and Kufra was expressly recognized. This agreement was again ratified two years later. Unfortunately, in 1923 a misunderstanding between the parties to this agreement caused it to lapse. It is to be hoped, however, that a new arrangement will be entered into between Sayed Idris and the Italian authorities which will restore to these oases of the Libyan Desert their peace and prosperity.

The importance of these aspects of the Senussi rule in maintaining the tranquillity and well-being of the people of the Libyan Desert can scarcely be overestimated.