

Book Review

**Divine Madness: Mohammed
Abdulle Hassan (1856–1920)**

Abdi Sheik-Abdi. London: Zed Books Ltd., 1993, 226 pp.

This book is a welcome addition to the few book-length biographies of important African historical figures. The study, which consists of an introduction and six chapters, offers a fresh and balanced perspective on one of Africa's most controversial nationalists: Mohammed Abdulle Hassan, the mullah of present-day Somalia. Not only is he relevant to understanding modern Somali nationalism, but he also occupies a significant role in the wider context of African resistance to western imperialism. In brief, he represents the clash between Islamic and western values in colonial Africa.

Divine Madness begins with an examination of the early, colonial, and contemporary literature on the subject in various languages. In fact, one of its strengths is the author's use of a variety of foreign and indigenous sources. Sheik-Abdi draws extensively on archival and documentary data in Italian, Arabic, English, French, and Somali. Moreover, he

incorporates oral accounts from Somalis to complement his archival and documentary research, a method that enhances the indigenous perspective on Mohammed Abdulle Hassan and his activities in the Horn of Africa.

In addition, the author presents, in the first and second chapters, an overview of Somaliland in its historical context. This serves as the background in recounting Hassan's life and times. Along with a detailed examination of the Cushitic inhabitants of Somaliland, Sheik-Abdi discusses the background to the mullah-led Dervish uprising by focusing on the European colonization of Somaliland and its attendant problems. Perhaps the main response of the colonized Cushitic people to western imperialism was a deeper and more intense commitment to Islam and pan-Islamic unity, which brought about religious militancy and revivalism.

The most substantive contribution of this book is found in chapters three through five. Here Sheik-Abdi reconstructs, using an interdisciplinary approach, Hassan's transformation from a religious leader into a nationalist with secularized and cross-clan interests. He focuses on the mullah's origins and upbringing, his religious philosophy, political orientation, and anticolonial activities against British, French, Italian, and Ethiopian colonizers. Sheik-Abdi's vivid description of the mullah's armed conflict with Europeans offers insightful evidence of his leadership abilities in combining diplomacy with confrontation. This advances A. Adu Boahen's position, stated in his *African Perspectives on Colonialism* (1987), that African leaders demonstrated great leadership skills in the face of western imperialism.

In recounting the many roles of Mohammed Abdulle Hassan in Somaliland, including those of spiritual leader and poet, Sheik-Abdi presents in great detail the opposing perspectives on the mullah's personality and his activities by skillfully balancing European accounts with indigenous sources. While it can be said that the mullah was an inspiring and strong-handed leader, it would be misleading to conclude that he was "mad," as Sheik-Abdi correctly points out (p. 55). Hassan's zeal in pursuing his twin goals of reviving the religious spirit in Somaliland and of driving the non-Muslim foreigners out of his country cannot be construed as "madness."

Sheik-Abdi ends his study by placing Hassan and his Dervish movement within the broad framework of the evolution of nationalism in the Horn of Africa. He notes correctly that there is a connection between the mullah's Dervish movement and the political organizations that appeared after his death in 1921. It is no surprise, therefore, that Hawiye supporters of General Mohammed Farah Aidid compared him to Hassan as he opposed American military intervention in Somalia during "Operation Restore Hope" in 1993. Despite the many characterizations of the mullah, which ranged from "mad" to "tyrant," he should be seen ultimately, as Sheik-Abdi documents, as a nationalist who broke all barriers, including religious, ideological, and ethnic divisions. In this

regard, he can serve as a model for contemporary Somalis who are grappling with the difficult task of nation building in the wake of the Somali crisis. Indeed, this study supports the description of Hassan as the "father of the Somali nation."

Divine Madness is without doubt a very detailed, well-researched, and attractively presented book that will be of invaluable use to Africanists and Somali nationalists. It offers a fascinating interdisciplinary approach to African biographical reconstruction that will aid future researchers. Also, this book presents a revisionist perspective from an indigenous standpoint that advances Somali studies.

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