

A LETTER FROM SAYYID MUḤAMMAD °ABD
ALLĀH ḤASAN TO THE BRITISH GOVERNOR OF
SOMALILAND, JUNE 1905

LIDWIEN KAPTEIJNS

Sayyid MuḤammad °Abd Allāh Ḥasan (1856-1921) was a Somali religious leader who for more than twenty years (1898-1920) led a holy war against the Christian colonizers of his country (in particular the administration of British Somaliland) and their local Somali allies. After four costly British expeditions against him (1901-04), Italian and British diplomatic overtures led the Sayyid to accept a peace agreement, which gave him a small autonomous area in Italian Somaliland and a port on the Indian Ocean. The treaty of Ilig (May 1905) gave the Sayyid both too little and too much. It gave him too little because his followers coveted the lush grazing of the Nugaal valley beyond his new borders. It gave him too much, since the Sayyid used this new international recognition to realize some of his state building ambitions, including a ‘blue water policy’ and the development of a small merchant fleet. The letter presented below was written shortly after the Ilig agreement. Archival notes indicate that it was written c. 1 June 1905, at Biyo Ado (near Gabba) on the coast.¹ It was addressed to E.J.E. Swayne, commander-in-chief of the first British military expedition against the Sayyid and Commissioner of the Somaliland Protectorate.² The letter was carried by a Dervish delegation led by °Abd Allāh Shiḥiri, who himself translated it into English in front of Swayne. °Abd Allāh Shiḥiri, a former

- 1 Public Records Office, London (PRO), Colonial Office (CO) 535, vol. 1. The Arabic original is included in this volume. I am grateful to Jay Spaulding for comments and assistance with the preparation of the text.
- 2 See Douglas Jardine, *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland*, London: Herbert Jenkins 1923, 57 and Abdi Sheik-Abdi, *Divine Madness: Mohammed Abdulle Hassan (1856-1920)*, London: Zed Press 1993, 99ff.

British naval interpreter, had been part of the Dervish movement from its inception. He had been the leading Dervish representative in the Ilig negotiations and remained one of the Sayyid's closest advisers until his defection in 1906.³ In 1909, with Italian and British assistance, he denounced the Sayyid in front of the leader of the Ṣālihiyya brotherhood, Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ. The latter expelled the Sayyid from the brotherhood, an excommunication which seriously weakened the Dervish movement.

In the letter presented below the Sayyid first reassured Swayne that he had accepted the peace settlement, that he would avoid conflict, that he would treat Swayne's messengers well and that he, if provoked by Somalis in British territory, would raise the matter with Swayne before taking military action. The second issue the Sayyid raised was the special character of the Dervishes; as they were the people of the Book (the Qur'ān), of the *sharī'ca* (Islamic Law) and of God, they were bound to avoid lies, deceit, slander and greed. Third, the Sayyid complained about certain individuals in the British camp, the naval interpreter °Alī °Utūbi, Magan Amān, and the °āqils (the headmen appointed and paid by the colonial administration) of the Darood clan family residing in Berbera. The Sayyid expressed satisfaction about ḥājji Mūsā Fāraḥ (here called by the nickname of 'Igarreh'), the most trusted and highest ranking Somali official in the Protectorate administration, on whom he, in other letters, often heaped scorn. Risaldar-Major Mūsā Fāraḥ, had started his colonial career as a policeman in Aden. He had joined the Protectorate staff as a member of the mounted police and distinguished himself during the British expeditions against the Sayyid. In 1906 he became a 'native political agent' and in 1912 he became 'Chief Native Assistant', in charge of local intelligence. He was the most trusted Somali adviser of Swayne and later governors. For Jardine, Mūsā Fāraḥ was the Sayyid's counterpart, as he was in the pro-government camp what the Sayyid was in the anticolonial resistance movement.⁴

The Sayyid's fourth point continued the complaints about

3 PRO, CO 535 vol. 6.

4 Jardine, *Mad Mullah*, 77-8, 311-12; Sheik-Abdi, *Divine Madness*, 186-7 and PRO CO 535, vol. 42.

saboteurs in the British camp. He took credit for the administration's discovery of their intrigues by referring to his *karāma*—in Sufi terms, power to work miracles. In an earlier letter, the Sayyid had ordered Swayne to leave the country in one hour. Now he explained (and indirectly apologized) for this demand; he had acted only out of love for his country and had become angry at the unfounded news that the British would build a railway inland from Berbera.⁵ Yet the Sayyid still expected Swayne to leave the country, in his own time and without the use of force.

Fifthly, the Sayyid raised concerns about the livestock, possessions and relatives his Dervishes had left behind in the Protectorate. In their absence, others might make decisions about these (for example marrying off young women) and reap rewards. The Sayyid insisted that Swayne prevent this.⁶ Sixthly, the Sayyid asked for assistance, kind treatment and all kinds of presents.

In the postscript, after receiving, as the archival notes indicate, a delegation of Bagheri Ogaadeen people who complained of Ethiopian raids, the Sayyid accused the Ethiopians of attacking his people in spite of the peace agreement. His appeal to Swayne to do something about this is ill-tempered and far from polite.

Although the body of Arabic diplomatic correspondence the Sayyid composed during his lifetime was vast, in general only the rather loose English translations prepared by Indian officials of the Somaliland administration have been preserved. Most original Arabic letters were kept in Somaliland, where most appear

5 PRO CO 535, vol. 1. The British administration received two undated letters from the Sayyid (preserved here only in translation) on 15 April 1905. The first one read: 'Now I explain my meaning, that the Government go out of my country in one hour'. The second one commented upon the rumours about the railway: 'We have heard however that you intend to make a Railway and that is is being made in Berbera to take into the interior wherever you wish it to go. We are not pleased at this and we think that you have started peaceful proposals and treachery at the same time. ... The very men who designed the War with us design now also this railway and for the very same purpose. ... If you wish to make a railway, make it from Zeyla to Mandaha towards Harar [the old caravan route]'.

6 Compare for similar remarks Jardine, *Mad Mullah*, 162-8 and PRO CO 535, vol. 11.

to have been lost. Although the translations (quoted extensively in Jardine's *The Mad Mullah of Somaliland*), more or less succeed in conveying the general meaning of the letters, the present Arabic text allows us to hear the Sayyid, as it were, 'speak' Arabic. For scholarly conclusions about the Sayyid's Arabic, which was of course not his native tongue but the language of his education and religious training, we must await expert linguistic study. However, even impressionistically, the Sayyid's relatively low-brow, colloquial, and grammatically not always correct Arabic, with its distinct Egyptian and Sudanese ring, contributes another small clue to the life and character of this flamboyant historical personality.

Arabic Text

الحمد لله على كل حال من الاحوال اما بعد فهذه رسالة صادرة
من محمد بن عبد الله وكا/فة الدراويش الى جنرال سوين^٥
ومراد الورقة امور

اولها نعرفك ان الجماعة حقنا⁷ وصلوا / الينا واخبرونا أنك
سويت عليهم طيباً واخبرونا أنك صلحت البلاد البلاد⁸
(وايضا اخبرونا أنك / تقول أقوم من البلاد أعنى بلاد نُقَالَ
وبوهودله وما قرب منهما ففرحنا بذلك فرحاً شديداً و/ايضاً
أخبرونا أنك طلبت منا ان لا يقع فتنة من الدهور وايضاً

7 Spelled as shown.

8 Spelled as shown.

أخبرونا أنك تُحِبُّ علينا حباً شداً / يداً وايضاً يمدحوك كثيراً
والآن نعرفك نحن قبلنا الاصلاح ولا يقع منا فتنة وإذا حصلت
/ الفتنة من الناس الذين معك نعرفك الحال ولا نقوم عليهم
إلا باعلامك وايضا نعرفك أن / البلاد أمان ما أحد يخاف
عنا وإذا أجَّ⁹ إلينا واحد أو جماعة منكم نسوى عليهم خيراً
هذا من / طرفٍ

والامر الثاني نعرفك نحن غير الناس والكذب عندنا حرام
والخيانة والنميمة والبخل / كذلك فلا ترى منا كذبا ولا
خيانة أبداً على شأن نحن أهل الكتاب وأهل الشريعة وأهل
الحق وأهل / الله فالله حرمنا من الكذب والخيانة والنميمة
والبخل وجميع المفسد فإذا قلنا لك الكلام / فلا تشك ولا
يقع في خاطرك خلاف ما قلنا لك ابداً هذا من طرفٍ

والامر الثالث أعرّفك / ان الناس الذي عندك مفسدين ولا
يحبون الإصلاح العام ولا الخاص ولا يحبون الدولة / ويريدون
خسارتكم ويردّاون فلوسكم ولا يدرون شيئاً وهم ذو لونين تارة
يجيئو إليك وتارة يجيئو الينا واكثر المفسدين هم الذين آمنّت
عليهم واكبرهم على عتوبٍ / وجميع عقال طارود لكن ان

9 Spelled as shown.

مَقَنَّ أَمَانَ لِسَانِهِ طَوِيلًا وَأَمَّا مُوسَى إِكْرًا فَلَا تَسْمَعُ مِنْهُ / إِلَّا
 الْإِصْلَاحَ وَلَا يَحِبُّ الْإِفْسَادَ وَالْخَسَارَاتِ فَإِنْ أُرِدْتَ الْإِصْلَاحَ
 بِكُلِّ جِهَةٍ فَامْسِكْ / الْمُفْسِدِينَ اكْبِرْهُمْ عُتُوبًا وَعَقَالَ طَارُودَ
 وَتَأَدَّبْ مَقَنَّ أَمَانَ وَلَا تَلْغُ كَلَامِي فَكَلَامِي / صَدَقٌ وَحَقِيقَةٌ
 وَتَشُوفُ عَوَاقِبَ كَلَامِي هَذَا مِنْ طَرَفٍ
 وَالْأَمْرَ الرَّابِعَ لَا تَسْمَعُ كَلَامَ النَّمَّاءِ / مِينَ وَنَحْنُ كَذَلِكَ مَا نَسْمَعُ
 كَلَامَهُمْ وَاعْلَمْ بِأَنَّنا سَمِعْنَا أَنَّهُمْ غَيَّرُوا كَلَامَنَا وَكُتِبْنَا وَ /
 أَخْبَرُوكَ أَنَّ الدَّرَاوِيْشَ غَزَوْا إِلَيْكُمْ فَهَذَا كَذِبٌ وَمِرَادُهُمُ الْإِفْسَادَ
 وَأَنْتَ شَاهِدٌ عَلَى ذَلِكَ / وَإِيضًا نَعْرِفُكَ كُتِبُوا إِلَيْنَا رِسَالَةٌ لَا
 خَيْرَ فِيهَا وَيَشْهَدُ عَلَى ذَلِكَ أَنَّهُمْ أَفْسَدُوا أَمْرَكَ فَكَيْفَ / لَا
 يَفْسِدُونَ أَمْرَنَا وَسَمِعْتَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ فَضَحَهُمْ وَظَهَرَتْ¹⁰ كَذِبُهُمْ عِنْدَ
 الدَّوْلَةِ وَمَا ذَلِكَ إِلَّا / بِنِيَّتِي وَقَلْبِي وَكِرَامَتِي فَكَيْفَ يُمْكِنُ لِي
 أَنْ أَكُونَ مَفْسُودًا وَأَنَا أَعْلَمُ النَّاسَ وَأَكْثَرَ النَّاسَ / عِلْمًا وَعَقْلًا
 وَصَبْرًا وَيَقِينًا بَلْ مَا كُتِبَتْ إِلَيْكُمْ إِلَّا خَيْرًا وَطَيِّبًا وَطَلَبْتَ أَنَّكَ
 تَقُومُ مِنْ أَرْضِي بِإِخْتِيَارِكَ وَرَأْيِكَ بِلَا قَهْرٍ وَلَا إِجْبَارٍ وَلَكِنْ
 حَمَلْتَنِي عَلَى ذِكْرِ السَّاعَةِ الَّتِي وَقَعَتْ فِي قَلْبِكَ / شَكًّا مَا
 حَمَلْتَنِي إِلَّا حَبِيئًا بَارِضِي وَأَمَّا ذِكْرُ الرَّيْلِ وَي فَخَبِرَ النَّاسَ الَّذِينَ

10 Spelled as shown.

ذكرت لك أسماء/هم وانسابهم أنكم نويتم تضعوه في ارضنا
فتحيرنا وتغير حالنا مرة واحدة والان / اخبرك ان قلبي إستوى
طيب مستريح هذا من طرفٍ

والامر الخامس اعرفك ان أهلنا / وعيالنا واموالنا عندك بالأمانه
فنبغي ان لا يتعرض علينا أحدٌ ولا يتزوج اهلنا أحدٌ ولا يظلم
/ عيالنا أحدٌ ولا ياخذ أموالنا احد فكيف وهم تحت امانتك
هذا من طرفٍ

والامر السادس / نبغي منك ان تكون معنا بكل وجهٍ حتى
النصرة والمعانة على أعدائنا في كل وقتٍ ونكون / نحن معك
مثل ذلك وايضا نطلب منك المداهنة والجبر والعطية بكل نوع
وبكل فن على قدر سخاوتك / وربتتك ولهينا¹¹ جميع ما
طلبت منا هذا¹² والسلام //

و (. . .)¹³ الامان والعهود وغزت على اهلي / ودر اويشي
واصابت اموالي وما/ل اهلي نفسا ومالا وقتلوا ناسا / كثيرا
لابدّ الف نفر وزائد والمال لا يخص فكيف ذلك وقد وقع
الصلح / بين العام والخاص فان كان قولكم / صحيح فانظروا
هذا الشأن القبيح / واعتني هذا واشير هذا //

11 Conjectural reading.

12 Spelled as shown.

13 Hiatus; the top line of the postscript is unreadable.

السيد محمد /

عبد الله /

حسن //

Translation

Praise be to God in all circumstances. Thereafter: this letter comes from Muḥammad b. °Abd Allāh and all the Dervishes to General Swayne. The objective of the letter consists of several things. First, we inform you that our people arrived and informed us that you treated them well. They informed us that you put the country¹⁴ in order. Also, that you say that you will go away from the country, that is, from the Nugaal and Buuhoodleh and their environs. At this we rejoiced greatly. They also informed us that you have asked from us that no discord may arise ever. They also told us that you love us greatly and moreover praised you much. Now we let you know that we have accepted the peace settlement; we will not cause discord. If discord is caused by the people who are with you, we will inform you of this situation and will not move against them except after notifying you. We also let you know that the country is secure; no one is in fear of us. If an individual or group comes from you to us, we will treat them well. This is one issue.

Secondly, we inform you that we are not like [other] people, for lying is forbidden to us, as are deceit, slander and greed. You will never see lies or deceit from us, because we are people of the Book, people of the *sharī'a*, people of the truth, and people of God, and God has made lying, deceit, slander, greed and all evil deeds unlawful for us. If we tell you something, do not doubt it and do not ever let something different from what we said enter your mind. This is another issue.

14 In Arabic the word 'the country' occurs twice, undoubtedly by mistake.

Thirdly, I inform you that the people who are with you are evildoers and do not like the peace settlement in general or in particular. They do not like the government; they want you to suffer loss, they covet your money and do not understand anything. They have two colours; at times they come to you and at other times to us. The greatest evildoers are those in whom you have put your trust, foremost ʿAlī ʿUtūbi¹⁵ and all the ʿāqils of the Darood. But Magan Amān is insolent. As for Mūsā Igarreh,¹⁶ from him one hears only reconciliation and he does not like corruption and loss. If you want peace on all sides, then arrest the evildoers, most of all ʿUtūbi and the Darood ʿāqils. Discipline Magan Amān. Don't discount my words, for my words are sincerity and truth. You will see the upshot of my words. This is another issue.

Fourthly, don't listen to the words of slanderers; we, similarly, will not listen to their words. Know that we heard that they changed our words and our writing. They informed you that the Dervishes set out to attack you, but this is false. They want to cause trouble; you are witness to this. We also inform you that they wrote us a letter with no good in it, and it is shown in this way that they undermine your cause, so how would they not undermine my cause? I heard that God exposed them and that their lies were revealed to the administration. This only occurred because of my [good] intention, my [honest] heart and my miraculous power. How would it be possible for me to be corrupt, while I am the wisest of people and the greatest in learning, intelligence, forbearance and conviction. Indeed, I wrote to you only good and kind [words]. I asked you to leave my land by your own choice and decision, without coercion or force. But what prompted me to mention 'in one hour', which sowed doubt in your heart; what prompted me was only my love for my land. As for the mention of the railway, the people whose names and affiliations

15 Spelled ʿAtūbi one time and ʿUtūbi another.

16 The Somali word *igarreh* means 'the one who owns a she-camel whose own offspring has been taken away from her but who is nevertheless milked for consumption by others'. It expresses the Sayyid's criticism of Mūsā Fārah's service to the colonial government rather than (as the Sayyid would put it) to his own people.

I mentioned to you announced that you intended to put it [the railway] in our land. We were bewildered and flew into a rage, but now I inform you that my heart is calm, settled and at ease. This is another issue.

Fifthly, I inform you that our people, children and possessions are with you in your trust. We wish that no one interfere with us, that no one marry our people, treat our children unjustly, or take our wealth. How could this be possible while they are in your trust! This is another issue.

Sixthly, we desire from you that you are with us in every way, even with assistance and support against our enemies at any time; we will be with you like that. We also ask from you kind and gentle treatment and presents of all kinds and variety as your generosity and rank allow. We take pleasure in all that you asked from me. This [is what I have to say] and [I conclude with] peace.

[Postscript:] [...] guarantee of security and agreements. But they raided my people and my Dervishes and took my wealth and the wealth of my people, both persons and property. They killed many people, certainly one thousand individuals and more and wealth that cannot be counted. How is that possible if a peace agreement has taken place between the influential and the common people? If your words are sincere, then look into this repulsive matter, take care of this and give orders regarding this.

[Three imprints of the same seal]:

Sayyid Muḥammad / ʿAbd Allāh / Ḥasan.