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Rabeh Zubair in Central Sudan According to a Hausa Story**Abstract**

This article is an analysis of Rabeh Zubair's career as presented in the second part of a Hausa narrative by certain Ḥājj Aḥmed which is often considered as the first Hausa drama. The narrative is based on oral tradition, significance of which as a historical source in Africa is now quite generally recognised and accepted. The story of Rabeh is seen from an African perspective, giving his balanced portrait, which differs considerably from an European image of him as a bloodthirsty tyrant. In 1882 Rabeh attacked Baghirmi which began his conquests in the Lake Chad area and finally led to the defeat of the Borno kingdom. For seven years he was governing Borno from his headquarters in Dikwa, thinking even about turning his forces against the Sokoto Caliphate. When Britain, France and Germany agreed to divide Borno between them, in 1900 Rabeh was defeated and killed by French at the battle of Kusseri on the Shari river. The Hausa text points to the fact that Rabeh Zubair is by no means an easy figure to assess.

Commercial activities between Hausaland and Northern Africa have been pictured in some Hausa literary works. In this case study one of two texts of the dramatic narratives by one Ḥājj Aḥmed from Kano, who was settled in Tunis, is taken into consideration. The narratives tell us the story of the trans-Saharan journey of another citizen of Kano, called Mohammed Agigi, who was returning from Tripoli to his native city. Ḥājj Aḥmed's narratives were done on request of a German scholar, Rudolf Prietze,¹ who enjoined his informant to tell the story in a dialogue form. In such a way first Hausa "dramas"

¹ R. Prietze (1854–1933) has dedicated his life to the elaboration of the linguistic heritage of H. Barth and G. Nachtigal, and made research on Hausa and Kanuri languages as well as on their popular poetry. He started studying the Hausa popular poetry in Tunis in co-operation with Ḥājj Aḥmed. Then for ten years he was

came into existence². They were subsequently annotated, translated into German, edited and published in two parts.³

The first part, “From Ghadames to Ghat”, describes a caravan journey under the leadership of a certain Mohammed Agigi, who was returning from Tripoli to Kano. The description of Mohammed Agigi’s journey ends in Ghat, because some of Prietze’s notebooks, together with his other possessions, had been destroyed during the World War I.⁴ The second part, “Discussions in Ghat”, concerns mainly Rabeh Zubair’s (known also as Rabīḥ b. Faḍl Allāh) activities. It contains Agigi’s narration in Ghat to his host Abdu Salam, who was an Arab trader.

The majority of events in the two dramas were real happenings. Those fictitious have been labelled as such by the editor. So in the introduction to the first drama R. Prietze disclosed that Ḥājj Aḥmed created the episodes of dying of thirst in the desert, the skirmish with desert plunderers, and the sandstorm.⁵ Also in the foreword to the second play he remarked that his co-operator’s information was based on his personal observations when he was in Tripoli.⁶ Prietze added:

“These glimpses into the most recent past of the Sudan – before the European powers divided it among themselves – appear to be based on tales that were told in Tripoli around the turn of the century and may contain some inaccuracies”.⁷

Since the significance of oral tradition as a historical source has now been quite generally recognised and accepted, so the historical dimension of the first Hausa dramas deserves due attention. In further part of this case study we shall concentrate ourselves on the second play, as we are particularly interested in Rabeh Zubeir’s career seen from an African perspective. But first let us sketch the contents of the “Discussions in Ghat”. For both businessmen, Mohammed Agigi and his host Abdu Salam, the situation on the

continuing his research with Mūsā bin Ḥussein, a scholar from the Al-Azhar University. Apart from Hausa, he studied there also Kanuri.

² Cf. S. Piłaszewicz, ‘Literature in the Hausa Language’, in: *Literatures in African Languages. Theoretical Issues and Sample Surveys*, ed. by B.W. Andrzejewski, S. Piłaszewicz, W. Tyloch, Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 227; Umaru B. Ahmed, ‘Muhammadu Agigi’s Trans-Saharan Saga by Haji Ahmadu Kano: Comments on an Early Hausa Dramatic Text’, *History in Africa: A Journal of Method*, 18 (1991), pp. 23–38.

³ Cf. R. Prietze, ‘Wüstenreise des Haussa-Handlers Mohammed Agigi, in Gesprächen geschildert von Ḥājj Aḥmed aus Kano, mit seinen Erläuterungen aufgenommen und herausgegeben von Dr Rudolf Prietze: Gespräche eines Kaufherrn auf der Reise nach Kano, I: Von Ghadames nach Rhat’, *Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen*, 26–27 (1924): 3, pp. 1–36; ‘Wüstenreise des Haussa-Handlers Mohammed Agigi (Fortsetzung). Nach dem Diktat und den Erläuterungen von Ḥājj Aḥmed aus Kano herausgegeben von Dr Rudolf Prietze. II: Gespräche in Rhat, *Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen*, 28 (1925): 3, pp. 175–246.

⁴ Cf. R. Prietze, ‘Gespräche in Rhat’, p. 176 f.

⁵ Cf. R. Prietze, ‘Von Ghadames nach Rhat’, p. 1.

⁶ Cf. R. Prietze, ‘Gespräche in Rhat’, p. 175.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 176. English translation by Umaru B. Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 23 f.

Tripoli market is of greatest importance. The information in this respect, provided by Hājj Ahmed, is based on his own observations during his stay in the city at the beginning of the 20th century. Of special interest are those fragments which deal with the continued existence of the clandestine slave trade and smuggling the “white slavery” to Tripoli in order to satisfy the enormous demand for eunuchs in Istanbul, Mecca and Medina. It appears from the text that the Hausa merchants knew the Turks who used to buy slaves and export them across the sea.⁸ One can assume that the Hausa traders did not go into business solely with the inhabitants of Northern Africa, but transacted also with other nationals who engaged in commerce in the region.

Trade relations inevitably direct attention of Mohammed Agigi and Abdu Salam towards the newest historical happenings. To the most important of these events belongs the resettlement of the Moslem population from Crete to Trypolitania⁹ as a result of a great unrest which partially discloses the plans of the European powers, and also touches upon the activities of the Sanusiyya brotherhood in the region. Despite the decline of the Turkish empire, and the political rivalry among the European powers in order to exploit it, in eyes of the North African Muslims the Turkish Sultan was still considered a powerful figure as he was referred to as *Sarkin Duniya* – “The Ruler of the World”.¹⁰

The fate of the refugees from Crete spread panic among the Arabs from Benghazi which was intensified by recruitment them to the Turkish army. Therefore, they started to flee to Jaghbub to look for protection of the powerful Sidi Mahdi, the leader of the Sanusiyya brotherhood. During the reign of Sidi Mahdi, quadrupled the number of *zawayas* which functioned as defence forts and bastions. He continued the policy of his father, Ali as-Sanusi, the founder of the brotherhood, enlarging the territory of his influence to the South. The Sanusiyya expanded gradually from Cyrenaica through Zawila, Kawar, Kufra and Borku oases, until it reached Kanem, Borno and Wadai from where its doctrines spread in the Sub-Saharan Sudan.

During his trading activities Mohammed Agigi, main protagonist of both Hausa dramas, used to visit Wadai, the ancient African kingdom on the territory of the present-day Chad Republic, to the east of the Chad Lake. It was founded in the 16th century by the Maba tribes who became Muslims in the following century. In the second part of the 18th century, Wadai conquered Borno and then Baghirmi, and reached the status of the dominant power in Central Sudan. It was governed by Sultan who was accompanied by the Council of Elders. According to Agigi’s narration, at the end of the 19th century Wadai was a very dangerous country, especially for the visitors. No one was audacious enough to leave his house in the late afternoon and during the night-time. Both men and women of Wadai were armed with knives and they could kill innocent person without any punishment:

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 181 f.

⁹ The Muslims flying from Crete were settled down in different areas of the Turkish Empire, including Damascus.

¹⁰ Cf. R. Prietze, ‘Gespräche in Rhat’, p. 186.

Agigi: The ruler of Wadai said: “Faki Wabi!¹¹ Pilgrims and traders are in your hands. Traders are not allowed do kill a man with a gun. If they kill someone with a knife, nothing will happen. As for your Fulani brothers, tell them: ‘In my town there are no arrows. Those who kill with arrows, they will be killed with arrows, too. If someone knows that he is not able to defend himself, he should not leave [his compound]. Let the inhabitants of the town to kill each other’”.¹²

At this point the narration switches to the personality of Rabeh Zubair, “[...] an improbable invader, [...] a Mahdist general who carved a path of conquests across Central Africa”.¹³ His activities caused Sidi Mahdi to close trade routes leading to Borno. The story of Rabeh spreads over the rest of the text and presents a balanced portrait of this character, which differs from the viewpoint depicting him as “[...] a bloodthirsty tyrant, with hardly a redeeming feature”.¹⁴ Rabeh was a Sudanese from Sennar who served as a slave under Zubair Pasha (known also as Al-Zubair Raḥma Mansūr), the Eastern Sudanese slave trader. He had risen from the ranks to become a flag-bearer or military leader in Zubair’s organisation on the territory of the Bahr al-Ghazal and Darfur. By 1880 Egyptian authority, under the leadership of the British general, Charles Gordon, had begun effectively to limit slaving activities in the area. Zubair Pasha had been placed under restrictive custody in Cairo.¹⁵ According to Mohammed Agigi’s account it happened like that:

Agigi: You [Abdu Salam] ask me from where did he come? If you want to hear about him, he was a slave of the Fur ruler. When he had acquired power, he rebelled. Then the rulers of Egypt came and caught his master. Doing it, they acted craftily and said: “Zubair, come to me and I shall give you my daughter. You will take her as you are my beloved friend. Whatever you do, do it in company of the one who loves you”. So Zubair set forth and went to them. But earlier the ruler of Egypt gave the command: “When he comes, catch him and plunder his compound”. They caught him and destroyed his compound. As for Rabeh, then he was not present in the town. When he heard the news that his master was caught and that his compound was plundered, he set forth and ran

¹¹ Wabi Faki was a Fulani learned man from Sokoto, famous in the Western and Central Sudan. When he began his pilgrimage to Mecca, he visited on his way Abeche, the capital of Wadai. Its ruler’s son asked him there to prepare a magic which could eliminate his brother from the rule. Wabi Faki listened to his request and provided the prince with a magical sheet of paper. One month later the ruler died and was succeeded by the prince. Wabi stayed with the new ruler, and his son became governor of almost half of Wadai. Cf. R. Prietze, *ibid.*, p. 190.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 191 f.

¹³ Cf. Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of Nigeria*, London–Lagos–New York: Longman, 1984², p. 223.

¹⁴ Cf. Umaru B. Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

¹⁵ Cf. Louis Brenner, *The Shehus of Kukawa: A History of the Al-Kanemi Dynasty of Borno*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973, p. 123.

away to Nuba, Dschonge and Firti,¹⁶ as far as to the Ethiopian border. He made war on the Golo¹⁷ and continued the fighting until he became powerful. The English were secretly sending guns and powder to him. He said to them: "As for me, I am working for your benefit. Therefore we cannot run short of guns and powder".¹⁸

In reality, Rabeh first began his service under Zubair's son, Sulaimān. In 1879 Sulaimān was defeated in battle and killed by Gessi Pasha, a lieutenant of General Gordon. After Sulaimān's power had been broken, Rabeh succeeded to the leadership of the following of Zubair and his son, but could not avoid harassment by Gessi Pasha. At the same time, in the 1880s, he became heavily influenced by the Sudanese Mahdi, Muḥammad Aḥmad. Therefore he instituted among his followers the Mahdist devotional exercises and uniform, the patched *jubbah*, a wide-sleeved kaftan. By 1889 Rabeh discerned that conditions in the Nilotic Sudan were no longer tolerable for him and his followers due to the growing power of Anglo-Egyptian authority.¹⁹ He began moving westwards, building up his army with newly captured slaves. Step by step he started to organise a mobile military state in Central Sudan.²⁰

In 1892 Rabeh attacked Baghirmi, an ancient African kingdom founded in the 16th century which was spreading on the territory of the south-western part of the present-day Chad Republic:

Abdu Salam: Why did he [Rabeh] begin moving towards Baghirmi?
 Agigi: What did force him to march towards Baghirmi? When he became ruler, he sent his people everywhere. Some of them went to Darfur, others went to Wadai and the rest to Borno. The ruler of Bagirmi used to plunder his traders which were making their way to Borno. Rabeh heard the news: "The ruler of Baghirmi has robbed your commodities and murdered all your big men". Rabeh asked: "Who is that ruler of Baghirmi?" His people answered: "He is a certain Abu Sekin".²¹ Rabeh said: "So it is. It was him who has done it. Long before I heard about him that he was committing downright robbery. He plundered people who were going to Adamawa, he robbed those who were going to Wadai, and those going to Borno". He commanded: "Write a letter for me which I shall send to Abu Sekin.

¹⁶ These were localities on the Darfur border.

¹⁷ Town and Golo tribe are in Bahr el-Ghazal, not far from Dar Fertit.

¹⁸ Cf. R. Prietze, 'Gespräche in Rhat', pp. 194 f.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Cf. Thomas Hodgkin, *Nigerian Perspectives. An Historical Anthology*, London-Ibadan-Accra: Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 320. See also Y. Urvoy, 'Histoire de l'empire de Bornou', *Mémoires de l'Institut Français d'Afrique Noire*, 7 (1949), pp. 126-130; Émile Gentil, *La Chute de l'empire de Rabah*, Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1902, pp. 236-238.

²¹ It is not Abu Sekin but rather Sultan Gwaranga, his son is meant here.

He must give me back my precious and valuable merchandise, before the world learns about us". When the letter had been sent to Abu Sekin, he was told: "Here is a letter from a certain Rabeh". [Abu Sekin] looked at it and asked: "Who is that Rabeh?" The messenger replied: "He was a slave of Zubeir. When Zubeir had been caught, [Rabeh] ran away, went to the unbelievers and became strong there. Now everywhere people are afraid of him". Abu Sekin passed his judgement: "The messenger is innocent. Go and tell him that if the rulers are afraid of him, me, Abu Sekin, I am not afraid of him, and I am not afraid of his master, Zubeir. Tell him that I am a free man. Tell him: 'The underdog has to eat humble pie'. [...] Tell him that he should not venture to enter secretly into my country. I shall know about his every move. Tell him that if he had been a man, he would have not run away, having left his country behind".²²

When Rabeh learned from the messenger that Abu Sekin robbed his merchandise in order to abuse him, he decided to attack him. He sent a message to the English, asking them to provide him with guns and powder. Then he summoned a mallam and ordered him to fix a proper day for starting the campaign. When Rabeh asked what was Abu Sekin's army like, the messenger replied:

"The one who wants to jump over the fire, he has to tuck end of his loin-cloth into his waist-band. As for the Baghirmi people, you cannot see any difference between a woman and a man. They all are alike. Woman with the spear, and man with the spear. Woman on horseback, and man on horseback".²³

The martial nature of the Baghirmi did not hinder Rabeh, a masterful military tactician, from defeating them. He made use of a spy, in accordance with the Hausa proverb: "A town should be captured in conspiracy with its inhabitant". The spy took the lead and led Rabeh's army through the open country where water was available. When they entered the Baghirmi country, Rabeh began conquering the towns he was passing through. In Agigi's pronouncement there is a passage which suggests that some Muslims collaborated with Rabeh: "Mind yourself! Rabeh is coming with some Fulani mallams who provide him with charms".²⁴ On advice of some counsellors, Abu Sekin (= Gwaranga) decided to go and meet his adversary outside the capital. They were fighting with each other for seven days. When Rabeh was informed that among the wounded enemies were also women, he gave a command:

²² Cf. R. Prietze, 'Gespräche in Rhat', pp. 195–197.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 203 f.

“Do not make any difference between a frog and fish. Shoot at them until they ask for mercy. If I do not see Abu Sekin’s head, I know that the Baghirmi have been not defeated yet”.²⁵

After some time a fugitive from the enemy’s army informed Rabeh that Abu Sekin had run away and that he had taken refuge in his town. Rabeh re-assembled his people and set forth towards Abeche. He despatched his foot soldiers with pickaxes and ordered them to make a breach in the town wall. In the meantime the Baghirmi notables decided to surround Abu Sekin and try to force their way through the enemy’s positions. As for the commoners who had been left in the town, they submitted to Rabeh.

Then Abu Sekin sought military assistance from Shehu Hashimi²⁶ of Borno, and Hayatu²⁷, the ruler of Jama’are. According to Agigi, it was Shehu Bukar (Bokar) who despatched his people to help Abu Sekin! In reality, Shehu Hashimi refused to comply with the request. After the defeat of Baghirmi, the Shehu did impose restrictions on the export of guns and ammunition to Rabeh, but these were poorly enforced, and a substantial portion of Rabeh’s supplies during this period came from traders then resident in Borno. On his side, Rabeh imposed severe demands on the Sultan of Logone, who was not in a position to refuse him although he was a vassal of Borno. Generally speaking, the Shehu adopted an inactive policy of “wait and see”, thus allowing Rabeh to make preparations to invade Borno.²⁸

As for Hayatu, he is presented in the drama as one of the leading allies of Rabeh on the diplomatic front, and he remains Rabeh’s ally against the Shehu of Borno. Shehu Hashimi adopted a suspicious attitude towards Hayatu, as the latter attached himself to the Mahdist movement. When Rabeh approached Baghirmi, Hayatu entered into an alliance with him and married one of his daughters. His ambition was to return to Sokoto and enforce his claim as Caliph. Hayatu’s plans were well known in Kukawa, the capital of Borno. It was thought that a careful avoidance of any confrontation with Rabeh might encourage him to by-pass Borno and move further westward in an attempt to assist Hayatu in his endeavours.²⁹

Agigi: Rabeh sent someone to Borno and said: “The Baghirmi country is my country. As for you, you have to protect your own country. I have no better friend than Malam Hayatu. Malam Hayatu is on my side. As

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

²⁶ Shehu Hashimi b. Umar al-Kanemi (1885–1893) was ruling when Rabeh invaded Borno. He is remembered as the least generous of the Shehus, weak and irresolute.

²⁷ Hayatu was a grandson of Sultan Muhammadu Belo, the son of Shehu Usman ‘Dan Fodio. He left Sokoto because of political difficulties. He finally made his way to Borno, and Shehu Bukar (1881–1884) allowed him to settle in Balda, in the present Cameroon Republic. Then Hayatu founded a strong polity at Marwa (known also as Jama’are) and became supporter of the Mahdist movement. Cf. Murray Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, London: Longman, 1977², p. 122.

²⁸ Cf. Louis Brenner, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

²⁹ Cf. Umar B. Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 34; Louis Brenner, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

for you, ruler of Borno, make your balls of cooked flour. And I shall bring you milk to mix with the balls. If you want some sweetness, look for it yourself". Then Rabeh sent someone to Malam Hayatu and asked him: "How are things between you and Borno?" Hayatu replied: "There is hostility between us. If they could, they would annihilate us, because we are stronger from them". Rabeh declared: "So we shall meet in Borno. Do not fear anything. I shall not touch you, and also you do not touch me. Assemble all your people and come here, but without the Kanuri people. Go and come to a standstill in the vicinity of their town. If they overcome me, you will capture their town. If, however, I drive them away, we both will enter the town". Hayatu said: "I am ready to come. Neither me, nor my people will touch you. If I realise that the Borno people are stronger than you, I shall help you. If, however, they are not able to cope with them, I will keep my eye on them". Rabeh decided: "If I capture this town, we shall live together in it. You will be ruler of the town and I will become your war leader". Malam Hayatu said: "You should know how to cope with them. In the first encounter they would be dangerous and they would force you back. After withdrawal you will repeat your attack and then you will drive them away. They will turn back and return to their town. You will follow them and expel them from the town". Rabeh replied him in secrecy: "Do not come too close to me. The Kanuri do not know that we are in collusion".³⁰

In summer 1893, Rabeh moved his forces into Borno. The Kanuri divided themselves into two groups. It was decided that the Shehu should remain in the town as nobody was certain what were the plans of Hayatu who came close to the Borno frontier and stayed there. The other group under command of the vizier Moman Tahr took the battle to Rabeh, who was then operating in the region south to the Chad Lake. Although the Borno forces greatly outnumbered those of Rabeh, in the battle near Ngala its army was decimated and routed by the enemy. Moman Tahr and two of the leading *kachellas*³¹ were captured and subsequently killed. According to Agigi, when the defeated army began to return to the town, the Shehu left Kukawa and ran away to Zinder.

In reality, having heard the news about the defeat, Hashimi himself took command of the army and engaged Rabeh near Marte. Once again the Borno forces suffered a severe defeat. The Shehu, his court and all the commoners in Kukawa were thrown into panic. During the night Hashimi, his family and some leading men fled north-westwards. Others were heading in other directions. This episode in the Borno history has been portrayed in the Agigi's narration in the following way:

³⁰ Cf. R. Prietze, 'Gespräche in Rhat', pp. 211 f.

³¹ *Kachella* is in Kanuri a military title for royal slaves.

When Rabeh learned about the flight of the Borno ruler, he said: "Let us follow him!" He sent someone to Hayatu and declared: "The ruler of Borno ran away. Prepare your people. We shall meet in Kukawa and overcome all those who were left without their Mother". On their arrival [to Kukawa] they found an abandoned place. The ruler ran away and his people scattered. There were two groups of them. Some of them followed the ruler of Borno. Some others, big slaves and [Shehu's] children decided: "It is better for us to die than to go to a foreign town and be exposed to derision". So they turned against Rabeh and said: "If we do not succeed, let us not succeed for ever. One does not die twice. Death is a single event. Let us go in mass. The one who has some days left for him, he will avoid any oppression". Prince Adam commanded: "Set off with all your might. Let nobody raise his head. Let us attack them in mass!" Rabeh was forewarned: "Look, those Kanuri people are coming back to us." Rabeh commanded: "Where are our riflemen? Fire!" The Kanuri rushed to the attack, and then they abandoned the attempt. They attacked once more, but they felt that they were unsuccessful, so they ran away. The one who followed the Borno ruler, he followed him. The one who remained, he was killed by Rabeh. Rabeh arrived, entered the town and killed all the king's children, as well as the Arabs and the learned men – all of them. Then he left Kukawa and set forth for Dikwa. He stopped there and said: "Mallam Hayatu, you will remain there, you will not return to your town. I give you the hand of my daughter. You will be my imam. As for the courts, I make you responsible for judiciary".³²

The invader showed no mercy for the inhabitants of Borno, and the city was laid waste by a ruthless pillaging. It is said that more than 4.000 persons have been taken captive and another 3.000 have been killed. The bulk of the commercial goods was taken from North African traders. Only the property of the Sudanese merchants who had been co-operating with Rabeh was left unharmed. Trading activities suffered a lot in this lamentable situation:

Agigi: It is because of Rabeh. When he invaded Borno, he slaughtered some Arabs from Tripoli. The news about this reached Sidi Mahdi. It was said to him: "A certain slave of the Darfur ruler, whose name is Rabeh, he arrived and conquered Borno. He expelled the Borno ruler, got hold of the white people³³ and killed all of them. As for Kanuri, the inhabitants of this country, he became their master. He sold those he wanted to sell, and left alone those he wanted to leave alone." When Sidi Mahdi

³² Cf. R. Prietze, 'Gespräche in Rhat', pp. 217–219.

³³ North Africans are meant here.

learned about this, he said: “He is an unbeliever, no doubt. He killed free Muslims who did neither eat nor drink any unlawful thing, and who were without any fault. If you do not want to have them in your town, you should expel them. Let everyone come back to his town, or let them go to another country that they sell their merchandise there”. Our Sidi Mahdi commanded: “Since now our traders will not set forth for Borno, until Rabeh’s death”. He sent the message to Tripoli and to Benghazi saying that a trader can proceed to Wadai and to Kano but he is not allowed to pass through Borno. He sent the message to Wadai, to the town of the Wadai ruler: “Your trader who proceeds to Kano is not allowed to pass by Borno”. He sent the message to Kano and made an appeal to the Kano ruler: “Do not allow Rabeh’s people to enter your country”. The Kano ruler gave an order: “Don’t let the Borno people come to my country, and don’t let my people enter the Borno country”.³⁴

Shehu Hashimi settled in the village of Maganwa south of Geidam. Many of his courtiers, officials and royal slaves were also in the neighbourhood. Rabeh’s efforts to subdue them are presented by Agigi in a dramatic way. Matschina and Guru towns submitted to Rabeh through the agency of Fadella (Faḍlullā), son of Hayatu. When Rabeh demanded the regalia of Borno (*kayan sarauta*), he was told that:

“Regalia of the Borno ruler are with Amadu.³⁵ Slaves, horses, protective quilting for cavalry, chain-armour and helmets – all of them are in Zinder. We do not have anything here. Amadu has taken all those things. Go and ask him to give you back all those things which are yours”. Amadu sent a message to Guru and to the Matschina ruler. He said: “You and Rabeh, you are bastards of your mothers. Ruler of Guru, and you, ruler of Matschina! I am the end of your days. If I am not able to kill Rabeh, certainly I shall overcome you”. Amadu sent a message to Gumel and said: “Today I am Borno, because all the power of Borno passed into my hands”. The ruler of Gumel replied: “I do not recognise Zinder, and I do not recognise Rabeh. Once more the world became muddled. As for me, I decided to follow the Fulani”.³⁶

In Borno, those who had claims to its leadership began to seek a new Shehu. After some controversies Abba Kiyari b. Bukar al-Kanemi was installed as Shehu in Geidam. He thought that to have two Shehus living might divide allegiances of the people so he sent some of his slaves to Maganwa where they assassinated the former ruler of Borno

³⁴ Cf. R. Prietze, ‘Gespräche in Rhat’, pp. 192–194.

³⁵ Known also as Yakudima. He was Tanimu’s son, a vassal of Borno ruling in Zinder.

³⁶ Cf. R. Prietze, ‘Gespräche in Rhat’, pp. 221.

during his morning prayers.³⁷ Having regrouped the remnants of the Borno army, Kiyari set out to win Kukawa back. Rabeh's positions in the vicinity of Gashegar (on the southern bank of the River Yo) were overrun and his army put to flight. The Borno army set to looting his war camp but failed to destroy Rabeh's forces. Rabeh's troops regrouped and under cover of darkness counter-attacked. The Borno army panicked and fled. Shehu Kiyari and some of his most courageous followers, including his three brothers, refused to escape but fought to the end and, when they were finally taken captive, they hurled defiance at Rabeh until they were killed.³⁸

For seven years Rabeh was governing Borno from his headquarters in Dikwa. The new ruler found himself surrounded by hostile forces. To the east was Wadai, with which he had come into conflict few years ago. To the west was Sokoto Caliphate, inimical to him because of his Mahdism and his alliance with Hayatu, a Mahdist member of the Sokoto ruling family. The plundering of North African merchants during his capture of Kukawa, when twenty of them died, led temporarily to the total cessation of North African trade and to the virtual blockade of Borno.

Before the conquest of Borno, Rabeh and Hayatu agreed that they would join forces, first to invade Borno, and then to turn against Sokoto. By promising a future campaign against Sokoto, Rabeh bolstered Hayatu's hopes and maintained their alliance. When, however, he set out to visit the Fulani caliphate, he decided to leave his ally behind:

Rabeh set forth, and also his army set forth. He said: "Mallam Hayatu, I leave my town in your hands. You and those young people, you are my children. Keep your eye on them: they should not be dissatisfied. As for me, I am going to see your parents – the Fulani". Hayatu replied: "We shall stay here, me and the youngsters. Nothing evil will befall them. But you have to be careful. Do not come close to them because they might cheat you. First, send them a gift. If they accept it, they are on your side. If not, you have to withdraw tactfully".³⁹

According to Agigi, Rabeh arrived in the Bade country and despatched his messengers to Kano in the company of the Bade escort. When they reached Hadejija, a border town between the Bade and Hausa countries, they were stopped there and asked to pay custom duties. On advice of the Kano ruler they were not allowed to continue their journey.

The ruler of Kano said: "Keep them there.[...] Go and tell Mamma, the ruler of Hadejija, that I am their master: master of him, and Katagum, and Misau, and Gombe, and Bauchi and of many other rulers. If they

³⁷ In Agigi's account there is a passage which suggests a natural death of Shehu Hashim. "Fadella [son of Hayatu] said: "I have got the news that the ruler of Borno did not arrive in Zinder. He set out in the direction of Matschina [in the vicinity of Zinder] and died there". Cf. R. Prietze, *ibid.*, p. 219.

³⁸ Cf. Louis Brenner, *op. cit.*, pp. 127 f.; Elizabeth Isichei, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

³⁹ Cf. R. Prietze, 'Gespräche in Rhat', p. 230.

conquer Kano, none of you will be able to defend himself. Even Sokoto and those from Zaria, Katsina and other countries – all of them are afraid. Tell the ruler of Katagum and that of Hadejiya that they should despatch them [Rabeh's people] to the border with Katagum. There is a town on the border called Gamawa. Establish a market there for them that they can sell the merchandise they brought with them. Tell Rabeh that I am thankful to him, but you should not take anything which belongs to him. Mark out an area for them and do not allow them for entering our country. As for our traders, they are not allowed to enter their country. [...] Tell Rabeh that if he encroaches on the territory of the Fulani country, certainly he will hear gun's report".⁴⁰

In the meantime, Britain, France and Germany agreed to divide Borno between them. After a series of clashes between Rabeh's forces and the French, in 1900 Rabeh was defeated and killed at the battle of Kusseri on the Shari river.⁴¹

Rabeh Zubair is not an easy figure to assess. Most contemporary sources, as well as most subsequent accounts emphasise his ruthlessness, destructiveness and rapacity. Borno traditions point to the destructive rapacity of Rabeh's soldiers, and to the disastrous decline in agriculture. An assessment of his activities is also given in the Hausa source under review:

The ruler of Katagum said: "Come back to your country [...] and tell Rabeh that he is our neighbour now. Earlier Borno was our neighbour. We knew everything which was going on in it. If he had not come, Borno would have been conquered by Hayatu or by Malam Gaini [a Fulani from Katagum]. It happened so because the affairs of Borno were not in accordance with God's will. They are thoroughly corrupt. There is a lot of oppression and dirtiness there. Everyone who was coming there with his merchandise on the head could be robbed in Borno due to their evil nature. Rabeh partially improved the situation, and partially worsened it. When he encroached Borno, he forbade oppression as well as corruption. When we heard about it, we rejoiced. When he arrived in Borno, he did also damage. He killed the Arabs from Tripoli and confiscated their property. It was bad and forbidden. He killed all people from Ghadames, he killed all people from Zeila. They had stayed in Borno as guests. He killed all great scholars. That is why we came to hate him".⁴²

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 231 f.

⁴¹ Cf. Mervyn Hiskett, *The Development of Islam in West Africa*, London–New York: Longman, 1984, p. 199.

⁴² Cf. R. Prietze, 'Gespräche in Rhat', pp. 235 f. .

Seven years of Rabeh's government in Borno were occupied largely in establishing his authority and in combating European detachments who were eager to share the Borno's "cake" between them. It is not easy to imagine the shape his later rule would have taken. Émile Gentil, who directed the campaign which led to the defeat and death of Rabeh, duly appreciated his capable reorganisation of the local government and revenue collection.⁴³ R.A. Adeleye of the Yoruba origin was even more explicit about him: "Doing nothing intrinsically different from what his European rivals were doing to African countries, he stands condemned in the view of the latter largely by reason of his failure".⁴⁴

⁴³ Cf. Thomas Hodgkin, *op. cit.*, p. 389 f.

⁴⁴ Quoted after Elizabeth Isichei, *op. cit.*, p. 224.