INFLUENCE OF ARABIC POETRY ON THE COMPOSITION AND DATING OF FULFULDE JIHAD POETRY IN YOLA* (NIGERIA)

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the significant contexts of use of Arabic script in Africa is the large amount of manuscripts in Fulfulde, inspired especially by Sheehu Usman dan Fodio. The writings of this pivotal political and religious leader and his contemporaries have been revered by his followers, and thus ample numbers have survived until the present day. Being Muslims and inspired by Arabic poetry, Usman dan Fodio’s contemporaries have used the Arabic script and metre to write up their compositions in various languages.

The power of the Fulbe states in West Africa was closely associated with the Fulbe’s ‘ownership’ of Islam. Their aversion to the colonial powers who undermined their ruling position has since also led to a massive rejection of Western and Christian education by successive generations of Fulbe (Breedveld 2006; Regis 1997). Most Muslim children do learn to read and write Arabic in the Qur’anic schools, resulting in widespread use of the Arabic script in Fulbe societies until today.

The aim of this paper is to present initial results from the investigation of the jihad poetry composed in Fulfulde which is now available in Yola, Nigeria, and is, for the purpose of this paper dubbed the Yola collection. This collection contains 93 manuscripts of copied Fulfulde poems by Usman dan Fodio and his contemporaries and is at present privately owned by a family (see below). First, the present paper gives a brief introduction to the main poet, Usman dan Fodio, and his contemporaries are named. Next,

* The initial consonant in the name of the city Yola is a glottal (laryngealized) palatal affricate, represented in standard Fulfulde spelling by y with a hook, sometimes also represented as y preceded by an apostroph. For reasons of convenience, in this article the English spelling is used.

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some comments are given on the use and status of the Yola collection in present-day Nigeria. The paper further provides an overview of the use of the Arabic script to write Fulfulde and describes the influence of Arabic poetic techniques on the composition and dating of the Fulfulde poems in the Yola collection.

2. USMAN DAN FODIO

Sheehu Usman dan Fodio (1754–1817) was born in Marata in the state of Gobir (present day Niger) into a Fulbe, Muslim family. Usman dan Fodio is the Hausa form of his name by which he is usually known in the literature. In Fulfulde, he is known as Usumaanu bii Foonduye and the form in which his name appears in his Arabic manuscripts is ʿUṯmān ibn Muḥammad ibn ʿUṯmān ibn Ṣāliḥ ibn Muḥammad ibn Ḥarūn at-Takrūrī al-Mālikī al-ʾAšʿarī, known as Ibn Fūdī (Kensdale 1955: 163). The title Sheehu came to be used as his personal name, and in Nigeria he is often merely referred to as Sheehu. He became an important Muslim teacher and after he was forced to flee his home town, because of political rivalry with the rulers of Gobir (cf. Njeuma 2012; Boyd & Mack 1997), his main drive became the reclamation of his position, the rooting out of pagan practices, and the installation of ‘true’ Islam (Haafkens 1979: 25). In those days, the northern part of present day Nigeria and adjacent parts of Niger were an amalgam of smaller states and kingdoms, bound loosely together by vicinity and a kind of common ethnic identification by their leaders as Hausa. Usman dan Fodio became the instigator of a wave of jihads that were directed against these Hausa states, claiming their leaders and population to be pagan or at least only nominally Muslim. The series of battles began in 1804 with an attack on Gobir, the home area of Usman dan Fodio, and formally ended in 1809 with the founding of the Islamic state of Sokoto, i.e. one large Hausa Muslim empire with Sokoto at its centre. The Sokoto empire not only encompassed northern Nigeria, but also large chunks of present day Niger and Cameroon. Although Sokoto previously was a rather unimportant place, it has remained the religious centre of northern Nigeria ever since.

The leaders of the jihad, Usman dan Fodio, his brothers, uncles, and later on also his son Muhammed Bello and daughter Nana Asma’u, were not only warriors with the sword, they were also warriors with words. They were prolific writers, often presenting their ideas in the form of lengthy rhyming texts, hence the remarkable name of such texts: jihad poetry. The poems cover a wide range of topics; religion, politics, and history and they provide