



Juan Maria Schuver, photographed in Philippopolis,  
7 November 1877

Juan Maria Schuver's Travels  
in North East Africa  
1880–1883

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THE HAKLUYT SOCIETY  
LONDON

1996

kettledrums have accompanied the bridegroom and stationed on the outside, proclaim at irregular intervals *urbi et orbi* that important events are happening inside. Privacy is neither sought nor wished for; on two occasions that I had to visit the happy couple I was drawn into the nuptial room, where to my horror I found myself between two half drunk people, recently bathed in oil. It is proverbially dangerous to place oneself between two combatants, but here I had to escape not from blows but from loving caresses.

The chief is not allowed to repudiate his wives, but this is rather a disadvantage for the latter, as nothing prevents him from starving them without their being able to return to their parents.

On other occasions he keeps up a certain amount of dignity and discipline. Several saddled horses are always ready at his door, while a dozen armed retainers follow his every step. Gaudy shawls and a mantle of neatly draped ape-skins are his favourite dress. His horses of Galla breed are pretty-looking creatures, but weak in the legs and unable to stand a fatiguing journey.

His official title is one, which the Emperor of Austria himself might envy. He is nothing more nor less than 'Sheikh Ajib of Gubba, son of Ibrahim, son of Hamad, son of Mohammed el-Nur [en-Noor], the great Porcupine (Abu Shok [Aboo-Choka]), lord of Monkuis (the "five mountains") and protector of Beri'.

The first of June again saw us on the road, as I was desirous of visiting the nearest Shangallas (negroes under Abyssinian rule) and get as much of a glimpse of the Makade (the generic term for Abyssinians both at Famaka & Gubba) as possible without being forced to a journey to Ras Adal. For on the frontier of Gojjam the same rule holds good which renders Abyssinia so unapproachable on all sides; strict orders exist to bring every intruding stranger by goodwill or by force to the court of the ruler of the country.

My chief object was to reach the towering mountain of Kinien, which closes the Isien plain, fully 45 miles East of Gubba. There was no chance of obtaining guides and Mondo, though he had lately come from thence, completely ignored the path. But as the country was open, the grass as yet being only half-a-foot in height, there was no difficulty in trusting to the compass. We passed a couple of Gubba villages; the last encounter we made of human beings before plunging into the Gala<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Arabic *khala*: open country, empty space.

was a lucky one, for we chanced to meet a Faki on horseback, followed by a slaveboy carrying an enormous gourd full of excellent *merissa*. As it is well known that all liquids except water, milk & coffee are interdicted to these Pharisees, I think it was rather an act of charity to relieve him from the temptation of sinning. There is an Albanian proverb about 'He who carries the wine, does not drink it'.

A thin forest on undulating ground clothed with a carpet of fresh grass, which made the numerous anthills look like so many funeral mounds and intersected by many a dry Khor, all belonging to the Isien basin, we travelled through for 2½ days without meeting a trace of human life or coming on any of the rhinoceroses, elephants and buffaloes, which my companion had predicted. Four ma'arifs, small gazelles, many of them tailless and not larger than a big dog and a few small black hens, not to be distinguished from the domesticated ones, were all the game we saw. Poor hunting-grounds these are indeed.

Towards the close of the third day we struck upon a few Gumuz huts, where we were received with the most delicate hospitality, though we could only communicate with them by signs. Thus is [?]<sup>1</sup> have found to be up to now, the negroes everywhere, where they have not been vitiated by the contact of Mohammedans or Christians. These people are emigrants from Gubba and live a life of the most absolute republicanism and freedom, every family keeping at a distance of a mile from their nearest neighbours. The women and children were all suffering of purulent ophthalmia, which appeared to spare the men. Fowls were their only animal riches, and these had all their tails carefully plucked out, a proceeding which is believed to fatten them. The Bertas used to preserve the empty shells, which the chicken leaves behind, string them on twigs and stick these in the roofs of their huts in the belief that only on that condition the chickens can live.

A red handkerchief procured a guide to the mountain, at whose base we spent a day wandering from hamlet to hamlet before we hit upon the abodes of the soldiers, who had escorted Mondo to Gubba. As they had not been paid for their exertions, they did not receive us with much cordiality. All at once it was whispered all around that I was a Turkish spy, upon which the whole village crowded round me, staring as if they wanted to eat me and scratching their bodies all the while in a way clearly indicating that their fingers itched from the desire to lay hands on me.

They simply laughed at my attempts to make them give me some idea of their language, which is clearly different from that of the Gumuz. Beads procured food and beer.

<sup>1</sup> Schuver omitted a word or phrase here.