



EDUCATING MUSLIM WOMEN

The West African Legacy of
Nana Asma'u, 1793-1864

Jean Boyd ❀ Beverly Mack

Educating Muslim women:
the West African legacy
of Nana Asma'u
(1793–1864)

Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack

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*Maps drawn by Dr. Alexander Kent, FBCart.S., FRGS

PREFACE

Nana Asma'u (1793–1864) was a prolific Muslim scholar, poet, historian, and educator, a legend in her own lifetime. That legend lives to this day; people still name their daughters after her; her poems are read and recited both privately and in public gatherings, and still move people profoundly; the memory of her remains a vital source of inspiration and hope. Asma'u was a devout, learned Muslim who was also courageous and independent-minded, able to observe, record, interpret, and influence the major public events that happened around her. Most important of all perhaps, her example as an educator is still followed: the system she set up in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, for the education of rural women, has not only survived in its homeland – through all the traumas and disruptions of the colonization of West Africa and the establishment of the modern state of Nigeria – but is also being revived and adapted elsewhere, notably among Muslim women in the United States.

In this book, we give an account of Asma'u's upbringing and the critical junctures in her life, described from several perspectives: that of her own first-hand experiences as presented in her writings; that of those who witnessed her endeavours as her contemporaries; and that of travellers to the region. We have relied on a variety of sources, primary and secondary. Of the former, the most important are Nana Asma'u's own works, notably her poetry collected and preserved by her family in their home. For an outsider's view of life at the time, we have referred primarily

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to nineteenth-century travel memoirs, especially those of Hugh Clapperton and Heinrich Barth. We have of course consulted and benefited from modern scholarship about the peoples, culture, and history of the region, the works in particular of Murray Last, Margery Perham, Mervyn Hiskett and David Muffet. For the account of her legacy, her present influence, and how her example is being sustained and adapted, we have depended on our first-hand experiences and field studies in Nigeria, and documents pertaining to the efforts of women to develop a collective voice and establish their rights as women and Muslims in today's societies. Information about the sources used for this book is set out in the References (pp. 235–45).

The Introduction briefly explains the historical moment of the story recounted in this book, and its cultural setting. We give particular attention to the practice of Sufism in West Africa, its association with Islamic scholarship, the role of the Qur'an in teaching, the pattern and method of education, and the part played by women. That is the minimum of backgrounding necessary to enable a proper appreciation of the achievements of Nana Asma'u and an understanding of why her example should have such resonance today. Thereafter, the main body of the work is arranged as follows:

Chapter 1 narrates and explains the circumstances of the hijra (emigration) of the Fulani community from 'Degel, and the ensuing Jihad which ended with the foundation of the Sokoto Caliphate. The Fodio family, including Asma'u, were actively involved in shaping these events, the understanding of them, and managing their consequences.

Chapter 2 discusses Asma'u's role as a young mother, as senior wife of the Wazir, as the Caliph's sister; her concerns about, and her activism in seeking to meet, the challenges that arose from the social upheavals during and after war.

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Chapter 3 explains the origins of the ‘Yan Taru, the network of women teachers that Nana Asma’u founded and organized. It remains a model for women’s education systems, both in Nigeria and internationally, nearly two hundred years after it was established.

Chapter 4 presents Asma’u’s character, using examples of her poems to illustrate her versatility and intelligence. It goes on to recount how, after her death in 1864, her sister, Maryam, assumed her role, and how scholarship among the ‘Yan Taru is sustained in an unbroken tradition to this day.

Chapter 5 describes the advent of colonialism, which led to the devaluation and marginalization of Islamic scholarship in West Africa. The negative effects are explained of the abrupt imposition (under British rule) of an alien script, of the illiteracy that followed, and of changes to women’s education in the early twentieth century.

Finally, chapter 6 reports the activism of Muslim women scholars in Northern Nigeria in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and gives an account of ‘Yan Taru organizations, patterned on Nana Asma’u’s, established by Muslim groups in various cities in the United States.

This book is the third on which we have collaborated to bring the life and works of Nana Asma’u to the attention of scholars and the wider public. The first was a text with translation in English of over sixty of Asma’u’s known works, their sources, historical pedigree, and original manuscripts in facsimile: *The Collected Works of Nana Asma’u Daughter of Usman dan Fodiyo 1793–1864* (1997; Nigerian edition, 1999). The second was a volume that provided Asma’u’s perspective on her time and place in the contexts of history, anthropology, religious studies, literature, and women’s studies, including representative excerpts of her works: *One Woman’s Jihad: Nana Asma’u, Scholar and Scribe* (2000).

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In the present book, we have tried to carry the earlier studies up to the present day.

We are mindful indeed of the profound personal debt we owe to the direct heirs of Nana Asma'u, her descendants and other dedicated scholars, who gave so generously of their time and hospitality, who permitted us access to private papers and books, to private spaces, to the precious and fragile heirlooms reverently passed and preserved from generation to generation, and who shared with us their memories and thoughts about Nana Asma'u. It is a rare privilege to have come to know the life and work of this accomplished scholar through the recollections of her direct descendants and, indeed, all those who strive to embody her virtues in their lives. Her involvement in and contribution to nineteenth-century Northern Nigerian history deserves fuller consideration in the field. Her influence on contemporary Muslim women and communities in the international twenty-first century context is irrefutable. As her descendants themselves believe, all who strive to live by her example are of her lineage in the same sense that she was one of a long line of disciplined, ascetic Muslim scholars who embody and keep alive, in word and deed, the example of the *Sunna*, the way of the Prophet.

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