Nana Asma’u (1793–1864) spent her life in what is now known as northern Nigeria, never imagining that her reach would extend to a country that was the final destination for Africans transported there against their will in the Atlantic slave trade during the span of her lifetime. Raised in a literate, activist family of Qadiriyya Sufi Muslims, Asma’u established a program of women’s education that has endured multiple political transmutations in Nigeria and jumped the ocean to flourish in twenty-first-century North America. In both places, Nana Asma’u personifies local resistance to oppression and fosters women’s spiritual right to acquire knowledge. This chapter is an exploration of her life and how her legacy has impacted two continents.

Origins

Islam is as diverse in its practices and communities as any of the other Abrahamic religions. While most Muslims agree on Islam’s foundations – the Qur’an, the five pillars of recommended behaviors, the Prophet Muhammad’s life history – beyond those, there is much variation in interpretations, practices, and schools of law. The Sunni–Shi’a split occurred quite early in Islamic history’s seventh-century origins. Throughout the subsequent unfolding of Islam, mystic philosophy, known as Sufism, has been practiced by Muslims in both Sunni and Shi’a communities. Just as Islamic practices are not monolithic, Sufism’s particular practices also vary, depending on the interpretation of the brotherhood community to which one adheres. Nevertheless, a commonly held Sufi belief is that “the soul has no gender.” Despite the Qur’an’s clear message of human equity, many Muslims’ interpretations deem Sufism heretical either for practicing gender equity or on the grounds that it advocates mystic union with God, which they feel allows for more human agency than is merited in theological matters. Nevertheless, in the twenty-first century, Sufi brotherhoods remain some of the fastest-growing branches of Islam.

Asma’u’s family’s particular brand of Islam was Sunni, and they were adherents of the Sufi Qadiriyya brotherhood that had spread from its twelfth-century Persian roots in the preaching of Abdul Qadir Gilani (1076–1166), which advocates free will. Asma’u was born into the ethnic Fulani clan known as Fodiyo, which means “learned” in the Fulfulde language. Among the Fodiys, both women and men were educated from an early age. The Fodiys originated from the Futa Toro region of West Africa, now known as Senegal. The clan consisted of ethnic
Nana Asma’u

Fulani scholars and pastoralists who had resided there since the fifteenth century. They had long practiced Islam, which had spread westward along the North African coast and then south along the West African coast between the seventh and fourteenth centuries. Asma’u’s grandparents were among those who had gradually migrated eastward from Futa Toro into the region now known as northwestern Nigeria by the early part of the eighteenth century. As they moved, they encountered ethnic groups that either were not Muslim or practiced syncretic forms of worship that combined traditional spirit possession (Hausa, bori) practices with aspects of Islam. Some of the rural Fulani migrants simply grazed their cattle, but others, who were scholars, settled in urban areas and acted as scribes for illiterate local kings.

The Fodiyo family of scholars had been actively involved in teaching, preaching, and producing written works since at least the eighteenth century, when Nana Asma’u bint Fodio’s parents settled in the region. All four of Asma’u’s grandparents were highly educated, literate scholars of Islam, whose reverence for the accumulation of knowledge set the standard for subsequent generations. Asma’u and her siblings were educated in their early years by their mothers and grandmothers, as was their father, the Shehu. Asma’u was quadrilingual. Fulfulde was her first language, but Arabic was central to acquiring a deep knowledge of Islam, so she learned to read and write in both languages. In addition, Hausa was the language of the local Hausa majority, and Tamchek was spoken by itinerant Tuareg herders who moved around the region seasonally: Asma’u spoke both these languages and wrote in Hausa as well. In Asma’u’s family, prose narrative was the common means of communicating concepts of equitable social organization, while poetry was the familiar language of the Qur’an as well as the format for compositions of remembrance and admonition. As Qadiriyya Sufis, their aim was to study and preach Islam, freely, in a gender-equitable context. Asma’u’s poetic productivity began when she was in her mid-twenties, following years of study based on the canon of classical Islamic works that comprised her father’s library. Among these manuscripts were over 300 of the Shehu’s own compositions in prose and poetry. Asma’u and her brother Bello wrote poetic works to each other whenever they were physically separated by battles or caliphate demands, commenting on current events and suggesting strategies.

The Sokoto jihad

Asma’u’s father, Shehu Usman ‘dan Fodiyo (1754–1817 CE), is renowned as the leader of the regional Sokoto jihad (1804–8, with skirmishes lasting until 1830) to reform Islamic practices. Plans for the jihad evolved over several decades, during which the Shehu’s practice of preaching about Islam was met with increasing resistance by local Hausa kings. When he began to preach in about 1774, local kings tolerated his activities, but as his following grew, it became a threat to the status quo. With the death of an older, more deferential king and his ambitious son’s succession, new laws prevented the Shehu’s continued preaching and banned new Muslims’ overt expressions of their faith, including public prayer and Islamic attire for both men and women. By 1804, the Shehu and his followers felt they had no recourse but to resist such oppression through jihad activities. They launched the first of several signal battles and years of itinerancy as they fled from Hausa non-Muslim enemies and fought back when they could. Against all odds, the Muslims’ ultimate victory in the region resulted in the replacement of non-Muslim Hausa kings (called Sarki in Hausa) with Fulani Muslim leaders known by the Arabic term Emir. Nevertheless, the majority’s Hausa language continued to be the lingua franca of the region, and the Hausa majority were not compelled to convert to Islam. The Sokoto jihad led to the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate in what is now northern Nigeria and a pattern of ethnic mixing that resulted in contemporary Hausa-Fulani ethnicity. By the time the British arrived
in northern Nigeria in 1903, they found extensive Islamic education systems, which they felt obviated the need to establish schools in the north as they had done in the southern part of the country. Asma’u was instrumental in that change, but not because she orchestrated mass literacy. Rather, the extensive system of orally transmitted Islamic education among rural women that Asma’u established in the aftermath of the jihad laid the groundwork for the spread of Islam well beyond urban areas.

The jihad began when Asma’u was 10 years old. By then, she had been a student for more than five years and was expected to behave at a level of maturity far beyond what might be imposed on a child of that age in contemporary Western culture. Her father had personally overseen her education and that of her other siblings, both girls and boys, instilling in them the expectation that they would contribute to society through their intellectual as well as physical capabilities. Asma’u married Gidado, her brother’s close friend, and began a life-long collaboration with them both as intellectual equals. Thus, throughout the jihad battles, Asma’u joined her father, uncle, brother, and husband in active involvement in the philosophical and practical aspects of the jihad, during which literary communiques among them featured prominently. Asma’u’s opinions on strategies were respected, and she was revered as a stalwart supporter of jihad efforts.

In the aftermath of the jihad years, Asma’u sought to improve the quality of life for defeated rural Hausa women by creating a program through which they could learn the basic tenets of Islam through oral instruction. To this end, she established a program of women extension teachers, the ‘Yan Taru, “the Associates,” in which her poetic works were the material through which social reform was effected throughout the region. The aim of the ‘Yan Taru system was the transmission of Islamic cultural and spiritual knowledge; literacy was not the aim, nor was literacy a necessary skill for the women who became teachers in the system. They could easily have listened to the recitation of Asma’u’s poems and memorized them. Then, they would teach rural women in the same manner. Although members of the Fodiyo family and those who studied with them were highly literate and skilled in composition, they lived in what was, for the masses, an oral culture. Memorization of verse has been integral to Islamic culture from its inception, as the devout are expected to internalize Qur’anic verses for daily prayers. The entire first chapter of the Qur’an, the Fatiha, is brief, easily memorized, and recited by all Muslims, regardless of whether they are literate, at least five times a day. It should be recalled that Islam was meant to be accessible to any and all – equality among the devout being a central founding principle – and ease of access to Qur’anic verses was a prime factor in accomplishing this end. Thus, the ‘Yan Taru system was never a literacy program but a means of spreading knowledge about Islamic culture and local history through the transmission of memorized verse suited to the needs of the time.

Asma’u’s poetic works

Of the works that Nana Asma’u wrote, approximately 60 have survived and been published in the twentieth century; more may exist in the family library in Sokoto, in northern Nigeria. Most of her works were long rhymed poems, with a few in prose form. Her poetic style exhibits great literary talent, especially in the demonstration of acrostic style, and facility in producing takhmis (Ar.), a process of appending three lines to other poets’ poems in couplets, rendering a new poem in quintains, in which the original rhyme and meter are faithfully maintained. Such poems were written as homage to the original author, whose work would be easily recognized, embedded in the new poem. Asma’u also wrote her poems in the particular language best suited to her audience: for scholars, Arabic was the lingua franca; poetry meant for her extended
family members was written in Fulfulde. For the masses, and especially for ‘Yan Taru instruction, Asma’u wrote poems in Hausa.

Asma’u’s works were devotional, instructional, and historical, as well as eulogies for those in her community. Devotional works advised spiritual rigor, instructional pieces taught normative Islamic practices, and historical works explained the jihad from her family’s perspective. All three of these types of poems were in Hausa (as well as Arabic and Fulfulde) so that the masses could learn from them. The eulogies provided blueprints for ethical-personal behavior, focusing on individuals’ spiritual characteristics rather than accomplishments in the socio-political context, and because many of these concerned Fulani individuals in her extended family, Asma’u wrote these in Fulfulde. Any works on deeply metaphysical topics or spiritual healing were in Arabic and thus available only to those sufficiently educated to make good sense of the material; these poems reflect her extensive study of classical Islamic scholarly works and intellectual discussions with others of like mind. Although Asma’u is known to have been in written communication with scholars across the Sahara, in Mali and Mauretania, she was not averse to creating basic informative works for rural women as well. Any transmission of knowledge was worth her effort.

Asma’u’s devotional poems are exemplified by her first known composition, “The Way of the Pious.” She wrote it in prose when she was in her mid-twenties, in Arabic, a language facility that attests to her long years of study in her youth. In it, she speaks to an educated audience, and her topic conveys spiritual concerns that guide her every action. The poem advocates a demonstration of devotion to the sunna (the practice, the way) through the performance of charitable actions recommended in the Qur’an, like teaching and visiting the sick, and the development of character traits like humility and modesty. It is a concise rule book for appropriate spiritual behavior, divided into four distinct sections: 1) barriers between man and paradise; 2) personal traits that lead to damnation; 3) redeeming traits; and 4) ways in which one can demonstrate love for Muhammad in daily life. The work reflects her intimate knowledge of the Shehu’s teachings and writings on these topics.

At the end of her life, Asma’u composed a similar work, “Reasons for Seeking God.” This time, she wrote it in Hausa for the benefit of Hausa speakers, so that her ‘Yan Taru women teachers could use it for instruction in the rural regions. “The Way of the Pious” is one of the few works Asma’u produced in prose form. It is long. It would have been read and heard by those Arabic-speaking scholars who would have appreciated its content without needing to memorize it. “Reasons for Seeking God,” however, consists of just 35 concise rhymed couplets instead of prose, for ease of memorization. In it, she advises:

16 Repent and obey God’s commandments
For to desist from evil is to show repentance.
17 The Shahada and prayer are true
And the fast, alms, and the pilgrimage for those who have the means.

In verse 17 alone, she has named succinctly the five pillars of required behavior for Muslims: profession of faith, prayers, fasting, charity, and pilgrimage. These are among the first things a new Muslim learns about Islam. ‘Yan Taru teachers memorized and then taught this poem to their students in rural areas. The mnemonic devices of rhyme and meter, and of course its Hausa language, made it accessible to Hausa-speaking refugees still learning about reformed Islam in the region, easy to memorize, and informative. That Asma’u wrote this work at the end of her life indicates that her spiritual seeking was a consistent trait, which she sought to share with everyone, regardless of their level of education, ethnic background, or preferred language.
“Fear of the Hereafter” (1860) is an example of eschatological poetry that Asma’u felt contained an urgent message for both her Hausa and Fulfulde-speaking audiences, so she wrote it in both languages during the same year. The poem comprises a manageable 54 couplets that could easily have been memorized. Written at the end of her life, this work consolidates Qur’anic descriptions of the hereafter, discussing how the world will end, and contrasting fates of the wicked and the pious:

8 The sun and the moon will merge
And darkness will descend over everything
9 The heavens will split asunder and angels will descend
To find the populace huddled together …
12 The noise of the roaring and crackling will exceed
Any noise we know like thunder …
23 Mankind will be divided into two, those for Hell
And those for Paradise and joy.

These issues were on Asma’u’s mind in her old age, and she likely felt that it was important to write this poem in Hausa for instructional purposes but also in Fulfulde to remind those among her clan-members who might become lax in their spiritual practices.

Asma’u wrote an especially important instructional poem called “The Qur’an” in Fulfulde (1829), Hausa (1838), and Arabic (1850). The Fulfulde and Arabic speakers, being familiar with the Qur’an, would have appreciated this poem, which includes the names of all 114 chapters of the Qur’an:

1 I pray to God the Glorious,
Through the honor of Ahmadu and the Sura Bakara.
2 And Ali Imrana and Nisa’u and Ma’idatu
Lan’ami, La’arafi, and Lanfali and Bara.

These two verses include the Hausa language forms of the names of the first nine chapters of the Qur’an: Fatiha, al-Baqarah, al-Imran, An-Nisa, Al-Maidah, al-Anam, al-A’raf, Al-Anfal, and al-Taubah; the rest of the Qur’anic chapter names are included in the remainder of the poem. It is for the Hausa speakers that this poem would have been most instructive. It contains a mere 30 couplets, easily memorized. In 1838, the ‘Yan Taru were actively engaged in teaching rural women normative Islamic practices. This poem provided a succinct outline of the entire Qur’an, allowing the ‘Yan Taru teachers to “unpack” it, explaining the messages contained in each Qur’anic verse. When the teachers left the area, the women who had participated in the classes retained their memorized list of Qur’anic chapter names and explanations about the message of the Qur’an.

Some instructional poems were focused on jihad victories. Asma’u wrote “Caliph Aliyu’s Victory” in both Fulfulde and Hausa in 1844 to spread the word about this particular jihad success. While these two poems cover the same material, their tones are different: for her Fulfulde-speaking family members, Asma’u focused on their spiritual strength as the cause of victory, while for the defeated Hausa speakers, she emphasizes that it was their lack of spirituality that caused the defeat. The two short works – 25 couplets each – are news flashes, written in urgency to explain to separate audiences the reasons for victory or defeat, and urging the Hausa speakers to realize the error of their ways.
Other instructional works in Hausa include two long compositions: “Yearning for the Prophet” (vv 316) and “Signs of the Day of Judgment” (75 vv). Neither has a date of composition. The first is a detailed biographical account of the Prophet’s life, but with emphasis on events that can be viewed as parallel to events in the Shehu’s life. Likely too long for rural women to memorize, it was sufficient for them to hear this song and recognize the similarities implied in it between the Prophet and the Shehu. The ‘Yan Tari teachers are known to have recited this long poem during their procession to villages – some of these journeys involved several days’ worth of travel on foot. This gave credibility to the Shehu’s jihad and was meant to foster loyalty among those who were adjusting to the newly reformed Islamic Caliphate. “Signs of the Day of Judgment” is a terrifying account of the Last Days, straight out of the Qur’an. If anyone had doubts about the importance of repenting and becoming devout, this poem would surely have frightened them into rigorous prayer and right behavior.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Two centuries and an ocean away, in Pittsburgh, American ‘Yan Tari students replicate the ‘Yan Tari program in a way that suits their own socio-economic conditions. These members of the Light of the Age Islamic community do not speak Hausa or Fulfulde, and their Arabic facility is limited. They study English translations of Asma’u’s instructional poems, like the one listing Qur’anic chapters, and her historical works. These American women have other concerns as well: their curriculum is fluid and includes as much Arabic language instruction, Sufi thought, and Islamic history as an individual’s time allows. In this way, they straddle the approaches of the Fodiyo scholars and rural illiterate women of Asma’u’s day. Some of the Arabic-speaking women at the Light of the Age teach separate Arabic classes for children. Social welfare work is integral to the curriculum as well: the homeless and refugees in America need to be aided. To this end, the entire membership of the Light of the Age community regularly distributes food and clothing to the homeless in Pittsburgh, and these modern-day ‘Yan Tari women have funded a homeless shelter for local women in need. Just as nineteenth-century women teachers in Nigeria took a practical approach to the conditions of the women they needed to reach, so too do the twenty-first-century women in Pittsburgh hearken to the activist example of Nana Asma’u to educate however and wherever they can. The Light of the Age community exemplifies gender, race, and ethnicity equity as it is meant to be practiced in Islam.

The Light of the Age mosque was founded in the late twentieth century by an American Muslim, Shaykh Muhammad Shareef, who had studied with Fodiyo scholars in Africa and sought to carry on their Qadiriyya Sufi teachings in an American context with African heritage ties. He sought to bring orthodox Islamic practices to Pittsburgh because it was known as the site of the first African American mosque community, the first African American Sunni Muslim community in the United States (Hakim 1992: 157). Shareef explains:

with the [circa 1930] emergence of the … [African Moslem Welfare Society of America], we witness a direct connection between the African American community and African Sunni Islamic traditions. This was the reason that as Amir of the [American] Jama’at [community] of Shehu “Uthman ibn Fuduye,” I decided to centralize the national community in Pittsburgh.

Thus, the explicit aim of the Light of the Age mosque was to recreate the ideal social context of the Sokoto Caliphate and live by its values. In subsequent years, Shareef’s leadership role fell
to a young Latino hip-hop singer and convert, Imam Hamza Perez, who focuses on teaching that jihad is an internal spiritual struggle against the negative self, assists Shareef remotely in the publication of Shareef’s translations of Shehu Usman dan Fodiyo’s works, and writes his own poetry exploring Sufi concepts (Taylor 2009). The community continues its classes and social welfare work, mobilized by women’s involvement.

Conclusion

In a time when groups like Boko Haram – in the same country as the Fodiyos – engage in horrific acts in the name of Islam, specifically in regard to prohibiting women’s education, it is an uphill battle for Muslims to garner credibility. Nevertheless, living by Sokoto Caliphate values is an achievable goal. In Pittsburgh, Light of the Age congregants, both women and men, work outside the home as insurance sales people, art teachers at local schools, tree trimmers, and accountants, among other jobs. Their discretionary time is devoted to social welfare work organized through consensus among mosque members. Communal prayer is enjoyed in private, gender-specific spaces, in adjacent sides of a large partitioned room, with the imam speaking the sermon to both sides. They share group celebrations of Islamic holidays, educational lectures, and planning meetings at the mosque, for which potluck meals are provided, and cleanup duties are shared. But always, education classes for all are an important focus.

Women’s right and obligation to pursue education, both inside and beyond the home, always has been a central precept among the Fodiyos and was promoted in the structure and subject matter of the original ‘Yan Tāru women’s education system. Asma’u, her sisters, and other women of the Fodiyo extended family were expected to study to the best of their abilities, just as was the case for men in the family. They studied the same texts, composed prose and verse, and taught others, as did the men in the family. When Shareef settled in Pittsburgh at the end of the twentieth century, he began to teach in the manner of and with the curriculum familiar to scholars in Sokoto, thereby establishing an atmosphere of egalitarian worship and behavior. He encouraged the women of the community to develop their own ‘Yan Tāru study group, based on Asma’u’s example; because Muslim women in Pittsburgh have a long history of community activism and appreciation for education, this was not a hard sell. The Light of the Age women operate autonomously according to their needs.

The philosophy of the Light of the Age mosque has endeavored to be egalitarian from the outset, and while this aim is not perfectly executed, it harkens back to overt Fodiyo support of women’s autonomy in educating women; it also has adhered to the Qur’anic assertion that the “best among you is the most devout” (49:13) without regard to gender, nationality, or ethnicity. This foundational precept of equality dovetails with the American democratic ideal of equality, especially with regard to women’s rights; the intention of this community is to put that ideal into practice. For members of the Light of the Age community, social activism and education are the driving forces, embraced in a context of gender equality. This manner of social organization follows that of the original Fodiyo community and Nana Asma’u’s philosophical foundation for her ‘Yan Tāru system of educating women. It is a system whose merits continue to benefit women in its country of origin and beyond.

Notes

1 Qadiriyya Sufism is arguably the most widely spread of all Sufi brotherhoods.
2 Evidence of girls and women being educated in Asma’u’s family is available for three generations prior to her birth.

Until the onset of the British colonial era in the twentieth century, Hausa had been written in Arabic script, a process known as *ajami*.

British colonial intervention in the region, beginning in 1903, resulted in significant changes in education systems, including the establishment of secular schools for boys, and eventually girls’ schools and women’s teacher training colleges. Much has been written about this process elsewhere. For more on this topic, the reader is directed to my “Islamic Cultural Socialization and Education in Nigeria” (with Omiunota Ukpokodu) in *Voices from the Margin: African Educators on Africa and American Education*, eds. O.N. Ukpokodu and P. Ukpokodu (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2012), pp. 85–107. For more on the topic of Muslim women’s Knowledge Production in the Greater Maghreb: The Example of Nana Asma’u of Northern Nigeria” in *Gender and Islam in Africa: Rights, Sexuality, and Law*, ed. Margot Badran (Seneca Falls, NY: Woodrow Wilson Press co-publishing with Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 17–40.

It is indicative of her sensitivity to the needs of students that these terms are in the Hausa language of the majority population.


These are available in Boyd and Mack, 1997. Any works cited here may be found in that volume.

Asma’u’s letter to a Mauritanian scholar is but one indication of her communiques; see Boyd and Mack, 1997: 282–4.

In *The Caliph’s Sister*, Boyd notes that these women were never set upon by highway robbers or wild animals, although those dangers did indeed exist in that time and place.

The Few of a Kind Store in Pittsburgh supports the women’s shelter, which serves any woman in need.


This is al-Masjid al-Awwal, located at 1911 Wylie Ave. in Pittsburgh.


Personal communication to the author, August 2014.

References


