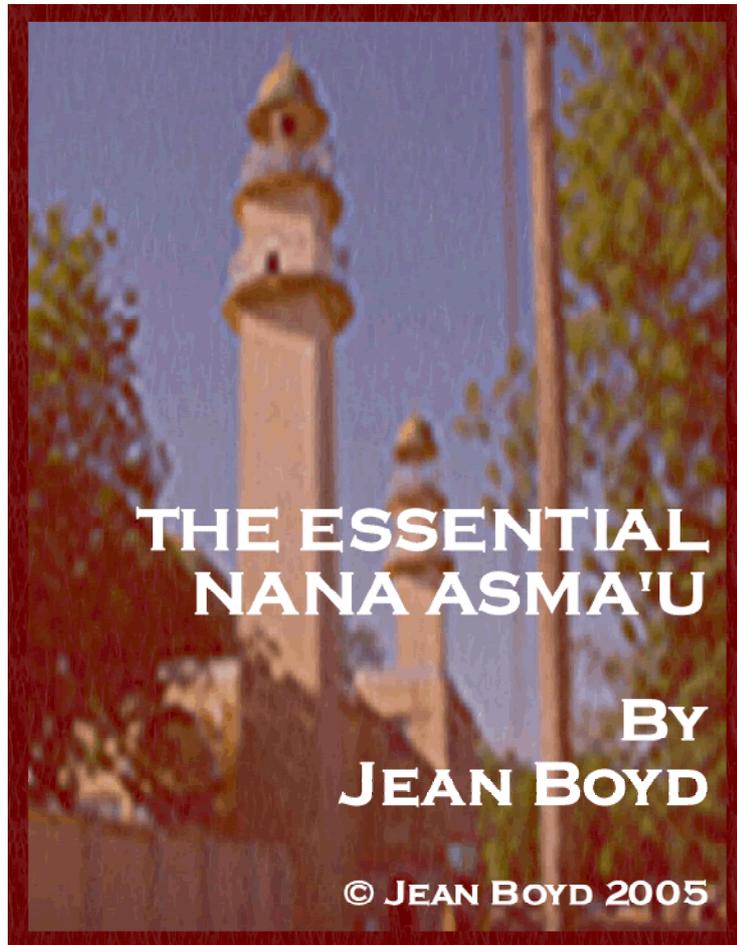


The Essential Nana Asma'u



## **The Essential Nana Asma'u**

The square in front of the red adobe house "was too crowded to pass through" wrote Isa in the poem he composed on the death of his sister Nana Asma'u in 1864. No one was left unmoved, "even men were crying ... she benefited the elderly, helped the poor. She was the benevolent one, the peace maker, the healer of hurts, our brilliant shining light, I held love and respect for her in my heart."

When Nana was born Africa was a very different place from what it is today. For one thing the countries we see on the map, like Nigeria, did not exist. Instead the land was open and right across the Sahel, the habitable semi desert area, were pockets of Sufi Muslims each headed by a holy man, teacher, mediator and medical practitioner. Nana Asma'u's father was one such person who led the devout men and women living in the 'university-without-walls' at Degel near Sokoto. All the localised groups had a sense of belonging to a wider Muslim world. Although the geographical area was immense - the whole of Australia would fit into the Sahara - scholars knew of each other and communicated by sending messages, books and poetry via well established trade routes.

The fascination of the Shehu's personality is that it combined the fundamental characteristics of two different kinds of men, one the Sufi seeing life as a pilgrimage to a spiritual Mecca, the other the lawyer-theologian who derives his knowledge from his understanding of the Shari'a and wrestles with the realities of building an Islamic state. "His learning dazzled men's minds" wrote his son

## **The Essential Nana Asma'u**

Mohammed Bello. Yet all this did not stand in the way of his direct involvement in the bringing up of his children, something we know about because Nana related some of the stories of those days, for example how she told a fib and was gently reprovved by her father.

Asma'u was, from the beginning, a girl of great promise. Her mother, Maimuna, died when she was little so she and her twin brother, Hassan, were brought up by her stepmothers who were educated ascetic women seeing everything in the light of the Qur'an.

The education process, which led to, the kind of scholarship exemplified by the Shehu began at the age of five or six and the Qur'an, the rivet binding society to the Word, was the starting point. There was no such thing as a secular approach to learning. The second step, during which basic Islamic principles were studied, was Tawhid, and with the study of 'books' began the formal study of the Arabic language. Lessons proceeded as follows: a section of text was copied out of the book by the student who would then read it back to the teacher to make sure any errors were corrected. The teacher would then explain the text and comment on it then the student would repeatedly go over it until it was fully understood. Only then would the student proceed to copy another section of the book being studied. The result of this approach is a high degree of memorisation of texts and poetry, which has a marked effect on the intelligentsia, they enjoy being able to hear, recognise and, in displays of virtuosity, recite

## **The Essential Nana Asma'u**

streams of verse to order. They also learn to compose using the memorised texts as models.

This how Asma'u learned and how in due course she became a Hafiza. Before this was achieved, however, and when she was only eleven years old, something happened which changed her life and the lives of uncountable other people forever.

The Shehu's teaching which had begun in 1774 extended far and wide as he made preaching journeys to towns remote from his own home at Degel. For thirty years he spoke in a quiet and confident manner to ordinary people - like cattle herders, blacksmiths and weavers in places where they congregated, markets for example. He drew people to him, converted them to the Faith and accepted their devotion. Eventually the chiefs saw a gathering storm in the increasing number of converts and ordered the Shehu to leave taking with him only his family. He refused to leave his people behind so on Thursday, 21<sup>st</sup> February 1804 the Shehu and his entire community evacuated Degel, their most valuable possessions, their books, safely placed on the backs of camels brought for the purpose by a desert ally.

The Hijra was a very significant event which the scholars with their knowledge of the Qur'an and the history of the Prophet knew would have serious repercussions. No real understanding of what followed can be reached without appreciating that the Shehu believed that events in his life mirrored related happenings in the life of the Prophet

## **The Essential Nana Asma'u**

Muhammad. He said so in his poem 'Munasaba' and subsequent historians, notably Asma'u, underlined the point.

The Shehu, who did not enjoy robust health, was not a warrior. He stayed at the heart of the community with the women, children, aged, sick and wounded always no more than a mile or two away from the scenes of action, well within the danger zone. There was no place to hide, no food depots to visit, no arsenal from which to obtain weapons.

The women, often hungry and weak from the effects of fatigue and ill health traversed huge distances in the rear of the army. When they could they prepared flour from the whole grain of millet and guinea corn and blended onions, peppers and tamarind for the sauce. Meat and fish, eggs and butter were rare luxuries, medicines unobtainable, their skins cracked because of the lack of oil, water and firewood were hard to obtain. No man or woman with the Shehu on that journey had an easy time. Many were killed or died of disease while others were injured or struggled to master their fears.

The enemy capital fell on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1808 to forces led by Asma'u's brother Muhammad Bello. By that time she was already married to his life-long friend and companion, Gidado, she moved to Sokoto a new walled city just being built.

When the Shehu died on 20<sup>th</sup> April 1817 Asma'u was aged 24. We know that she used to visit the family home where her stepmothers

## The Essential Nana Asma'u

and little brothers and sisters lived. We also know that on one very special occasion the Shehu visited Gidado's home to see his daughter. She may have been ill or perhaps it was when one of her children died. Whatever the reason, it was a very remarkable thing to do in the context of the times in which he lived. He entered the women's quarters and placed his hands on the lintel over the door of Asma'u's room. To this day the event is remembered and the place of the handprints preserved.

Asma'u's charisma was rooted in the *baraka* she inherited from her father and in her personal *baraka*, or moral vividness, which she developed. This had four essential components, scholarship, piety, therapeutic gifts and good works.

Scholarship she put to good use when the Shehu died in 1817. She was then in her mid twenties and had already memorized the Qur'an. From her married home near Caliph Bello's house she was easily able to visit her father's house and in the rooms of his four widows, start to collect, collate and copy his corpus of works.

In the elegy she wrote thirty years later for her husband she attributed to him the credit for this important move. He was the Waziri, chief officer of state, under his friend the Caliph, with enormous responsibilities as keeper of the Chancellery where all correspondence was handled, and was also Bello's roving ambassador. He did not, however, have unfettered access to the rooms of the Shehu's

## **The Essential Nana Asma'u**

widows. Asma'u was the person best able to sit patiently with the women who had brought her up and piece together all the folios the house contained.

Her work, accomplished so diligently and proficiently, was recognised; Bello purposely groomed her. She was his student and he coached her in her literary skills. There were other sisters who were highly literate and scholarly like Hadija and Fadima, and Bello's wife Aisha, was well known for her good deeds. Nevertheless Asma'u, named after the girl who had helped the Prophet, was the person who more than anyone else, Bello entrusted with the task of organizing the women.

Her character, already moulded by the rigors of the Jihad, and the strains of building the new 'Medina', was further tested by the violence that the death of the Shehu provoked. His enemies rebelled and invaded the Caliphate and camped outside the gates of Sokoto. The Caliph, Muhammad Bello went off to fight, but before he departed he left a message with his wife with the instruction that it should be given to Asma'u who he knew was in a state of anxiety. When Asma'u arrived at Aisha's room she read the note which was an acrostic poem based on the aya of the Qur'an which means, "So verily with every difficulty there is relief." (94:5) In the poem Bello asks the questions, "Are you apprehensive knowing that your Lord is powerful?" (v.6) and "Do you think He would neglect one who is hopeful of Him?" (v.14) Asma'u wrote a response which was also an acrostic poem. It constitutes the first indication of literary collaboration between

## The Essential Nana Asma'u

Asma'u and the Caliph. The rapport between brother and sister was reinforced over the years. Intuitively they reacted to each other's needs. Waziri Junaidu with whom these particular points were discussed on 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1995 said, "Bello had much confidence in her; she was a channel through which he could reach the indigenous population."

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries there had been an intensification of literary works and the Fodiyo clan were responsible for much of the formidable output of poetry, letters and books. Writing was a way of life in the family Asma'u was born into. In addition to composing formal scholarly writings in Arabic, the *ulama* aware of the importance of making their works accessible to for local consumption, wrote also in Hausa and Fulfulde, the languages know to most people literate and illiterate. However in their writings they did not describe the daily life of people, for example how they dressed, the houses they lived in, or what they ate. We do not know from Caliphate sources for example what Asma'u looked like. She, when writing elegies, spoke only of the behaviour which did people honour, focusing on the Sufi qualities which they evinced by which I mean characteristics such as pleasantness, patience, piety and charity.

So it is fortunate that of those who visited Sokoto and published journals was Commander Hugh Clapperton in 1824 and 1826-27. He was sent on expeditions by the British Government and travelled via Tripoli, the North African port from which Trans-

## **The Essential Nana Asma'u**

Saharan caravans set out on their long journeys south.

He stayed in Sokoto for eight months in all and on both visits he was guest of Waziri Gidado, Asma'u's husband. Clapperton was either uninterested in, or not very well informed on the politics and history of Sokoto but his eye-witness descriptions of people and places are valuable. He said Sokoto was the most populous town he had visited in the interior of Africa. It was laid out in regular well built streets. The wall was between 20 and 30 feet high and had twelve gates which were regularly closed at sunset. There were two large mosques besides several other places for prayer, a spacious market place in the centre of the city, and another large square in front of the Caliph's residence. The dwellings of the principal people were surrounded by high walls which enclosed flat-topped houses built in the moorish style.

Imagine Waziri Gidado entering his house dressed in a red cap round which was wound a white turban, hand woven robes, trousers and boots. He would have walked through the entrance foyer into a courtyard where horses were tethered and on to the main hall the lofty ceiling of which was supported by large pillars. Inside the house was his wife Asma'u who lived there alongside her co-wives.

The main meals of the day were fura, a soured milk dish, drunk early, rice with butter at about 10.00 a.m. and an early evening meal of rice with fish or meat. They had bread made from wheat, melons, figs, onions, condiments

## The Essential Nana Asma'u

and spices, potatoes and ingredients such as the leaves of the baobab tree [*kuka*] and *daddawa* made from tamarinds.

Asma'u was a dedicated teacher who busied herself in her school which still exists in the same location. In her day all the women and children dressed in indigo coloured hand-loomed garments which neatly covered them. The chief teacher in 2005 is Asma'u's direct descendant, Hajiya Laddo, and the curriculum is the same now as it was then. They spent much of their time cleaning and spinning cotton and cooking food for the family and guests. Asma'u would have listened to petitioners who came with a whole range of problems including those that could only be addressed by applying the detailed legal knowledge she was perfectly familiar with. Her own circular room was a place of retreat which, in the courteous society she lived in, was not overrun by children and not entered without permission. Here she composed her works, prayed and spent her private life. When she went to Caliph Bello's house, which was just round the corner, she covered herself from head to toe, only her face, feet and hands being visible. Bello was her teacher, she was his trustworthy pupil, his wife was her best friend just as Gidado was Bello's. They lived and worked as a team.

Clapperton said the Caliph was a noble looking man 44 years of age, although much younger in appearance. He was 5 feet 10 inches tall, "portly with a curling black beard, a small mouth, a fine forehead, a Grecian nose and

## The Essential Nana Asma'u

large black eyes. He was dressed in a light blue robe with a white muslin turban.

"The Caliph sent for me this afternoon," wrote Clapperton, "I was taken to a part of his residence I had never before seen. It was a handsome apartment within a square tower, the ceiling of which was a dome supported by eight ornamental arches with a bright plate of brass in its centre. Between the arches and the outer wall of the tower the dome was encircled by a neat balustrade in front of which was gallery, which led to an upper suite of rooms.

We had a long conversation about Europe. He spoke of the ancient moorish kingdom of Spain and asked me to send him some Arabic books and a map of the world."

On another occasion "he asked a great many questions about Europe and our religious distinctions. He continued to ask several other theological questions until I was obliged to confess myself not sufficiently versed in religious subtleties to resolve these knotty points." Bello asked about the Greeks, knew about the British subjugation of India, the war in Algiers and wanted to obtain a replacement for his copy of Euclid, which had been accidentally lost in a fire.



## The Essential Nana Asma'u

### Illiteracy among rural women.

No account of Asma'u's life would be complete without a description of how she tackled the difficult issue of illiteracy and ignorance among rural women. This was an important matter because the integrity of the Caliphate was at stake. There was a real danger that a new generation would emerge which was lacking in religious knowledge and moral fiber. Asma'u was the chief educator of these women and organized classes for scattered groups living in villages and hamlets. The scheme she devised was practical and her approach methodical. It was so well rooted, so acceptable and so well organized that it has survived. I have visited dozens of women who knew the genealogies of the women who were part of this educational movement. They said, "It was Nana who started it."

First she identified a town or village in need of help. She would then make enquiries about the reputation of mature women living there who, because they were older, were no longer confined strictly to their homes. Asma'u had to satisfy herself that the woman she was to appoint, as leader of an area, was educated and a person of the highest integrity. The title she gave to each of the leaders was *Jaji*, the title used by the man in charge of a trading caravan. That is how she perceived the structure she put into place - caravans of women coming to her house to receive instruction.

The *Jaji* took with her only girls and older women. The young wives were not however left out. They explained their fears and

## The Essential Nana Asma'u

illnesses to the *Jaji* who promised to relate them to Asma'u. They sent gifts in the form of grain, honey dried vegetables, cotton thread and cloth for Asma'u to feed and clothe the poor and destitute, on their behalf. Asma'u viewed the spiritual journey of her students through life as being in essence the same as hers. She was kind to them, sympathising with the hardships they suffered. She stroked the heads of the young girls and prayed they would grow up to be good Muslims. She listened to the worries of the older women, including those presented on behalf of women left at home and advised the *Jajis* in the law, because it was they who would have to make decisions back in the villages. She paid great attention to finding ways of helping the sick especially when they faced problems that seemed impossible to solve.

She composed Islamic verse for the women to memorise and take back with them to the villages. This poetry was sung in the village homes from which sounds could travel easily from compound to compound to be heard by neighbours and become part of the culture, and they varied in content. One, Begore, was about the life of the Prophet. Wakar Gewaye told the story of the Shehu and the Jihad: some were concerned with the penalties for bad behavior, and the rewards in Heaven for the pure in heart. She taught them about famous women in the past, the wives and daughters of the Prophet, the pious women of the Middle East including Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah.

## The Essential Nana Asma'u

Very importantly Asma'u gave her students a sense of belonging to a wider Muslim world and being part of a long and honored tradition of Muslim women activists. Asma'u wrote as follows of one of her *jajis* who had died:

"It is human nature to long for happiness in the world, but only a fool seeks happiness where pain and pleasure are mixed, where the moments of joy are followed by times of bitterness. I accept the misfortune (of her death) and remember Hauwa the *jaji* who loved me, a fact well known by everybody. During the dry season, the wet season, the harvest, the time of the dust storms and the start of the rains she was on the roads bringing people to me. She warned them to come in good faith, for the intention was important, she said, and so was coming for the love of the Shehu. As for myself, I taught them about religion, turned them from error and told them about the essential religious obligations like ritual ablution, prayer, alms, hajj, the fast, all of which are compulsory for adults. I taught them what is permissible in the Faith and what is forbidden so they would know how to act. I instructed them to distance themselves from prohibited sins such as lying, avarice, hatred, envy, adultery, theft and self esteem. I said they should repent because these things lead to perdition. My pupils and their children are well known for their good works and peaceful behavior in the community. May Allah forgive her, have mercy upon her and unite her with the

## **The Essential Nana Asma'u**

Shehu in Paradise. May Allah grant this request and reward her for her good works which she performed with the blessed aid of the Shehu."



## The Essential Nana Asma'u

### "Beloved Women Friends"

Asma'u referred to her women colleagues as "beloved women friends" and "wise and pious sisters". She encouraged their belief that the sisterhood was part of the historical Islamic tradition by writing elegies which linked women from all strata of society with the Shehu and all the Saints of Allah in Paradise. The women about whom she wrote included her friend from childhood, Aisha, who Asma'u described as the "guardian of orphans", and Fadima, her sister, about whom she said, "she provided provisions when an expedition was mounted, sorted problems and urged people to live peacefully". Both were praised for their piety and learning. In a similar vein she wrote about perfectly ordinary people who included her neighbour Halima. In this quotation she identified Halima's good qualities. She said:

I have composed this elegy for Halima  
Who was a very kind good neighbour.  
She was a fine woman with lots of  
common sense;  
She loved children and adults, treating  
them fittingly with respect.  
She was religious and kept close  
relationships in good repair,  
Acting always with never ending  
patience.  
May God forgive her, make her happy,  
And bless her as she awaits the Last  
Day.

About her own work, Asma'u said this:

I taught them what, in the Faith of  
Islam, is permissible  
And what is forbidden, so they  
would know how to act.  
I said they must distance themselves  
from sins such as lying, meanness,  
hatred and envy

## The Essential Nana Asma'u

Adultery, theft and self-esteem. I said  
they should repent  
Because these things lead to perdition.  
My women students and their children  
are well known for their good works  
And peaceful behaviour in the  
community.

Asma'u was by far the most prolific writer and influential woman to have emerged in the Western Sudan during the nineteenth century. Her keen intelligence and her intellectualism were linked to a marked determination to use her talents for the good of the population.

Nana Asma'u not only had a school for town's women inside her house, she was responsible for the management of the household and had six sons to bring up. She could quite possibly have narrowed the focus of her own activities to what was going on in her own home but she didn't. She created the space for women to seek education and to be respected in their own right as learned Muslims. What is more she extended her vision to include poor rural women with hardly any education at all and gave them instruction according to their ability to learn. Had she been an arrogant woman, proud of her position, they would have fallen away and failed to return year after year as we know they did.

Asma'u addressed the ills of her society in ways which fitted the times. When she died in 1863 her place at the helm was taken by her sister Maryam and then by her niece, and so on through the decades. No one hindered the women Yan Taru during her day nor those that followed. The colonialists took no interest in them because they were unaware who they

## The Essential Nana Asma'u

were. If they happened to notice them they must have assumed they were old ladies travelling with children and nothing more. The military and civilian regimes of the post colonial era also showed no interest in them..

However, the existence of the corpus of her works in the safe keeping of the *ulama*, the widespread belief in Asma'u's *baraka* and the continuing work of the Yan Taru kept her name alive. Add to this the presence of Modibos, senior women educators, descendants of the Shehu, who lived and live to this day at what was once his family home. They still receive the endless streams of Yan Taru and pass on knowledge including Asma'u's poetry.

In 2003 five senior Muslim women gathered at the Sokoto headquarters of the Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria [FOMWAN] to be interviewed by a Dutch TV company. There was a gynaecologist, a lecturer in Modern European languages, a University librarian, a mechanical engineer and the Director of the Centre for Hausa Studies at Usumanu Danfodiyo University, Hajiya Sa'adiyar Omar. She said,

The aim of FOMWAN is to upgrade the status of Muslim women through increasing their religious awareness and education - exactly what Nana Asma'u did. She mobilised women and brought them together, she taught and reformed them making them better members of society. Our inspiration came from her and we look on her as a model. Whatever we achieve is indigenous. Our

## **The Essential Nana Asma'u**

ideas do not come from USA, nor the UK, nor from Saudi Arabia. We have our model here. We may learn from others but our upbringing, our development is through Nana Asma'u.

FOMWAN members in Nigeria help to disseminate information about AIDS, visit female prisoners, support orphanages, open health clinics, set up workshops where women learn useful crafts, and help in the organisation of UNESCO vaccinations programmes. Asma'u's spirit indeed lives on.

