



Nana Asma'u: Nineteenth Century West African Sufi¹

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Nineteenth-century Nana Asma'u lived a scholarly, activist life in what is now Nigeria. She was an accomplished multilingual scholar who considered the education of illiterate masses to be as important as her own communication with other scholars in her community and across the Sahara to Mauritania and Timbuktu. She promoted education through the use of her poetry, which included texts about Islamic ethics, Islamic histories, and clear approaches to Islamic daily practices. Until recently Asma'u's work has been far less discussed than that of her famous father, Shehu Usman 'dan Fodio, leader of the Sokoto Jihād which began in 1804,² and the Fodio family's Sufi profile has

¹ This chapter contains technical terms and names from a number of different languages, and it is impossible to reflect the sometimes conflicting methods of transliteration. For this reason the usual dots and dashes have been omitted in most cases. Hausa has several implosive sounds often indicated in print by hooks appended to the letters b, d, k, and y. These diacriticals are not as readily accommodated by presses as standard Arabic diacriticals. Therefore, for this publication, words with hooks are indicated by the insertion of an apostrophe in place of the hook, as in 'dan Fodio. In this case 'dan is the Hausa word for the Arabic "ibn", meaning "son of". Other examples are the terms: 'Dan Yalli, Mo'dibo, Fa'dima, Wa'kar, Al'kammu, A'kilu, 'Yan Taru.

² The Shehu's life and times have been discussed extensively, but principally by Murray Last and Mervyn Hiskett [Murray Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Longman, 1967); Mervyn Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973)], both of whom drew heavily on the Arabic writings of the Shehu himself, along with works by his younger brother Abdullahi, his son Muhammad Bello, and son in law, Gidado 'dan Laima. What is known to date about Nana Asma'u and her active role in the history of her times is found in a biography and four recently published books: the text and translations of her collected works, and three other books on Asma'u's life and times: Jean Boyd, *The Caliph's Sister* (London: Frank Cass, 1989); Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack, *The Collected Works of Nana Asma'u, Daughter of Usman 'dan Fodiyo (1793 1864)* (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 1997); Beverly Mack and Jean Boyd, *One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u, Scholar and Scribe* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000); and Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack, *Educating Muslim Women: The West African Legacy of Nana Asma'u (1793 1864)* (Oxford: Interface Publications, 2013). These five volumes constitute the principal

been discussed less often than the historical effect of its jihād. As Qādiriyya Sufis, the Fodios were intellectually engaged; they eschewed overt demonstrations of ecstatic engagement like dancing or large public *dhikr* sessions. This chapter addresses Nana Asma'u's writings and activism as they represent the Fodio clan's Sufi identity and, as a part of that philosophy, their perspectives on gender-equity. Asma'u's poetic works and social welfare activities demonstrate the extent to which she and her associates were quietly, and thoroughly, immersed in Sufi belief and practice.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE FODIO FAMILY IN WEST AFRICA

Nana Asma'u bint Usman 'dan Fodio (1793–1864) was born into a family of Muslim scholars in the region now known as northwestern Nigeria, in the community of Degel, which no longer exists. Degel was, in its day, a lively centre of scholarly interests. It was home to several thousand scholars, many of whom were *ḥuffāz*, imams, muezzins, and panegyrists, some with nicknames indicating their origins: *al-Maghribī*, *al-Sūdānī*, *Malle*.³ The Sokoto Jihād, a struggle of Islamic reform led by Asma'u's father, Shehu Usman 'dan Fodio, saw the decline of Degel and the rise of Sokoto as a thriving urban centre in the aftermath of the Jihād's series of conflicts.⁴ The Jihād constituted a watershed of religious reform that permanently altered the social fabric of what was to become Africa's most populous contemporary nation, Nigeria; social relations there occasionally still echo the Jihad's Hausa-Fulani confrontations, even after two centuries of integration and intermarriage.⁵

By the eighteenth century, literacy and intellectual exchange across the Maghreb was central to the way of life and communications among West

sources for this chapter. I am grateful, as always, to Jean Boyd for her careful reading, comments, and suggestions for revisions on this chapter.

³ Boyd notes that the document listing scholars living at Degel can be found in Gidado's 1838/39 manuscript, *Majmu Khisal al Shaikh* (Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, xxxvi and 250); Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, 18–20.

⁴ The tombs of both Nana Asma'u and the Shehu are in the Fodio family compound (H. *hubbare*) in Sokoto.

Capitalization of "jihād" in this chapter indicates reference to the Sokoto Jihad in particular, as distinguished from other jihads of the time, or jihad behavior in general. The Sokoto jihād was the most far reaching and effective of a series of several nineteenth century West African jihads. Sokoto continues to be a thriving urban centre, but it retains its small town atmosphere and spiritual ambience in the twenty first century, about which Murray Last has written (*African Studies Review* Vol. 56, No. 2 (September 2013), 1–20).

⁵ Since the nineteenth century in northern Nigeria, Hausa Fulani ethnicity has been a source of both unity (with much intermarriage), and conflict, with political rivals blaming ethnicity for certain disparate points of view and political affiliations.

African Fodio clan members, both women and men. What is known about the Fodio family's nineteenth-century conditions and philosophies comes from their own writings; hagiographic perspective about them originates in their own impressions of their historical roles, which were overtly aimed at creating a lifestyle that followed the *sunna*. The foundational principles of Islam – Qur'anic ethics, adherence to the pillars, expectations of equality – were their avowed ethical guidelines. Sufi tenets were integral to the intentions of the Jihādists in their efforts at resocialization that followed jihād battles. This effort was significantly orchestrated by women's roles in teaching Sufi values.

The Fodio family was known as ethnic Toronkawa for their origins in the Futa Toro region (Senegal) of West Africa. Their antecedents emigrated eastward in the sixteenth century, from Futa Toro to Konni, the border region of what is now northwest Nigeria and Niger, led by their patriarch, scholar Musa Jokollo.⁶ Eleven generations after the clan settled there at the border of Bornu and Songhai, Shehu Usman 'dan Fodio's great-grandfather, Muhammad Sa'd, shifted the family to the town of Maratta, in the Konni region, to escape persecution that prevented his freedom to teach. Sa'd's son (the Shehu's father, Muhammad) was a scholar there, and the Shehu's mother was from Maratta. Muhammad subsequently moved his own family further into the bush, to Degel, where they settled, continuing to work as scholars.⁷ It is believed that the Shehu was born in Maratta, in 1754, either before his father moved the family, or because his mother had returned to her own family for the birth. He grew up in Degel. His mother Hawwa's lineage is significant in the family's Islamic identity, for her line of descent is "linked to the branch of the family most noted for its learning";⁸ she traced her descent directly from the Prophet Muḥammad's daughter Fāṭima. The family's Islamic identity was demonstrated in their given names, their scholarly heritage was evident in their surname, and their Sufi affiliation was indicated in a lineage connection to the Prophet's family.

The Shehu's father Muhammad became known by the name "Fodio/Fudi", the Fulfulde term for "learned", in recognition of his scholarship.⁹ This

⁶ This and the following historical information from Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, lxxiii.

⁷ This is the region on the main road to Birnin Kebbi and Gobir, the route from Agadez, Ingall, Birnin Konni; the connection to Niger is strong.

⁸ Although Last notes that the Shehu never mentioned this in his writings, others have documented Hawwa's descent as: "Hawwa bint Muhammad b. Ahmad al Sharif b. b. Ali al Yanbu'i b. 'Abd al Razzaq b. al Salih b. al Mubarak b. Ahmad b. Abi'l Hasan al Shadhali b. 'Abdullah b. 'Abd al Jabbar b. Hurmuz b. Hatim b. Qusay b. Muhammad b. al Hasan b. Fatima, daughter of the Prophet." (Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, 4, n. 9)

⁹ This has been spelled as variants "Fodio", "Fodiyo", and "Fudi".

became the surname for him and his descendents. Muhammad Fodio instructed his son, as did the Shehu's mother Hawwa, and her mother, the Shehu's maternal grandmother Rukayya.¹⁰ Traditions about the Shehu's education confirm the ethnic pattern of mothers and grandmothers as children's first instructors in these communities. The Fodios' mode of scholarship followed traditional models, in which a student studied with a credible scholar to the point of earning an *ijāza* – a license to teach a particular book that one had mastered under that tutelage – conveying scholarship that was couched in terms of both practical and mystical understandings of the world.

QĀDIRIYYA SUFISM AMONG THE FODIO FAMILY IN WEST AFRICA

The Sufi character of the Fodio family was clear in their self-identification as Kadirawa, adherents of Qādiriyya Islam, a Sufi brotherhood which originated in the teachings of Persian scholar 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilānī (d. 1166, Baghdad) and took its name from him.¹¹ Al-Jilānī is revered as a saint and *sayyid*; he traced his lineage to both Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, sons of Fāṭima and 'Alī, the Prophet Muḥammad's daughter and son-in-law. Born in Persia, al-Jilānī was a preacher, teacher, and writer, and one of the most revered among Sufi notables. He promoted the Ḥanbalite doctrine of Sufism that conformed to the foundational precepts of Islam, rejecting the imposition of esoteric beliefs that threatened violation of Islamic traditions rooted in the tradition of the Qur'ān and the *sunna*. al-Jilānī was known as *Muḥyi ad-dīn*, the "reviver of religion",¹² and was revered by even as great a saint as Abu Madyan (1126–1198) of Tlemcen, who studied with al-Jilānī in Makkah; Abu Madyan is revered in his own right as an ascetic saint of the Maghreb.¹³ Another Sufi

¹⁰ The Shehu's early life is recounted in Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth*, and in accounts contemporary to the Shehu, including *al Kashf wa'l bayan* and *Raud al jinan* by Gidado 'dan Laima, 'ida' *al nusukh an tazyin al waraqat* by Abdullah b. Muhammad Fodio. Jean Boyd's *The Caliph's Sister* is a wealth of information about the Shehu's family with a focus on Asma'u and her life.

¹¹ His full name is Al Sayyid Muḥyi al dīn Abu Muḥammad 'Abd al Qādir Al Jilānī al Ḥasanī Wal Husaynī, (1077–1166 CE), born in the town of Na'if, district of Gilan, Iran, and died in Baghdad, Iraq. He was a famous Ḥanbali Salafiyyah jurist and Sufi based in Baghdad. He is also referred to as al Qadir, al Gilani, or al Jelani.

¹² Annemarie Schimmel, *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1975, 247) discusses the legend that accounts for this sobriquet.

¹³ Abu Maydan was born in Andalusia, studied in Fes, and established a *zāwiya* in Bejaia on the Algerian coast. He is associated with Tlemcen, near where he is buried, and he is known for his rejection of the material trappings of the world.

figure, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350), documented Ḥanbalite Sufism; his writings were supported by an outpouring of works that confirmed the conformity of Sufism to “‘orthodox’ Sunni creeds . . . rooted in the Qur’ān and the precedent of the Prophet and the first Muslims”.¹⁴ The writings of the Fodio family reflect these Qādiriyya views on practical asceticism and reliance on the example of the original Muslim community; their inclination towards Ḥanbalite Sufism is reflected in the Shehu’s preference for promoting the primacy of Qur’ānic ethos and rejection of local inclination towards syncretism.

Sufism was a prime means of spreading Islam beyond its place of origin, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, through “the untiring effort of Sufi preachers who manifested in their lives the basic obligations of Islam”,¹⁵ and used vernaculars to spread the veneration of the Prophet. From the tenth to the nineteenth century C.E., Sufi preachers were increasingly active in the Maghreb through trans-Saharan networks of commerce and scholarship, which facilitated interchange from Arabia to North Africa and throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Islamic scholars travelled and wrote to one another across the entire region, and Sufi concepts were transmitted widely. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a West African surge of interest in the Qādiriyya order may have been caused by the confluence of the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the rise of European imperialism, and the appearance of the Wahabī movement seeking reform in Islamic communities; added to these influences, the revival of Sufi thought at al-Azhar in Cairo promoted Qādiriyya activity among orders throughout the Maghreb and West Africa.¹⁶ In the Fodio family, Muhammad Bello cites evidence of sixteenth century Sufi presence in the region in the name of a scholar of the Saharan kingdom of Ahir (c. 1543) called al-‘Aqib b. ‘Abdullah al-Ansamuni al-Massufi, and in the writings of Abdullahi Sikka, a Kano (Nigeria) scholar of that same period.¹⁷ It is safe to say that by the nineteenth century, Sufi activity in the region was active and widespread.

Family accounts indicate that Asma’u’s education, like that of her siblings, followed the pattern of her father’s classical grounding in Qur’ān memorization early in his life, followed by the study of *tafsīr* and *sīra*, including the Moroccan mystic Abu ‘Ali al-Ḥasan b. Ma’sūd al-Yusī, al-Fazzāzī’s panegyric

¹⁴ Toby Mayer, “Theology and Sufism”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, Ed. Tim Winter. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008, 268.

¹⁵ Schimmel, *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 240.

¹⁶ Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth*, 61–63.

¹⁷ Ibid., 60; this is from *al-‘Atiyya lil mut’I*, cited in Hiskett’s PhD dissertation, I, 91.

to the Prophet “The Twenties” (*al-‘Ishrīniyyāt*),¹⁸ and Berber al-Busīrī’s *Burda* (“The Cloak”), both of which discuss the Prophet Muḥammad’s miracles.¹⁹ The Shehu’s education also included *fiqh*, *ḥadīth* (relying on ninth century al-Bukhārī’s *Saḥīḥ*), his most comprehensive guide to an understanding of the Prophet’s life, astronomy, and Sufism:²⁰

In all of this the Shehu became learned, through the study of certain Arabic texts which had become standard works among the scholars of his community, and he encouraged his daughter Asma to acquire such knowledge. His son Bello was also an expert in this study and so, no doubt, were his other children.²¹

Hiskett cites his source for this information as “WKS, p. 83, i.e. *Wa’kar Karomomin Shehu*” (“Song of the Shehu’s Miracles”) by Malam Isa ‘dan Shehu (the Shehu’s son, Asma’u’s brother).²² This was a Hausa verse form of the longer Arabic prose account of the Shehu’s life, *Raud al-Jinān* (Meadow of Paradise), written by the Shehu’s son-in-law, Gidado ‘dan Laima.²³ Gidado was Bello’s best friend, who fought beside him in the Jihād battles, and Asma’u’s husband. It is clear from these writings that they were all immersed in scholarly pursuits and felt it important to document their intellectual activities.

For his early education the Shehu’s teachers were his uncles ‘Uthman Binduri and Muhammad Sambo, who were both accomplished scholars and known as pious men of “magisterial reforming zeal”.²⁴ The Shehu’s son, Muhammad Bello, wrote that his father’s grounding in Qādiriyya Sufism came from the Shehu’s Tuareg teacher, Shaikh Jibril b. ‘Umar, who conferred on the Shehu *salasil* in Qādiriyya, Shādhiliyya, Khalwatiyya, and several other licenses from Jibril when Jibril returned from Egypt, where he himself received them from Muhammad Murtada b. al-Husaini al-Wasiti. Jibril’s enthusiasm for reform of local practices underlined perspectives that

¹⁸ Asma’u’s “Remembrance of the Prophet” (*Mantore Arande*, F. 1843) and “Yearning for the Prophet” (*Begore*, F. n.d.) reflect these influences (see Boyd and Mack 1997:188–189, 304–345).

¹⁹ Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth*, 37.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 37–39.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

²² See Mervyn Hiskett, “*The Song of the Shaihu’s Miracles: A Hausa Hagiography from Sokoto*”, in *African Language Studies* XII (1971), 71–107.

²³ Boyd notes that in *Raud al-jinān* Gidado has listed everyone who was close to the Shehu: children, wives, aunts, uncles, servants, judges, imāms, *waziris*, and disciples. Children are listed in birth order, with Bello fourth in order of sons, and Asma’u height in order of daughters (personal communication 11/14/13).

²⁴ Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth*, 39–40; Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, 5.

the Shehu had learned from his previous teachers.²⁵ Other influences may have been a Degel resident Sufi, Muhammad Koiranga, who is reported to have facilitated the Shehu's mystical experiences,²⁶ and Sidi al-Mukhtar al-Kunti, whose active preaching in the regions west of Degel coincided with and acknowledged the Shehu's preaching and activism.²⁷ Whether these scholars were influenced by disciples of Abū Madyān or al-Jawziyya is not known, but the active nature of the trans-Saharan trade routes from West Africa through the Sudan to Cairo make the prospect feasible. Through his teaching, Shaikh 'Umar's commitment to the Qādiriyya brand of Sufism passed to the Shehu, along with privileged knowledge about Sufi secrets of litanies, prayers, and religious exercises leading to ecstatic states;²⁸ many of these were said to have been conveyed directly to the Shehu by the saint al-Jilānī himself in the Shehu's mystical experiences.

Thus, by the time the twenty-year-old Shehu's missionary career began in 1774, he had not only spent many years studying Islam, but had also engaged in spiritual practices like retreats and extended prayer sessions. He continued to study throughout his life, as was the custom among scholars of the time. The Shehu's wives Aisha, Hauwa (Bello's mother), and Maimuna (Asma'u's mother) were confirmed Sufi mystics, as were other women of the community, described in Asma'u's "Sufi Women" (discussed below; see p. 207); his household was one in which his immersion in mystical experiences was common.²⁹ Thus, Asma'u absorbed the wholly Sufi nature of the family, the only context that she knew, through her studies, daily discourse, and the influence of family members. The Shehu wrote books in Arabic, and long Fulfulde poems on *tafsīr*, *tawhīd*, *fiqh*, and Sufi tenets. His preaching was in the Hausa vernacular of the region.³⁰ The Shehu's sermons, written down by

²⁵ Last (*The Sokoto Caliphate*, 6) and Hiskett (*The Sword of Truth*, 60) culled this information from Muhammad Bello's *Infaq al maisur*.

²⁶ Last (*The Sokoto Caliphate*, 20), notes that there were more than seven Sufi students of the Shehu at the time. This information is culled from Gidado's nineteenth century *Raud al Jinān*.

²⁷ See Batran, Abdal Aziz, "An Introductory Note on the Impact of Sidi al Mukhtar al Kunti (1729 1811) on West African Islam in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries." *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 6, No. 4 (June 1, 1973), 347–352. Batran notes that al Kunti regarded the Shehu as a Sufi saint, and was aware of Abdullahi b. Fodio and Muhammad Bello's writings and activism. I am grateful to Professor Yacine Daddi Addoun for pointing out this reference.

²⁸ Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth*, 61.

²⁹ Ibid., 64. Boyd confirms that Hauwa, Bello's mother, and Maimuna, Asma'u's mother, were confirmed mystics. These and other women are mentioned in the poem "Sufi Women" in Boyd and Mack (1997) (personal communication, 14 November 2013).

³⁰ Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, 9.

his son Muhammad Bello, confirmed the importance of upholding the obligations of the pillars of Islam, and discussed Sufi concepts of the soul's tendencies towards either destructiveness or salvation, depending on one's inclination towards ego-fulfilment or selfless purity.³¹ Asma'u was born when the Shehu, in his late thirties, had just returned from five years of preaching and having mystical visions in Faru, in nearby Zamfara. He had written a book on the *sunna* (*Ilyā' al-sunna*) that marked him as an important scholar of his time.³² The association of Faru with the Shehu's mystical visions and emphasis on following the *sunna* endowed Faru with importance as a Sufi site.³³

The Qādiriyya emphasis on adherence to the *sunna* is clearly evident in the manner that the Shehu sought to emulate the life and jihād of the Prophet. Asma'u describes this aim in several of her works.³⁴ The Shehu's immersion in Sufi learning is further reflected in the library holdings of the family, to which he would have turned during his education. For example, he studied Ibn Arabī's "Meccan Revelations" (*al-Futūḥāt al-makkiya*), and al-Ghazālī's well-known "Revivification of the Sciences of the Faith" (*Iḥyā' ulūm al-dīn*), which was likely the inspiration for the Shehu's own work, "Revivification of Orthodoxy" (*Iḥyā' al-Sunna*).³⁵ It is clear that the Shehu understood himself to be a reviver of religion in the Degel region, following the historical example of al-Jilānī himself.

Although the early years of the Shehu's preaching were non-confrontational, change in leadership brought difficulty. Over a period of thirty years (1774–1804) the Shehu became increasingly at odds with local Hausa leaders concerning religious matters. The Sokoto Jihād aimed at reform of local non-Islamic religious practices and resistance to local prohibitions on preaching and teaching of Islam. The Shehu was not a restrictive fundamentalist in the Wahabi sense, but he did advocate conformity to orthodoxy within the

³¹ Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth*, 42 et passim.

³² Boyd, *The Caliph's Sister*, 3. Boyd also notes that the Shehu lived for four years in Faru east of Bakura, Zamfara, where he had the mystic experiences as described in his *Wird* 1204 1208 (personal communication 14th November 2013).

³³ This accounts for its significance as the place from which Sarkin Musulmi Attahiru 1st said farewell after setting out from Sokoto for Makkah in 1903; this was an important assertion of resistance of the Caliphate leaders to British colonial incursions.

³⁴ Her works "The Journey" (*Filitago*, F. / *Wa'kar Gewaye* H. 1839, /840) and "The Story of the Shehu" (*Ko'iwī Shehu*, F. / *Labaran Shehu*, H. 1841/1864) (CW 131 153 and 156 175) have been discussed by Beverly Mack in "Imitating the Life of the Prophet: Nana Asma'u and Shehu Usman 'dan Fodiyo" in *Tales of God's Friends: Islamic Hagiography*, Ed. John Renard (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2009), 179 196, and will be addressed below.

³⁵ Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth*, 60 61.

Qādiriyya Sufi context. Political resistance to his efforts to secure the right to practice Islam without persecution led him to launch the Jihad in imitation of the Prophet.

In the two decades between 1774 and 1794 the Shehu gained a significant following. Prior to this time his preaching had been well received by local kings, but as local leadership changed, the Shehu found himself increasingly at odds with kings who sought to control or subdue the rising numbers of Qādiriyya Muslims in their midst. Although the Gobir ruler declared himself a Muslim, the Shehu objected to his methods of rule, which favoured local traditions in conflict with Islamic ideals and codes of behaviour.³⁶ New laws against sartorial expressions of Islam, demands for the reversal of conversions to Islam, and increased aggression towards Muslims fuelled the need to mount a jihād of resistance and reform.³⁷ It was at this time (1793–1794 C.E.), that the Shehu began having mystical experiences, including dreams in which the saint 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī spoke to him about making a *hijra*, which was the beginning of plans for a jihād.³⁸ He later wrote about these experiences in his work *Wird* ("The Litany").³⁹

It was also at this time that his wife Maimuna gave birth to twins. It has long been a tradition among Muslims to name twins after the Prophet's (non-twin) grandsons, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. In 1793 the Shehu duly named his son Hasan, but instead of Husseina, he chose the name Asma'u for his twin daughter. Some speculated that she was named after the daughter of the Prophet's Companion Abu Bakr. Odd as this seemed at the time, the only sense that could be made of the Shehu's choice was that he had foreknowledge of the girl's destiny to play a significant role in her father's work, as did the historical Asma in aiding the Prophet's and Abu Bakr's *hijra* out of Makkah. As history has demonstrated, Asma'u did indeed play a significant role as a scholar, teacher, and confidante to her father the Shehu, her brother Caliph Bello, and her husband Lieutenant Gidado during the Sokoto jihād and its aftermath.

The Sokoto Jihād battles were precipitated by a local king's reversal of his father's earlier conciliatory attitudes. Prohibitions on public prayer,

³⁶ Last notes the Shehu's concerns about issues of jurisprudence, taxation, conscription, political appointments, music, and women's activities, as cited in *Kitab al Farq* (Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, lxviii).

³⁷ Last (*The Sokoto Caliphate*) and Hiskett (*The Sword of Truth*) provide many more details about the prelude to the jihād, but that is not this chapter's focus.

³⁸ Last (*The Sokoto Caliphate*, 10, 20) explains the details of his mystical encounters as described by the Shehu in his *Wird*. Hiskett (*The Sword of Truth*, 63, et passim) discusses the Sufi nature of the Shehu's learning and teaching.

³⁹ Hiskett, *The Sword of Truth*, 64–67.

conversion, wearing turbans and veils, and the selling of some Fulani as slaves, all increased to breaking point.⁴⁰ From her infancy, Asma'u had known nothing but the struggle to defend what her family perceived to be an Islamic way of life, against opposition they considered to be parallel to that of the original community of Muslims more than a millennium earlier.

ASMA'U'S SUFI UPBRINGING

By the time Nana Asma'u was born, her scholarly family was already at the centre of social conflict. She knew her father as a devout Sufi whose mystical encounters were the likely source of her unexpected name, and whose long years of fraught existence confirmed his belief in the spiritual imperative of his reformist mission. Eleven years old when the Jihād battles began, Asma'u had studied the classics from her father's library, internalized Qādiriyya tenets of belief, and understood her father to be striving to emulate the Prophet. Her written works and activist behaviour throughout the rest of her life are consistent with this grounding in Qādiriyya spirituality. It is no surprise that her work is infused with Sufi concepts and advocacy.

The Shehu's Sufi practices combined voluntaristic and gnostic approaches.⁴¹ When he was nearly forty, his gnostic encounters merged with his worldly endeavours in dreams in which he met the eponymous founder of the Qādiriyya order who fostered promotion of the Jihad in order to put Sufi behaviour into practice in the community.⁴² The Islamic reform the Shehu sought through the Jihad was one that secured for the average person the opportunity to practice Islam and gain access to deeper spiritual experiences, as in the Prophet's jihād. In this the Fodio clan's Sufi tenets were "both generated and . . . illustrated out of Muhammad's own mysticism".⁴³ The Fodios demonstrate in their writings – as a rationale for the Jihād – the importance of following the *sunna* and encouraging such behaviour on the part of others.⁴⁴ Asma'u's poetic descriptions of her father confirm his intention to imitate the Prophet, and echo the tradition that

⁴⁰ Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, 11–13.

⁴¹ Schimmel suggests that it is often the case that the tendency is towards one of these over the other (*The Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 6).

⁴² Hiskett (*The Sword of Truth*, 66–67) discusses the Shehu's dreams (recounted in Abdullahi's writings) in which al-Jelani robed the Shehu in symbolically Sufi garb and also handed him the "sword of Truth", saying "Verily to make ready weapons is *Sunna*."

⁴³ Schimmel *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 9, quoting F.A.D. Tholuck in his 1821 volume on Sufism.

⁴⁴ Schimmel (*The Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 9, 24, 27) confirms the origins of Sufism in the life and behavior of the Prophet and Qur'anic inspiration.

“a Sheikh in his group is like the prophet in his people”.⁴⁵ The hagiographic nature of the family’s descriptions of Shehu Usman ‘dan Fodio are meant to endow his life’s story, and therefore his reformist aims, with credibility, as well as to demonstrate reverence for him.⁴⁶ The Shehu’s confidence that his jihād was destined to be successful was based on his belief in the intercession of saints who would aid Muslims in overcoming unbelievers.⁴⁷ He understood his mission of reform as progress on the Sufi path, providing service to his community.⁴⁸

EDUCATION AND GENDER EQUALITY

The pursuit of education was incumbent on both women and men among the Fodios. Asma’u was educated in her early years by her mother and grandmother, as was her father. As an adult, she taught classes of young men as well as separate classes of women, and communicated freely with male scholars across the wider Maghreb region. The Shehu is known for having admonished local Hausa men for not encouraging the women of their families to leave the house for the purpose of education whenever that instruction was available locally. He said that preventing women’s education was antithetical to appropriate Islamic behaviour,⁴⁹ and the number of scholarly women in the Fodio family attests to the practical application of that belief in the importance of education and enlightenment, regardless of gender. If the estimate of more than a thousand male scholars among the Shehu’s followers is accurate, it can be assumed there were among them a goodly number of women scholars as well.⁵⁰ Judging from what is known about women scholars in the Fodio family, and from the testimony of contemporary Sufi shaykhs

⁴⁵ Schimmel, *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 101.

⁴⁶ See Carl Ernst’s commentary on hagiography in his *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala Publications, 1997, pp. 63, 65–68, 137). The works mentioned above – Hausa poem *Wa’kar Karomomin Shehu* (“Song of the Shehu’s Miracles”) by Malam Isa ‘dan Shehu (the Shehu’s son) and Arabic prose account of the Shehu’s life, *Raud al Jinān* (*Meadow of Paradise*) by Gidado ‘dan Laima – are explicitly hagiographic.

⁴⁷ Schimmel, *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 203 discusses saints as the “governors of the universe”, granting blessings from rainfall to victory over oppression.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 229, notes that this is a characteristic aim of Sufi striving.

⁴⁹ See Boyd, *The Caliph’s Sister*, 4–6, in which she cites passages from the Shehu’s Fulfulde works that criticize men’s unfair and unkind treatment of their wives. Asma’u reiterates this in her Hausa poem “A Warning” (1856). She also criticized women’s bad treatment of their husbands. This even handed view is in keeping with the Qur’ān’s consistently egalitarian treatment of the genders; see 24:3, and 24:26, for examples.

⁵⁰ This number is cited by Last, *The Sokoto Caliphate*, lxxvi, who drew it from Gidado’s *Raud al Jinān*.

that they are unlikely to marry women who are not their equals,⁵¹ it must be assumed that there were significant numbers of women scholars in the Sokoto Caliphate community.

Asma'u's own education involved personal instruction from family members who drew from a corpus of works in the Shehu's library of manuscripts, which numbered in the thousands. These included not just the books the Shehu had written – those were more than three hundred – but also many Arabic manuscripts of classical Islamic literature, some dating back to works by twelfth-century authors. Evidence of these is clear in Asma'u's own poetry, which includes her reworkings of earlier authors' classical works, according to literary custom.

In contrast to Asma'u's rigorous education, there were in the region increasing numbers of uneducated, non-Muslim slave women captured in Jihad battles whose new positions as wives or servants were potentially disruptive to community welfare. A shared understanding of Islamic values was crucial to unity in the incipient Caliphate. To this end, Asma'u organized a corpus of educated Muslim women capable of reaching uneducated rural women to instil in them the essentials of Islam. Asma'u's model of extension education was called the '*Yan Taru* ("The Associates").⁵² Its teachers were older women and young girls – those without child-care responsibilities – who would first study with Asma'u, and then, once trained, travel together in groups on foot to remote areas to instruct rural women. '*Yan Taru* lessons included poetic works that described normative Qādiriyya Sufi values, as well as practices that ranged from the quotidian (how to pray, how to dress) to the esoteric (ethics, tenets of belief). The rationale for this organization of women teachers was that early marriage and domestic obligations militated against young girls being at liberty to leave their communities and travel with a Shaykh for study as boys did, but women should not be deprived of enlightenment because of their domestic obligations; thus, the '*Yan Taru* could bring education to them in their homes. The value of this organization is evident in the fact that it has remained active from its inception – throughout colonization, post-colonial times, and into independence – into the twenty-first

⁵¹ This perspective has been conveyed to me numerous times in Morocco and Nigeria; in Morocco individuals have testified to the logic of marrying one's intellectual equal, while the prevalence of women in the Sokoto Caliphate is evident in genealogies that pre-date the jihād (listed in Jean Boyd's notebooks) and in the lists of women '*Yan Taru* teachers from the period of the jihād to the present, as documented in the appendix in Boyd and Mack, *Educating Muslim Women*.

⁵² The '*Yan Taru* movement has been discussed in Boyd, *The Caliph's Sister*, and Boyd and Mack, *Educating Muslim Women*.

century, when contemporary women continue to educate one another in a Qādiriyya context using the methods and materials begun by Asma'u in the 1820s.⁵³

EVIDENCE OF SUFISM IN ASMA'U'S STYLE: POETIC FORM, ORALITY, VERNACULAR LANGUAGE

Asma'u's collected works present the strongest evidence of immersion in Sufi tenets: first, these are poems, not prose; second, they lend themselves to oral recitation; and third, they are composed in the vernacular as well as in more scholarly languages. Although other members of the Fodio clan wrote prose and treatises, Asma'u's works are in poetic form, the perennial mode of communication of Sufi themes. The importance of poetry to Sufis is derived from its Arabic linguistic origins, in which ever-deepening esoteric meanings can be implied most economically in poetic form.⁵⁴ Asma'u's poems are Sufi in content. They express the importance of emulation of the Prophet, commentary on the *sunna*, discussion of miracles, belief in the guidance provided in the Qur'ān, ethical behaviour, adherence to practices prescribed in the pillars, affirmation of the benefit of wisdom over knowledge (*ma'rifa* v. *'ilm*), and the superiority of moral obligation to the community over conquest. Other topics of Asma'u's that reflect constant Sufi concerns include detailed parallels between the Shehu's life and the Prophet's, comparisons between their inspirations for jihād and the jihād battles (set over a millennium apart), attention to miracles, and reference to Sufi figures in history.

These concepts are conveyed in poetic works whose mnemonic qualities facilitate their being internalized through oral repetition and memorization. Each of Asma'u's works, while written, lends itself to memorization and oral recitation for use as a lesson plan in the 'Yan Taru context. Oral expression is characteristic of Islamic devotions, as is evident in daily prayer, and repetition of prayerful words and phrases in the process of *dhikr*. Sufis have long acknowledged the value of oral transmission of spirituality, understanding that repeated oral prayer allows for the internalization of the word, which transforms the human vessel in ways that writing cannot: Sufis say they write their prayers on the heart, where they cannot be destroyed. In Sufism's early years, attention to the oral communication of gnosis was recommended:

⁵³ There also exist North American chapters of the 'Yan Taru, as discussed in Boyd and Mack, *Educating Muslim Women* (chapter 6), and in Beverly Mack's "Nana Asma'u's Instruction and Poetry for Present day American Muslimahs" in *History in Africa*, 38, (2011), 1–16.

⁵⁴ Schimmel, *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 13.

“[t]rue gnosis . . . is not attained through books . . . ‘to break the ink-pots and tear the books’ was considered by some mystics the first step in Sufism”.⁵⁵ The respectability of illiteracy in this context is inherent in the Prophet having been called *ummī*, (Qur’ān 7:157), a word implying mystical associations in a man who was pure spirituality, untouched by worldly intellectuality; “[t]he heir of the Prophet is he who follows the Prophet with his actions, not he who blackens the face of paper”.⁵⁶ Although Asma’u was not without her inkpot, this perspective underlines the value afforded oral communication in her community. Western scholarship has long since endowed the written form with greater credibility than the oral form, but among nineteenth-century Sufis oral communication remained a respectable means of conveying important concepts.

Asma’u’s poems were intended to be recited in Fulfulde and Arabic among her family members and other scholars, and in Hausa among the masses. Inherent in that practice was her reliance on the vernacular, which facilitated the spread of Sufism from its inception.⁵⁷ Early Sufis composed in vernaculars to make esoteric concepts clear to non-Arabic speakers, and thus developed vernaculars into poetic languages of new literary modes.⁵⁸ Sufi teaching circles are vibrant centres of learning around the world, where they combine oral instruction in local languages with communal *dhikr* in Arabic.⁵⁹ Asma’u was quadrilingual, but wrote in only three of these languages: Arabic, Fulfulde, and Hausa,⁶⁰ depending on which language was understood by her audience. This practice was in keeping with Prophetic instruction to teach to the level of the student, and served the practical needs of the Caliphate following the Jihad, during years of integration of refugees.

For example, one of Asma’u’s Hausa poems – “The Qur’ān” – contained all 114 names of Qur’ānic chapters in a mere 30 couplets.⁶¹ Its brevity facilitated its memorization by rural women, while the itinerant teachers were qualified to unpack the work, explaining the import of each Qur’ānic chapter (discussed more fully below; see p. 209). “The Qur’ān” is interesting for its having

⁵⁵ Schimmel, *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 17.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 218, 222.

⁵⁷ Schimmel gives examples of the use of Persian, Turkish, and Indo Muslim languages as vehicles for the spread of spiritual concepts that could not be understood by the masses in classical Arabic (*The Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 33).

⁵⁸ Schimmel, *The Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 33.

⁵⁹ Personal experience in visiting women’s *zāwiya* meetings throughout Morocco (2001–2008) indicate the efficacy of the use of *darija* Arabic for discussions.

⁶⁰ Asma’u also spoke the Berber language Tamachek, although she did not compose in it.

⁶¹ All references to Asma’u’s poems in the following discussions are from Boyd and Mack, *The Collected Works*. The interested reader may refer to it for details.

been composed first in Fulfulde (1829), then in Hausa (1838), and finally in Arabic (1850). Hiskett noted its Arabic title, *Qasīda fī'l munāja*, while mentioning that it was of “little literary interest”.⁶² As a listing of Qur'ānic chapter titles, it is certainly not compelling in a literary way, but its function was one of educational value. Asma'u composed it first in Fulfulde – towards the end of the period of Jihad battles – perhaps as an exercise, and for review and commentary by her family members. Its Hausa composition in 1838 was a deliberate effort to create a lesson plan that was succinctly composed and transparent in intention to serve the needs of reconstruction, in which *‘Yan Taru* instruction was instrumental.

ASMA'U'S POETRY: SUFI IDEALS IN ARABIC, FULFULDE AND HAUSA

Asma'u's collected works include over sixty originals. Of these, eighteen are elegies of family members primarily written in Fulfulde; one is in Hausa, two are in Arabic. Among the rest of the poems, seven (11 percent) are in Arabic, thirteen (21 percent) are in Hausa, and the majority, twenty (33 percent), are in Fulfulde, her first language, and that of the scholars of her community. Each poetic work, especially among the elegies, is composed in a context of Sufi values, with a focus on the importance of the *sunna* and cultivating Sufi character traits of humility, piety, and active social welfare behaviour. Because the language of the work indicates the audience to whom she was speaking, these poems will be discussed here as compositions that seek to communicate Sufi concepts to particular groups of listeners.

ARABIC WORKS

In 1820, when she was in her mid-twenties, Asma'u wrote her first composition, “The Way of the Pious”, in Arabic. This inaugural piece was Asma'u's presentation of the tenets she had learned, as well as an example of her facility with the poetic style. In this four-part work she clarifies the importance of expending one's energy in support of the Islamic community through good works such as visiting the sick, and cultivating character traits such as humility and modesty, which reflect values she will extol in those she eulogizes later in her life. Like all her works, this first poem is well organized and moves logically from difficulty to resolution: part one lists barriers between humans and heaven (death, difficulties of the grave, resurrection); part two

⁶² Mervyn Hiskett *A History of Hausa Islamic Verse* (London: SOAS, 1975), 44.

explains personal traits that lead to damnation (eight in number); part three lists redeeming habits (also eight in number), and part four lists ways in which a human can exemplify the Prophet (and thus demonstrate love of God) in daily life. All of this is information she would have absorbed from her studies and from listening to her father's sermons.

The next composition that Asma'u wrote in Arabic came many years later, in 1839, and after she had written many other poems in Fulfulde and Hausa. *Tabshīr al-ikhwān* is literally "A Message to the Brethren", but it was addressed to those who specialized in *ṭibb an-nabī*, medicines of the Prophet. The Shehu barely mentioned this kind of spiritual healing, except to say it was *sunna* (in his *ihyā al-sunna*). This work of Asma'u's addresses many women's health issues referenced in the Qur'ān, such as childbirth (*sura* 56), pregnancy (*sura* 69), weaning (*sura* 85), desire for a male child (*sura* 89) and protection of newborns (*sura* 90). That Asma'u composed it in Arabic indicates that it is not meant for consumption by the masses, but for scholars who could use this information to counter the growing tendency of post-Jihād communities turning to Hausa non-Muslim *bori* spirit-possession-curing cults for these problems. The Jihād battles were fought for the reform of syncretistic practices; the remedies described in this work were meant to prevent back-sliding, and to offer acceptable solutions to health dilemmas. Writing this in Arabic would ensure that only responsible individuals, well versed in *sunna* practices, would have access to the information in it.⁶³

Several other Arabic works are included among Asma'u's collection: a prayer for recovery, missives to foreign scholars, and three elegies. Asma'u's "Thanksgiving for Recovery" also was composed in 1839, but its date is not as important as its focus, which echoes historical Sufi Rābi'a al Adawiyya's prayer for recovery from a broken wrist. The implications of drawing a parallel with Rābi'a are evident; other Arabic speakers would have known about the iconic "first Sufi".⁶⁴ The three Arabic communiques in Asma'u's collection have no dates, but indicate that Asma'u was accustomed to being in touch with scholars well beyond her home. "Welcome to the Mauritanian Scholar" is addressed to a foreign scholar, Alhaji Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Shinqiti. Asma'u calls him "brother" and refers to olfactory manifestations

⁶³ What remains a mystery is the reason that Asma'u chose to focus on Qur'anic chapters 44–108. Boyd notes that this is a section from a work written by an earlier scholar or maybe the Egyptian physician who visited Bello and passed medical books to Asma'u for her use (personal communication 14 November 2013).

⁶⁴ Reference to Rābi'a's prayer is given in Dr. Javad Nurbaksh's *Sufi Women* (London: Khaniqahi Nimatullahi Publications [1st ed. 1983, 2nd ed. 1990]), 15.

of his grace; clearly these two scholars knew one another through communications across the desert, and respected one another's intellectual capabilities. Her greeting represents a continuation of their long pattern of exchange in Arabic, the lingua franca of Islamic scholarship. Another communique includes messages from her kinsman Shaikh Sa'ad, in which each of them praises the accomplishments and character of the other, citing *aḥādīth* to illustrate their points. It is clear by this exchange that Asma'u was a respected scholar among her peers. The third example, "Poems Exchanged Between Asma'u and Aliyu", is replete with metaphoric language in a refutation of the claim by some Tijāniyya adherents that the Shehu had left the Qādiriyya brotherhood and embraced Tijāniyya affiliation late in his life. Commenting on the awkward situation of Tijāniyya Shaikh 'Umar having overstayed his welcome in Qādiriyya-dominant Sokoto, a poet named Aliyu b. Ibrahim writes to Asma'u, describing the situation as comparable to being wooed by "girls in flowing robes . . . daughters of a noble lady", and challenged by the appearance of two other "girls garbed in lovely clothes, prancing . . . their sloe-eyes flashing and their bodies beautifully perfumed." Thus, he personifies poems that describe these two competing brotherhoods: the "daughters of a noble lady", that is Asma'u's poems, he implies, represent the Qādiriyya, and the other poems come alive as rival allures, representing the Tijāniyya. His poem sets up the tension between them. Asma'u replies to his imagery with graciousness, praising his poetic skills, and yet deftly refraining from commentary on the subject matter itself. Their several exchanges end with wishes for mutual goodwill "the scent of which is like the perfume that wafts from wine", bringing to mind the metaphoric image of ecstatic intoxication rendered by divine love in Sufi poetry.

The three Arabic elegies that Asma'u's wrote were two lamentations for her close friend and life-long companion 'Ayesha, and one for her brother Bello, which appeared in Fulfulde as well as in Arabic. Asma'u was extremely close to her brother Bello, whose best friend was Asma'u's husband, Gidado. 'Ayesha and Bello were married; Asma'u's close companionship with 'Ayesha is no surprise. The use of Arabic for remembrances of 'Ayesha and Bello accomplishes three aims: first, it indicates the esteem in which Asma'u held them both; second, it indicates that the scholarly language was suitable for them in death as in life; and third, it allows Asma'u to speak of qualities of their characters that reflect immersion in a *sunna* context. These Arabic remembrances remain more widely accessible than any written in Fulfulde or Hausa. Asma'u's grief at their loss is deep, and she means to respect their memory through her use of Arabic, making the sterling qualities of their spirits known on as wide a scale as possible.

FULFULDE WORKS

In 1822, just two years after completing her first composition, Asma'u was inspired to write her second work, which was to be her first in Fulfulde. Prior to a jihād battle, as Asma'u and her close friend 'Ayesha were steeling themselves for the beginning of the battle, Asma'u's brother Bello, aware of his sister's and wife's anxiety about the danger, hastily composed a fourteen line work in acrostic form, which he had delivered to Asma'u as she sat with 'Ayesha in 'Ayesha's house.⁶⁵ Its acrostic line is the Qur'ānic verse *Fa'inna ma'a al-'usrin yusra* (94:5): "so verily with every difficulty there is relief". His poem includes commentary from this *sura*, including the questions, "Are you apprehensive, knowing that your Lord is powerful?" (v. 6); "do you think He would neglect one who is hopeful of Him?" (v. 14). It also advises, "Do not be despondent, but anticipate His bounties, God's affairs are according to plan . . . Joyful relief will come soon" (vv. 7–8), and "Despairing from His mercy is a loss – nay, it is a disbelief leading to Hell" (v. 11). With the war drums sounding just over the hill, Asma'u had to have replied hurriedly. Her skill was such that she was able to reply aptly, in a new poem with the same acrostic line; she included a prayer "for victory and that the rebellion of [the enemy] may be overcome" (v. 9). This is the first known literary collaboration of the siblings.

In 1826, having seen years of Jihād battles wear down communities on both sides, Asma'u, like many, was desperate for an end to the fighting. She composed "Give Us Victory", her second Fulfulde poem, as an urgent prayer for God's help in resolving the conflict in the Jihādists' favour. She appeals to God for the overthrow of the enemy, seeking it "For the honor, the board and the pen, and what was written/For the honor of the Qur'ān, the most excellent of books, and the Old Testament books of Psalms and the words of Jesus/ For the honor of all holy books of God, religion, and insight of precious Belief/ For the honor of the Prophet and other Envoys of God" (vv. 11–14). The poem is unfinished, but her belief in the validity of the Jihād's promotion of the *sunna* is evident in this fragment. Those who were able to understand it would have been familiar with her referents, having been educated in Islamic works as she was.

Asma'u's belief in the credibility of her father's mission is evident in the extent to which she draws parallels between the Shehu's life and times and those of the Prophet Muḥammad in two closely related Fulfulde works: she

⁶⁵ An acrostic poem uses the letters in a word or phrase as the beginning of each line. Read vertically, the first letters comprise a phrase that defines the topic of the completed poem.

describes the details of the Shehu's mission in her Fulfulde poem "The Journey" (1839) and gives biographical details about the Shehu and his family in "The Story of the Shehu" (1841). Her audience of Fulfulde-speaking clans-people would have been fully apprised of the events of both Jihāds, so the intention of the first poem is to emphasize similarities between the Shehu's mission and that of the Prophet Muḥammad, drawing parallels between their respective metaphysical missions, struggles, and battles. In the second of these works, modelled on Prophetic *sira* compositions, her dense history of the Shehu's family members and associates was but one of several such works being composed at around the same time by Asma'u's husband Gidado and uncle Abdullahi. Attention to all these works in relation to one another is interesting because it allows for examination of their differences: Asma'u's poem, unlike Gidado's prose work on the topic, includes fewer names in a more compressed length, which allows for easier memorization. She mentions individuals who would have been known to the audience: for example, reference to the "scholar of Al'kammu" (v. 60) referred to the Shehu's close friend Umaru, the father of 'Ayesha, Bello's wife and Asma'u close friend. The next line mentions "the scholar from Jenne who knew divine mysteries". The talismanic qualities of such images would have given rise to discussion about their roles in the community, the Shehu's own personality, and each individual's contribution to the mission of the Caliphate. These were individuals whose Sufi affiliations were taken for granted by those in the community, so discussing their poetic descriptions would have provided opportunity to affirm the credibility of their actions.⁶⁶

In 1833 Asma'u turned her versification to both education and introspection. Her 1833 Fulfulde work "A Warning" is a straightforward, twenty-six line explanation of the behavioural obligations incumbent upon Muslims and the reverence for the Prophet that they should exhibit. It appears to have been created for students who would be using this material in their own classrooms; its clarity and brevity are intentional. In the same year Asma'u produced a deeply personal poem called "Forgive Me" that appears to have resulted from her having spent time in *khalwa*. This was written when she was forty, about the same age as her father was when he began to have mystical experiences, like several other family members: her own mother Maimuna and her (half-)brother Bello's mother Hauwa were known for their frequent spiritual retreats, as was Bello's sister Fa'dima. In participating in a mystical retreat, Asma'u was seeking to strengthen her spirituality and character. She describes seeking assistance in overcoming self-will ("it is my own will which

⁶⁶ Both these works were later translated into Hausa by Asma'u's brother Isa.

has control, help me to overrule it", v. 2), expresses inadequacy in feeling penitence for her sins (v. 3), and mentions the Prophet's "religious duties in the cave" (v. 15) as exemplary. Most noteworthy is her reference to her own blameworthy faults. She would have understood these through her father's explication of blameworthy qualities in a Sufi context, which she had enumerated in her very first composition, "The Way of the Pious". These two poems, "A Warning" and "Forgive Me", produced during the same year, represent the two most active aspects of Asma'u's personality: the drive to educate, and the desire to deepen her spirituality.

Several of Asma'u's Fulfulde works describe for the Fulfulde-speaking clan significant Jihād events. "The Victory at Gawakuke" and "The Battle of Gawakuke" demonstrate Asma'u's active involvement in Jihād events. The first was written in 1836, immediately after the victory, which was a turning point for the Jihād forces. In this work Asma'u's identified both the Shehu and his son Bello as saints ("Great blessings were obtained through this saint [*waliyyi*] of God, son of God's saint" v. 19). Asma'u not only calls Bello himself a saint, and son of a saint, but she also describes the miracle of the pouring forth of water as being parallel to such an event during a Prophetic battle in the historic Tabura campaign. This poem is evidence that the Shehu and Bello were considered to be Sufi saints at the time of the Jihād, which itself was understood to be a military campaign in the tradition of Islam.⁶⁷ Bello died the year after this poem was completed. The second poem was written decades later, in 1856, and included far more details about the battle. By the time she wrote it, she was well known to have followed her father and brother in their degrees of scholarship, piety, and *baraka*.⁶⁸ In this second poem on Gawakuke she sought to commemorate Bello as a charismatic leader who had grown up in a pious family, had demonstrated personal *baraka*, had been profoundly studious, and as someone who had demonstrated therapeutic gifts and miracles. Asma'u explains his accomplishments in theology, jurisprudence, medicine, mathematics, and *ḥadīth* (v. 6); notes his familiarity with the esoteric as well as the exoteric (vv. 7–8, noting ability in *kashf*); confirms that he followed the *sunna*, as did the Shehu (vv. 10, 18), and demonstrated justice, generosity and mercy (vv. 10–15); cites oaths of loyalty to Bello from followers

⁶⁷ See Donal B. Cruise O'Brien and Christian Coulon, Eds. *Charisma and Brotherhood in African Islam* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989:17) (quoted in Boyd and Mack, *The Collected Works*, 64n) for a (mistaken) argument that the Fodio community did not regard the Shehu and Bello as saints until much later and only in response to challenges by the late coming Tijaniyya members in the region.

⁶⁸ Bello's nature is confirmed by European travellers who met him, such as Heinrich Barth (1859 III: 108, 117, quoted in Boyd and Mack, *The Collected Works*, 230).

of al-Jilānī (v. 32); describes the miracles Bello performed in bringing forth water (vv. 35–38);⁶⁹ and explains how he defeated non-Muslims (vv. 52–54). It may be that by this time, twenty years after the battle and nearly as long after Bello's death, the Caliphate was in need of reinforcement; Asma'u sought to make this second poem on Gawakuke a vivid reminder of what they had fought for, and encouragement of the ideals that needed to be upheld.

Ten years after admonishing the community to attend to the maintenance of their hard-won Islamic community, Asma'u wrote "Islam, Sokoto, and Wurno" in Fulfulde in 1849 because she saw that people were disinterested in maintaining Sokoto and Wurno as had been intended. She was by this time an authority in the community. She explained that she knew the Shehu had "seen" the fortress town of Wurno before it was built ("The Shehu pointed eastward from where they were and said, 'There is your town. Everything about it has been revealed.'" v. 8), and understood that its purpose was to give light to the region; its aim was to defend the Caliphate. The Shehu had prayed for the (newly built) Sokoto to be an exemplary community, while Wurno was "likened to a lamp giving our light to Sokoto" (vv. 11–12). Those who knew the Qur'ān would have understood this immediately as an allusion to *ayat al-nūr* (24:35). She intended that the poem would spur them to support what had been built.

A few years later, Asma'u was distressed about the new threats to the community raised by the advances of enemies from without and within. The urgency she felt is evident in her poems "Destroy Mayaki" (1853), "Destroy Bawa" (1861), and "Dan Yalli" (1863). The first two focus on enemies who continued, despite years of Jihād battles, to plague the security of Islamic communities; the third, written the year before her death, criticizes the misgovernment that Asma'u sees among her own people. All three begin in urgency, omitting the customary opening doxologies. In the first (Mayaki) Asma'u urges community leaders to "destroy those who have set out to destroy religion . . . [and] give victory to those who have learned from their religion . . . strengthen the hearts of Muslims to fight the Jihād" (vv. 10–11, 13). The aim of this activity is to bring prosperity in a community in which people can practice Islam: "bless Muslims with food and clothing, bless herdsmen with good pastures . . . open the routes in all directions so that communications . . . will

⁶⁹ As discussed in Boyd and Mack, *The Collected Works*, 237n, Asma'u says of this miracle "I saw it with my own eyes". This may be an indication of her mystic capabilities, or perhaps she was actually on horseback at the battlefield; she was known to have ridden horses often, and knew about the historical Aisha's propensity for involvement in battle. H. Clapperton *Journal of a Second Expedition into the Interior of Africa* (Philadelphia, PA: Carey, Lea, and Carey 1829: Vol. 2, 177) notes women in Gidado's entourage.

be easier . . . give us fat cattle, goats, sheep and camels” (vv. 16–18). Thus, she sought to inspire men to fight to protect what they had, giving them a vision of the security they should be seeking, and specifying the work they had before them. Similarly, in the poem about Bawa, she calls on God for help: “[they seek] to eradicate religion, May God eradicate them” (v. 4). Just as she named the enemy in these first two works, in the third she names her kinsman, ‘Dan ‘Yalli, criticizing his unlawful behaviour, which she saw as detrimental to the welfare of the newly formed Caliphate. In all three works she calls on the spirit of the Shehu, the miracles of Qādiriyya ‘Abd al-Qādir, and Sufi saints Shaykh Aḥmad al-Rifā’ī (d. 1122), Shaykh Aḥmad al-Badawī (1199–1276, Egypt), and Shaykh Ibrāhīm al-Ḍaṣūqī (1246–1277?) for aid. This is a mark of her authorship.⁷⁰ Especially at the end of her life, Asma’u was unafraid of speaking her mind, and confident in her estimation of what was right. She had spent years immersed in study, prayer, and contemplative retreat. At this point she felt compelled to speak the truth with the urgency of one who knows that there is little time for politesse. These poems were written in a language the enemy would not have understood, but certainly her kinsman would have heard the criticism that she was ready to direct towards them whenever necessary.

“Remembrance of the Shehu” is an 1854 Fulfulde composition that exemplifies the collaborative composition process that is a signature of Asma’u’s time. She wrote it to honour the style and content of one of her father’s Sufi litanies, called “*Afalgimi*”,⁷¹ said to have been written when he was ten years old. Although both his poem and her imitation of it are simple litanies outlining the obligations of the pillars and requesting guidance and strength to follow the *sunna*, perform ablutions, and be generous in *zakat*, nevertheless the focus of each is the saintly nature of the Shehu. It might have been presumptuous for anyone else to write a poem in imitation of the Shehu’s own work and to state clearly in it “I have copied the style from the Shehu” (v. 10), but Asma’u was 62 years old when she wrote this, her father was long dead, and she was, after all, her father’s daughter. The fact that verse three opens with three untranslatable words is likely the fault of we who presented Asma’u’s material in English,⁷² or perhaps an error in copying, but it is an

⁷⁰ Boyd says Waziri Junaidu told her that the inclusion of Shaykhs in a work aids in identification of a work as hers. “Elegy for Bukhari” (v. 2) may be the earliest time in which she included them (personal communication 14 November 2013).

⁷¹ *Falgimi*, “visitation”; *Afalgimi*, “you have visited me” (F.). I am grateful to Malama Nafisa Gusau and her mother, Hajiya Hanatu A’kilu for confirming a definition of this term.

⁷² Of course, we also enlisted the aid of several Fulfulde speakers, who were also unable to make sense of the words.

intriguing conundrum that bears comparison with the untranslatable letters that preface several Qur'ānic verses.

Finally, Asma'u's Fulfulde "Fear This" (n.d.) is a terrifying, 99-quintain poem based on a poem in couplets by Mamman Tukur. To his poem Asma'u added her own *takhmis*, a three-line addition to an existing couplet, maintaining original rhyme and metre, creating a new poem in quintains, whose original author nevertheless would be well known. This was a standard means of creating new poetic works that honoured earlier ones through their evident association, and added new information to each verse; often it was a pious exercise. Based on Qur'ānic descriptions of Hell, this is a stern reminder to listeners of the horrifying punishments awaiting those who stray from the path. Its detailed content demonstrates Asma'u's thorough grounding in the Qur'ān through both memorization and exegesis. In addition to this detailed work, she also composed in 1860, in both Fulfulde and Hausa, a work of similar import called "Fear of the Hereafter", whose 54-couplet form was much more readily memorized for dissemination in instructional 'Yan Taru classes in its Hausa form.

HAUSA POEMS

The Hausa masses, having had no training in Qur'ānic study or *sira* works, could not be expected to know the details of either. To provide an educational basis for this knowledge, Asma'u created poems of her own composition and also translated into Hausa certain effective works by others. The horrors of everlasting damnation certainly got people's attention. In discussing Hell in her Hausa works "Fear of the Hereafter" (above), and "Signs of the Day of Judgment" (n.d.), she was able to explain what she understood to be the fate of those who ignored the obligations of Islam and refused to follow the *sunna*. These two works, at 54 and 75 couplets, respectively, were readily memorized by both teachers and students in the 'Yan Taru movement. The latter work not only spoke of the pains of Hell, but also explained the need to follow the *shari'a*, making a logical connection between the law of the community based on Qur'ānic interpretation and divine law.

Having got her audience's attention by scaring them, Asma'u also offered listeners accounts of the exemplary lives of both the Prophet and the Shehu in two works that represent a wealth of such panegyric composition by many others in her community, a mark of Sufism in a community.⁷³ Asma'u translated into Hausa Muhammad Tukur's Fulfulde poem "Yearning for

⁷³ Hiskett, *A History of Hausa Islamic Verse*, 43.

the Prophet" (n.d.), a detailed 316-couplet work aimed at educating the masses about the Prophet's life and times.⁷⁴ Another of her works, her 1839 poem "Ahmada", presents the Prophet's life in 55 couplets – perhaps easier for learners to memorize than the longer one. It is a panegyric in the *madih* eulogy style. Both works have a rhyme scheme that depends on the frequent use of the terms *Ahmada* and *Muhammada*, emphasizing the Arabic root ḤMD, "praise".⁷⁵ Asma'u was familiar with thirteenth-century works on the topic, such as al-Buṣīrī's *Burda*, al-Fazzāzī's *al-qasā'id al-witriyya*, and al-Tawzarī's *simt al-hudā*, which are commonly known in the region.

In 1831, with the Jihād battles well over and the populace striving to resume a semblance of normalcy, Asma'u composed a formidable work in Hausa for use by the 'Yan Taru instructors in rural areas among Hausa speaking women. "Be Sure of God's Truth" discusses the concept of *ḥaqīqa*, Divine Truth, in informing people at all levels of their obligations in a community based on Islamic principles. The Shehu, his brother Abdullahi, and his son Bello had organized the new Caliphate on the classical concepts of State developed by the Abbasids (circa eighteenth century). Each wrote a book advising that the viability of a community rested on the morality of its leader. These books are, respectively: *Bayān Wujūb al-hijra*, 1806 ("Communication of What is Necessary Concerning the Jihād"), *Diyya al-Hukkām*, 1821 ("Light for Governors/the Brilliance of Wisdom"), and *al-Gaith*, 1821 ("The Abundant Downpour: Regarding the Behavior of the Just Imam").⁷⁶ Asma'u's Hausa poem is based on her father's 1812 Fulfulde poem on the same topic, which he wrote to remind the ruling elite, flush from jihād victories, to keep in mind a focus on divine law in the process of establishing an administrative order. In her poem Asma'u has added a *takhmis* to each verse of his original poem. Asma'u's composition in Hausa is meant for mass consumption, reminding people of the reciprocal responsibilities between the ruled and the rulers, all of whom answer to God's ultimate authority. The poem's refrain, *Tabbat Hakika* ("Be sure of God's Truth") holds both esoteric and exoteric meaning. As shown in *sura* 69, *al-Haqq* is one of God's 99 names; the end-line refrain is the Hausa form, *hakika*. The dual exoteric Prophetic and the esoteric mystic messages are clear throughout the poem: "Whoever seeks a position of

⁷⁴ See Mack 2009 for details about "Sufi Women", "Yearning for the Prophet", and "The Journey" in a Sufi hagiographic context.

⁷⁵ Hiskett, Mervyn, *Some to Mecca Turn to Pray: Islamic Values and the Modern World* (St. Albans: Claridge Press, 1993), 293.

⁷⁶ Shaykh Muhammad Sharif maintains a rich Web site on which his translations of these and many other Fodio related works are given. See the library listings on the Web site of the Sankore Institute (<http://siiasi.org>).

authority/So that he can get rich or powerful/Or slyly allies himself with wrong-doers/And those who buy titles of authority/Without doubt will burn ... be sure of God's Truth (v. 8). Asma'u's poetic explanation of the need for the rulers and ruled to work together for a higher good has become famous in the region and continues to be popular in contemporary times. Its perennial message is as important now as it was when it was first composed.

Asma'u's Hausa poem "A Warning" (1856) differs significantly from the one she wrote in earlier in Fulfulde; the Fulfulde poem describes Islam's pillars and obligations, with no mention of gender issues, presumably because the active participation of Fulfulde-speaking women in scholarly endeavours made gender a non-issue. For Hausa listeners, however, Asma'u stated clearly that "Women may leave their home freely for [education]" (v. 21). The poem contains information about the *sunna*, describes the esoteric nature of God ("He knows all mysteries" v. 3), clarifies the importance of following the pillars, and explains the use of prayer beads, a mainstay of Sufi devotions. The following year Asma'u composed "A Prayer for Rain" as a critique of non-Islamic customs, like drumming, which is associated with *bori* spirit possession cult activities. The point of the message was that relief from drought should only be sought from God, with the aid of saints: the Shehu, al-Jilānī, Rifā'ī, Badawī, and Dasūqī (vv. 9–10). She invokes the importance of following the *sunna*, and describes (rain) water in the same way as the Prophet has been described: as a mercy to the world (v. 5).

"Reasons for Seeking God" (1861) is meant as a straightforward lesson plan for Hausa speakers explaining why and how one should seek God. Like her very first poem, this one is based on her father's sermons. Its brevity (35 couplets) allows for easy memorization. This work includes instruction in following the *sunna*, instruction on prayer and the other pillars, and reiterates the "forbidden behaviours" that the Shehu had described in his writings on Sufism. Asma'u includes in this work mystical numbers, noting that God's messengers number 313, and His prophets 4,120. As in other poems, she calls on the support of saints like al-Jilānī, Rifā'ī, Badawī and Dasūqī.

ASMA'U'S TRANSLATIONS OF HER OWN WORKS

Asma'u translated several of her own poems to make them available to different audiences. Some works, written originally in Hausa, presumably for use in 'Yan *Taru* classes, she then translated into Fulfulde for dissemination among her clanspeople. For example, "Sufi Women" (Hausa, 1836; Fulfulde 1837) is Asma'u's version of a classic work that dates back to as-Sulamī's tenth century work of the same name, which was recomposed by Ibn

al-Jawzī in the twelfth century.⁷⁷ The Shehu likely had a version of the classical “Sufi Women” among his library holdings, on which Asma’u’s brother Muhammad Bello modelled his own prose work of the same name in 1836.⁷⁸ Bello asked Asma’u to write versified translations into both Hausa (1836) and Fulfulde (1837), into which she incorporated names of contemporary women of the community. The aim of her translations was to make his news on the topic widely available, because it was needed by both women and men. On the one hand, it appeared that the significant numbers of Hausa women war refugees who had been put into concubinage by the Jihādists between 1810 and 1835 were unfamiliar with and disinterested in Islamic women’s roles. At the same time, the men of their households were failing to provide re-education programs and social support for these women. Bello and Asma’u sought to bolster women’s social roles by educating both genders about the importance of Sufi women, both historically and in their own community. Thus the aim of offering the “Sufi Women” poem in Arabic, Hausa, and Fulfulde was to be sure that everyone heard, in his or her own language, examples of ways in which women were important to society, and the names of particular historical and contemporary individuals whose roles were valued. What distinguishes Asma’u’s Hausa and Fulfulde versions of this work is her addition of the names and attributes of women of the Sokoto Caliphate. By adding them to this classic praise of Sufi women in history, she elevates their standing to that of those earlier women, thereby adding them to the chronicles of those to be revered in Sufi history.

Asma’u wrote some works in both Hausa and Fulfulde at the same time, intending to reach both her brethren Fulfulde speakers and the Hausas masses with the same news: “Caliph Aliyu’s Victory” (Hausa and Fulfulde, 1844) and “Fear of the Hereafter” (Hausa and Fulfulde, 1860). “Caliph Aliyu’s Victory” explains the defeat of non-Muslim Kebbi forces. It is spare, a news bulletin, but the delivery of the same information is different in tone between the two renderings. The Fulfulde version is more subdued, explaining the expectedness of the outcome, given the unbeliever status of the Kebbi forces: “Anyone who leaves the community of the Shehu has left the *sunna* and is doomed (v. 12)”. The Hausa version is more direct and didactic: “of the Kebbi people no one is left/ They are in profound trouble/They rebel because of their worldliness/ They are beyond reach and will not go to Heaven” (vv. 10–12).

⁷⁷ Abu ‘Abd al Rahman as Sulamī, *Early Sufi Women: Dhikr an niswa al muta ‘abbidat as sufiyyat*, Trans. Rkia Cornell (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999). Historian and Ḥanbalī jurist (d. 1200) Abu al Faraz ibn al Jawzī’s work is *Safwat al Safwa*.

⁷⁸ At this writing, Bello’s Arabic version remains untranslated.

Yet both works explain the defeat, and confirm the importance of following the *sunna* and eschewing worldliness if one is to hope for heaven.

The work that was chronologically Asma'u's third was the Fulfulde version of "The Qur'ān". This represents a unique example of her translations of her own works for the purposes of instruction. In 1829 she composed this succinct, 30-couplet poem that included the names of all 114 chapters of the Qur'ān. To have written this in Fulfulde indicates that she was concerned to test it on her family members – Fulfulde speakers – to be sure that it was comprehensive and clear. None of them would have needed instruction in the names of Qur'ānic content, but they surely could have commented on the efficacy of her presentation of this information. By 1829 the Jihād battles – two and a half decades after their start – were nearly over. At this time she would have been well aware of the effects of warfare and the need for resocialization. The 'Yan Taru movement had begun, so in 1838 she translated this work into Hausa, for use by 'Yan Taru teachers. It was brief enough so that it could be memorized; the 'Yan Taru who taught it would have been intimately familiar with the import of the chapters, which they could explain during their teaching residence in a village. By the time the 'Yan Taru teachers left the village, the women villagers would have the memorized poem as an internal index of Qur'ānic contents, and would remember what had been conveyed about each chapter in the lessons they had received. Late in her life, in 1850, Asma'u translated this work into Arabic, making it more widely available to Islamic scholars in the Maghreb region.⁷⁹

THE ELEGIES

Nearly all Asma'u's elegies were in Fulfulde and were meant as consolation for her clanspeople and close friends. She wrote elegies for: her uncles Abdullahi and Na'Inna; brothers Caliph Bello and Buhari; husband Buhari; brother-in-law Mustafa; cousins Halilu and Mo'dibo; local man Malam Dandi; sister Fa'dima; close friend 'Ayesha; niece Fa'dima; neighbour Halima; local woman Zaharatu; 'Yan Taru leader Hawa'u; and even an unnamed "youth" who had assisted her in her later years. Each work extols the qualities of the individual that are worthy of blessings: hospitality, piety, kindness, generosity, patience, respectfulness of others, diligence in helping, and a conciliatory nature. Some were praised as scholars, citing the ḥadīth "when a scholar dies, Islam is

⁷⁹ When this poem was published in 1997 (Boyd and Mack), the women of FOMWAN in Nigeria were quite interested in its use for educating contemporary women. (Boyd, personal communication 14 November 2013).

breached". The Sufi devotional nature of some was mentioned, commenting on their use of *tasbīḥ* and recitation of *Wird*. For each, Asma'u closes by calling on the blessings of the Prophet, his Companions and Followers, and the Shehu. For some she adds an appeal to a combination of the Sufi saints mentioned in her other works – al-Jilānī, the Shehu, Rifā'ī, Badawī, and Dasūqī. What is significant in these elegies is the variety of individuals remembered, from a "youth" and local man and woman who worked unceasingly for the benefit of the community, to significant historical individuals like the Shehu's brother Abdullahi, Caliph Bello, and Gidado. All three of these were individuals known to European travellers and active in Jihād warfare. They were important historical figures, but Asma'u's elegies are significant for what they omit: she did not discuss military campaigns, swordsmanship, international scholarly renown, miracle-working, or qualities of *baraka*. Every individual is evaluated in terms of non-worldly qualities that are significant in relation to their heavenly rewards, nothing more. Their statuses were measured against Sufi qualities of character, because that is what Asma'u believed to be the most important features of a person.

CONCLUSION

Asma'u's Sufi upbringing infused her poetic works with the tenets of Qādiriyya Islam. She was a scholar respected by her kinspeople at home and scholars across the Sahara. Asma'u was immersed in practices of *khalwa*, *dhikr*, *sunna*, Qur'anic recitation, reliance on appeal to Sufi saints, and instruction of all these behaviours in a multiplicity of modes, including three languages and several poetic styles. She collaborated with her brother, Caliph Muhammad Bello, on several poetic works, and worked to organize the Shehu's library after his death: Asma'u was designated to catalogue the hundreds of volumes in it, and she enlisted the assistance of her husband Gidado.⁸⁰ Asma'u organized and wrote the material for a mass social welfare educational program for women, the 'Yan Taru, to ensure the education and welfare of women no matter whether they came from town or village, and were of Muslim birth or otherwise. *Jajis*, the women leaders, required that everyone set out with the right intentions, for every religious act must begin

⁸⁰ The Shehu's library was in the rooms of the Shehu's wives; Asma'u would have had access to these materials at any time. Gidado was adamant that the Shehu's books be preserved, and in many cases this required recopying of older manuscripts. See "Elegy for Gidado", vv. 17–20 (Boyd and Mack, *The Collected Works*, 201).

with the formulation of the *niyyah*, pious intention.⁸¹ The 'Yan Taru organization, with its Sufi foundation, has operated unabated from its inception in the nineteenth century, throughout the twentieth century colonial and post-colonial periods, and into contemporary times in the twenty-first century. All Asma'u's work and study were rooted in Sufi scholarship, and fuelled by her life-long devotion to Sufi tenets and practices that sustained her and her kinspeople through warfare, itinerancy, and the task of supporting an Islamic state against the human propensity to take the easier, instead of the right path.

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⁸¹ See "Elegy for Hawa'u" (Boyd and Mack, *The Collected Works*, 252–254 and fn 594, citing Annemarie Schimmel *Deciphering the Signs of God*, 199, 102 on *niyya*).

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