

The Intellectual Contribution of Nana Asma'u to Women's Education in Nineteenth-Century Nigeria

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Introduction

The *jihad* led and fought by Shaikh Uthman b. Fodio against the Habe rulers at the central Sudan at the beginning of the nineteenth century had as its objective the reform of Muslim *ummah*. Islam, though it was the main religion among the majority of the leaders of the central Sudan, was not observed properly and their lives and some of their practices contradicted the teachings of the Shari'ah.¹ Shaikh Uthman himself had confirmed this when he declared:

They are undoubtedly unbelievers, even though they profess the religion of Islam, because they are polytheists who turn away from the path of Allah and raise the flag of worldly kingdom above the banner of Islam.²

However, the most significant reforms introduced by Shaikh Uthman b. Fodio to central Sudan and among Muslim society of his period were in the area of education of women.

The *Jihad* for Women's Emancipation

Before the *jihad* of Shaikh Uthman there was concrete evidence supported by religious commandments during the early period of Islam encouraging women's education,³ but with the passage of time Muslim women were denied their right to education. The denial angered Shaikh Uthman and he condemned the *ulama* of that period for considering it more important to teach their students than teaching their wives, children and slaves. Shaikh Uthman then emphasized that teaching one's own family the basic religious principles should take precedence over teaching external students. Shaikh Uthman explained clearly in his book, *Nur al-albab*, the negligence of women's education among Muslims when he said,

... one of these impious practices is that most of the *ulama* leave their wives, daughters and slaves neglected like animals without teaching them what Allah enjoins on them regarding their articles of faith, their ablution, their prayers and other things which Allah commands that they should be taught. Among these are the things permitted to them in their business transactions and the like ... they treat their wives, daughters and slaves like household implements which are used until they are broken and then thrown onto the rubbish heap. Alas! How can they abandon their wives, daughters and slaves in perpetual darkness of ignorance while they daily impart knowledge to their students. This is nothing but error because they are instructing their students in the manner out of sheer egotism and hypocrisy. This is a grievous mistake. It is incumbent on a learned man to instruct students only when there is no other

person (in the neighbourhood) to perform this duty: and even then, it should be done after his household has been instructed because this latter duty takes precedence over the former.⁴

Shaikh Uthman advised women to demand that they should be educated and they should refuse obedience to husbands if the latter refused/failed to instruct them on their religious obligations. This exhortation must have appeared too revolutionary to many of his contemporaries.⁵ He specifically directed Muslim women as follows:

Oh Muslim women, do not listen to the words of the misguided ones who seek to lead you astray by ordering you to obey your husbands instead of telling you to obey Allah and His Messenger. They tell you that a women's happiness lies on obeying her husband. This is no more than a camouflage to make you satisfy their needs. They impose on you duties which neither Allah nor His Messenger imposed on you. They make you cook, wash clothes and do other things which they desire while they fail to teach you that which Allah and His apostle have prescribed for you. Neither Allah nor his apostle charges you with such duties.⁶

However, Shaikh Uthman's advice to women does not stop them completely from obeying their husbands. He concluded with the following words, 'Yes, indeed, a wife ought to obey her husband secretly and openly according to *ijma* even if her husband is a very poor man or a slave. Only when he orders her to disobey Allah is it permissible for her to refrain from obeying him since no obedience is due to a human creature if it means disobedience to the Creator. If a woman obeys her husband, her reward will be doubled. Such obedience should, however, come after obedience to Allah and His Messenger'.

Shaikh Uthman placed the responsibility of educating women on their husbands. He emphasized that failure to carry out this duty is blameworthy and the root cause of our social problems. This attempt by Shaikh Uthman to encourage women's education sparked serious criticism and opposition from his conservative contemporary Muslim scholars. Mustapha Goni, a Borno scholar in a poem addressed to Shaikh Uthman, declared it religiously illegal to allow women out of their homes to attend lecture sessions.⁸ While Shaikh Uthman defended his position on women's education and social participation, he denied ever allowing free association between the sexes in his teaching sessions.⁹ He reaffirmed, however, that keeping women in intellectual darkness was a more reprehensible evil than the 'evil' of allowing them to attend his teaching where they might have direct contact with members of the opposite sex.¹⁰

The Women's Response

Having heard the efforts made by the jihadists in restoring women's right to education, freedom of speech and moral obligation, women responded positively. They freely attended Shaikh Uthman's lectures, sermons and discussion sessions. This enabled them to play a very significant role in navigating the course of *jihad* and conveying its message to the Muslim community. They did that mainly through their writings and poems. The most prominent women among them were Nana Asma'u and her sister, Maryam.¹¹ They were actively consulted on various religious issues and even after the death of Shaikh Uthman, their influence continued. For example, Maryam suggested the appointment of Muhammad Bello as the Emir of Kano following controversy after

the death of Abdullahi the former Emir in 1885 and later secured his appointment as the Emir.¹²

Nana Asma'u's Life and Works

Nana Asma'u, the daughter of Shaikh Uthman b. Fodio, was born in 1793 in Degel.¹³ She was the last born of her mother's 11 children, the twin sister of Hassan, and among the 36 children of Shaikh Uthman.¹⁴ She was brought up strictly in the Islamic way. She was fostered by her step-mother, Aishatu Kwagga, also known as Gabdo, because her mother died while she was still young. Jean Boyd highlights her personality when she described her as 'tall, fair complexioned, and the mother of believers in Sokoto caliphate'.¹⁵

Nana Asma'u received her education from her father, her brother Muhammad Bello, her senior sister Hadija, and her step-mother, Aishatu Kwagga. She was also taught by her husband, Gidado Ibn Laima, who was also a learned man of that period.¹⁶ She was also taught by other teachers the subjects of *tawhid*, *tafsir*, *hadith*, *fiqh*, Arabic grammar, Arabic literature and logic. Her working knowledge of Arabic enabled her to study the Qur'an and Hadith in greater depth. She knew the Qur'an well and wrote a poem entitled *Surorin Kur'ani* (the chapters of the Qur'an) in which she rhythmically listed all the Qur'anic chapters. She attended all lecture sessions of her father, Shaikh Uthman Fodio, and she was closer to him than any of his female children and that was why she was nicknamed 'Yar Shehu' (the daughter Shehu).¹⁷

Nana Asma'u spoke and wrote four languages, Fulfulde, Hausa, Arabic and Tama-jek, and she composed poems in Arabic, Hausa and Fulfulde.¹⁸ She had five children, all males, named Abdulkadir, Ahmadu, Sumanu, Abdullahi and Muhammad Laima.¹⁹ She died in 1865 at the age of 71.

Nana Asma'u's Intellectual Activities

Nana Asma'u had written about 50 works, which included several translations, commentaries and versification of her father's works.²⁰ The most significant of her works in Arabic are:²¹

Tanbih al-Ghafilin wa tadhkir al-agilin ila turug al-salihin.

Tabisher al-Ikhwan bi al-tawassulbi suwal al-Qur'an inda Khaliq al-Mannan

Marthiyyat A'ishatu bint umaru Alkamu.

Rasa'il

Tabniya li Shaikh Sa'ad

Qasida min Asma Ila Mu'allim Ahmad al-Muritani

Among her best Hausa works are:

Surorin Al-Kur'ani

Dalilan Samuwar Allah

Dawa'in Tsorace-Tsoracen Lahira

Kirarin Amada

Shaikh Uthman, from the start to the end of his *jihad*, vigorously promoted women's education and thus all his household women were highly educated. Among them was his daughter Nana Asma'u, who became the pride of all Muslim women in Northern Nigeria. By her personal example and effort she put into practice what her father had taught and propagated.²²

Nana Asma'u began her teaching career at the age of 14, after her marriage to Gidado dan Laima. She started the lecture sessions by teaching the women and children of her household, but later she included women from the surrounding villages. She taught women from Wamakko, Wurno, Hamma'ali, Gwadabawa and several other villages. She composed poems on various subjects to her students and taught them as a form of preaching.²³

Nana Asma'u's main contribution was in promoting the education of women in Nigeria. In order to equip them to bring up the next generation she recognized the need for educating women and particularly those in rural and remote areas. The scheme she devised for this outreach was practical and her approach methodical. She developed a system of reaching out to rural women which continues to exist in some form until the present day. She appointed mature women of learning, intelligence, and above all of reliable character, to head women's village units in villages and outlying areas. These head women were called *jaji* and she gave each leader a *malfa* (hat) which was the symbol of authority.²⁴

The instructional system was devised to allow women between the ages of about 14–44 to stay at home and look after their families while taking their lessons. The students were eligible to participate in the instructional programme provided that they obtained the permission of their husband or father. The *jajis* also urged each student to set off with full commitment and determination to learn all they could and to renew their faith, acting throughout with great piety.²⁵ In return for their learning experience, the students and their families would send gifts of appreciation to Nana Asma'u. These gifts included grain, butter, cloth and honey which were used by Nana Asma'u for her welfare services to the disabled and the sick.²⁶

Nana Asma'u taught women the essential religious obligations such as prayer, ritual ablutions, *zakat*, pilgrimage and fasting, all of which are compulsory for Muslim adults. She also taught them what is permissible and what is prohibited in Islam so they would know how to act and deal with others. She warned them against lying, avarice, hatred, envy, theft and low self-esteem. Nana Asma'u's seriousness and trustworthiness encouraged men to allow their daughters and wives to attend her lecture sessions.²⁷

The *Yan Taru* Movement

In order to facilitate the education of women Nana Asma'u started the *Yan Taru* movement in 1840. She was the innovator and organizer of this movement. Her pupils came from villages and towns and they included women from various ethnic groups, including the Fulani, Hausa and Sulubawa. Some lived in places which were more cosmopolitan and where various ethnic groups intermingled. The diversity of their origins found expression in their clothes, habits and life styles.²⁸

The organization of the *Yan Taru* movement has remained much the same—the annual visits to Sokoto, the singing of songs, the bringing of gifts and alms, reciting *tafsir* in the Hubbare (tomb of Shehu), the *jajis*, the sense of belonging to a supra-domestic organization and the identification with Islam. There have, however, been some changes lately. Now women frequently journeyed to Sokoto in lorries or buses whereas formerly they had walked.²⁹ The term '*Yan Taru*', meaning association, can be employed in a number of ways to refer to any gathering of people, such as at a sporting event. Within the context of women's movement in Nigeria, however, the word takes on a specific meaning and it refers to the *Yan Taru* movement launched by Nana Asma'u. However, the existence of this movement is known primarily among its

members and to the scholars of the Asmawian tradition, such as the Waziri of Sokoto. Though it is not a secret society, it was not widely known because it operated within women's circles and therefore was not an overt activity.³⁰ The *Yan Taru* movement set the precedent for the contemporary movements in Nigeria such as the recent drive for 'Better Life for Rural Women'. In this movement women are mobilized and taught the principles of Islam and the importance of good works and welfare services to the sick and the disabled. However, the main difference between the two movements is the principle upon which they were based and operated. Nana Asma'u's main focus was on the overall development of the woman's personality and the enhancement of her potential to make a positive contribution to society. It is now time for Nigeria to reintroduce Asmawian method of education into the present educational system so that parents will have confidence and can be persuaded to send their daughters to school. The syllabus should be reorganized and the uniforms and the mode of learning must be improved and be in line with the Islamic principles, the plan for which was so effectively developed by Nana Asma'u a century ago.

Conclusion

The present day society in Nigeria has deviated much from the precedent set by the jihadists. The secularization of national life and the educational system makes it difficult for parents to send their daughters to school who fear the harmful influences their daughters might be exposed to in the secular educational environment. Thus, an overhaul of the whole system is needed if Nigerian women are to participate fully in learning and in national development.

To this day Nana Asma'u is regarded as a source of confidence and example for Nigerian Muslim women. Her works have great influence on women, and are especially inspiring to Muslim women in Northern Nigeria. It is an area where the education of women still lags behind, mainly because people are not sure whether or not Islam permits women's education.³¹

Modern Nigeria needs to reorganize its educational system and make it accessible and attractive to women around the country. The plan and principles of this overhaul already exist in the historical records of the country which has witnessed the revolutionary reforms introduced in the *jihad* by Shaikh Usman b. Fodio and carried out effectively in the sphere of women's education by his illustrious and talented daughter Nana Usma'u a century and half ago.

NOTES

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4. Uthman b. Fodio, *Nur'al albab*, trans. I. A. Ogunbiyi, Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, pp. 28-58, 82-385.
5. Ogunbiyi, *op. cit.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. Uthman b. Fodio, *Nur al-albab*, *op. cit.*
8. Ogunbiyi, *op. cit.*, p. 55.
9. Uthman b. Fodio, *Irshad al-Ikhwan ala jawaz itikhad al Majlid li ajil ta'alim al-niswan ilm furud al-ayan*, N H R S, Zaria, Nigeria: Ahmeo Bello University, n.d. Ibrahim Sulaiman, *A Revolution in History, The Jihad of Usmanu Danfodiyo*, London: Marshall Publishing Ltd., 1986, p. 86.

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15. Aishatu Ahmed, 'An Anthology of the verse of Nana Asma', ph.D Thesis, University of London, 1981, pp. 1-vii.
16. Aisha Ahmed, 'An Anthology ...', *op. cit.*, pp. vii-viii.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. vi-viii.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. vii-viii.
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*, pp. vi-viii.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*
24. Jean Boyd, *The Caliph's Sister*, Assoc. The Great Britain, 1989, p. 51.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
31. Aisha Ahmed, *op. cit.*, pp. vii-xxv.