

## **Educating Muslim Women: The West African Legacy of Nana Asma'u (1793-1864)**

*Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack*

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Kube Publishing, 2013. 256 pages.*

*Educating Muslim Women* is a unique study of Muslim women told through the story of Nana Asma'u, a nineteenth-century Fulani woman from Northern Nigeria who became a renowned scholar and greatly impacted Muslim women in Nigeria and beyond. Drawing on history, literary analysis, and ethnography, the volume's slimmness belies a wealth of material that will interest historians, applied linguists, and even sociologists of contemporary Muslim communities.

The book's main argument is that Muslim women have played a greater role in their communities than has previously been understood by historians. While using Nana Asma'u as an example, Boyd and Mack argue that she was not unique and offer painstaking details to show that her society supported and encouraged female Islamic scholarship. In addition, they relate how contemporary women continue to follow her example. The book is organized roughly chronologically, although the chapter titles suggest a thematic organization that is not always adhered to.

The introduction offers some background on Sufism, which in later chapters the authors narrow down to the Qadiriyyah order. They define Sufism as "the prayerful pursuit of knowledge aiming to move an individual closer to God" (p. 15). Their focus on knowledge allows them to emphasize Islamic scholarship and education: "Education, like Islam itself, was integral to all parts of daily life" (p. 21). Nineteenth-century schools are depicted as places where pupils learned Qur'anic recitation and received religious blessings, as well as practiced farming, obtained medical treatment, and sought personal advice. By depicting education as central to Islam and Islam as central to Northern Nigerian society, their subsequent account of how involved women

were in Islamic education enables them to assert that women were (and are) central to Muslim societies.

In chapter 1, “Hijra and Jihad,” we meet “the Shehu” (a localization of *shaykh*), Asma’u’s father Usman dan Fodio, who founded the Sokoto Caliphate in 1808. Boyd and Mack present the Shehu as a feminist who encouraged his contemporaries to educate women and urged Muslim women to demand their rights. Although ostensibly about “Asma’u’s Early Years” (a chapter subsection), here we learn about the Fodio community under the Shehu’s leadership and its battles with its neighbors. Much of this history is recorded through Asma’u’s poetry.

Chapter 2, “Asma’u’s Role in the Caliphate,” seeks to debunk stereotypes about Muslim women, this time tackling the western image of “the harem.” The community’s women are shown to have been active – they produced important materials for household use and for sale – and not “waiting listlessly to be called to provide sexual service to a high-status man,” as western stereotypes would have it (p. 69). Here Boyd and Mack make a strong argument that women’s labor was integral to the household and community and should be respected; however, it remains unclear whether it actually was. Although female scholars were clearly highly valued – her brother Bello praised Sufi women, adding local women’s names to the list of male and female devotees included in ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn al-Jawzi’s *Ṣifat al-Ṣafwah*, Sufi Women (p. 82-83), and asking Asma’u to translate it from Arabic into Fulfulde and Hausa – but whether or not such respect extended to other women’s work is less clear.

Chapter 3, “Origins of the Yan Taru,” narrates Asma’u’s creation of the Yan Taru, travelling village women’s groups that assisted other women at funerals and childbirths, cleaned mosques, gave advice, helped resolve disagreements, and taught women the Qur’an as well as how to perform the daily prayers and other Islamic rituals. These groups were intended to replace the *bori* spirit possession cults that served as women’s support groups and thus were seen as drawing them away from Islam. The authors return to these Yan Taru groups in chapter 5, showing that they continue today, “still following the traditions established by Asma’u.” Many group leaders know their genealogies leading back to her and cite her “work and demeanor as models for their own” (p. 182).

In chapter 4, “Poetic Works,” we learn more about Asma’u’s work as an Islamic scholar who used poetry to chronicle events as well as to educate others, particularly women. Boyd and Mack maintain that Asma’u played a central role in popularizing Islam by composing Islamic poetry in Hausa, nurturing “the religion of ordinary people in the marketplace,” and demonstrating “that Islam was no longer the preserve of an intellectual elite” (p. 127). They show

that she was well versed in classical Arabic poetic forms and used them to link local events with early Islamic history. The poems also offer information about Asma'u herself: "In weaving her signature into the end of the poem, Asma'u followed classical Arabic poetic form, while also describing her role in the community. She was secure in her knowledge of her authority, and the rightness of what she advocated" (p. 129). They claim that her "ability to speak directly to rulers and scholars," while at the same time educating "illiterate rural women at the bottom of the social scale" (p. 135), made her scholarship unique.

Chapter 5 chronicles colonialism's damaging effects on the Sokoto Caliphate, especially on Islamic scholarship and education, and shows how British prejudice undermined the region's thriving scholarly tradition. After 1900, when the Arabic script was discarded for school use, "the products of 'Western' schools were deemed to be literature and the rest, of the Arabic tradition, were not included in the government statistics. [...] Suddenly, instead of being acknowledged as the most literate territory in the nineteenth century, it became the most 'illiterate'" (p. 161). This cultural upheaval strongly impacted Muslim girls' education. In the first British girls-only school, "parents could see no point in their daughters learning things which did not conform to the cultural values of their society and they encouraged them to be naughty so they would be expelled," further adding to British stereotypes about the Muslims' ineducability (p. 168). The authors suggest that it was the colonial officials' lack of knowledge of Sokoto's history and of "the scholarly Nana Asma'u" (p. 168) which allowed them to judge Muslims harshly. In contrast, women recalled "a long tradition of women standing up for their rights" (p. 173) and thus, in the 1980s, women and girls began to speak out against the poor state of the education system. However, we read in passing about teenage girls who "stood up in court and repudiated their parents," leaving it unclear whether they were defying the western education system or the Islamic traditions upheld by their parents (p. 173).

In the book's sixth and final chapter, "Muslim Women Scholars in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries," the authors document numerous groups influenced by this long history of indigenous female Islamic scholarship and activism. In addition to the contemporary Yan Taru treated in chapter 5, other twentieth-century women's organizations reflected those groups' spirit. The chapter's second half shows how African Americans learned about the Qadiriyyah brotherhood through Malcolm X, who visited Sokoto in 1964. A number of them subsequently joined the brotherhood, modeling themselves "in action and appearance on an African Muslim community they believe to represent their heritage" (p. 220). Drawing on Boyd's previous publications on Asma'u, African American women in Pittsburgh created their own Yan

Taru organization in 2005. Many of them subsequently moved and started up related organizations in other cities. Today the groups include increasing numbers of Latina converts. Asma'u's influence has thus become transnational and transracial.

*Educating Muslim Women* is strengthened by the great diversity of sources used, including both contemporary scholarship and colonial travelers' accounts, Boyd's field notes from the 1950s up to the present, the poetry of Asma'u and others, and interviews with Islamic scholars and the Shehu's descendants. The book, which is itself poetic, includes detailed visual imagery that enables the reader to imagine Asma'u and her community.

In arguing that women like Asma'u and the contemporary women who follow her example perform valuable and valued roles in their communities as educators, Boyd and Mack implicitly offer a counterpoint to popular stereotypes about Muslim women as oppressed. Although largely successful in this effort, they sometimes present a rather romanticized image of Islam in which women are central. They frequently move seamlessly between statements about generalized Muslim beliefs and their specific focus on the nineteenth-century Fodio community. While this movement allows them to use a historical source to challenge contemporary assumptions about Islam and Muslims, it unfortunately sometimes results in an essentialized representation of Islam as timeless. This is regrettable, especially in light of their important claim that Asma'u's life cannot be separated from the sociopolitical context in which she lived.

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