

Jean Boyd and Beverly B. Mack, eds. *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u, Daughter of Usman 'dan Fodiyo* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997).

Many current observers of Hausa society accept as self-evident the nearly-complete Islamicization of this linguistically and culturally widespread people. Thus, they may believe the seeming uniformity of the religion in Hausaland to be an indication of the longevity of Islam in the area. The long-term activity of Muslims in Hausaland notwithstanding, the events of the Fulani jihad beginning in the early nineteenth-century, under the leadership of Shehu Usman 'dan Fodio, resulted in dramatic reforms in Islamic practice and governance that in turn encouraged and sanctioned increasing popular expression of Islamic identity.

Acting as her father's biographer and historian of the jihad, 'dan Fodio's daughter Nana Asma'u contributed significantly to the spread of Islamic culture and to the importance of the Hausa language in the West African Islamic corpus. This collection of her works is a testament to this.

Nana Asma'u's various poems, including *Wakar Gewaye*, *Godaben Gaskiya*, and *Rokon Ruwa*, exhibit the range of her abilities as hagiographer and exhorter. Moreover, her mastery of three languages appears in not only her compositions in Fulfulde, Hausa, and Arabic, but also in her application of Arabic poetic meters, such as *Kamil* and *Tawii*, to Hausa and Fulfulde verse. Asma'u also translated into Hausa several Arabic and Fulfulde pieces written by her father (for example, *Tabbat Hakika*) and others. Evidence such as Asma'u's writing has convinced scholars of West Africa that "when such material circulates in vernacular languages as well as in classical Arabic...Islam is no longer the preserve of an intellectual elite but has made a significant impact on the common culture."<sup>1</sup>

For students of Hausa language and social history, this collection of Nana Asma'u's works is indispensable to examine the processes by which Hausa oral and literary tradition promoted Islamicization at the societal, not just royal court, level. Asma'u's life

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<sup>1</sup>Mervyn Hiskett, *A History of Hausa Islamic Verse* (London: SOAS, University of London, 1975), p. 51.

and work leave no doubt that women held many important responsibilities and organized collectively in certain circumstances, suggesting further that perhaps a womanist consciousness existed. Such a reading of Asma'u's lifework would suggest that the Fulani jihad, at least at the beginning, strengthened women's positions in Hausa society.<sup>2</sup>

To further grassroots Muslim activity, Nana Asma'u founded the *yan taru* women's education system, in which women gave religious instruction, cared for the poor, and performed many other social functions. With elegies dedicated to her half-sister (*Elegy for My Sister Fadima*) and other women as well as a poem for Sufi women, Asma'u also left invaluable biographical information about individual women, a rare find for scholars of nineteenth-century Hausa women.

To a certain extent, Asma'u also legitimated the jihad and Fulani rulership in Hausaland. In specific, she chronicled events of the jihad and the life of the Shehu. For instance, she devoted *Wakar Gewaye* to the enumeration of the worldly activities of the Shehu, while, in *Godaben Gaskiya* and *Rokon Ruwa*, she called upon her father as she invoked various sufi saints. For example, she included her father in the company of the renowned Sufi mystics.<sup>3</sup> Such reverence for the Shehu by Asma'u (and others) "...contributed to the process of 'canonization'...in consequence, a miracle tradition grew up around the Shehu's memory."<sup>4</sup> Collections of *Karamomin Shehu Usman 'Dan Hodiyo* (Miracles of the Shehu Usman 'dan Fodio), including such vignettes as "Labarin Shaihu 'Dan Hodiyo da Madugu," "Labarin Shaihu 'Dan Hodiyo da Wani Malami," and others, comprise this tradition surrounding the "acts" of the Shehu, a tradition that Hausa society continues to enjoy today.

<sup>2</sup> Some scholars claim the 'dan Fodio promoted the use of the veil for women as an outward sign of Islamic faith and that, over time, this practice developed into *purdah* (wife seclusion). However, according to the *Hausawa da Makwabtansu* (*Kano Chronicle*), Muhammadu Rumfa 'dan Yakubu (r. 1463-1499) began the practice of *purdah*, though no further enumeration is given.

<sup>3</sup> "Godaben Gaskiya," *Collected Works*, p. 461. This version is slightly different from that in *Zababun Wakoki*, though the meaning is essentially the same in this case.

<sup>4</sup> Hiskett, p. 135-136.

Another enduring aspect of Asma'u's poetry is her enumeration of precepts for proper Islamic conduct, the consequences of following religious instruction, and the penalties for failure to follow such precepts. She articulated religiously-sanctioned codes of behavior through various imagery. One such metaphor is the path or way, *hanya*. In *Godaben Gaskiya* and *Rokon Ruwa*, Asma'u envisioned the path in terms of ideal behavior, as contained in the *sharia* and in the *summa*.<sup>5</sup>

Asma'u also employed the notion of religious training, discipline or instruction, *horo*. Throughout *Wakar Gewaye*, she stressed the importance of the Shehu's instruction.<sup>6</sup> The use of these literary images clearly stems from the 5 pillars of disciplined Islamic behavior, as contained in the *summa*. The five precepts—profession of faith, alms-giving, prayer five times a day, pilgrimage to Mecca, and fasting during Ramadan—are important to self-definition as a Muslim. Asma'u outlined these in *Godaben Gaskiya* as well as other exemplary behaviors such as just governance and citizenship in *Wakar Tabban Hakikan* and ritual cleanliness in *Godaben Gaskiya*.

Often, however, Asma'u outlined proper practice through negative example, or through admonitory verse.<sup>7</sup> In *Godaben Gaskiya*, she counted adultery, slander, false testimony, and greed among the list of sinful behavior (entire section of "Sinners" is devoted to this enumeration). Though Asma'u alluded in other poems to practices that qualified people as infidels or non-believers, she specifically mentioned *bori* (Hausa spirit possession belief) in *Rokon Ruwa*.<sup>8</sup> In fact, in this poem unlike others mentioned here, she targeted several indigenous, popular Hausa practices that would conflict with Islamic orthodoxy. In addition to the spirit possession cult of *bori*, she named *caca*, gambling, singing for competition, and drumming.<sup>9</sup> As for the latter, she qualified her disavowal of it by stating that drumming in jihad, during work, and to help others was permissible.

<sup>5</sup> Hiskett, p. 64. *Godaben Gaskiya*, verse 6, line 2, and others (verse 72/71, depending on version). *Rokon Ruwa*, p. 467, verse 13, line 1.

<sup>6</sup> The second line of many verses in *Wakar Gewaye* includes "horo nasa" (ex. verse 11), p. 445.

<sup>7</sup> Hiskett's classification, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> p. 467, verse 12, line 1.

<sup>9</sup> pp.467-468, verses 12 and 14-18

Clearly, Asma'u and other Muslims lived in a bifurcated world, of sinners (with various levels, the worst being that of Kaffirs, non-believers) and the righteous ones. The cosmological world of Asma'u was also divided into two—the earthly and the afterworld. In *Rokon Ruwa*, as in many poems, she linked the two worlds through the effect that worldly behavior has on one's position in the afterlife (as in *lahira*, possessions for journey).

This notion of 'good works' can, of course, be found in the eschatology of many world religions. Asma'u exhorted her followers through the metaphorical linkages of the mundane, that is worldly, to the spiritual. For example, in *Godaben Gaskiya*, she linked the following of the five pillars of Islam to the climbing of five hills on the bridge to Paradise, an arduous journey but one that holds great rewards. In *Rokon Ruwa*, she advised Muslims to abide by Allah as the giver of water, necessary for all life but particularly precious in the Sahel. She clearly wrote these words with her predominantly agrarian followers in mind, whose dependence on water she masterfully relates to their livelihood and search for explanations for natural circumstances.

As stated earlier but should be reiterated, to find such a body of sources that reveals aspects of the lives of elite women is rare. It is even rarer to find within such a body of evidence some insight into of the relationships of the elite and non-elite in Hausaland. The editors Beverly Mack and Jean Boyd have arranged the text in such a way as to be accessible to scholars and students of all disciplines and of all levels of language competence. As this work is #9 in the *African Historical Sources Series*, Boyd and Mack take great care in detailing where sources are to be found, other scholars who have translated Asma'u's text, and the condition of the materials. This kind of reciprocity on the part of the editors is commendable and should occur more frequently in order that Africanists may share sources and critique their colleagues' work more responsibly.

The editors include a section on orthography and an explanation of romanization of Hausa language. Also included is discussion of Arabic words that have been fully 'Hausa-ized'. After a brief, but helpful introduction, the editors have included a chronology of events that also locates Asma'u poems in appropriate years. Then English translations of poems, with brief background information,

appear. A glossary and bibliography of published works are followed by poems in Hausa. Finally the section of poems in *ajami* (Hausa or Fulfulde in Arabic script).

The footnotes that Mack and Boyd provide are very helpful. Both editors have published important scholarly works on Hausa women. Moreover, they have consulted other authorities, such as the late *Waziri* of Sokoto, Alhaji Dr. Junaidu, Mervyn Hiskett, John Hunwick, to name just a few. This work thus represents the efforts of many renowned scholars of Hausa and West Africanists.

To their credit, the editors have included interpretive English translations. That is to say, the English translations are not literal. Thus, those depending on the English translations will find well-polished poetic language that reads well, for example, for a class on Hausa literature for English speakers. Students of Hausa language may find it a valuable exercise to attempt their own translations, as this author has done. The great number of Arabic words, not all translated by the editors, can prove to be difficult to those not familiar with the language.

The text is a must-have for West Africanists, Islamicists, and scholars of women's studies. Boyd and Mack have culled these rare materials from many sources, and it is now time for scholars to make use of them.

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