



Nana Asma'u, A Muslim Scholar: Excerpts from One Woman's Jihad

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Nana Asma'u and the Scholarly Tradition [Chapter 1, pp.]

ONE This book focuses on a nineteenth-century Muslim woman in West Africa who was a legend in her own time. Nana Asma'u (1793-1864) was a respected public figure of significant authority. She was active in politics, education, and social reform; she was a prolific author, popular teacher, and renowned scholar and intellectual. Asma'u did not accomplish her work in isolation; she was actively involved with her family and the wider community of which it was a part. She managed a household of several hundred in an age when technology was restricted to what could be

rendered by hand for the growth, production, and processing of food or material goods. During warfare, she was an eyewitness to battles about which she reported in her written works. Throughout the period of the Sokoto jihad, a series of battles in a campaign to reform Islam (1804-1830), and long after, Asma'u was an active teacher of both men and women. In addition to teaching students in her own community, she reached far beyond the confines of her compound through a network of itinerant women teachers whom she trained to teach isolated rural women. An accomplished author, Asma'u was well educated, quadrilingual (in Arabic, Fulfulde, Hausa, and Tamachek), and a respected scholar of international repute who was in communication with scholars throughout the sub-Saharan African Muslim world. Asma'u pursued all these endeavors as a Sufi of the Qadiriyya order, but the driving factor in her own life and that of the community was their concern for the *Sunna*, the exemplary way of life set forth by the Prophet Muhammad. With the *Sunna* orchestrating the lives of its members, Asma'u's Qadiriyya community sought to serve through teaching, preaching, and practical work, focused on a spiritual life in the world, while rejecting materialism.

Asma'u was a pearl on a string of women's scholarship that extended throughout the Muslim world. This chain of women scholars originated long before Asma'u's lifetime and stretched over a wide geographic region from the Middle East to West Africa. The network of women's scholarship contemporaneous to Asma'u is but the tip of the iceberg. It did not spring forth fullblown, but was nurtured over successive generations as an integral part of the aim of Islam: the search for communion with God through the pursuit of Truth. Education and literacy have been hallmarks of Islam since its inception. Any society that impedes equitable access to salvation by controlling or limiting who can get an education eschews the tenets of Islam; so for the Qadiriyya community to which Asma'u belonged, to deny women equal opportunity to develop their God-given talents was to challenge God's will.

This book has two aims. The first is to bring to life a nineteenth-century Muslim West African woman of renown. There is no doubt that Nana Asma'u was exemplary in her character and accomplishments. Her story speaks for itself, without question. The second aim is to suggest that there may be women in other Sufi communities bordering the Sahara who also performed an important part in their societies. Nana Asma'u is exceptional in her achievements but may not be unique in the role she played. This task can be only begun here, by motivating readers to seek further sources in other languages and other places, and mine them more deeply.

Caliphate Women's Participation in the Community [Chapter 6, pp.76-91]

SIX A certain number of women in the Caliphate community, like their descendants in contemporary Sokoto and nearby towns, were teachers and writers. In the predominantly oral culture of the Caliphate, teachers were effective in transmitting works through the spoken, chanted word. Repetition and memorization of these popular poems resulted in their reaching a far wider audience than originally intended, as voices echoed beyond the open-air class area and recitations passed well beyond the first learners to the extended family and neighbors alike. Asma'u established a cadre of literate, itinerant women teachers (*jajis*) who disseminated her instructive poetic works among the masses. Trained by Asma'u, these women were extension teachers, using Asma'u's works as lesson plans and mnemonic devices through which they instructed secluded women in the privacy of their homes. The tradition of educating women, and of women themselves writing tracts as practical guides to both rudimentary life skills and pious behavior, was an integral part of the Sokoto Caliphate community. The practice continues into the twenty-first century. In nearly every case, contemporary women cite Nana Asma'u as their exemplar in seeking knowledge as a necessary pursuit in their lives. This was a matter which she said could be undertaken only if they behaved like respectable married women.

Nana Asma'u's training of *jajis* and the *'yan-taru* was community work whose primary tool was the spoken word. In keeping with the attitude of reverence for the word that lies at the heart of Islam, her scholarship and dissemination of it were expressive of the spirit of Islam in both content and form. Not all her poetic verse was theological tract, but all of it was relevant to some layer of the community, whether scholarly or unschooled. Captured Hausa men and women were new in the Caliphate, and needed to know practical things: how to dress, how to pray, how to reshape the common details of their lives into Islamic form. Asma'u's works not only informed women on these matters, but also reinforced Sufi characteristics and the principles of the *Sunna* by outlining in praise poems the spirituality and moral characteristics that made a person noteworthy. It was not a person's wealth or political achievements that were significant, but faith and right living. Asma'u cites the asceticism and teaching skills of long-dead Sufi women, and the benevolent characteristics of her brother Bello, the caliph, as examples to be followed. The message she conveys in these works is that worldly greatness is not a worthy aim, but personal goodness—patience and generosity—is what makes a person pious.

Al-Ghazali's (A.D. 1058-1111) treatise *On the Duties of Brotherhood*, a classic work with which Asma'u was familiar, advises the devout Muslim on eight specific obligations toward his or her community members: material assistance, personal aid, holding one's tongue, speaking out, forgiveness, prayer, loyalty and sincerity, and affording relief from discomfort and inconvenience. Concern for the material, psychological, and spiritual welfare of the community was incumbent upon every individual, and was the guiding principle of society. Attention to these issues was integrated with the advocacy of the *Sunna*, the right mode of behavior, as the focus of the community. In short, there was much that a woman not only *could* do, but was *obligated* to do in the promotion of the good of the community, and for the good of her own soul. These are the principles that Asma'u and her students promoted in the community, and women's roles were central to their promotion. By teaching women, Asma'u was by extension training whole families in orthodox Sufi practices that focused on following the *Sunna* and the Qur'an, the two guiding lights of the Caliphate.

Growing up as she did during the jihad instilled in Asma'u an activist spirit that gave no quarter to elitist approaches to literary works. Each of her long poems is functional well beyond the promotion of the aesthetic. The works discussed here demonstrate the kinds of "lesson plans" she created for *'yan-taru*. As mnemonic devices, these works could be memorized by teachers and students and then explained in fuller detail during instruction. *The Path of Truth*, *A Warning, II*, and *Sufi Women* are some of the best examples of the ways in which Asma'u used her scholarship to spread knowledge and provide benefit to the entire community. *Lamentations for Aisha, I & II* and elegies for Zaharatu, Hawa'u, and Fadima describe exemplary lives of women.

These works function in different yet complementary ways. They share attention to the community of women, whether Fulani or Hausa, whether seasoned scholars or novices. *The Path of Truth* provides both basic and theologically sophisticated instruction in Islam that is useful to either women or men. *A Warning, II* couches instruction in terms of advocating proper behavior, in both practical action (the pillars of Islam) and attention to the spirit behind activity, such as attending classes outside the home. *Sufi Women* connects the community of caliphate women to Muslim women scholars and Sufis throughout history, confirming a tradition of women as active members of the devout Muslim community over twelve centuries, while *Lamentations for Aisha I & II* and elegies for various women present examples of women whose characters bear imitation.

The Path of Truth

When a *jaji* left Asma'ū to return to her home village, she walked in the midst of her group of women students, her distinguishing headgear lending utmost respectability to the group. She probably carried a copy of Asma'ū's latest work, which may well have been at one time *The Path of Truth*. Written in Hausa in 1842, it has one hundred thirty-two verses, divided into sections treating obligatory religious duties, resurrection, sinners, salvation, and Paradise, which merits three consecutive sections at the end. All this is framed by opening and closing prayer doxologies. Each couplet's end rhyme provides a mantra: the repetition of "Ahmada" or "Muhammada" every two lines keeps the work focused on the need to follow the *Sunna*, the example of the Prophet Muhammad.

Following the opening doxology (nine verses), the next section describes in detail the obligations of the pillars of Islam, as well as outlining the obligations and attitudes of Sufi living. Throughout these twenty verses neither male nor female is mentioned. Rather it is emphasized repeatedly that these obligations are incumbent upon every Muslim:

*You should always be clean and wear clean clothes.
Look well to the details of your religion so that we may all
be united with Ahmada.
You should seek religious knowledge and stop straying from
The Path. Do not be one of the lost in the next world.
Ahmada.
Such knowledge enables you to follow God and the Prophet.
Insight into the Sunna will carry us to Ahmada.
Wishing for a Muslim everything that you
Wish for yourself is [in keeping with] the character of Muhammada.
(vv. 19-21, 28)*

One can well imagine this section being used to instruct those new to the orthodox practice of Islam, informing them of the practical details of daily Muslim behavior.

In the next section, eleven couplets describe examples of inappropriate behavior. Like every culture, this one had to deal with usurers, adulterers, slanderers, hypocrites, liars, show-offs, frauds, and intriguers. These sinners are described like figures in a Hieronymus Bosch painting, suffering the fates they have earned:

*The usurers will see their bellies swell bigger than gourds
In size and exposed to Ahmada.
They will rise on the Last Day as if possessed of the Devil
The Qur'an told their fate, Ahmada.
The stink of the adulterer is worse than the stench of carrion:
He will be driven away, so that he is far from Ahmada.
The slanderer, the hypocrite
And he who gives false witness will not see Ahmada.*

*With their tongues hanging down to their chests, they will be exposed
For they will not get salvation from Ahmada. (vv. 40-44)*

Likewise the arrogant, the tyrannous, the intriguer, the fraud, the embezzler and briber, the ungrateful child, the backbiter, the envious, thieves, and infidels will receive punishments appropriate to their sins. Asma'û makes clear that this plan, guaranteeing that "what goes around comes around," is not hers, but derives from the word of God, for the Qur'an told their fate (v. 41). This section aims to scare students into right behavior, reinforcing the instruction that precedes it with the sure result of failing to follow Muslim obligations.

The next thirteen verses are an instruction manual for the Day of Salvation. A series of events will signal the end of the world, beginning with Muhammad's return to earth:

*Muhammad will return and our deeds will be weighed while we stand
Some will be saved only through the salvation of Ahmada.
Those whose [good] deeds exceed
The bad ones will be saved only through the salvation of Ahmada.
Those whose bad deeds exceed
On that day will perish, unless they are saved by Ahmada.
Papers will be given to some in the right hand, to others
In the left hand: the latter will be far away from Ahmada.
The meritorious will be saved because they followed
The way of the Sunna and helped Muhammada. (vv. 60-64)*

The plan is clear: it remains only for the student, the aspiring good Muslim, to follow the right path.

The second half of this work describes Paradise, its approach bridge, its pools, and those who will be lucky enough to populate it. To individuals in the Sokoto Caliphate, immersed in dusty, hot, difficult days, such a work had to be a welcome reprieve from the toils of the day, offering hope in the distant future, and the assurance that certain behavior in the present guaranteed the contentment Paradise had to offer:

*Let us dwell there and drink milk and honey
And enjoy bliss together with Ahmada.
For there is no illness, no aging, no poverty
No death: we remain forever
Forever in enjoyment, relaxation and pleasant talk
We walk in Paradise, we have seen Muhammada.(vv. 94-96)*

Throughout each section of this long poem, there is a noticeable absence of gender bias. This perspective is in keeping with the belief in Sufism of the equitable position of men and women; the "soul has no gender." It is clear from other works by Asma'û that she is well aware of the importance of describing women's roles when appropriate, as will be discussed below. But this work is a carefully balanced account aimed at the good Muslim, and it is significant that she eschews the opportunity to use gender-specific pronouns. Indeed, the only ones used are in relation to the Prophet Muhammad; otherwise she speaks directly to *you*, *i.e.*, her Muslim audience, without gender. Yet this work is not devoid of personal touches. At the end of the work, Asma'û wove into the verses the seal of her authority, speaking directly to her audience again as "friends":

*If anyone asks who composed this song, say
That it is Nana, daughter of the Shehu, who loves Muhammada.
You should firmly resolve, friends, to follow her
And thus you will follow exactly the Sunna of
Muhammada. (vv. 125-126)*

Generations of women learned this poem by heart, and in doing so they internalized the message that right living is the aim of every Muslim; the *Sunna* is the Way, the Path of Truth.

A Warning, II

Other times created other needs. *A Warning, II* was written in 1856, in Hausa, for the benefit of the sections of the population needing resocialization and instruction in the guiding principles of the Caliphate. The Prophet instructed teachers to “speak to the people according to their understanding”; Asma’u would have been familiar with this advice. This work is appropriate to the time in terms of its message, its form, and its mode of delivery. The message is a simple, direct outline of the tenets to be followed by orthodox Muslims; the form is the couplet, and the language is that of the masses, Hausa. As in the longer work *The Path of Truth*, Asma’u explains here—in only twenty-seven couplets—the basic principles of Islam for anyone whose level of devotion was questionable: follow the pillars of Islam and the *Sunna*. The first nineteen couplets are a distillation of the longer work in setting forth the obligations of devout Muslims.

It is significant that Asma’u focuses on women in the next five verses, spending nearly a fifth of the entire work directly addressing women who are new to the Muslim caliphate community. These “women’s verses” are liberating. This may surprise feminists who are “apt to be suspicious towards Islam which they consider a sexist tool of oppression” (Coulon 1988: 114) and those historians who believe the Shehu “insisted on secluding Muslim women.” We know from the Shehu’s own writings on the subject that many of the educated elite wanted their wives to stay at home but failed to teach them anything, treating them “like household implements which became broken after long use and which are then thrown out on the dung heap.” In this context, therefore, Asma’u’s words are very significant for she says that women have a duty to seek knowledge, which by implication means taking the initiative and acting according to their consciences. She said, “Seek,” not “Wait until someone does something for you,” and, yes, she said women must obey their husbands, but only their lawful demands.

*Women, a warning.
Leave not your homes without goodreason
You may go out to get food or to seek education.
In Islam, it is a religious duty to seek knowledge
Women may leave their homes freely for this.
Repent and behave like respectable married women
You must obey your husbands’ lawful demands.
You must dress modestly and be God-fearing.
Do not imperil yourselves and risk hell-fire.
Any woman who refuses, receives no benefit,
The merciful Lord will give her the reward of the damned. (vv. 20-24)*

But wherever there are obligations there are also rights. This work states clearly that if a woman wants freedom it has got to be in the context of behaving as an exemplary Muslim. Discreetly dressed women may “leave their homes freely” for education; in fact, they “must” go out to seek education—it is their religious obligation to do so. The work’s emphasis on seeking religious knowledge is significant in promoting *among women* the ethos of spirituality based on intellectual pursuit of an understanding of God, and the intention is that such

spiritual knowledge will benefit the entire community. Indeed, the last verse before the closing doxology confirms that this is Asma'ū's intention in this poem:

*I have written this poem of admonition
For you to put to good use in the Community. (v. 25)*

Women were required to contribute to the promotion of the socio-spiritual needs of the Sokoto Caliphate.

Sufi Women

That women have had such an active role to play in the Muslim community was not a new idea to Asma'ū. Educated in a classic Islamic mode, she was familiar with works such as thirteenth-century Ibn al-Jawzi's *Sifat al-safwa*, which lists Sufi women saints of exemplary character. Asma'ū's brother Bello wrote on the topic in an effort to remind people of the Sufi foundation of the Qadiriyya community, warning women to harken back to the Sufi principles and urging them to eschew their acquisitiveness. His work is founded on older works, such as that of al-Jawzi, which described Sufi women saints as "blessed anonymous women who gave themselves over to perpetual worship" (Chodiewicz 1994: 18).

With evident enthusiasm, Asma'ū seized Bello's composition, translating it into both Hausa and Fulfulde verse within a few months, thus making it available to as wide an audience as possible, but Asma'ū's poem is not simply a reworking of earlier sources, for she makes it relevant to her community in several ways. It includes transmogrified versions of the Arabic names of women, making them more accessible to her own community. For instance the historical Habiba 'Adawiyah becomes Habibatu Adawiyyatu in Asma'ū's version, and the famous eighth-century Sufi woman saint Rabi'a of Basra appears as Rabia'tul in the Hausa-Fulani version of her name. It is certain that Asma'ū was aware of the original Arabic names—so well known was al-Jawzi's work, and so classic was Asma'ū's education. Therefore, Asma'ū's decision to localize them indicates her intention of making this work relevant to her own audience. Asma'ū describes the wives of the Prophet (vv. 11-15, 21), his mother and daughters, and also the women of the community of her father, the Shehu. Two of his wives were still alive at the time of the composition of the poems; she described them as exceedingly pious, unworldly, good-natured, and generous. Other Caliphate women were renowned scholars:

*The teacher of women, Habiba
She was most revered and had great presence.
I speak of Aisha, a saint
On account of her asceticism and determination.
And Joda Kowuuri, a Qur'anic scholar
Who used her scholarship everywhere....
There were others who were upright
In the community of the Shehu; I have not listed them.
Very many of them had learned the Qur'an by heart
And were exceedingly pious and zealous.
(Sufi Women, vv. 68-70, 73-74)*

These images indicate a continued, accepted presence of women teachers in the Caliphate community. More importantly, such a presence is modeled on women's roles that extend back to the period of the establishment of Islam, and Asma'ū weaves into her work evidence of the historical precedent for such roles.

The poem *Sufi Women* emphasizes that pious women are to be seen in the mainstream of Islam, and to warn against excessive attachment to worldly gain. It could be memorized by teachers for instructional purposes. Its intended effect was to mobilize women in promoting the Muslim ethos over all other authorities. Thus, in response to the application of political or

patriarchal pressure, women could cite this poem as support for their insistence on spiritual over human laws.

Asma'ū's versions of *Sufi Women* are, in the Islamic world, rare examples of "popular" women's history. Written for ordinary housewives, the poems had the potential to transform their lives by giving them a sense of identity and ridding them of the despair which rootlessness brings. Importantly, Asma'ū affirmed her personal belief in the power of the great saints of womankind. In a remarkable and possibly unique way she said she looked to them, personally, for help.

*For their majesty will wipe away my sins
And because of them I will escape the burden of my
wrongdoings.
In this world and the next, where souls await judgment
I will rely on them for my salvation. (vv. 59-60)*

In this she speaks for all women who might have heard this work, placing herself among the ranks of ordinary women of the caliphate, subject to the same doubts, worries, and burdens.

Lamentations for Aisha, I & II

The elegy was a standard genre of poetic expression, in which Asma'ū excelled, proving to be one of the most prolific lament writers of her time. She wrote between sixteen and twenty elegies. Some are in praise of revered figures like Bello, her uncle Abdullahi, or the famed scholar Mustapha, but six focus on the lives of women who might otherwise have remained unknown to history. She held deep respect for everyone who lived a useful life in the context of Islam and expressed her appreciation of their efforts in what she wrote. To her, Halima, "a kind neighbor," and Zaharatu, who with willingness "attended women in childbirth," made contributions which were necessary and highly valued.

The two works that she wrote for Aisha, her lifelong friend and eventual sister-in-law, should be read as a pair because they express complementary perspectives on mourning. The first describes Aisha's accomplishments as a devout Muslim who cared for orphans and widows, promoted community harmony, and possessed the piety of one who has memorized the Qur'an. In this work Asma'ū appeals to God to preserve Aisha's soul and welcome her into His eternal light. The second work is more heartfelt. In it Asma'ū offers insight into the ways in which these women related to one another, neither isolated nor under the domination of men. The depth of Asma'ū's grief is evident in this work:

*This poem was written because there is no one else like her
from among the Brethren. How long my nights dwell on her.
How often she helped me to forget my own grief
and how often she helped me most kindly.
The depth of my sadness and loneliness after her death has Grown
O the multitude of my sorrows, the deepening of my
gloom! (Lamentation for Aisha II, vv. 5-7)*

Asma'ū notes that although wild expressions of grief are eschewed, crying and like mourning is not forbidden in Islam: "I cry for her with tears of compassion / and of longing and sympathy for her, and loving friendship" (*Lamentation for Aisha, II, v. 14*).

Asma'ū's loss is also a loss for the community, because Aisha so active and contributed so much to it: "She was a guardian of orphans and widows / a pillar of the community, ensuring harmony" (*Lamentation for Aisha I, v. 8*). Having memorized the Qur'an and by implication being as learned as many a judge, Aisha was as able to clarify the inheritance rights of widows

and orphans as to find them shelter, food, and clothing. As wife of the Caliph she was able to champion any cause from a position of strength. She was accessible to women in need, and listened to what they had to say.

In the second work lamenting Aisha's death, Asma'u is colloquial and heartfelt:

*Oh my eyes weep liberally for my loved one
as a consolation for my grief and a companion for my
gloom.
Shed copious tears for the loss of Aisha
the noblest of my dear ones of my age group, my
friend....
The depth of my sadness and loneliness after her death has
Grown
O the multitude of sorrows, the deepening of my gloom!
Know you not that love, when firmly established, is
priceless?
There is no child who could make me forget that love
and no brother, nothing which could soothe me, not even
all sorts of riches.
Therefore my heart withers from worrying:
sigh after sigh rises up from my grief;
Tears have continued to flow constantly
as if they would never dwindle or cease....
I cry for her with tears of compassion
and of longing and sympathy for her, and loving friend
ship. (vv. 1-2, 7-11, 14)*

Not only does Asma'u reveal her own humanity in mourning so deeply, but she also accepts Aisha's frailties: "[May God] forgive her lapses and reward her / for the good things she did for me gladly and graciously" (v. 17). Taken together, these two works on Aisha describe her many aspects, from formal to casual, and draw her fully as a three-dimensional woman whose pretence is a loss to the community as well as to the individuals who knew and loved her.

Elegies for Fadima, Zaharatu, and Hawa'u

These are short works (23, 28, and 21 verses, respectively) in which the best-known traits of each woman are lauded. Each is praised in remembrance of the positive contributions she made to the community. The emphasis is not on who she was, but on how her actions defined the depth of her character. In each case, her actions are in accord with the spirit of the *Sunna* and the aims of the Muslim Sokoto community.

Fadima was Muhammad Bello's full- and Asma'u's half-sister and seems to have inherited the same kind of energy that he had:

*She succored the Community with her many acts of
charity, feeding people.
Relatives and strangers alike: she showed no discrimination.
She gave generously; she urged people to study.
She produced provisions when an expedition was
mounted. She had many responsibilities.
She sorted problems and urged people to live peacefully, and forbade
squabbling. (vv. 7-10)*

Fadima married the army Commander in Chief, (the *amir al-jaish*), Aliyu Jedo; hence, her involvement with organizing the production of "hardtack" food for the army. Two principal items were *murje* and *kilishi*, the former a kind of muesli, the latter dried meat. Both were high-protein foods, light in weight and long-lasting. *Murje* was produced by first threshing and

milling millet seeds, then cooking the millet flour, drying it, soaking it in butter and honey, drying it again, and finally rubbing it into granules which could be stored by a horseman in his saddlebags and either eaten as it came or reconstituted into porridge by the addition of milk. To prepare food like this would entail negotiations with all manner of suppliers, as well as the workforce. Fadima linked these activities with her famed hospitality, which had nothing to do with entertainment and everything to do with providing food on a daily basis for anyone who, at nightfall, was at the gates of the house and was hungry.

Asma'ū did not just confine her praise to women such as Fadima who performed prodigious tasks, but, as we have already stated, she also encouraged women by praising those who did quite mundane jobs. Zaharatu was such a person, who worked indefatigably for the community: Asma'ū gave credibility to her accomplishments, noting:

*She was a fine person who benefitted the Muslim Community.
She gave religious instruction to the ignorant and helped
everyone in their daily affairs.
Whenever called upon to help, she came, responding, to
lay out the dead without hesitation.
With the same willingness she attended women in childbirth
All kinds of good works were performed by Zaharatu.
She was pious and most deserving: she delighted in giving
and was patient and forbearing. (vv. 6-10)*

It may well be that when more documents come to light, elegies will be found that were written by "princes" in praise of pious barbers who circumcised boys, or bone setters who tended broken limbs. However, it remains true to say that literature of this kind is rare.

Hawa'ū was a *jaji*, or leader of the bands of women students known as *'yan-taru*, or "those who congregate together, the sisterhood." Asma'ū relied on each *jaji* to act as a mentor and to bring groups of women to her. To each she gave a large *malfa* hat made of fine silky grasses. Usually worn by men, the hats have a distinctive balloon shape because they are intended to be worn over turbans. The late *Waziri* of Sokoto always wore one on formal public occasions. A *malfa* was also (and remains) one of the marks of the office used by the *lima* of Gobir, the chief of women devotees of *Mbori*. Asma'ū deliberately took up the symbol, and by giving each *jaji* a *malfa*, she at once devalued its uniqueness and transformed what it stood for. From being symbolic of *bori*, it turned into an emblem of Islam. Asma'ū ceremonially bestowed a red "turban," or strip of red cloth, on each new appointee. Tied round the brim of the hat, the turban was further proof of the wearer's authority and may have been ceremoniously wrapped round the hat by Asma'ū herself.

When students reached Asma'ū, they went to her apartments and were given refreshments. She talked to the older women, who relayed to her the problems sent by the women left at home. Through listening to her they learned how to apply the law and make commonsense assessments. She received the young girls too, smoothing her hands over their heads and praying that they would marry good husbands and bring up their children in the Faith. By passing her hands over their heads a special kind of transfer of blessing-power was effected.

She became very attached to her devoted *jajis*, especially the subject of this poem, Hawa'ū. This elegy is more a remembrance of what Hawa'ū represented than of the individual:

*I accept what has happened and remember Hawa'ū who
loved me, a fact well known to everybody.
During the hot season, the rains, the harvest, when the
harmattan blows and the beginning of the rains, she was
on the road bringing people to me.
She warned them to journey in good faith, for she said*

intention was important.

*As for myself, I taught them the religion of God in order
to turn them from error, and instill in them the knowledge of their obligatory
duties*

*Like ritual ablution, prayer, alms, pilgrimage and the fast,
all of which are compulsory for adults.*

*I taught them what, in the Faith of Islam, is permissible
and what is forbidden so they would know how to act.*

*I said they must distance themselves from sins such as
lying, meanness, hatred and envy,*

*Adultery, theft and self-esteem. I said they should repent
because these things lead to perdition.*

*The women students and their children are well known for
their good works and peaceful behavior in the community (vv. 5?13)*

It is clear that the educational network of which Hawa'û was a major part was central to the success and unity of the community. Thus, Hawa'û represents the generic woman, whose intellect and active promotion of education hold the community together.

Asma'û was not isolated, nor was she ever a lone voice. When she wrote, she addressed her contemporaries about shared problems. In addition, her works demonstrate how she went about organizing, educating, and reconciling the women of the Caliphate. To help her she had the relatives and friends with whom she had grown up and the activists she had recruited.

Contrary to what many imagine to be the case, educated women did not "enter purdah," disappearing into subordinate anonymity, when the new Islamic state was established. In the Caliphate there existed a world of women's Islam whose leaders held prestigious and powerful positions in the hierarchy of the Caliphate, a world which Asma'û's works reveal. It was well organized and efficiently run; it had clear objectives and a wide membership; it recruited from all ethnic groups and all age levels. Its political objectives were the conversion of women to Islam, education within Islam, and the harnessing of their talents to the development of the state. The potency and power of the 'yan taru movement has been borne out by its continued existence to the present day.

All this contradicts the views of those who have talked of the "men being Muslims and the women pagans" or women being "on the periphery of the periphery of the Muslim world," or "women silently subverting the Islamic rules which keep them in an inferior position". Such perspectives have contributed to negative stereotypes about Muslim women, in which they are depicted as different from active, independent African women of other ethnic, socio-political groups solely because of religious constraints. Those views derive from a paucity of women's voices in recorded history. The corpus of Asma'û's works can redress this situation, providing firsthand testimony to the active, necessary participation of women in Caliphate society.

[Poems by Nana Asma'û, pp.166-167]

A WARNING, II

Wa'azu

A.D. 1856/A.H. 1273

LANGUAGE OF ORIGINAL: HAUSA SOURCE OF TEXT: WAZIRI JUNAIDU

1 I give thanks to God the Merciful

Who created me; the Generous King.

2 He is One, to Him belongs everything,

He has no beginning because He began everything.

3 He hears, just as He sees:

He knows all mysteries, He is omniscient and patient.
4 But He does not hear with ears,
Nor does He see with eyes.
5 Trust in Him and His existence.
There is no King except God the Bountiful,
6 And trust in Muhammad His Messenger,
Then you will be an upright Muslim.
7 Do not innovate. Keep strictly to the Sunna
For the Sunna will suffice you till you reach Heaven.
8 Repent, for repentance purifies the worshiper
So he can escape from sin which leads to Hellfire.
9 Safeguard the proprieties of ritual ablution,
And on the Bridge over the Fire, you will feel no pain.
10 If you are ill, procedures can vary,
For God gives his servants concessions.
11 What God wants most
Is work that is willingly done.
12 From God we should all seek
Forgiveness and His trust.
13 The Everlasting never dies
Forever and ever and ever He exists.
14 Listen to my warnings, brethren,
And heed them: admonition is good for you.
15 Let us repent because repentance
Is the gateway to God the Merciful.
16 Give the alms you must and those you wish, and pray
For the sake of the Prophet, our Leader.
17 Say your prayer beads in the mornings
And in the evenings and say extra prayers in the night.
18 To love the Qur'an is to love God:
For the Prophet's sake, read it constantly.
19 This is the Path of the Almighty.
He who follows will never turn.
20 Women, a warning. Leave not your homes without good reason
You may go out to get food or to seek education.
21 In Islam, it is a religious duty to seek knowledge
Women may leave their homes freely for this.
22 Repent and behave like respectable married women
You must obey your husbands' lawful demands.
23 You must dress modestly and be God-fearing.
Do not imperil yourselves and risk Hellfire.
24 Any woman who refuses, receives no benefit,
The merciful Lord will give her the reward of the
damned.
25 I have written this poem of admonition
For you to put to good use in the community.
26 I end with thanks to God. I invoke His peace On the Prophet and
his companions.
27 The year of the Hijra is 1273.