



One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u, Scholar and Scribe - Book Review *African Arts*, Winter, 2001

By **Aisha R. Masterton**

Beverly B. Mack and Jean Boyd Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indianapolis, 2000. 198 pp., 5 b/w photos, map. \$35 softcover.

Nana Asma'u was the daughter of Shehu Usman 'dan Fodio, a Fulbe scholar. After escaping an assassination attempt by the non-Muslim Hausa chief of Gobir, the Shehu launched a jihad in which the Muslim women were full participants. In 1808 the chief of Gobir and his Tuareg allies were defeated, and the Shehu founded the Sokoto caliphate, whose influence is still felt today. His daughter dedicated her life to disseminating Islam and upholding the caliphate. She set up an educational system for Muslim women, acted as a colleague and adviser to her brother and her husband, and managed the practical demands of implementing a new government.

Nana Asma'u also wrote a large collection of poetry in Fulfulde, intended for the Fulbe aristocracy, and in Hausa, intended for the majority population composed of nominal Muslims and non-Muslims. Her writings fall into several traditional Arabic genres. Many of the Fulfulde poems are elegies for people who played a significant role in her father's jihad. The Hausa works are mnemonic devices that have been handed down through the generations.

Jean Boyd published her first book on this remarkable woman in 1989: *The Caliph's Sister: Nana Asma'u 1793-1865, Teacher, Poet and Islamic Leader* (London: Frank Cass). With Beverly Mack, who helped Boyd translate all of Asma'u's works into English, she wrote *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u, Daughter of Usman 'dan Fodiyo (1793-1864)* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997). As Mack says in her preface to *One Woman's Jihad*, "Ironically, when that book was done, we realized we still were not finished because the text and translation to me were insufficiently accessible to average students" (p. xiv).

The primary goal, therefore, of this book is to introduce this material to those new to the field of African history and literature. *The Caliph's Sister* focuses more broadly on the history of the jihad

and the way of life among Asma'u's family. Generally, one does not feel that *One Woman's Jihad* offers anything new. Why could these works not have been combined as a single edition?

A few photographs interspersed in the text are a nice addition: they show a house in Goronyo, the entrance to Asma'u's room, and a girl learning Qur'an in the traditional way. There is also a facsimile of one of Asma'u's original works, which gives the reader an idea of the style in which many others may have been written. A map of the Sokoto caliphate circa 1820 enables the reader to locate the places mentioned in the poems.

One Woman's Jihad is an overview of certain aspects of Asma'u's life and works. The text is divided into six parts: "Nana Asma'u and the Scholarly Islamic Tradition," which outlines her education and her role in the community; "Qadiriyya Sufism," which explains the difference between the outer and inner aspects of the Islamic way and highlights the desirable qualities of a Sufi; "The Caliphate Community," which describes the uniqueness of Degel and the organization of Sokoto; "The Poetic Tradition," which introduces the different genres of Arabic poetry and techniques employed by Asma'u; "Sokoto as Medina," which compares two poems demonstrating how the Shehu's life mirrored the Prophet's; and last, a chapter on the role of the female educators of the Caliphate.

This text is followed by a selection of translated poems and a glossary of terms. Altogether, the book makes for easy reading and comprehension of Asma'u's world; it does, however, seem to lean toward oversimplification, leaving some important questions unanswered. Nana Asma'u's jihad is written entirely and uncritically from her point of view as an orthodox Muslim, but it is vital when targeting a non-Muslim audience to be aware of doubts that might be held about the whole jihad itself, about the implementation of war, about the treatment of captives, and about the teaching of the Sunna. With an emphasis on jihad, the deeper, subtler aspects of Islam are in danger of being overlooked.

How can the light of the Islamic movement be conveyed to a skeptical audience? A sentence such as "Captured Hausa men and women ... needed to know practical things: how to dress, how to pray, how to reshape the common details of their lives in Islamic form" (p. 77) smacks of the type of "Islamic colonialism" to which Wole Soyinka and other non-Muslim scholars so object. The movement was about more than just cultural imperialism and political power; it was about offering a pure way of life and a gateway to God-consciousness.

The editing of the text has also left some points unclear. One of these concerns the meaning of the names "Muhammad" and "Ahmad." "Ahmad" is the more esoteric form, and it is cited in the Qur'an when Jesus prophesies that one would come after him "whose name shall be Ahmad" (LXI, 6). Boyd and Mack first mention these names when discussing Asma'u's poem "In Praise of Armada," saying, "It begins with repeated mantras `Muhammada' or `Ahmada' (Muhammad's heavenly name)" (p. 56). The Prophet's name is not, strictly speaking, a mantra, a term that implies a blurring with "Eastern" religious concepts. On page 65 the authors mention "Muhammad, or the alternative form Ahmed"--the esoteric name now spelled completely differently--and on the next page we read: "It has a rhyme which incorporates the names of the Prophet, Ahmada or Muhammada." This lack of consistency counters Asma'u's intended effect in employing the repetition of those names.

The poems in the appendix are presented in the order in which they are mentioned in the text. Readers who require more information about them are referred to *Collected Works*. It would be interesting, from a literary point of view, to have a book that helps one appreciate the poems more fully, since a twenty-first-century non-Muslim reader is likely to approach them with all the baggage of his or her own aesthetic education.

Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack are pioneers in introducing Nana Asma'u to an English-speaking readership, and they have opened up a new world for many students and scholars. However, it seems that the work to effectively convey what Asma'u was trying to do has only just begun.

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