



## **One Woman's Jihad: Nana Asma'u, Scholar and Scribe**

By Beverly B. Mack and Jean Boyd. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000.

Pp. 198. ISBN: 0-253-33707-0,  
0-253-21398-3

### **Book Review By Connie Lamb Brigham Young University, USA**

*(From MELA Notes 75-76, Fall 2002-Spring 2003)*

Nana Asma'u was the daughter of the spiritual and political leader of the Sokoto community in what is now northwest Nigeria. Sokoto was the capital of this region in which the people followed Asma'u's father in a new social order based upon orthodox Islam. Reared in an intellectual and religious environment, Asma'u became a poet, teacher, scholar of Islam, and a role model for Muslim women. The authors state that she was a legendary figure

even in her own time, and one of their purposes is to bring to life a nineteenth century Muslim West African woman of renown.

This book is the result of collaboration between two scholars, working in the same region of Africa, who share an interest in the life and works of Nana Asma'u. Jean Boyd is former Principal Research Fellow of the Sokoto History Bureau and now a Research Associate of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. She taught school in Nigeria where she "discovered" Asma'u while researching the history of the area. Beverly Mack is Assistant Professor of African and African-American Studies at the University of Kansas. She went to Nigeria on a Fulbright doctoral dissertation grant to find, record, and analyze Hausa women's praise poetry. She also heard of Nana Asma'u and found that no books had been written about her. Both scholars realized the importance of this woman in Nigerian history and Muslim women's study. After meeting, they collaborated on collecting her works and then translating, analyzing and making them public.

One Woman's Jihad combines history, religion, literature and social life. It is the story of one woman's writings and influence, and the authors provide a rich context for her life and works. The contents include considerable background information about the community where Asma'u lived, the particular brand of Islam they practiced, poetic traditions, and women's participation in the community. Her father, the Shehu, was leader of the group and Asma'u was one of his closest advisors.

The title of the book is a play on the word "Jihad". Jihad means struggle, especially against evil forces, in order to live a righteous life. Asma'u's father waged a jihad in which he and his followers sought to promote a proper Muslim way of life and the right of all to follow it.

Besides participating in that jihad, Asma'u conducted her own jihad — the struggle to advance women's education, status, and influence among the Sokoto community through both her words and actions. She was devoted

to Islam and to her father's goals; her faith was the foundation of her pursuit of knowledge. Asma'u's accomplishments were well known among the people in the area, even generations later. By the age of twenty-four, she was fluent in Arabic, Fulfulde, Hausa, and Tamachek and was familiar with the works her father had composed as well as the reference library he had accumulated.

The book is divided into two major parts, context chapters and an appendix, which includes 13 of Asma'u's poems used as examples of content and style analysis. Chapter one provides a historical background of the area, and the genealogical background of Asma'u's family, and the jihad. The particular brand of Islam which her family followed is known as Qadiriyya Sufism, a type of orthodox Islam based on the Quran and Sunna (the proper mode of behavior). Sufism is often described as Muslim mysticism which focuses on the spiritual and shuns the material, corporeal world. Another chapter describes the Sokoto caliphate community of which Asma'u was a prominent figure. It was a nineteenth century community that modeled itself on the original Muslim community of the seventh century. Asma'u's father, an uncle, her brother, Bello, and her husband, Gidado, made up the core of public leaders with her father and later her brother as caliphs. They often sought Asma'u's opinion and she was the designated leader of women and responsible for the promotion of education among them (p. 30). Asma'u was not only a writer but a teacher as well. She advocated the Sunna to her students and they assisted her in promoting these principles in the community.

By teaching women, Asma'u knew she was teaching whole families in orthodox Sufi practices. Many of her poems encouraged righteous living, especially among the women. The equitable position of men and women is a belief of Sufism. Asma'u promoted this idea both through her writings and her own life's example.

Poetry has been a common mode of expression throughout the history of Islam. There were many scholarly women in Asma'u's clan who "focused their studies on the Arabic poetic composition that is the style of the work of God" (49). Asma'u employed various forms and styles of poetry so that her corpus of works display her extensive education and ability to converse in sophisticated techniques. One form she used is acrostic poetry in which the first letter of each line forms its own message, which relates to the message of the whole work. Other techniques are end rhyme and adding lines to an existing work. She often gave admonitory verses, the wa'azi or warning style of Arabic poetry. The versification of a pre-existing prose work is a technique called in Arabic, manz. umah. Asma'u was asked by her brother, Bello, to versify his work about Sufi women which led her to continue the use this method.

Most of her poems use doxologies, which are opening and closing lines that invoke God's name and aid. Asma'u also wove the imagery of classical texts into her own works which enhanced the respectability of her works, putting them into the same league as the classics. The authors discuss how Asma'u used the different techniques and styles and provide sample poems for each of them in the text and the appendix. For each poem in the appendix they give title, date written, if known, the language of the original, and the source of the text. She wrote poems in Arabic, Hausa and Fulfulde, often translating them into one of the other languages for wider distribution. For a complete collection of her poems, see Boyd and Mack's monumental publication, *The Collected Works of Nana Asma'u, 1793-1864*, published in 1997 by Michigan

State University Press. To learn more about Nana Asma'u's personal life, one should consult Jean Boyd's book, *The Caliph's Sister*, published in 1989 by F. Cass. They wrote this third book to explain how Asma'u used her poems to further the work of the caliphate jihad. It is a literary analysis of her works including style, content, context, beliefs and women's lives.

This book about Arabic poetry appears at a time when many works are being published on the topic. One of the early ones is A. J. Arberry's *Arabic Poetry* published in 1965 by Cambridge. Lila Abu-Lughod's book, *Veiled Sentiments*, is a discussion of how modern Bedouin women used poetry as a vehicle for personal expression and confidential communication.

These poems are a form of traditional oral poetry called *ghinnāwah* and encompass a range of formulas and themes. They relay emotional feelings. Asma'u's poems, on the other hand, were written down and deal mostly with people or events. A central theme for her was the importance of Muhammad and his teachings with the attendant encouragement toward behavior patterned after the prophet. Another recent book is *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology*, edited by Nathalie Handal and published in 2001. It makes visible the works of a great number of Arab women poets who are virtually unknown to the West and demonstrates the wide diversity of Arab women's poetry. In contrast to the poetry of contemporary women as given in these books, Mack and Boyd's book brings to light poems of a nineteenth century Muslim woman. The authors' goal was to make her visible to the modern world and to suggest that there may be other Muslim women who lived in an earlier time and who have written poetry that modern scholars are not aware of. It is evident from these works that Arab and Muslim women are a part of the tradition of using poetry for a variety of expressions.

*One Woman's Jihad* is a well-written and fascinating book that should be of interest to scholars and general readers alike. Those interested in history, literature, religion, Islamic studies, and women's roles should find this book a great resource. With the current interest in Islam and the Middle East, the book provides good insight into one type of Islam and its historical background in Nigeria. Academic libraries and larger public libraries should include the book in their collections.

The authors provide notes for each chapter, a good index, a works cited list, and a glossary of terms. Since this is original research and analysis on their part, the authors do not use extensive references. However, the notes are helpful and the works cited lead readers to other publications, which deal with regional history for that part of Nigeria, Islamic beliefs, African history, Muslim women, and poetry. ***This book about Nana Asma'u is a great contribution to the study of Muslim women's roles in times past and of the poetic tradition among Arabs/Muslims.***