



The Caliph's Sister: Nana Asma'u, 1793-1865, Teacher, Poet, and Islamic Leader – Book Review

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This delightfully illustrated biography tells a story which challenges the accepted conventional view of African Muslim women. It gives the first full analysis of the life of Nana Asma'u, born 1793, the daughter of the scholar Shehu Usman dan Fodio. The story of Asma'u's life covers her education, her wartime experiences during the Jihad from 1804 to

1808, the nurture of her literary talents by her brother Caliph Muhammad Bello and her emergence as a leader.

After the jihad the return to strict Islamic standards meant that many cultural activities were banned - some kinds of drumming and dancing, and also the bori cult which had effectively controlled the patterns of the lives of many women. Asma'u, described by her contemporaries as 'tireless', energetically set to work to introduce an equivalent Islamic organisation, the Yan Taru movement, to respond to women's needs. The efficiency of this organisation is witnessed by the fact that it is still in existence 130 years after her death!

Asma'u's intellectual acumen was matched by a literary flair; she wrote in three languages, Arabic for formal pieces, Hausa for her didactic verse, and Fulfulde when she wished to address her contemporaries within the ruling circles.

In her maturity Asma'u was esteemed as a poet by scholarly contemporaries and revered by her Yan Taru students; by Caliphate leaders she was regarded as an authoritative figure and she remained in full vigour until her death in 1865. Asma'u's intellectualism, her efforts to deal practically and sensibly with the problems faced by nineteenth century society in what today is Northern Nigeria, and the ways in which her works and memory have been cherished are now, in this book, made available to a larger audience.

The author, Jean Boyd, spent 29 years in Northern Nigeria, much of the time working under the aegis of the celebrated doyen of West African Islamic scholars, the Waziri of Sokoto, Dr. Junaidu.

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