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The Role of Women as “Agents Religieux” in Sokoto

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RÉSUMÉ

Les femmes musulmanes sont considérées conventionnellement y compris par les hommes musulmans comme des croyants de deuxième ordre qu’elles soient vues comme des agents capables de contourner et de manipuler les pratiques islamiques ou qu’elles soient vues comme des victimes consentantes. L'article attire l'attention sur une tradition musulmane différente, celle des femmes pieuses, et parfois savantes, impliquées dans les activités religieuses. Les autres analystent l’œuvre des femmes savantes de Sokoto qui ont fondé il y a 125 ans une organisation de femmes qui a survécu jusqu'à nos jours. L'article suggère que ce phénomène n'est pas propre à Sokoto et que parmi les femmes musulmanes en Afrique les mouvements islamiques réformistes d'aujourd'hui peuvent s'inspirer de cet exemple historique.

Introduction

"Les ligues féministes d'Europe," commented the Algerian, Ismael Hamet, in 1898, “n'apprendraient pas sans étonnement, peut-être, qu'au commencement de ce siècle un prince noir déclara, au nom du Koran, que Dieu n'avait pas rivé la femme aux besoges du ménage, mais que seul l'égoïsme de l'homme les lui avait dévolues” (7). It is now eighty-seven years since Hamet drew the attention of people in Europe to certain educational policies of the Shaikh 'Uthman b. Fudi. Similarly, for some twenty years now “Nana Asma’u” (as the Shaikh’s daughter is called) has been commonly used for naming women's halls of residence in Nigerian schools and universities. It has been for long a commonplace, too, that specific groups in West Africa, in particular the scholarly “castes” of Futa Toro and Mauretania, have produced notably learned women, while in the Islamic world generally the existence of women scholars of great distinction has been the subject of orientalists’ interest (albeit somewhat cursorily) ever since I. Goldziher published his brief note in Muhammedanische Studien in 1889-90 (1971, 2:366-367). To this, the burgeoning literature both on Islamic societies and on women has added a little more colour to our knowledge of the role of women as poets, saints, or politicians in the history of Islam.

Yet it is striking how very little is actually on record, after so many years of Islamic research in West Africa, either about specific women Shaikhs or about the organisation of women’s Islam in the history of any particular community.
Comments have tended to be more facile than informed or to be confined to footnotes (e.g. Monteil 1964, 150; Tringham 1968, 47; Last 1967a, 234 n.8; Paden 1973, 139 n.64). Our plea, then, is that serious attention needs to be paid to the role of women as “agents religieux” in Islamic West Africa, with biographical detail of what they both thought and did. Conversely, if learned women are in fact not a feature, say, of the Jakhanke scholarly community or if indeed they left no mark on the jihad states of Ahmad Lobbo or al-hajj ‘Umar al-Futi, then their very absence is noteworthy in itself and perhaps needs an explanation.

In the recent literature where Muslim women are considered as Muslims (as distinct from the literature on women as wives: mothers, farmworkers, slaves, etc.), the emphasis has been almost exclusively on their role as preservers of pre-Islamic religion or at best as marginal or “second-rate” Muslims — a view apparently held also by many Muslim men. For example, within Nigeria, M. Bovin (1983, 89) stresses the way Manga women today sustain traditional values against their menfolk’s Islam; R. Pittin (1979) similarly, in analysing the culture of independent women in Katsina, focuses on traditional religion as women’s lost source of political power. Outside West Africa, studies such as V. Maher’s (1974) in Morocco, Aissa Ouits’ (1984) in Algeria, or P. Constantinides’ (1977) in Sudan have confirmed the same impression, made familiar from I.M. Lewis’ Ecstatic Religion (1971; 1983; and Besmer 1983), that spirit possession cults are perhaps the main or most interesting feature of Muslim women’s religious practice in Africa. Women’s profession of Islam, by contrast, is seen either as merely overt compliance to conceal a covert intellectual independence (Pittin 1979) or simply as part of an ideology by which social stratification and the subordination of women are maintained (Strobel 1983, 127; 1984, 93-94; Schildkrout 1983, 107). Our quarrel is not so much with these scholars’ analyses of what they describe as with the partiality of their description. If women in these Islamic societies really are so concerned with things religious, is it not very probable that a proportion of women will also prove to be pious Muslims — a category admittedly harder (and less exciting) to research?

Furthermore, amidst the concern with establishing the socio-economic consequences of religious practice, it is easy to overlook what individual women have actually said, let alone what they believe, in all its complexity. M. Strobel, for example, in her account of Mombasa women (1979), concentrated more on what women did than what they thought. Indeed, the most common academic framework used for the analysis of women’s thoughts has not been anthropology or even history, but literature. Yet while both M. Hiskett (1975) and J. Haafkens (1983) have discussed Sokoto religious poetry composed or sung by women, neither have been interested in the women themselves: only Beverly Mack (1981) has, to date, worked with a woman poet — in the Emir’s palace at Kano where, as in Katsina’s palace, possession cults are practised by some alongside the strict piety of others. But it is not only the articulate women
that concern us; it has been easier still to overlook the reticent, whose informal organisations for religious purposes are almost by definition private — yet are not necessarily the less significant or influential for being so. Inevitably, the immediate historical evidence is sparse; yet we have found in discussing at seminars the data presented here that West African colleagues, from their personal experience, know of comparable evidence elsewhere.

The primary purpose of this article, then, is to set out in outline the work of some of the learned women in nineteenth-century Sokoto — the subject of Jean Boyd’s research for the last eight years (1982). But first we attempt to put in context the Shaikh’s policies on women’s education and the formal women’s organisation that developed from them. These other remarks reflect primarily the views of Murray Last and are intended to provoke debate and further research. For our contention is that we have here more than just another case of a famous scholar and all his daughters; we have, rather, a concerted attempt over a long period to mobilise women as “agents religieux.”

I The Historical Background

A. Women and education in eighteenth century north-west Hausaland

The late eighteenth century was apparently a particularly difficult period for Fulbe (and pastoralist culture generally) in north-west Hausaland. Conditions in Borno to the east were no longer favourable, so much so that some Fulbe had started to return westwards from Borno back to Hausaland. Similarly in Hausaland itself, states such as Kano or Gobir were already integrating Fulbe into the political structure, as officials of the state and as tax-payers. Finally, Fulbe groups were exposed to raids for slaves or for cattle. Though specific evidence is scanty, it seems probable that as the political and social “space” for Fulbe was being closed down, Fulbe women were felt to be particularly at risk. Certainly, the issue of Muslim Fulbe being seized as slaves (or concubines?) was a pressing legal problem in this period. In rather different vein, the Shaikh remarked on the highly provocative way in which young Fulbe women dressed and the openness of their manners even in public places like the market. But it may be an exaggeration to suggest that courtesanship or prostitution was becoming a particular problem in north-west Hausaland in the eighteenth century or that Fulbe women were being attracted by opportunities for an easier life in the newly prosperous cities.

In the towns of Hausaland before the jihad, there had developed a mercantile-scholarly elite which formed in effect an urban Muslim “reform party.” Though this party in each of the major cities had succeeded in getting their candidate selected as Sultan, their reforms — and their style of life — were inadequately Islamic for the various rurally-based reformers; particularly objectionable was the way they connived in the exploitation of the countryside by the urban ruling military class. These urban merchant-scholars were
apparently prospering, with the boom in the slave trade and in cotton goods. Though the Shaikh ‘Uthman for a while taught in such a milieu, he evidently found it offensive. For it was against his scholarly colleagues in the towns that much of his invective was aimed — particularly the way they treated their wives (some of whom were presumably from Fulbe or Tuareg families and thus unaccustomed to urban manners). It seems that in the urban milieu, in marked contrast to the agricultural and pastoral economies of the countryside, women’s reproductive capacity was far more valuable than women’s labour, and in consequence a kind of serial polygyny, in which post-menopausal women, particularly if childless, were discarded and divorced, had become the norm even among the relatively wealthy class of scholar-merchants.

By contrast, tradition has it that in the Shaikh’s own family, his mother and grandmother were learned; so too was the mother of one of his teachers. But his family were not particularly unusual in this; his contemporary ‘Abd al-Qadir, the mujahid of Futa Toro, had been taught by Khadija, a sister of Ahmad al-Aqil (who was himself a Mauretanian came to study in Futa Toro) (Marty 1919, 236; Willis 1979, 12). Indeed, north of the Senegal valley, among the Zawaya, there were several women Shaikhs noted both for their learning and for their haraka (Stewart 1973, 24-26, 29). It is perhaps another indication of the remarkably close relationship between Fulbe and Tuareg scholarly sub-cultures that the Shaikh’s learned daughter, Nana Asma’u, could speak some Tamacheq — though it seems that the lingua franca between the two groups was usually Arabic.

To a man of the Shaikh’s background, then, the solution to the problem of both Fulbe pastoralist women and the urban divorcees was obvious: educate your wives and daughters, and let them, once they are past child-bearing, be the household’s own teachers of Islamic learning (‘Uthman b. Fudi [n.d.] 1898, 15-16). Ideally, of course, this should all take place in purdah. But purdah posed a problem. First, purdah was not practised in the scholars’ own pastoralist communities, whether Fulbe or Tuareg, any more than it was in the agricultural communities where women’s labour was essential. Although we know that the Shaikh came to insist on purdah in his own household, it is not clear how widely (or strictly) his example was followed even in his local circle of scholars. Second, if women were to become really well-educated, it was important for them to attend the lectures of visiting preachers and scholars. Indeed, it was the relative purdah-less-ness of Fulbe and Tuareg society that had fostered a tradition of learned women in the first place. The apparent contradiction was quickly and sharply pointed out by a Borno scholar who criticised the Shaikh for letting women attend his meetings alongside men. The Shaikh asked his brother ‘Abdulllah to compose a poem in their defence — but the dilemma remained unresolved. Indeed, ‘Abdulllah himself, in a commentary on his poem nearly thirty years later (in 1813), points out that women should legally be prevented from going out even for instruction, dhikr or preaching (‘Abdulllah b. Fudi [1813] 1963, 86-87).
B. Yan Taru: a women’s religious organisation in nineteenth century Sokoto

The ultimate success of the jihad (after 1808) only accentuated the importance, and the problem, of women’s education. For households of the Sokoto community now took in large numbers of non-Muslim or scarcely Muslim women as captives, in addition to the male servants or slaves within the house or on the farms. For children growing up in such a household, the milieu was likely to lack the sort of values the reformers had fought to establish. For example, in the medical sphere (which is predominantly the concern of women), traditional remedies were more readily available than Islamic ones. Though, to counteract this, Muhammad Bello and others compiled Arabic-Hausa herbal vocabularies and abridged standard Islamic medical texts (mainly on Tibh al-Nahi, however), such un-Islamic concepts as witchcraft remained prevalent (Last 1967b). In the context of the Middle East or North Africa, where Islam was effectively the only religion, “cultural” beliefs like witchcraft did not pose a significant challenge; but in places where traditional religions were still viable politically and ideologically, such beliefs were a threat to the new order. Thus, if the ethos of the jihad was to outlast the original generation, a more radical transformation than that found in the central Islamic lands was necessary. To achieve this degree of transformation and to ensure it was perpetuated, the participation of women as agents religieux was essential.

However, the problem was complicated by the fact that already in the public sphere, in order to achieve effective government over the various peoples of the new Caliphate, Muhammad Bello (like his father) had had to modify the ban on traditional culture in matters like political titles, “palaces,” fine clothes, and music — even in matters of law (e.g. land rights and penalties for adultery). So long as Muhammad Bello was alive, his eminence as a scholar and a governor was enough to maintain the authority of the Law, however pragmatically it had had to be administered. But, as Bello himself foresaw, his judgements would create problems for his successors if they were to maintain even the spirit of the Law. There was, it seems, a further cause for concern around 1837. Al-hajj ‘Umar al-Futi during his eight years in Sokoto had clearly won for himself and the Tijaniyya a considerable following both in Sokoto and in Gwandu, and there was a possibility of him being chosen to succeed Bello as Caliph (Sa’id [c. 1860] 1899-1901). 10

Although al-hajj ‘Umar left Sokoto about 1838, shortly after Bello’s death, he had demonstrated how open the Caliphate was to a “take-over.” The memory of the Shaikh, strongly identified as he had been with the Qadiriyya, was a potent weapon in any sectarian rivalry and could be used to unite Sokoto around the Qadiriyya. If the men could thus be reorganised around a brotherhood, then should not the women be organised too?

Although explicit evidence is not always available, it seems that the policy adopted for this purpose after 1837 by the Vizier Gidado and his wife Asma’u
was to formalise the veneration of the Shaikh as a saint and to organise women around classes of Islamic instruction at their house. First, around 1838 they wrote books on the *karamat* of the Shaikh and Muhammad Bello in which they formalised oral tradition; but Asma’u, by translating some of them into Fulfulde verse, made them accessible and memorable as never before. Second, the Shaikh’s genealogy linking him to the Prophet was revived (‘Abd al-Qadir b. Gidado quoted in Last 1967a, 4 n.9). Whether the Shaikh’s house and his tomb there were also at this period being promoted as a point of “pilgrimage” for prayer and for *haraka* is not known; sainthood does not necessarily imply a tomb “shrine.” However, we do know that a concerted effort was made to bring the jihad’s ideals and its history to the non-Arabic-speaking public in a memorable form. The result was a considerable body of vernacular poetry, in many cases translations of works originally composed in Arabic prose — some classical, some original. As Fulfulde was gradually going out of general use, translations of some of the Shaikh’s poems and other important texts were also made into Hausa.11 Finally, Nana Asma’u started teaching women in her room in Gidado’s house; and out of these classes developed the regular system whereby women from outlying villages came to Sokoto and received extended instruction. It is thus tempting to suppose that Nana Asma’u was ultimately responsible for initiating the development of a regularised, popular “cult” of her father and brother, perhaps as a deliberate, Islamic focus around which to organise women, just as her husband Gidado and her son, the next Vizier ‘Abd al-Qadir, appear to have been co-ordinating the defence of the Qadiriyya against inroads by the Tijaniyya.

If this was a deliberate policy (albeit one that developed gradually, through the 1840s and 1850s), then it was one that would have aroused some controversy. The Shaikh himself had taken care to deny that he was a “complete saint,” while contemporary accounts of him by his brother and son both tend to play down any element of the miraculous (Last 1967a, 211-212). The role of saints and their tombs was, of course, a very contentious issue in Islamic reformist circles generally; and in the Sokoto Caliphate there were apparently the same divisions as are found elsewhere in the Muslim world — between the more sufi-oriented and those more inclined to strictly legal interpretations.12 However, the popular reputation of the Shaikh for *haraka* dates back to his own lifetime, and his house was associated with visions and prayer during Bello’s caliphate. Furthermore, in an early poem in Fulfulde written specifically for women, the Shaikh appears to take for granted that Fulbe women could and did visit tombs.13

Gidado and Asma’u were thus merely building on to an existing structure of popular belief; they were also simply adding the name of Muhammad Bello to the list of “saints.” But if there was any controversy (and certainly some are disapproving today), we suspect that Asma’u was exempt from criticism in part because she was the Shaikh’s daughter but more importantly because the “pilgrimage” (as it later became) was primarily for women.
Visiting holy places is in itself not new to Hausaland. The Shaikh criticised the importance given to sacred stones and trees and once sent someone to bring him such a stone and bury it (‘Uthman b. Fudi [1814] 1967, 87). Indeed, some sacred places had long been the site of fairs and now, as market centres, were the focus of caravans. Pilgrimage and the caravan trade were thus interlocked — no less in West Africa than in Arabia. Equally, cities such as Kano and Katsina had their saints’ tombs which attracted “pilgrims;” and such tombs are, of course, a familiar feature in the Sahara. But generally in West Africa, saints, or their tombs never gained, at least among men, the important role they had elsewhere. A practice somewhat parallel to what Asma’u was apparently instituting in Sokoto had long existed in Egypt, for example, where women went on Fridays to a Shaikh for instruction or to the cemetery while men went to the mosque (Goldziher [1889-1890] 1971, 367). Since there are restrictions on women using mosques, the tombs in Sokoto just behind the Shaikh’s mosque must have provided a convenient alternative site for women to gather.

The pilgrimage to Mecca is, of course, incumbent on men and women alike, so long as it is practicable; and there was always considerable pressure within the Sokoto community for performing the pilgrimage either individually or en masse, a pressure heightened by millenarian expectations throughout the thirteenth Islamic century (AD 1786-1883). Muhammad Bello, in order to discourage or to console would-be pilgrims when conditions were too difficult, discussed the meritorious alternatives allowed, particularly jihad (al-Naqr 1972, 55-61). Women, however, were not obliged to participate in jihad (‘Uthman b. Fudi [1806] 1978, 82; Muhammad Tukur in Haafkens 1983, 155); were, then, prayer and recitation (dhikr), especially at the Shaikh’s tomb, to be the alternative for them? There is canonical support for women participating in an albeit substitute “pilgrimage” (or ziyara as it should properly be called), as the present Waziri of Sokoto has argued (Junaidu 1961, 10). Furthermore, as members of the Tijaniyya brotherhood were discouraged from visiting tombs, the practice of ziyara in itself connoted affiliation to the Qadiriyya.

The Yan Taru (“The Associates”), as the women’s “pilgrimage” organisation is known in Sokoto today, grew up around Nana Asma’u and was carried on after her death in 1864 by her sister Mariamu; it continues till today (Boyd 1982, 123-126). The structure of the organisation has been compared by Jean Boyd to the way women were traditionally organised in Gobir under the “Inna;” indeed, she has suggested that Asma’u’s title “Nana” and Mariamu’s “Uwardeji” may be the Sokoto equivalent to Inna, along the lines set by Muhammad Bello when he had sanctioned the re-use of Hausa titles generally within the Caliphate. The format of the “pilgrimage” is modelled on that of a caravan. Complete with a caravan “guide” (jaji) wearing a man’s hat (malfa) tied round with magenta cloth, the processions of women from the various villages moved without escort, carrying their alms of grain etc., singing special songs and camping out in the open. Initially, the “pilgrims” foregathered in Asma’u’s room in Waziri
Gidado’s house, but after 1875 the site of the gathering was moved to Mariamu’s room in the Shaikh’s old house (where his tomb was). Although in oral tradition today the *Yan Taru* were primarily concerned originally with receiving instruction — moral and academic — from Nana Asma’u in her own room, undoubtedly the visit must have been accompanied, as it is today, by other activities. However, since it was restricted to post-menopausal women and young girls only, one common reason for shrine visiting, namely seeking a cure for infertility, was apparently excluded.

At present, it is not known how successful (in terms of numbers) or how widespread the *Yan Taru* movement was. The core, as a manuscript list reveals, was certainly local, confined to the area of close settlement occupied by the Shaikh’s community since the early decades of the century. Whether it ever constituted a kind of *tariqa* or an elite of committed Muslim women within the wider community is not yet clear. What is clear, however, is that women’s organisations have been important in mobilising women politically and culturally now for more than a century in Sokoto; indeed, they have proved to be of major importance in determining the outcome of Nigeria’s recent elections — not least in Muslim areas, where women voters in some towns apparently outnumbered men. Similarly, the tradition of “pilgrimage” to the tombs at Sokoto and Wurno, which the Sardauna strongly promoted in the early 1960s along with the “‘Uthmaniyya” (named after the Shaikh), is now seen to have more definite roots. It would, in short, be a mistake to treat the political significance of Muslim women as a recent phenomenon or one necessarily specific to a particular culture. Elsewhere, for example, the most significant developments may have come not from such articulate, literary-minded women as those whose biographies we give here (and whose poems were widely distributed and carefully preserved), but rather from the more obscure figures that organised other women. It is, then, on women as organisers of other women, and not merely as poets, sufis, intellectuals (competent though they were in these fields) that we suggest future research should focus.

II Sokoto Women Scholars of the Nineteenth Century: the Dan Fodio Sisters

A comprehensive assessment of all the writings of the daughters of the Shaikh ‘Uthman b. Fodi (“Shehu Dan Fodio”), let alone those of other learned women in Sokoto, is not yet possible as in some cases their writings have still to be collected and analysed. What follows is a review of the present situation. Asma’u has been taken out of chronological order and placed first because her works have been more fully explored and she was the chief educator. Most of the translations are to be treated as paraphrases as they have been made from the Fufulde through the medium of Hausa.
A. Asma’u bint ‘Uthman b. Fudi

Asma’u was born about 1793 to Maimuna. She was a twin child; her brother Hassan died in 1817 and left a number of works behind. Asma’u married Gidado b. Laima, companion and Waziri of the Caliph Muhammad Bello; she had five sons and initiated a system of women’s education. Fifty-two of her works have been discovered; if translations are taken into account, the number rises to sixty-one of which ten can be categorised as teaching poems. Elegies form the largest category; there are seventeen, the earliest being written in 1830, the last in 1865. In these elegies Asma’u promoted the Shehu’s cause and frequently used his name, praising those who measured up to his standards. Most of her works are dated and were her response to happenings in her time. For example, in 1821 she wrote a short acrostic poem in Fulfulde directed against the Tuareg chief Ibra who had invaded the caliphate. This is one of her earliest works and is entitled Fa’innna ma’a’ asur yasuran because it is based on sura XCIV, verse 5, of the Qur’an.

Evidence that she collaborated with Caliph Muhammad Bello in her writings is found in the translations she made into Fulfulde and Hausa of his Kitâb al-Nasiha which he wrote in 1836. Her translations, Tindinore Labbe and Tawasssuli ga Mata masu Albarka, were both dated 1837. After her brother’s death, Asma’u and her husband wrote nine works, she five and he four, on the lives and exploits of the Shehu and Bello, works which have been used by all later historians. In the reign of Bello’s son Aliyu, she wrote several works in support of his attempts to imbue his army with martial spirit. For example, she wrote a poem, Gawakuke Ma’unde, in 1857 in which she gave a graphic description of the battle of Gawakuke in 1836. Lines forty-five to forty-eight read as follows:

Then Bello ordered the standards to be unfurled; he told his men to prepare; he said, ‘to-day the unbelievers will be put to shame’. The men got ready and lined up with their weapons; the spearheads looked like fields of ripe millet. With standards flying Bello rode to take up his position at the head (of his men); swords and spears glittered. Round the matchless Caliph the host was as numerous as (flocks of) quela birds or (swarms of) locusts.

Asma’u, however, is best known for her interest in women’s education, for the classes she held and for the innovatory Yan Taru movement. A list of her students — known as Yan Taru — who came from the area south-west of Sokoto has survived. Enquiries in the villages have revealed that their leaders were known, generation by generation, and the recital of names ends with “and it was she who was Asma’u’s student.” No evidence has been found that more than one generation of country-based students journeyed to attend the classes in her life-time, later generations being tutored by her sister Mariam and her niece Ta Modi, which points to the 1850s as being the time when the Yan Taru movement was organised.
Asma’u in an elegy written in 1860 (Sonmore Hauwa) wrote as follows:

During the wet season, the harvest, the time of haze, the hot season and the period before the rains, she was out on the highways bringing people to me. She instructed them to come in good faith and because of the Shehu; and I taught them what is halal according to religion, and what is haram, so that they would use the knowledge. I told them to shun lies, meanness, quarrelling and envy; also theft and self-esteem. I said, repent, for these lead to perdition (ll. 6-12).

The young married women with family responsibilities did not go, but the older women took with them the girls in the pre-marriage age group, and they carried alms from those unable to travel. Asma’u used the alms (grain, cotton thread, and butter, for example) in her welfare work. Each leader (jaji) wore over her enveloping robes a large finely woven straw hat (malfa). The women and girls dressed in the approved Islamic manner with no part of the body exposed save the face, hands and feet. They sang religious songs, and they travelled and comported themselves in a sensible manner. Often they sang songs composed or translated by Asma’u. One of the best known was Begore composed by Muhammad Tukur, then translated into Hausa verse by Asma’u. The poem has 315 lines and is an example of sira poetry. An example of her “teaching” poetry is found in Wa’azu, written in Fulfulde and dated 1834:

These are the pillars of Islam and they are necessary to the belief of every Muslim. Zakka and the fast occur once each year. When the time comes, they must be done.

But prayer is performed five times every twenty-four hours (ll. 9-12).

A poem in Fulfulde entitled Sunago, composed in 1830, lists each sura of the Qur’an by name and in order. This was translated into Hausa, probably by Asma’u in 1838 and later still into Arabic by her nephew Aliyu b. ‘Abdullah b. Fudi.

Through these and other poems Asma’u taught generations of women and children, assisted as she grew older by her sister Mariam and her niece Ta Modi, although to judge by her writing her mental and intellectual ability did not diminish with age. After Asma’u’s death the classes continued and in the 1870s were moved to the Hubbare (Tombs) where Mariam lived. The Yan Taru movement continued under Ta Modi and flourishes today, though probably in changed form. The zakara, the best reciter among the Yan Taru in each village, recited religious songs at weddings, naming ceremonies and other suitable occasions. The jajis interviewed taught young children, swept the mosque, were involved in sorting out women’s affairs, gave instruction to young women, and concerned themselves with women’s conduct. They still propagate Islam, looking upon the task as a duty, and they continue to visit the Hubbare (Tombs) where they hope to gain baraka.
B. Hadiza bint ‘Uthman b. Fudi

Hadiza was the Shehu’s eldest daughter. She was born at Degel probably in 1782, and her mother was the sufi scholar Aisha. Hadiza married the learned Mallam Mustafa b. Muhammad b. Muhammad b. Salih b. Harun, a distant relative of the Shehu. About 1810 Hadiza and Mustafa settled at Dama near Salame. Their son ‘Abd al-Qadir was said by Heinrich Barth in 1854 to be the most eminent scholar of his day.

She is reported to have written a work on grammar which has the title *Katadurun (?)* and to have translated into Fulfulde verse the *Mukhtasar of Khalil*. But copies of both these works have not come again to light after being seen some years ago by the late alhaji Yahaya na Wawi. A third work is an undated and untitled poem in Fulfulde on the subject of the Mahdi. It has forty-five lines. In it Hadiza rejected (on the grounds that it was not in the hadith) one theory about his coming: “Although some say he will be born the son of Askiya’u, this is not so (line 4).” In lines eight to twenty she discussed the various themes put forward for the Mahdi’s advent. A fourth work, dated 1842, written in Fulfulde, has some fifty lines. Although the poem has some straightforward teaching points, these are prefaced by lines which are philosophical:

He who says he has dominion is a presumptuous fool. Allah’s dominion is beyond the imagination. I will pause to consider the nature of authority, its manifestations and origins. No one has the power to accomplish anything because no one can order the pre-ordained (ll. 9-12).

Good fortune, according to Hadiza, was being religious; the most religious person was therefore the luckiest: “The foundations of religion are five: keep them and be noted for your piety. They are: acknowledging the one-ness of Allah, prayer, fasting, alms, the pilgrimage (when possible) (ll. 17 and 19).” She went on (ll. 29-30): “Do not be conceited, do not sin, do not lie, do not envy. For the reward of the conceited is destruction, just as it is the reward of the envious.”

C. Fatima bint ‘Uthman b. Fudi

Fatima was born about 1787. She was the full sister of the Caliph Muhammad Bello, their mother being Hauwa known as Inna Garka. This nickname means literally “the mother of the parts of the house not reserved for women” and may indicate that she played some kind of organisational role in the community. Hauwa, like Aisha, was a noted sufi. Fatima married Aliyu Jedo, the commander-in-chief of the army, and played an important part in organising the provisioning of the army, according to Asma’u in her 1838 poem *Sonomore Fadima*. In the same poem Asma’u said Fatima was scholarly and that she kept a close relationship with her father, as it was through her, according to Gidado dan Laima in *Raud al-jinan*, that the Shehu indicated that he knew when he would die. Only one of her poems is at present known, and it is quoted in part in
Waziri Junaidu's *Arf al-Raihan*. In the poem Fatima poked fun at the middle-aged. She asked them to look at their white hair, view the gaps between their teeth, acknowledge their dimming sight, strain to hear as they used to be able to hear, and then admit to themselves that they were going soon to die.

D. Hafsatu bint ‘Uthman b. Fudi

Hafsatu was born about 1789 to the Shehu’s first cousin and senior wife Maimuna. She married Ibrahim Demba Hamma, a scholar from Birnin Gada, and second Mudegel b. Liman Alkamu. Hafsatu and Hadiza are said to have been among the teachers of Asma’u. One of Hafsatu’s works has survived, and it is very typical of the admonitory verse known as *wa’azi*. It is possible that, because all *wa’azi* carries the same message, some poems of the Fodio sisters have not survived on the grounds that they were considered unremarkable as *wa’azi* and therefore too “ordinary” to preserve. The one extant poem is in Fulfulde and is undated and untitled: Lines seven to thirteen read as follows:

Stop slandering people and lying, be religious and truthful so that your tomb will be full of light and you will enter paradise. If you deliberately disregard the law, you will have gained nothing because in the next world you will have lost everything and be yourself lost and in danger. In the tomb you will not receive your paper but instead be turned over to the inquisitors. Rulers who embezzle the inheritance of orphans and who cheat the peasantry will be severely punished. For fear of punishment, married men should treat their wives properly and give them their entitlements. Women should dress and behave with decorum for fear of being punished. Herdsmen who deliberately allow their animals to feed on growing crops will get their just deserts in the next world.

E. Safiya bint ‘Uthman b. Fudi

Safiya was born about 1803, the daughter of Jinni. She married Muhammadu Autan Jido b. ‘Umar Alkamu, but nothing else is known about her. According to Waziri Junaidu, she probably died young. The poem which has survived is twenty-seven lines long in Fulfulde. It is undated and untitled. Lines six and seven read: “O Allah, save me from the wicked designs of evil men and spirits, the followers of Satan. O Allah, take me to Mecca, Muhammad’s country; let me wander in it and go to Arafat;” and line nineteen reads: “O Allah, may I be saved with the Prophet; on the *siradi* may I be blessed.”

F. Mariam bint ‘Uthman b. Fudi

Mariam was born in 1810, probably at Sifawa. Her mother was the Shehu’s only concubine, Mariya, whose ethnic origins are unknown. Mariam’s first marriage was to Mallam Ade dan Gidado dan Laima. Of her two children by this marriage, her daughter Ta Modi (whose proper name was Mariam too) lived into the twentieth century and participated in the educational *Yan Taru* movement described above. Mariam’s second marriage was to Ibrahim Dabo,
Emir of Kano (1818-1846). She was not the Emir’s first wife nor was the dynasty descended from her. Nevertheless, Mariam in later life was looked on as an arbiter in Kano affairs. In 1846 she was widowed and went back to live in Sokoto where she helped Asma’u with her educational work.

In an untitled and undated work in Fulfulde Mariam wrote about the office of the Imam, possibly to settle a dispute over a new appointment. Her tone is decisive:

There are nineteen categories of people who ought not to be imams, of these six are utterly forbidden to lead the prayers. There is not complete agreement about the other thirteen, but the six in question are definitely unacceptable (ll. 3-4).

A second poem written in the reign of Caliph Mu’azu (1877-81) was directed against the guerrilla activities of the Chief of Gobir Bawa na Gwanki. The mocking tone of the poem is reminiscent of some of Muhammad Bello’s early works:19

He (Bawa) was dismayed when he saw the spears; he turned and did not return. He spent the day running till he was exhausted. The Shehu’s men were out like hungry lions after game. He mounted and rode without a saddle. He forgot about his turban, his amulets, his shoes and his belt. He forgot about his cloak, his prayer beads, his pillow, his clothes and his water bottle. He left behind his baggage camels. He was like an owl afraid to come out during the day because of his bedraggled appearance. He abandoned his horns, drums and other instruments. He left behind his flags and his rugs (ll. 4-7).

Mariam commented on the coming of the Mahdi, an event which assumed great importance in 1881 when the Mahdi of the Sudan, Muhammad Ahmad b. ‘Abdullah, was proclaimed. The emir of Kano Muhammad Bello (1883-92) wrote to Mariam about the current wave of emigrants, and her advice is contained in her al-Wathiqa ila Amir Kano. It is possible that she herself translated the letter into Hausa verse. There are, it seems, two versions, one of twenty-five lines named Lokacin da Sudanitiya za ta Tashi, and the second of thirteen lines named Fadar Shehu kan Wasewar Hausa. In her letter Mariam said:

As for the question about which you have sought our opinion, namely that the people of Hausaland pass by your place from all directions and claim among other things that the time for the evacuation of Hausaland has come, the answer is as follows: such people are utterly misguided and completely ignorant of their religion and worldly affairs.20

Mariam also wrote a poem dated c.1855 (?) named Ni‘imomin Ubangiji ga Bawansa, which is wa‘azi and may be listed as a teaching poem, the gist of which is “count your blessings.”
Conclusion

A fitting epitaph on the role of the Shehu's daughters is the tribute paid by Buhari dan Ahmadu dan Gidado, the Waziri of Sokoto at the time of the British occupation of the town in 1903. In a poem he wrote (Hiskett 1975, 76-77); “Formerly I knew it not: a saintly woman has made it clear to me, this fear [of the decline all around]. Mariam saw and gave heed... Thank you, Mariam, you reminded me, and I pondered; at first I was among the forgetful.” Their heirs, however, as “agents religieux” are not only the Yan Taru of to-day but also the influential organisations of educated Muslim women in such cities as Kano and Kaduna — a subject outside the limits of this article but one which, we suggest, deserves as much discussion.

The reader might be tempted to dismiss these poets and the women they organised as peculiar only to Sokoto or to explain them away as the result of a number of particular factors. It could be said, for example, that pastoralist Fulbe (like other pastoralists) are known to lack a traditional religion (e.g. Riesman, 1977); in which case the Yan Taru, in teaching Fulbe women Islam, smoothed an otherwise difficult transition from pastoralism to a sedentary (and more religious) way of life. Or it might be argued that such Muslim consciousness gave a new and necessary sense of solidarity to a particularly dispersed, outnumbered elite in a region where Fulfulde was not even the lingua franca (as it was, for example, in Adamawa or Masina); or even perhaps that women were simply being manipulated here as an element in localised inter-brotherhood politics. Without necessarily ruling out these or other such interpretations, we would suggest rather that the Yan Taru and the poetry are only the overt manifestations of a much more diffuse phenomenon. Nineteenth-century evidence has survived mainly in Sokoto on account of the manuscripts; elsewhere, the tradition has been “muted.” Only now, with Muslim women's movements openly active, has this tradition come to be heard, compelling us to re-examine our broad generalisations about women and Islam in Africa.

If, as we suggest the scattered pieces of evidence imply, we have not been describing here a purely Sokoto phenomenon, then the wider implications of these data are several. The first is that, in African specialised scholarly groups, early religious education and even literacy in Arabic could be — and was — taught by women to both boys and girls. As a rule, then, there was unity, not division, in the household's moral values as learned by children. When such groups in West Africa sought power in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the women mobilised the essential material support and labour that backed up the military campaigns — a logical consequence of their earlier persistent attendance at religious meetings. After power was won, the elderly women of the community, respected for their piety, became the moral “backbone” of a society that was now exposed to all the temptations power brings. Seen from this perspective, women played a direct and crucial, if usually unostentatious, role in making and maintaining the reform movements. Their intellectual
contribution to Islamic thought was to emphasise the value of memorising and reciting not only passages from the Qur’an but also particularly the local songs of religious instruction and devotion. Most notably, their use, as composers and performers, of vernacular languages in songs and poetry on religious themes helped to transform the character of West African Islam. Islam gradually ceased to be a religion whose rules and expression were limited to specialists learned in Arabic and became a faith in which popular piety could be based on an individual’s own understanding — a process of transformation continued to-day, for example, by the recent publication of a translation of the Qur’an into Hausa.

Organisations such as the sufi orders have also played their part in this transformation of Islam, particularly the Tijaniyya in North and West Africa and the Qadiriyya in East Africa, both of which had considerable numbers of women among their members, at least in the twentieth century. But as yet we know very little of these or other religious groupings of Muslim women, let alone the modifications in religious thought that women may have introduced or the debates they may have aroused among Muslim women. Is it not time now to go behind the social forms and consequences of women’s Islam as ideology and to consider seriously the thoughts of Muslim women as thought?

1. We would like to thank Jean-Louis Triaud and Louis Brenner for inviting us to write this essay for their table ronde held at the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, Paris (December 1983), entitled “Agents Religieux en Afrique Tropicale.” We have kept their term, “Agents Religieux,” as there is no easy English equivalent to describe all the various kinds of people actively involved in religious affairs. We would also thank Dr Humphrey Fisher for his comments on revising this essay for publication.

2. The significance of Hamet’s remark and his interest in publishing a translation of Nur al-alhab should also be considered in the context of Algerian intellectual history and the debates there over the role of women, as Dr Allan Christelow (Idaho State University) kindly pointed out to us.

3. Paul Marty (1921, 338) wrote: “À la différence de ce qu’on voit dans le Sénégal, et surtout en Maurétanie, il n’y a pas de femmes à la tête des doual du Fouta-Diallon. Le Karamoko est toujours un homme, encore que sa clientèle comprenne la plupart du temps des fillettes.” Borno is also notable for educating girls, if not usually to any high level of learning (Trimingham 1959, 158 n.2); the same was apparently true of Kano city (Mahmudu Koki 1977, 32). In the Fulbe scholarly milieu of northern Adamawa, Renaud Santerre (1973, 53-54; 1982, 364) came across a few learned women; they were the wives or daughters of scholars or princes. See Quimby (1979, 208) on the women of scholarly Dyula lineages teaching the fundamentals of Islam.

4. Paden’s footnote is particularly tantalising as it refers to women initiators in the Tijaniyya; compare the sixteen women who were muqaddams of the Tijaniyya in Tunis in 1917, briefly mentioned by Abun Nasr (1965, 89), but contrast Dwyer’s remark (1978, 593) that women in southern Morocco avoid membership of the Tijaniyya as being too demanding. Yet a footnote is perhaps better than the total silence, for example, of Elias Saad (1983) on Timbuktu (where certain notable women of scholarly families also had the title of “Nana!”). Similarly, recent general studies of Islam in West Africa (e.g. Clarke, 1982; Hiskett, 1984) ignore women’s Islam.
5. The majority of recent writers on the role of women in Africa south of the Sahara have, understandably, preferred to analyse sex and gender roles either in the family or in the wider economy (e.g. Oppong, 1983; Robertson and Klein, 1983). But even the general survey edited by Hay and Stichter (1984) is strikingly sparse where it deals with what Muslim women thought. By contrast Christian women in Africa have more often been the subject of study, partly no doubt because their Christianity is more public (e.g. Jules-Rosette, 1979).

6. In a brief survey of the Middle East and women's practice of Islam there, Fernea and Fernea (1972, 386) remark on the meagerness of the data but show that generalisations about the poor observance of Islam by women are not borne out by all the evidence. Yet in the thirteen years since their survey (and the call by their editor, Nikki Keddie, for research), little more has been published. Dwyer (1978, 587), however, makes it clear one should be wary of simply associating women with "informal" religion in Morocco.

7. Much of what follows is discussed in greater detail in M. Last (forthcoming): the basic data, though not this particular synthesis, are in Last (1967a). It should be remembered that the vast majority of our sources derive from the successful Muslim faction which led the revolution.

8. The tradition is confirmed in a poem, Tindinore Labbe, by the Shaikh's daughter Asma'u; as women are rarely included in the academic "genealogies" of male scholars, their names can easily be omitted from the manuscript record.

9. In his very lengthy song in Fullulde, Busura'a'u, the Zamfara scholar Muhammad Tukur implies, disapprovingly, that Muslim men and women not only attended the mosque together but also even waged jihad (Haafkens 1983. 155 lines 67-71). It is probable that women demanded access to Islamic teaching and insisted on attending public preaching and religious assemblies, perhaps to the embarrassment of their menfolk. For it is clear that Sokoto scholars were well aware of the standard arguments against what their women were doing. Women also accompanied the men on certain campaigns in the jihad, caring for the wounded etc. The much earlier incident when the Shaikh's wife was convinced she should remain in purdah (somewhat against her will at first!) is recounted in Gidado dan Laima's Raud al-jinan (unpublished).

10. An eye-witness account from the Tijani viewpoint is given by al-hajj Sa'id (c.1860] 1899-1901); Most historians ignore the possibility of al-hajj 'Umar being elected to the caliphate; hindsight perhaps makes it seem more implausible than it was at the time?

11. It is possible that much of this verse was translated with a largely women's audience in mind. Singers of the songs in Fullulde today in Cameroon are almost all women (Haafkens 1983, 9). Lists of titles of these poems are in Jean Boyd (1982) and Bello Said (1973); some are quoted in M. Hiskett (1975).

12. It is usual in this context to contrast the circle at Gwandu around 'Abdullah b. Fudi (and his legalistic stance) with those around Bello in Sokoto. But there were notable Sufis in both places, though perhaps more of the "old guard" were to be found at Gwandu with 'Abdullah.


14. The notable exception is, of course, the Mourides' centre at Touba. We would suggest that "saints," etc. may well be found to be important in West Africa, once we examine the history of women's Islamic organisations.

15. In the 1950s and 1960s, when the Sardauna was encouraging the hajj and the 'umra, it seems that many of the policies of Asma'u were revived by her great-grandson, the Waziri Junaidu, who is the custodian of her poems as well as being the most notable historian and a most important official in Sokoto. In 1960-61 he published two guidebooks for "pilgrims" to the newly refurbished tombs of the Shaikh and Bello, in which he also defends as sunna the practice of ziyara not only for men but also (more debatably) for women. In his house the schoolroom of Nana Asma'u is still maintained (a photograph is in Last, 1967a). Similarly, the genealogy, this time linking the Sardauna, via the Shaikh, to the Prophet, was re-published, in Hausa verse, on posters and on 45 RPM record.

16. These are to be found in the unpublished ms. book 'Arf al-Raihan by Waziri Junaidu, and in Bello Said (1973).
17. Asma’u’s works were: (1) Sonnore Bello in Fulfulde, 1837; in Arabic as Marthiyyat Bello, 1837; (2) Gikko Bello in Fulfulde, 1838; (3) Filitago in Fulfulde, 1839; (4) Ko’iswi Shehu in Fulfulde, 1840. Gidado’s works were: (1) al-Kashf wa’l-Bavan, 1838; (2) al-Majmu’fi’l-’Ashab Bello, 1839; (3) Majmu ‘yasir ila Khisal Shaikh ‘Uthman, 1840; (4) Raud al-Jinan, 1840.

18. “Askiau” apparently refers here to the claims made by Shaikh Ahmadu Lobbo in the Masina caliphate to be the mujaddid for the twelfth Islamic century, and “spiritual” heir to the Askia Muhammad of sixteenth century Songhai. Such claims, which required creatively emending (or forging) parts of the Ta’rikh al-Fattash, were dismissed in Sokoto and later in Timbuktu. Compare N. Levitzon (1971, 571-593); C.C. Stewart (1979, 408-429). For a recent discussion, see E. Saad (1983, 215).

19. Cf. the poem, for example, on the battle of Papara (Fafara) in Muhammad Bello ([1812] 1951).


Bibliography


