

TRADITIONAL POETRY OF NANA ASMA'U BINT FODIO

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Abstract - This paper discusses the traditional poetry of Nana Asma'u Bnt Usman Fadio and her participation in the Community of Caliphate and intellectual movement in the era. Is an exploration of the historical background, culture, society style and content of the poetry of Nana Asma'u bint Fodio. In other words, the study examines critical opinion in the poetry of Nana Asma'u and concluded that poetry is a vehicle for political, social and cultural emancipation. The paper further reveal that Nana Asma'us Poetry has long been used by people and African poetry today owes much to oral poetry which is a form of catharsis to use Freud's term, for the communication of ones feeling over a given situation. The Study revealed that Nana Asma'u was not only a scholar who contributed a lot to the literature produced during the Jihad movement led by her father Shehu Usman Dan Fodio, but was the first woman scholar in her time and in her area who become eminent and distinguished through her work of which made a lot of her poetry are elegies. It was concluded that Death played an important role in Nana's poetry thus the bulk of her poems are lamentations. She made death personal in her poems.

Nana Asma'u was brought up in a revolutionary and hard life as dictated by circumstances. Nana Asma'u was brought of to the learning environment. Known Islamic system of education which had been passed to Hausa land from Timbuktu. This system of education had persisted for many centuries whenever orthodox Muslims were to be found. At the age of three to four years she started to learn the Fatiha (the opening surah of the Holy Quran) by heart from her teacher. At the age of five she was given her alio (writing slate) with which she was taught words of the Arabic letters beginning with Bismi11 ah. She had to recognize the individual letters "b", "s", "m" and read them aloud to her teacher while pointing to them with her finger.

On satisfying the teacher that she could recognise the letters, the writing was washed off, and other sentences written out The classes would have been held in the open air in the women's part of the house. Asma'u and other children, boys and girls attended in the morning before 10:00 a.m and in the afternoon between 3:00 p.m and 5:00 p.m, the La'asar prayer marking the end of the afternoon classes "By the time she was ten years she had probably read the Holy Qura'an in its entirety, there being sixty h i j i b i (section)".-^ This was a necessary precondition for introducing Nana Asma'u to higher forms of knowledge. Thus, it is "when competence is reached in reading Arabic, poetry is studied much of which is also committed to memory. The memorization of classical Arabic texts and poetry which can be done concurrently, and the study of grammar preceded any attempt made by a student to compose any work of his or her own". Nana Asma'u's education followed these lines. Proportionally her education included more than academic and religious studies. From the beginning, the Shehu, Nana' s father stressed the crucial importance of individuals patterning their life-styles on the sunnah of the Prophet and the examples set by his companions. In Ihya al -sunna written in 1793, the Shehu had written clearly that "Whatever they did, we will do, and whatever they avoided, we will avoid" (sick) In the hadith there are many examples of the Prophet exhorting people to work with their hands. An example is found in Muhammad Bello's book K i t a b a 1 N a s i h a t (translated and versified by Asma'u) which mentions the example of the Prophet's daughter Fatima grinding her own grains by hand". Inevitably, the Shehu in order to set an example twined grass into ropes, "his son Muhammad Sambo carries produce to market in a sack slung across his shoulder". Nana Asma'u was taught to perform household chores by the Shehu ' s wives and these included food preparation, spinning, soap making and hair-dressing, education and home training contributed a lot to the intellectual and spiritual development of Nana Asma'u.

1.INTRODUCTION

1.1.Background of Nana Asma'u

Nana Asma'u Bint Fodio was born in Degel in 1794. She was born during the time of the Jihad reform period. Her parents came from a scholarly community which migrated to Hausa land from Futa-Toro, before the 15th century, To understand Nana Asma'u one has to view her against the background of the intellectual atmosphere in which she was born and brought up, as well as see her as the daughter of the Islamic revivalist scholar, Shehu Usmar B. Fodio.

Degel, her birth place was in Gobir the most northerly part of the Hausa kingdom. The Shehu's ancestors had lived for generations in roughly the same locality. Nana Asma'u spent most of her childhood in a restrictive and totally religiously committed atmosphere. In Nana Asma'u's home there was no room for idleness. Everyone in the household had something to do every day. "Everybody in the family had his or her own timetable, time for meditation during which people kept quiet, time for trade or profession by which one earned some money" Infact all these made the home atmosphere totally challenging.

Nana Asma'u, correspondently, was one of the children that benefited from the knowledge of the Shehu, her father. Nana was always present whenever her father was teaching any group of students irrespective of their age or sex. This gave her an opportunity to learn intensively. This in turn influenced her very well and contributed to her being a well learned woman, a teacher, a preacher and a poet in her own right.

2.NANA ASMA'U PARTICIPATION IN THE COMMUNITY OF CALIPHATE

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.

3. SOCIETY OF NANA ASMAU BINT FODIO

Throughout the time of Nana Asma'u she contributes in different fields of knowledge such as Islamic, Literature and so on. Nana Asma'u was literary collaborator with Muhammad Bello to translate his book into another language. A book titled *Kitabal-Nasi* was written by Muhammad Bello and Nana Asma'u however translated the book into Fulfulde and versified it. This work was dated 1836. Two years later another version appeared, this time in Hausa. It is titled *Tawassuli Ga Mata Masu Albarka*. Evidence points to the fact that Muhammad Bello and Asma'u collaborated over the book's compilation, translation and versification and that work started as early as 1833, presumably "after Wuruno became the rabit. Nana Asma'u died in 1865, at the age of seventy two. (Allah ya jikanta Amin) May her soul rest in perfect peace Amin.

So many people have written a lot about Nana Asma'u and her literary activities. Satura Mukoshy in her thesis titled *Contribution of Nana Asma'u Bint of Shaikh Usman B. Fudi to West African Literature 18th to 19th Century*, sees Nana Asma'u as having great qualities as well as being a good writer. She argues that Asma'u composed verses in Hausa to instruct her female students in Islamic religious knowledge in a simple entertaining way. In her *wa'az* (admonition) poems Asma'u instruct her students on how to perform ablutions, the purpose and situations for which *T a i m a m a* (sand ablution) is allowed. Some of Asma'u's poems according to Mukoshy, encourage her students to seek religious knowledge even if they have to go out of their matrimonial homes. However, Nana Asma'u insists that a woman going out to seek for knowledge must be decently dressed and should go out of commitment to Allah. Asma'u also has a poem which instructs her students to adhere to the five fundamental pillars of Islam namely *Shahada* (the belief in Allah and his messenger the Prophet Muhammad), *Salah* (Prayer), *Azumi* (Fasting), *Zakka* (Alms) and *Hajj* (Pilgrimage to Mecca).

According to Mukoshy most of Nana's works are mainly on religion and elegies in form of prose and poetry. Similarly, "Nana Asma'u in contemplative moods wrote on religious themes; in old age, she wrote dramatic poems of thanks at the overthrow of the son of her father's ally who turned despot" She also wrote on the courageous Mustapha, her brother-in-law who fought and won *Si lame*. She also wrote elegies on the brave deeds of people her friends and relative.

4. SOCIETY SYTILE ON NANA ASMAU'U POETRY

Nana Asma'u (1793-1863) was a princess, poet, and teacher, and is considered the precursor to modern feminism in Africa. She had such an impact of the education of women, that in Nigeria today, many Islamic women's organisations, schools, and meeting halls are named after her. Nana was a member of the Fodio clan who ruled the Sokoto Caliphate in modern-day Nigeria. Her family was part of a fundamental Islamic sect, known as the Qadiriyya, who

focused on the pursuit of knowledge as a spiritual path.

She had an excellent education from a young age. She learned all the Islamic classics, memorized the entire Qur'an, and was fluent in four languages: Arabic, the Fula language, Hausa and Tamacheq Tuareg. She wrote poetry in the first three, and became well-known in her time for her poems. She was an accomplished author and respected scholar in communication with scholars throughout the sub-Saharan African Muslim world.

Her poetry addressed topics like divine truth, Sufi women saints, Muhammed, and jihad battles. She also wrote eulogies that today serve as historical documents providing insight into the turbulent political atmosphere at the time. Much of her poetry placed a strong emphasis on women leaders and rights of women within the community ideals of the Sunnah and Islamic law.

Like other women in her family, Nana Asma'u taught both boys and girls together. However, in addition to teaching local students, she made an impact on Muslim women's education by training a large network of women as educators. The women memorized Nana's poetry as teaching devices to use in instructing Islamic women. The group of women, called *yan-taru*, or "those who congregate together, the sisterhood", traveled throughout the Caliphate educating women, who passed on their education to others.

Today, Nana Asma'u's works still inspire Muslim women all over the world. Her life and works are a testimony to a woman's right to pursue education and to be active in pursuing social issues. Her tomb in Sokoto is a place of pilgrimage for Muslims.

Amongst her over 60 surviving works written over 40 years, Nana Asma'u left behind a large body of poetry in Arabic, the Fula language and Hausa, all written in the Arabic script. Many of these are historical narratives, but they also include elegies, laments, and admonitions. Her poems of guidance became tools for teaching the founding principles of the Caliphate. Asma'u also collaborated closely with Muhammad Bello, the second Caliph. Her works include and expand upon the *dan Fodio's* strong emphasis on women leaders and women's rights within the community ideals of the Sunnah and Islamic law.

It may be worthwhile to make some general remarks about the very nature of poetry as a necessary introduction to the criticism of Nana Asma'u's poetry.

A poem is produced by a poet, it takes its subject matter from the universe of men, things and events. It is addressed to or made available to an audience of hearers and readers. "Poetry is what gets lost in translation" One cannot translate the word of a poem in such a way as to translate its meaning, and yet reproduce its original rhythm and colour, identical associative and aural values, all those nuances of sound and of symbolism that are a poem's very essence.

Moreover the syntactical order in which words are organised vary from language to language, and the overall effects of the words in the original may not be preserved when they are rearranged in the order imposed upon them by translation. Also there are words in each language that have no equivalent in another. "The French have no word for "home". There is no verb in English that is the exact counterpart of the German *causchen*, no does the German *qucken*" adequately render the implications of the English verb "to peer". "A poem will result when the genius of a language - its words, their sound and their sense offers the genius of a poet an opportunity to perform a miracle ".³ "A poem gives the world back to the maker of the poem, in all its original strangeness, the shock of its first surprise".⁴ it is capable of doing the same for the rest of us. "A poem is a way of knowing and feeling that requires, for its understanding a modicum of imagination and some familiarity with the conventions of the art".⁵ Moreover a poem may take a generation to yield its full secret. One might even say that a poem's meaning varies from age to age.

M. Maritain in his book *The Situation of Poetry* touches a profound truth when he describes a poem as a form of knowledge that is "not ordered to knowing but to being expressed in a work". Its aim, method and end result is the creation of a new thing. That new thing represents knowledge that could have been realised in no other way. "In a universe in which everything has meaning and in which all meanings are related and symbolised one another, the poet lives perpetually on the age of discovery ".⁶ it is the poet's function to understand, to interpret to learn what it is he is being told, by giving form to the formless and a body to the Bodiless. The true relation of reason to inspiration in poetry and of substance to form was first convincingly set forth by Dr Johnson's successors.

Poetry to them was simply "the expression of the imagination only another name for clearest insight, amplitude of mind and reason in her most exalted mood".⁷ They held the poet to be one who sees into the world of human experiences with clear and comprehensive vision. "The passion which stirs to life his creative instinct does not distort the truth but reveal it. Whilst his function is to communicate neither knowledge no moral instruction but power " Closely allied to the above the artist has always functioned in African society as records of mores, and experience of his society as the voice of vision in his own time. It is time for him to respond to this essence himself. In a paper "Why African literature?" David Rubadiri has spelt out the themes that would excite African literature for a long time as politics, race and self consciousness with a search for identity. Augustinho further said poetry coming from Neto and Siphon Sepami a, exhibit the quality of having matured out of the concept of asserting the colour identity. They represent to a large extent their feelings about the condition of their people, or human being through orientation of the protest culture which have gone to the extent of revolution in Neto Cheney Coker, in *A Poet in Exile* states that the very

existence of an African writer is itself a political statement and assert that poets should live. The content of what they write, otherwise it would be used against them by the very people who constitute their readership. Recognition may be the only reward they should expect because the poet is obviously going to jail, especially if he is an African poet".⁸ In the *People's Mood*, Mbulelo Mzamane recommends literature to politicians as a kind of political barometer to gauge popular feeling".¹⁰ He then rightly observed that the revolutionary poet is one that concretizes the aspiration of his people for a better life thinks that the movement see to the possibilities of realizing that goal. Garbai also affirms that a working definition of culture could be based on the idea that political domination in itself is an act of culture. "If imperialist domination has the vital need to practise cultural oppression, national liberation is necessarily an act of culture" Poetry has been a part of a cultural act or practice since the days of cultural nationalism. "Art is culture based and culture specific.

It is important to mention that culture has to do with self definition" Arguing further, Garbai says that the understanding of culture is based on the relationship between words and their meaning and how the poet might manipulate them. To understand any society in terms of their songs, music or poetry or any genre one has to comprehend and appreciate the culture. "The relationship according to Garbai between culture and poetry within the tangible aspect of a society is determined by the concentration of all the existing factors that formed the environment. Hence culture incorporates the tradition through dynamic representation for new values" However, Donatus Nwoga, in *African Literature Today* No.10, said African Poetry is that which includes the transcendental elements which provide the poet an opportunity to retain his audience by being relevant to his tradition. The angle of vision of the artist is affected by natural social and spiritual freedom within which he is operating". He also describes poets as those who hold up a mirror to the society and in this way raise significant questions over the operations of the artist.

In addition poetry is a vehicle for political, social and cultural emancipation. Poetry has long been used by people. African poetry today owes much to oral poetry and "it is a form of catharsis to use Freud's term, for the communication of ones feeling over a given situation". Writing poetry may not quite be an achievement, but a poet's attitude to the political problem in the society would determine his relevance and actual achievement. It is in this way that poetry in Africa can be understood as an art which is channelled to propagate ideas to influence the community. This does not mean that poetry is outright propaganda. Social realism both as a technique in poetry and a practical reality occupies an important place in African literature In this general vein Ruth Finnegan further views "Praise poetry as the most developed and elaborate poetic genre in Africa ".¹⁷ The elegies glorify virtues, express the people's beliefs, joys, sorrows and notion

about right and wrong. A lot of Nana's writings are actually elegies.

5.CONCLUSION

Nana Asma'u was not only a scholar who contributed a lot to the literature produced during the Jihad movement led by her father Shehu Usman Dan Fodio, but was the first woman scholar in her time and in her area who become eminent and distinguished through her work.

Nana Asma'u correspondently was one of the children that benefited fully from the knowledge of the Shehu her father. Nana was always present when her father was teaching any group of students irrespective of their age or sex. This gave her a golden opportunity to learn intensively. This in turn influenced her very much and contributed to her being a well learned woman, a teacher, a preacher and a poet. Nana was also educated by her elder brother Muhammad Bello. Her own observation of Bello's activities as a brother and also as a teacher gave her great courage in her own undertaking. A lot of her poetry are elegies. Death played an important role in Nana's poetry thus the bulk of her poems are lamentations. She made death personal in her poems. After all funeral dirges are not for the ears of the dead, they are for the living. Therefore, Nana made the dirges vehicles of a lamentation, philosophy ideas on morality and comments on the general human condition. Nana praised the way in which people attempted to reach high standard of behaviour most accepted in Islam.

Some of her elegies can be described as Sinner poems. They are deeply religious, devotional and prayerful. The Islamic belief in Allah and the life-after-death also shaped the tone of her poetry.

Each of the individuals Nana eulogised contributed greatly to the development and the success of the society. They were people with worthy qualities. In her injunctory poems on the other hand, Asma'u conceptualises life-after-death. The conclusion of a span of life on earth is not an absolute end to everything but death is a sign post for the possibility for life at another level.

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