



Poetic Expressions of Nana Asmau in the formation of Yantaru Movement and Impact on Literacy re-orientation in Northern Nigeria and the USA

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Abstract

The establishment of Sokoto Caliphate under the leadership of Sheikh Uthman Dan Fodio in the early 1800 witnessed the emergence of renowned Muslim Scholars led by the Sheikh himself. Others within and outside the family. Within the family, worthy of note are Abdullahi Dan Fodio, a brother to the Sheikh, Muhammad Bello, Sheikh's son and Nana Asmau, Sheikh's daughter. In this research, an attempt will be made to study the Poetic expressions of Nana Asmau in the formation of the Yantaru Movement and impact on the literacy re-orientation in Northern Nigeria in particular and later adaption of Nana Asmau's Poems in a Qadiriyya circle in the United States of America. The paper postulates that the formation of Yantaru Movement by Nana Asmau herself not only impacted the Hausa community of her time especially the Women folk, but also extended further, covering almost two centuries after the emergence of Yantaru Movement. The Paper conclude that the Yantaru Movement's impact on the literary field had exerted a great deal of influence in the poems of praise and eulogies on the Prophet Muhammad, to his four rightly guided Caliphs, leading Muslim Scholars, jurists and later metamorphosed and used by even Women musicians, Praise- Singers deviating from the original views of Nana Asmau.

Introduction

The presence of women, who have established themselves in a male dominated society, is brought to life, through the lens of their works and ideological efforts in many realms. In recent years, there have been a revival of interest in the analysis of the 'Yantaru movement (The Associates), firstly, from those who study the life and works of Nana Asma'u Danfodio, and secondly, from those who analyse the 'Yantaru movement and its literature from inception to date as an embodiment of the Hausa literary living traditions.

To truly understand the resilience of Sokoto women's scholarship in this research, we must distinguish between the original blueprint and its modern manifestations. I therefore, use two specific neologisms (The Asmawian and the Neo-Asmawian traditions) to categorize this history.

The term 'Asmawian' refers to the movement in its original, 19th -century form. It represents strict adherence to the foundational curriculum and ethics established by Nana Asmau herself, and the rigorous commitment to the Fodiyo intellectual tradition, where scholarship was a public, visible, and state-sanctioned duty.

The term 'Neo-Amawian' captures the movement as it adapted through the colonial, post-colonial and contemporary shifts we see in Northern Nigeria.



By using these terms, we avoid the mistake of seeing the 'Yantaru as a static, 'ancient' relic. Instead, we see a living, breathing tradition. While the 'Asmawian' honors the genius of the inception, the 'Neo-Asmawian' honors the grit and adaptability of the women who ensured that even the when the world thought that they were invisible, their intellectual resilience survived the colonial erasure.

Therefore, this research is an attempt to bring to light the Nana Asmawian 'Yantaru movement, in the view of the contemporary neo-Asmawian traditional experiences, which has witnessed the challenging period, of the Sokoto Caliphate by the British colonialist, which ('Yandaki, 2015) refers to as analysis of ethnographic presence. Within this view, the central focus is to analyse the experiences of the past centuries, and by which the present and the future can be literarily, culturally and linguistically projected through the lens of historical and historiographical approach.

Mack and Boyd, (2000) stated that, the 'Yantaru is a movement that was established to organise and train a cadre of women teachers, appointed as 'Jajis', who were free to travel by virtue of their maturity and piety. The movement is an in-home teaching of women in rural areas, who were in *Purdah*, and less educated. Nana Asma'u employed the poetic tradition in teaching the 'Yantaru. This technique provided the most basic devices for the lessons and training the 'Yantaru, following the memorisation of the verses by the students. The lessons ranged from instruction in chapters of the Qur'an, prescribed prayers, in history, biography of the Prophet Muhammad, accounts on *Sufi* women and elegies for pious individual Muslim faithful.

The study also seeks to establish the interconnectedness in the Asmawian and neo-Asmawian traditions of the 'Yantaru movement in Katsina, Sokoto axis, and also the USA. This study examines how the movement was established, and manifested as a living tradition and how the movement survived in the 18th to 19th centuries, despite the obstacles it encountered, from the influence of colonialism, which crippled the 'Yantaru movement of education, compared to the western education (*Boko*), which was introduced to the Caliphate by the British colonialist.

The Sokoto 'Yantaru, were the pioneering women scholars in the Caliphate, and they continued till today, in some parts of West Africa, the Maghreb and some parts of the United States of America.

Therefore, this research also attempts to examine the movement and its literary tropes in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods, and how it assumed a changing posture all through the centuries.

The Pre-Caliphate Practices

The Sokoto Caliphate, founded in the early 19th century was aimed to establish a state based on Islamic principles. This led to further marginalisation of pre- Islamic beliefs and practices. It is difficult to say definitively, what role women played in pre-Islamic Hausa land religion. However, there is some evidence that women held religious leadership positions in some communities and likely participated in religious practices seen as unorthodox, by the reformers. For example, there are accounts of female priests or diviners, such as the *Magajiya* and the *Inna* (referents of a mother in the Hausa 'Bori' cult figure) in Daura and Gobir Kingdoms respectively, (Ahmed, 2015; Ahmad, 2019).



The reformation of Islamic principles and practices through the Caliphate in the Hausa land has significantly altered these practices, though some elements might have blended with Islamic traditions. However, the role of Sokoto women in religious life, continued to be important. This likely reoriented the women's understanding of religious concepts and practices that established the 'Yantaru' movement, which is seen as an extension of revivalist spirit, and emphasised Islamic scholarship, over non-conformist traditions, shifting the literary landscape for women's education.

The Pioneers

The 'Yantaru' movement, stands as a testament to Nana Asma'u's dedication to female education, and social reform. Through an intricate network of female teachers and disciples, the movement which was established between 1817-1837, disseminated Islamic teachings, promoted literacy, and instilled moral values in women and girls, (Last and Boyd, 1985; Bullock, 2002). This grassroots initiative, transformed female education, laying the foundation for generations of informed and empowered Muslim women.

Although, the 'Yantaru' had established an education system, for women in the Sokoto Caliphate, studies focus almost exclusively on male scholars, in the Mediterranean, and Maghrib, to the detriment of their female colleagues, who have impacted profoundly on the society, (Mack, 2016).

The major arguments were spurred by the claim of colonial rulers, who dubbed the women of the Sokoto Caliphate, apolitical, and uneducated and were therefore, mostly confined to domestic chores.

This paper paves way for a deeper exploration of Asma'u's contributions. It invites interrogation of how religious revivalism fueled the literary landscape, to prioritise female education, and how the movement continues to resonate in contemporary efforts, towards gender equality and Islamic education.

The Argument: Asma'u's legacy, compels us to examine the continuous past, recognising how religious fervor, literary innovation, and social activism can intertwine, to empower marginalized communities and reshape cultural landscapes.

Women writers from the nineteenth century, in what is now Northern Nigeria, draw a rich, ancient tradition that stretches back prior to the *Jihad* era, particularly the works of pioneer women, whose writing styles, and genres, drew the classical Arabic poetic mode, to compose in different styles, and languages, primarily in Arabic, *Ajami* Fulfulde and Hausa.

Some of these women, were devout Muslim scholars, who composed *Sufi* poetry, from the ruling Fulani Fodio clan, most prominently Nana Asma'u Fodio, like other scholars in her family, her works secure her a position among the *Sufis* in the Sokoto Caliphate and beyond. It was clear that Asma'u was accepted by virtue of her blood ties, intellect and literary capabilities.

Nana Asma'u Danfodio was born into a *Sufi Qadiriyya* family, with a long Islamic tradition in Degel. Asma'u was born a twin, her brother was duly named Hassan. Sheikh Uthman chose "Asma'u" meaning the "beautiful" as her name.

Asma'u was raised and tutored by her family, the Fodio's, and other scholarly women in the Shehu's clan. She studied and memorised the Qur'an from an early age. She also studied



Philosophy, *Fiqh*, Mysticism, legal matters, *Tauhid* and Poetry. She was married at an early age of 14 to Gidado Dan-Laima, bore children and wrote poetic works. Nana Asma'u was fluent in Hausa, Fulfulde, Arabic and Tamachek. Asma'u's literary works dealt with the Sokoto *Jihad*, the Qur'an, the *Sunnah* and the role of Muslim women in the Caliphate (Boyd and Mack, 1997; Mack; Boyd, 2000 and Ahmad 2019).

Religious Revivalism: Asma'u being one of the central figures, in the Sokoto Caliphate, was chosen by her father, the Shehu to be the women's leader was therefore given the honorific title of "*Uwar-gari*" which is equivalent to the male title "*Uban-gari*" (Boyd and Mack, 1997; Mack and Boyd, 2000).

Asma'u was accepted by the leaders of the Caliphate and beyond. Her active engagements in her community and cooperated works with her brother the Caliph, Muhammadu Bello, and later with her husband, the vizier, Gidado Dan-Laima, were esteemed and extended far beyond the Sokoto Caliphate. She authored numerous treatises on Islamic law, theology, and history, demonstrating her versed knowledge and intellectual prowess. They were instrumental in shaping the Sokoto Caliphate's legal and religious framework, establishing her as a respected scholar and authority.

Her writings, infused with deep theological knowledge, aimed to revitalise Islamic faith and practice within the Caliphate. Her poems and prose championed the orthodoxy, advocating for adherence to Quranic teachings and the *Sunnah*. Through her work, she sought to combat laxity and moral decline, urging individuals and communities towards a more pious and disciplined way of life.

Thus, in the year 1837, she formed the '*Yantaru*, which was the basic step on women's literacy in home schooling. She personally taught many women about Islam and literacy. Asma'u's teachings were revolutionary in her time, as they enable women with an opportunity to learn, and participate more actively in society, and contribute to the intellectual life of the Caliphate.

In the contemporary era, the 'Yantaru legacy has become globalised. The movement serves as the template for so many modern women's organisations in Northern Nigeria, such as the FORMWAN, which actively champion female education and empowerment. Furthermore, the concept has crossed the Atlantic, with the American 'Yantaru chapters established in various US states. These groups focus on intellectual history and the transmission of Islamic knowledge within a diaspora context. The traditional role of the traveling Jaji has been adapted, with women utilising modern technology to virtually connect and teach across vast distances, and the translation of texts into English, and showcasing the network's adaptability while maintaining its core focus on female-led scholarship and piety.

Literary Reorientation: Hausa women, from the nineteenth century, to the end of twentieth century would have not contributed immensely to the literary traditions without the call to escape the bond of illiteracy, to enter the public sphere, first by the Shehu himself, as he was quoted in (Boyd and Last, 1985);

*Educate your wives and daughters and let them
once they are past child-bearing be the
household's own teachers of Islamic learning.*

(Usman bin Fodio, [n.d])



And later by Nana Asma'u's efforts in establishing the 'Yantaru' movement, which was the basic step on women's literacy in home schooling. Her literary prowess, revolutionised the Hausa literary landscape. Asma'u employed the poetic tradition in teaching the 'Yantaru'. Their mnemonic device was mainly based from Asma'u's didactic poems, mainly to tackle social issues like female education, moral lessons, religious and ethical conduct, fostering a sense of cultural identity and shared values within the Caliphate. She employed poetry as a powerful tool for education, using it to instill moral values, social etiquette, promote Islamic knowledge and foster unity among the people of the Caliphate.

The poem 'Fear This' as an example of her didactic work, is intended to instruct the community to recount the horrors of the afterlife (Mack and Boyd, 2000).

Her students learned to write, read and memorised those poems of which they were ready to pass on to the later generations. In this way, many women were educated and it was the beginning of women liberation in writing, from the classical Jihadist movement to the modern genres of Hausa women's literature.

After her death in 1864, Nana Asma'u's traditions were emulated by later generations. Her sister Maryamu (*Uwar-daje*) took over the affairs of the 'Yantaru'. After Maryamu's demise, she was succeeded by her daughter also named Maryamu (*Tamodi*) who continued with the training of the 'Yantaru', a movement that has survived and existed till the 21st century.

Recent researches revealed unequivocally that a number of women in the Sokoto Caliphate were scholars, that produced rich scholarly works and contributed to the fields of administration, politics, and the Caliphate formation. These women did not limit their works on governing the 'Yantaru', but maintained the traditional poetic style, following the manner of Nana Asma'u. They also wrote under their own names. Maryamu (*Uwar-Daje*) has about seven works credited to her. These include; "*Fadar Shehu kan Watsewar Qasar Hausa*," "*Waqar Limanci*," "*Waqar Ni'imomin Ubangiji ga Bawansa*." These are prominent examples of Maryamu *Uwar-daje's* works (Mack and Boyd,2000; Omar, 2014; Ahmad,2019).

It is a fact that, the 19th century Sokoto,s 'Yantaru', were the pioneering women scholars in the Caliphate. They continued to inspire contemporary scholars and activist, paving way for a more nuanced understanding of Islamic feminism and West African intellectual history. This remains a testament to the transformative power of literature and enduring legacy of the women, who illuminated the path for generations to come in Northern Nigeria, some parts of West Africa and now, the USA.

After the Pioneers

Despite its peculiarity, the anecdote in Nana Asma'u's literary texts survived in an era where few women could support themselves. Her works drew attention to the historical setting, as women in later generations continued these rich, varied traditions of literature and excel at issues in the intellectual and political ideologies, to the contemporary classics, feminist literary themes, and literary criticism.

These generation of pioneering women writers, inspired a later generation of women in the region. The first half of the 20th century saw the emergence of prominent women scholars, in the Sokoto Caliphate. This was attributed to the gains made by the 'Yantaru', in the preceding decades of women education, political and social status, which were motivated by the Fodio



clan to educate women and children. Those who excelled in their studies became teachers known as *Modibbos*. They conduct classes of *Tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis) to women during the month of *Ramadan*.

Saudatu bint Mahmud (*Modibbo Kilo*), a renowned Islamic *Sheikha* stands out among women scholars of the Caliphate in the 20th century. She was the daughter of a renowned scholar Malam Mahmudu b. Muhammad. Modibbo Kilo was taught by her father and other scholars in her family. She later became a teacher herself, and established a school in her matrimonial home. She became an authority in knowledge who was consulted by both male and female scholars. Her knowledge of the Qur'an gave her the opportunity to conduct *Tafsir* at the Shehu's *Hubbare* in Sokoto town.

At the forefront of these images, is the rich historical prose poetry, she published a travelogue of her migration and journey of two years from Sokoto to Makkah in Saudi Arabia, titled '*Hijirar Modibbo Kilo*. Some of her poems include; *Waqar Alqur'ani*, *Waqar Qabli da Ba'adi*, *Waqar Nasihah Game da Gavovi Bakwai*, *Waqar Hatsin Bara*, *Waqar Hikaya*, *Waqar Gurin Modibbo Kilo na Zuwa Makka*. There is also a work of prose she published titled; '*Taqaitaccen Tarihin Annabawa da Daular Usmaniya* (Omar,2013).

Later in the century, women writers contributed less, in this tradition of composing the traditional *Sufi* poetic and narrative treatise. This was perhaps due to the influence particularly linked to cultural and colonial educational activities that witnessed the beginning of all types of literary genres in the region.

According to (Mack, 2004), Hauwa Gwaram and 'Yar Shehu, are seemingly the most revered poets, who recite their poetry written in Roman script, without any musical accompaniment. These artistes are literate, because they write and recite their poems, either at poetry circles or on radio programmes. Thus, the benefits of Western education.

The publications of fictions by Hafsatu Abdulwahab, '*So Aljannar Duniya*,' Talatu Wada Ahmad's '*Mamallakin Zuciyat*' and Balaraba Ramat, '*Alhaki Kwaikwaiyo*', manifest the voices of Hausa women within themselves and the society. These were the beginning of Hausa women's writings in modern times, which saw a break from the poetic tradition of the past. The texts produced by these women ignored the classical *Sufi* tradition that has no relations with the poems produced by women of *Sufi* heritage, nor the classical poets earlier mentioned above.

Instead, modernist female writers of the first-generation novel, experimented with form and language, to capture the complexities of the modern Hausa society. Their works explored themes mostly of love, marital issues, alienation, and the fragmentation of identity, that depict the modern Hausa tradition, and imitated European, Arabian and Indian literatures. They seek to write about women's lives simply because, they represent a world of women's reality on issues that contain their own experiences, therefore choose a female protagonist.

Significantly, it cannot be denied that, the writers' status quo and educational background might explain this transformation against the past generation of *Sufi* traditions and the desire to prove their ability both as writers, activists and critics. These modern genre of Hausa women writers were similarly influenced by western civilisation. Therefore, the ancient '*Yantaru* traditions despite its originality and authenticity, could not meet the needs of the developing conservative,



modern Hausa society. Thus, the 'Yantaru were mostly ignored, a movement that was once grounded in a contemporary Hausa society and had now begun to disappear.

In the late 20th and early 21st century, the Sokoto 'Yantaru continued to be perceived in the Sokoto community as well as the United States of America. Although the number of the 'Yantaru women in the Sokoto Caliphate were very small. and mostly in their late 40s-60s, their activities and poetry continued to be present for reasons that are not sufficiently explained, perhaps due to the grandstanding occasions of the 'Yantaru held annually in the Caliphate, such as the beginning of the new Islamic year, on the 9th and 10th of the month of *Muharram*, the birthdates' of the Prophet Muhammad (*Maulud*) and on the 27th of Sha'aban, a day to the eve of *Ramadan*, etc (Omar, 2014; Ahmad,2019).

The Poetry

It is important to know that, Nana Asma'u composed poems and other scholarly works, that became the foundation of the 'Yantaru's curriculum. This literature also played an important role in reorienting women's understanding of religious knowledge, and practices.

The 'Yantaru literature, mostly in poetry which was shaped by religion, politics and history were mnemonic devices, particularly in Nana Asma'u's collections and has a profound impact on women's education. After the colonial expansion, the Caliphate was destabilised and many of these poems were lost or even destroyed, nevertheless some survived the turmoil, while most were memorised by the women disciples and were passed on to the coming generations. During this period, there was a literary cross-fertilisation, between the written and oral poetry. This witnessed the formation of literary and cultural 'Yantaru traditions, which established the neo-Asmawian traditions (Ahmad, 2019).

The Asmawian traditions, firmly established a genuine progressive, and instituted literature, from the time of formation of the Caliphate which was based on several common characteristics, language technique, style and theme. These were the first generation and represented the formative pioneering years. This period also saw the establishment of form and themes which has the clearest examples of *Sufi* poetic techniques. Nana Asma'u's poem '*Be Sure of God's Truth*' (*Tabbat Haqiqqa*) is a practical poem that addressed the needs of the uneducated members of the society. The verses below unapologetically justified these claims:

Let us study, and keep on learning:

This gives mankind all that he needs.

Do not stay among ignorant people

Who violently seize property in Muslim lands.

The Fire will seize them, Be Sure of God's Truth.

The verses above clearly direct her listeners to search for knowledge and abstain from ignorance. The message was aimed at every level of society, which the Sokoto *Jihad* was founded on. It emphasised the need to be literate as an obligation upon all Muslims (Mack and Boyd, 2000).

In '*The Path of Truth*' (*Godaben Gaskiya*), Nana Asma'u in a captivating poetic language, described the obligatory religious duties, the pillars of Islam, the imminence of death,



Resurrection, Paradise and the need to repent by following the *Sunnah* (way of the Prophet Muhammad) (SAW). In Verses 19, 20 and 21, Nana Asma'u plumbed on the need to be educated:

You should always be clean and wear clean clothes

*Look well to the details of your religion so that we may all
be united with Ahmada.*

*You should seek religious knowledge and stop straying from
The path. Do not be one of the lost in the next world.
Ahmada.*

Such knowledge enables you to follow God and the Prophet.

Poetry of 'Yantaru; Mobile University

Although, the 21st century *Yantaru's* poems do not have a specific structure, it is appropriate here to understand what is meant by the poetry of the *Yantaru*. This can best be understood in relation to the meaning of poetry itself before going further into the explanation.

The Hausa Dictionary CNHN, (2006) explained the meaning of poetry as 'an organised speech that is sung in rhyme or rhythm. It can be oral or written. Hence, (Gusau, 2014) tried to distinguish between oral and written poetry, where he points out that, oral poetry is different from written poetry. He said that oral poetry is a conversation prepared in wisdom and sensibility that goes step by step according to the rules, structure, and coordination; recited orally with rhyme, and rhythm, often with response.

Also, (Hiskett, 1969) stated that in relation to the status of poetry and teaching of the Islamic religion, especially where it concerns the Jihadists in the era of Shehu Uthman Danfodiyo. He pointed out that poetry is one of the easiest ways used by Jihadists to convey the message, and educate the people of their time. These poems were published in Arabic, Hausa and Fulfulde Ajami, during the Sokoto Caliphate for the masses to benefit thereof.

During the time of the Sokoto Scholars which include Shehu Usmanu himself, his brother Abdullahi Fodiyo, his children, Muhammadu Bello Fodio, Hassan Fodio, Nana Asma'u Fodio, Maryamu Fodio, Isan Kware and many others, used these poems to preach and educate the people. Similarly, other *Jihadi* Scholars including Gidado dan Laima, Dan Tafa and Khalilu dan Abdullahi and many others followed this tradition to emphasise the principles of the *Jihad*.

Usman, (2007) in his study stated that these poems have had a great impact in the Sudance region, where most of the time they are sung in public gatherings, such as in the markets and The Mosques, to spread the religion of Islam teaching and learning in different fields. An example of these types of poems is a Verse from the Shehu's '*Be Sure of God's Truth (Tabbat Hakika)*:

Let everyone consider and reflect



I will give you good advice: be respected

Let us continue to follow the path, and escape retribution

Listen to my song and repent

And so, find salvation, be sure of God's Truth

(Shehu Usmanu Dan Fodiyo) in (Mack and Boyd, 2000).

In the above verses, there are lessons in Shehu's warning to his people, men, women and children, to follow the path of truth. In the last verse, Shehu also pointed out that anyone who repents, and abandons his prejudices will be saved on the Day of Resurrection.

In the Nana Asmawian tradition, poetry was the primary pedagogical tool. Because women being reached, were often in remote areas or in seclusion.

The Poetry of the *Yantaru* is among some of the literary works that were used to present these kinds of religious teaching activities in the era of the *Jihadists*. They served as a unifying force, by translating the complex concepts of the Caliphate into vernacular verse. Nana Asmau ensured that the peasantry and the marginalized felt a part of the state's moral fabric.

As mentioned earlier, these poems were used by the *Yantaru* as learning and teaching materials, mostly composed by Nana Asma'u in her efforts to develop literacy for women, who were not able to live their homes, so that they are not left behind. They recite and memorise these poems in their homes. In this way, many of the women became literate and scholars in the Caliphate.

The analysis of the '*Yantaru* poetry from the 19th century indicate that most of the poems were in manuscripts, unlike the 20th and the 21st century poems that were later being recited and memorised orally and were mostly accompanied with dancing, or stumping of feet to create rhythm by the '*Yantaru* during occasions.

Therefore, by reviewing or looking at these poems as a part of the '*Yantaru* living literary traditions, it is quite essential to consider some of the reasons, involved in pointing out these literary works, and their importance in the literary history, which further affirms the literature of *Yantaru* that exists, though said to be controversial in nature and form.

Mack and Boyd, (2000) described this feature. According to them, the poems of '*Yantaru* have made a significant contribution to the development, and spread of Islamic knowledge within and outside the Sokoto Caliphate. In a short period of time the literature of '*Yantaru* has helped to weave together the threads of Hausa traditions that are mixed with cultural and linguistic aspect, from the 19th century until the 21st, which widened the dignity of the Hausa community in the eyes of the world.

Furthermore, the most important thing to note is that neither the theme of these poems nor the style or the structure of the poems, are being focused on, even though this might be relevant, but rather the circumstances in which these poems were composed. Those poems continued to survive through the 20th century to date.

Kiran Ahmada (In Praise of the Prophet)



Another poem by Nana Asma'u is; 'In Praise of *Ahmada*' (*Kiran Ahmada*). It was in praise of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and described aspects of the Prophet's life, (Mack and Boyd, 2000).

The poem is one of the many composed by the *Jihadists* with the theme of praising the Messenger of Allah (SWT). However, based on an analysis, it is understood that this poem is more effective and popular within the Sokoto community, especially among the '*Yantaru*'. This shows that *Kiran Ahmada* was one of the most popular poems that influenced the *Yantaru* in composing various poems of Praise of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) during important occasions and in places of visitation. Some of these poems include '*Wakar Muhammadu*', '*Farin Gani Mamman*', '*Lale-lale Mamman*', '*Sai Mun Ga Manzo*', '*Madara, da zuma baban Nana*' and many others.

From its first three lines, Nana Asma'u wrote:

Accept the song of praise Ahmada
Accept, O people, let us praise Ahmada.
God has enjoined us to praise him
Let us make firm our intention to praise Muhammad.
The heavens are limitless, but they do not reach
As high as the glory of Muhammad.
The glory of the firmament seems diminished when compared to
The glory of our Prophet Muhammad.
As for his beauty and physique, he surpassed all
For nowhere is there the like of Muhammad.

(vv.3-4,9-10,14)

In the last two centuries, the poem has had an enormous impact on the '*Yantaru*', in addition to the society as well. Beggars on the street has adapted the poem, using it to beg for alms, so did many women during naming ceremonies, weddings and the *Maulud* of the Prophet Muhammad.

Famous Hausa women musicians the likes of Uwaliya mai Ahmada and Barmani Choge drew their inspirations from the poem, in contrast to the original version. They were well known for their '*Kidan Ahmada*', (a popular culture by Hausa women performance artists) using different lyrics, style, and themes to entertain the audience during ceremonies, with a calabash orchestra, while women danced erotically to the music. Their performance style seemingly contrasts, and overlooks the Nana Asma'u's praise song, (*Kiran Amada*) moralistic views, (Mashi, 1982; Ahmad,2019).

As noted earlier, the social and political climate of the late 20th century created a new '*Yantaru*' perception and prompted the movement to change its course. Although, the '*Yantaru*' established the first women literacy circle in the Sokoto Caliphate, they were not given space by the British



colonial authorities during the periods of colonisation to manifest their activities but on the contrary, they were ignored. In a world where the British colonisers saw roaming women, and assumed illiteracy, these poems were actually a sophisticated, portable library of law, medicine, theology and social reforms.

The 20th century 'Yantaru within the Northern Nigerian region and some parts of Niger Republic, even though of the same roots with the Asmawian 'Yantaru, were mainly on the oral transmission of poetry. They were no longer recognised as agents of women's literacy, rather they were forced to hold on to a tradition that is more cultured than religious. It is no wonder that they began to be seen more of a semi-literate character, clinging to the ancient traditions that was labeled as the neo-Asmawian tradition.

The neo-Asmawian 'Yantaru were not authors of manuscripts, but were limited to memorisation or reciting poetry. Even though they were given some religious instructions, this type of 'Yantaru are less educated compared to their predecessors who were mostly senior citizens, less in number, had no support from the government or private organisations. They are underprivileged, mostly neglected, and mostly unrecognised. As a result, the 'Yantaru, were seen more or less in remote areas like the *Hubbares'* in Sokoto, Degel, Cimmola and *Unguar Jaji* and *Unguar Alaqali* in Katsina State respectively. During Islamic festivities as entertainers, their social and educational status are narrowing, if not moving towards extinction.

As a result of these factors, the Northern Nigerian 'Yantaru literature were shaped to a profound oral literary genre in form and themes. Unlike the pioneer poetry works written by the Jihadists, today, many of the 'Yantaru poems are composed by the 'Yantaru themselves (Omar,2014; Ahmad,2017), while some were mainly an adaptation of the *Jihadist* poetry, but rendered to suit the present audiences.

It is important to note that the 'Yantaru literature tend to focus more on the Prophet Muhammad, his Companions, Saints and the Sufis like Sheikh Uthman Dan Fodio, Nana Asma'u, Muhammad Bello, leaders like (*Jaji, Wazir, Majidadi, Bera,* etc) and several others. They employ a limited poetic lexicon and are marked by a musical, rhythmic repetitive rhyme schemes, often accompanied by dancing. Some of the 'Yantaru's Poems confirms this:

Song for the Prophet Muhammad (Waqar Muhammadu)

The trumpets blow for the sake of Mamman

Muhammad.

Mamman, who knows a thousand things,

Muhammad.

Husband to Maria,

Muhammad.

Compare him with miracle Water that treats all ailments

Muhammad (vv.1-4)



Throughout the verses of this long poem, the theme is in praise of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). The 'Yantaru adapted the concept of praising the Prophet from Nana Asma'u's poems as their leader and founder.

Similarly, we can take a look at a five-line poem by the 'Yantaru in praise of Fodiyo:

Fodio Kai a'Uban Waliyyai (Fodio you are the guardian of Saints)

Fodio, you are the guardian of the Saints.

Let me praise Shehu's father, for he alone I will beg

Fodio, you are the guardian of the Saints.

I will praise Abdu's father

Fodio, you are the guardian of the Saints.

And here is the Saint, the father of Saints,

Fodio, you are the guardian of the Saints.

You embrace us, when we die and meet in the next world

Fodio, you are the guardian of the Saints.

We can find many more of these poems in (Omar,2014; Ahmad,2017).

Literature of the American 'Yantaru: From Orality to Digital

Mack, (2016) in a detailed study, explained how Nana Asma'u's reputation and works spread from the Maghrib to the USA by the American *Qadiriyya* groups, which modelled and developed Muslim- American women's groups based on Asma'u's model of the 'Yantaru. The American 'Yantaru is an affiliation to the West African Sokoto Fodio Community. This group comprised of the American Women of each *Umma* within the states.

Inspired by Nana Asma'u's accomplishment and activism, the American 'Yantaru established study groups, and organised community charity projects. Contrary to the 20th century Northern Nigerian 'Yantaru (neo-Asmawian), the 21st Century American 'Yantaru had access to books and manuscripts, in which to educate themselves, but also, to adhere strictly to literacy, as it had been for the 19th century Sokoto Community. They focused on translating the *Jihadists* manuscripts, with scholars from the Sudan and preserving these works digitally on their website.

Jaji Dylia Hammadi Camara was named the leader of the American 'Yantaru in 2010 in an online interview she avers that:

'It was back in 1985, when I was fortunate enough, to come across two works by, Wazir al-Junaydu ibn Muhammadu al-Bukhari, which gave an accurate but concise depiction of who Nana Asma bin Shehu Uthman Dan Fodio was. They were his, Nayl'i- Arab Fi Istifsa' I 'n- Nasab and his Dabt'l- Multaqataat Minna'l- Akhbaar 'l-Muftaraqaat fi'l- Mu'alifaat. I came across



these works in the home of one of the descendents, of Nana Asma bnt Shehu, Ahmad Abideen, who lived in a southern suburb of Khartoum in Sudan.” (20 Feb 2017, via email)

The American 'Yantaru, implemented Asma'u's poetry as their lesson plans, in the same way that it had originally been 200 years ago in the Sokoto community. Jaji Dylia bint Hammadi Cammara also points out in this direction that:

“We consider Jaji Nana Asma'u as our Shaykha, or spiritual guide. As you know, on the spiritual path, a murid (disciple) always imitates her teacher, and follows all the directives and teachings dispensed by the teacher. By the same token, the Jaji, Nana Asma'u may Allah be pleased with her, and her family, even if not present physically any more, her teachings are alive, and thriving thus we would not be the 'Yantaru, if that was not central to our structure. We follow in her footsteps, at every level. We have our Curriculum, consisting of her texts, starting from the beginner level, to her most advanced text. But I also put together a curriculum, based on her training consisting of an in-depth study of the Sakkwato scholars, intellectual legacy, such as the Shehu, Shaykh Abdullahi Danfodio, Shaykh Muhammad Bello, Shaykh Dan Tafa, and others, may Allah be pleased with all of them. The aim is to have the same training she had, which produced the kind of scholarship she is famous for; may Allah be pleased with her.” (20 Feb 2017, via email)

Today, especially in the American 'Yantaru movement, the role of poetry has evolved but maintained its core essence. Modern scholars are translating these 19th century poems into English and other languages, ensuring the original 'Nana Asmawian' curriculum is accessible to a global diaspora. Even when the topics shifts to modern issues, the Neo-Asmawian poetry retains the foundational ethics: it is always didactic, always community-focused, and always centred on the dignity of female scholarship.

One of the poems used by the American 'Yantaru is; '*So verily*' was featured on the American 'Yantaru's curriculum. The poem was based on the sentiment in the Qur'anic Verse" *So verily with every difficulty there is relief*", it recommends perseverance in the face of difficulty (Mack and Boyd, 2000; Mack, 2016; Ahmad,2019).

So Verily

Lord God Almighty, all Powerful, He Who asserts there is more than one God will perish.

One God, Almighty, nothing is perfect except it comes from Him.

Come to God, receive His generosity: all good things are derived from Him.



Anyone who says he requires nothing of God is either ignorant or an unbeliever.

Everyone who seeks God's help will receive it, for God allows people to make requests.

When learning the names of the 114 *Surahs*, of the Qur'an, the American 'Yantaru, used Nana Asma'u's poem, *the Qur'an* as a means of memorizing all the names of the Qur'an chapters, as an efficient lesson plan, for students at any level of study. The work allowed a rudimentary understanding of messages, contained in the Qur'an, allowing discussions on verses and meanings for the students (Mack and Boyd, 2000; Mack, 2016; Ahmad, 2019).

The Qur'an

I pray to God, the Glorious,

Through the honour of Alhamdu and the Sura Baqara.

And Ali Imarana and Nisa'u and Ma'idatu, Lan'ami, La'arafi and Lanfali and Bara.

Through the honor of Yunusa, and Hudu, Yusuf, all, And the Ra'adu sura, Ibrahimia and Hujura.

And the sura of Nahali and Subuhana, so also Kahafi, Kahe and Dahe through their honor.

With Anbiya'u, Hajji, Muminina and The Sura of Nur, also Furqanu, and Shu'ara

The Verse as a Shield

Nana Asma'u's poetry, draws a rich literary tradition that stretched back to the dawn of the 'Yantaru literature. In this research, what I make of 'Yantaru poetry is that it was a technological innovation. By encoding the state's ideology into song and verse, Nana Asmau made the intellectual tradition *indestructible*. You can burn a Library, and you can exile a leader, but you cannot delete a poem that is etched into the collective memory of thousands of women.

The British ignored these women because they couldn't read the books written in their hearts. That poetry was the reason the scholarly tradition survived the colonial traits and emerged into the globalised Neo-Asmawian era.

Conclusion

Even after colonisation and decline of the Sokoto Caliphate, the 'Yantaru movement arguably persisted, keeping the flame of Islamic revivalism alive for women in Northern Nigeria, some parts of West Africa and the USA. The 'Yantaru being the custodian of the female Islamic education, and ensuring its transmission across generations, continued this tradition, allowing



the women to adapt their lessons to new audiences, using the poetry as mnemonic device, to make teaching more accessible to women.

Moreover, in a conversation with Jaji Dylia bint Hamadi Camara, she disclosed to me on the event of the newly turbaned national *Jaji* of the US, that the American 'Yantaru are very much active since she herself has been away from the US for so long, she ensured to nominate Jaji Maryam Martin, who was officially recognised as the National *Jaji* of the American 'Yantaru by the National *Jaji* of the Nigerian 'Yantaru in Sokoto on the 30/05/2024. This historic event of passing the *isnad* (chain of authorities) down, speaks to the strength of its foundation and its importance to the lives of the Caliphate's women.

The Asmawian and the neo-Asmawian traditions have focussed on the concept of literary history, and adapt to changing times, both in the West African region and across the Atlantic in the USA. The transformation of the *Yantaru* poetry from written to oral in the Sokoto community. Likely, the American *Yantaru* literary tradition added their own works, incorporating contemporary writing styles, or educational materials, alongside traditional forms, enriching the body of knowledge available for the women and examining the way in which Asma'u's poetry have been relevant to the American Muslim communities in the twenty first century.

Today, (even though not much of the movement is known in the present dispensation) the legacy continues with the 'Yantaru playing a significant role in religious education and its ability to adapt to changing political landscape, using accessible language, empowered women and ensured the preservation and adaptation of the Islamic knowledge, bridging religious revivalism and literary reorientation.

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