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Feminist or Simply Feminine? Reflections on the Works of Nana Asm'u, a Nineteenth-Century West African Woman Poet, Intellectual, and Social Activist

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Feminist or Simply Feminine?

Reflections on the Works of Nana Asmā’u, a Nineteenth-Century West African Woman Poet, Intellectual, and Social Activist

Introduction

Nana Asmā’u, a remarkable West African Islamic woman poet, intellectual, and social activist who flourished in the first half of the nineteenth century, offers an alternative to the popular stereotype that the Qur’an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad have historically sanctioned the abuse and low social status of women throughout the Islamic world. By focusing on the life Nana Asmā’u, who distinguished herself as one of the most eloquent of the “Fodiawa” reformists, one can trace not only formation of the esthetic canons of West African Arabic literature but aspects of Islamic discourse in this literature as it relates to the role of women. The term “Fodiawa” refers to the dynasty of the great Islamic reformer Shaykh ‘Uthmān b. Muhammad Fodiye (1754–1817)–Asmā’u’s father—whose early nineteenth-century jihad resulted in the radical transformation of the old Habe, or Hausa, states of present-day northern Nigeria from a domain of crass corruption and administrative incompetence into a powerful and well-ordered Islamic theocracy known as the Sokoto Caliphate.

A forceful and determined champion of a radical return to the fundamentals of “pure” Islam, the shaykh lists the abuse of women among the major forms of unwholesome innovation introduced by generations of Islamic
malams and jurists since Islam was introduced to the region in the fourteenth century. The seclusion of women was apparently introduced as early as the fifteenth century by the then Emir of Kano, Muhammad Rumfa. From then until the beginning of the shaykh’s jihad in 1804, seclusion had established itself throughout the Hausa-speaking world as a modus vivendi and as part of the defining characteristics of the Hausa Islamic woman. But, in his reformist zeal, the shaykh saw the practice as a major obstacle that must be exorcized in order to bring the Muslim community of believers back to what—in his view—should be its perfect state of health.

In light of the above, it is by no means surprising to find such a large and active group of women among the scholars, intellectuals, and writers in practically all generations of the Fodiawa. As a matter of fact, the roots of this remarkable intellectual and artistic ferment go back two generations before the birth of the shaykh. The shaykh’s grandmother Rukkaya was a notable teacher and poet; and so too was his mother, Hauwa. Of his four wives, three—Maimuna, Aisha, and Hauwa—distinguished themselves as poets and scholars, and together with his fourth wife and only known concubine, they bore him sons and daughters, many of whom distinguished themselves in similar intellectual and artistic pursuits. Of the female Fodiawa poet-scholars, by far the most notable were Fâdima (d. 1838), Khadija (d. 1856), Maryam (c. 1810–c. 1880), and the subject of the present paper, Nana Asmâ’u (c. 1793–c. 1865).

Born on November 11, 1793, Asmâ’ bt. ‘Uthman b. Muhammad Fodiye, a.k.a. Nana Asmâ’u, was a twin. She and her twin brother, al-Hasan b. ‘Uthman b. Muhammad Fodiye, are numbered as the shaykh’s twenty-second and twenty-third children, respectively. Both twins distinguished themselves as scholars and poets. Unfortunately, al-Hasan died too young to leave a decisive mark on the African Islamic literature of the age. However, he produced three collections of qasīdah verses, including a verse list of Islamic Caliphs. Asmâ’u, however, lived long enough to establish herself, not only as a versatile poet and translator but as one of the most distinguished female poets, intellectuals, and social activists in the history of African and Arabic Islamic letters. A trilingual writer, she is the author of eight qasīdah in Arabic, three prose works in Arabic, forty-two long poems in her mother tongue, Fulfude, and twenty-one poems in Hausa, the language of the conquered indigenous people absorbed into her father’s caliphate. Her complete works have recently been collected and translated into English with illuminating notes and commentaries (Boyd and Mack 1997; Mack and
Boyd 2000), and I am heavily indebted to these publications for the texts and the critical groundwork on which the present paper is based.

Educated by her father as well as by her aunt (one of his father’s wives, Aisha), and her half-brother, the erudite scholar, poet, and caliph Muhammad Bello, Nana Asmāʾu mastered the key Islamic sciences, acquired fluency in Arabic and two African languages (Hausa and Gawakuke) in addition to her native Fulfude, and became well versed in Arabic grammar, rhetoric, and prosody. Following in the footsteps of her father, she became deeply immersed in the dominant Qadriyya order of Sufi mysticism and developed a strong sense of the effects of innovation on the progress of the ideal of the sunna, or the straight path to God, as revealed by Prophet Muhammad. Married to the poet, polemicist, and Waziri of Sokoto Gidado dan Laima, and in close sororal relationship with Muhammad Bello, she mastered the craft of governance and diplomacy and greatly expanded her knowledge of and sensitivity to international affairs. Jean Boyd has rightly compared Nana Asmāʾu’s tutelage under her father to the way in which, in England, “Sir Thomas More educated his girls, and John Milton taught Deborah to read Latin, Italian, French and Greek” (1986, 126). But perhaps a better way of understanding the uniqueness of Nana Asmāʾu is to contrast her undisguised performance as a poet, intellectual, and social activist to the disguises worn by her nineteenth-century contemporaries in England—women writers who were forced by the prevalent sexism of their society to write under masculine pseudonyms (such as George Eliot or Currer Bell) in order to ensure that their works were not denigrated as the fulminations of the weaker sex. The fact that Nana Asmāʾu needed no male disguise says a lot about the character of the intellectual and social milieu in which she operated. I will discuss the particulars of this milieu under the rubric Reading Nana Asmāʾu Today: Feminist or Simply Feminine? But first, let us take a close look at Asmāʾu’s legacy as a poet, public intellectual, and social activist.

The Legacy of Nana Asmāʾu

As a poet, Nana Asmāʾu contributed immensely to the domestication of several classical Arabic poetic forms, notably the qasidah (ode or panegyric poetry), the waʾazi (hortatory poetry), the takhmis (three-line amplification of a
preexistent couplet by a master poet), the _manzuma_ (re-creation of a work by a master), and many others, as vehicles of Hausa-Fulfude poetic expression. In so doing, she can claim to be partly responsible for the cultivation of the Hausa-Fulfude tradition of _ajami_ writing. _Ajami_ refers to African language literature written in the Arabic script, a tradition that first established itself in Madagascar and the East African Indian Ocean littoral, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when Swahili written in the Arabic script not only became competitive but in fact displaced Arabic as the primary medium of literacy and literature in the region (Gérard 1981: 75–77, 93–114).

As mentioned earlier, Asmā’u’s complete poetical works are now readily available in print not only in all the original languages and scripts (Arabic, Fulfude, and Hausa) but also in English translation with extremely helpful notes and commentary (Boyd and Mack 1997; Mack and Boyd 2000). But a few lines from her “Elegy to Bello” will suffice to convey to the reader the forcefulness with which her mellifluous deployment of poetic tropes (in this case, similes) blends with and reinforces her religious piety and sororal passion for her deceased brother:

I am like a small chicken
Whose mother died, leaving him crying forlornly.
Or like someone abandoned in the wilderness,
Howling until his ears are closed forever.
God alone can wipe away my grief.
I am like an abandoned infant,
Left piteous and vulnerable,
Like a mother and father he cared for me,
That is how I remember him.
Only the grace of God can help me.

Existing studies show clearly that, in addition to her adroit use of the major classical Arabic meters in her verse compositions, Asmā’u sometimes departed from the existing convention in, for example, her thematic use of end rhymes and occasional dispensation with the doxologies with which Islamic writing in all genres usually begin (Boyd and Mack 1997). A precursor of T. S. Eliot’s idea of the interplay of tradition and individual talent, Asmā’u’s poetry employs frequent and dense allusions to, and at times appropriated, lines, verses, and longer passages from the Qur’an and other classical Arabic texts that are adroitly woven into the fabric of
her personal vision and ideology as a woman writing for both men and other women. By and large, she succeeded most wonderfully in domesticating these alien meters into a natural medium for an indigenous Hausa-Fulfulde prosody.

In Arabic literary aesthetics, the poet (shā‘ir) is “one who senses,” or, as defined by the eleventh-century poet-critic, ibn Rashīq, “the poet is someone who perceives things that other people cannot,” a view that, according to Roger Allen “encouraged the notion that [the poet was] born, not made; that the poetic gift was the consequence of innate rather than acquired qualities; not that certain skills did not have to be learned, but that the spark of intangible genius had to be already present for a poet to become really great. These assumptions concerning the nature of poetic talent led early Arab critics to assign greater credit to ‘natural poetry’ (maṯḥū‘) than to ‘artificial’ contrived’ (maṣnu‘)” (Allen 2000, 67). As an inheritor of the power to perceive things that other people could not—a power that seems to run in the Fodiawa line—Asmā‘u was primarily a “natural poet,” but the power of her poetry was clearly invested with its sharp cutting edge by her deep immersion into and study of some of the greatest masters of Arabic Islamic poetry, beginning with the earliest masters of the genre of the qasīdah and their pre-Islamic forerunners, notably the authors of the seven mo‘alloqa (The seven golden odes) that were hung on the walls of the holiest Islamic sanctuary, the Kaaba at Mecca, among them her fellow African Antar or Antarrah ibn Shaddah el’Absi (c. 550–c. 615 AD).

According to Allen, “The early qasīdah was a poem intended to convey a message. Examples of the genre from different periods display a degree of variation on the apparent structural principles of the initial segments of the poem, but the arrival at the crux is, more often than not, clearly marked within the poem’s textual form and was presumably even more so in public performance” (2000, 76). In the course of time, after the rise of Islam as both a religious and political force, the genre acquired characteristic features that have led to the application of such comparative generic terms as “the ode” or “panegyric” in its description. Thus Allen writes:

This type of poem, which had been an important element in the communal assertion of the tribe’s identity and sense of chivalry, came to assume a more specifically panegyric function. The poem was now addressed to a specific figure, more often a community (or a subset of it); its primary function was to extol this leader’s virtues as a representative of Islam and
its community of believers. Furthermore, the emergence of an elaborate court system, with its accompanying panoply of bureaucrats and courtiers, also demanded of the poet that he be prepared to serve as an entertainer as well as a morale-booster and propagandist. As a result of these changing expectations, the *qasīdah* now takes on a different structural logic for its new context and functions. While the latter part of the poem focuses on eulogizing the patron or other members of the court, earlier sections come to reflect the changed realities of performance context by moving away from the motif of journeying through the desert and halting over encampments. (79)

It is in this radically transformed mode that the *qasīdah* was received by Asmā’u’s generations and those immediately preceding them in the so-called Sudanic Africa (black Africa). What did she do with this received form of the *qasīdah*? Altogether she composed eight *qasīdah* in Arabic, mostly in praise of the leadership of the Islamic community of the reformist’s dreams and of the community itself. In doing so, she injected innovations of her own that have survived to this day as central to the distinctive features of the Central Sudanic *qasīdah* in contradistinction to the *qasīdah* traditions of other parts of Muslim Africa and Asia (see Hunwick (1996b).

The *takhmis*—a classical Arabic poetic process rather than a genre per se—is one genre on whose domestication and development in West Africa Nana Asmā’u left enduring marks of her creative genius. Essentially, the *takhmis* is a five-line verse, comprising a preexisting couplet by a master into which a latter-day poet weaves a prefatory triplet (or three-line verse) that dovetails in terms of meaning, imagery, symbolism, and prosody into the received two-line matrix. The finished *takhmis* may be a simple five-line poem or a complex concatenation of such five-liners. The essence of this deconstructive poetic process is not only to acknowledge and pay tribute to the master/mistress whose vision or thought is amplified but to create a dynamic vehicle for the stability and continuity of the original vision and thought.

Asmā’u’s mastery of the technique of the *takhmis* is often illustrated with reference to her poem “Fear This,” a reworking of a poem by her brother, Muhammad Bello’s pupil, Muhammad Tukur. Beverly B. Mack and Jean Boyd have offered a detailed commentary on Asmā’u’s amplification of Tukur’s work in coherent prose that offers a compendious reference point for understanding her mastery of the genre (2000, 52–56). Reminding
the reader that “the mark of an effective takhmis is the smooth integration of imagery, such that the images in the takhmis feed into the two final lines, creating a seamless verse” (Mack and Boyd 2000, 53), they offer the examples (reproduced below) from Asmâ’u’s “Fear This,” with Tukur’s original couplets in italics:

To me has been revealed something terrifying about death.
I fear God who created me and gave me prosperity.
The receiver of blessings should thank God, otherwise he will perish.
I thank the Fearful One who controls the instruments of fear,
Who when He causes people to die, removes them without a trace just like a site from which not even palm seedlings are left.

Anyone who has become involved in World Affairs should not act foolishly;
The best thing is to pay no attention to the World, for it is like a cramped room, so go prepared;
Yes, the best thing is to divorce the world, which constantly mutates,
Fear the world with its endless vacillations and do not take delight in it.
Be fearful by day and by night as the passing days bring death nearer.

In what God has instructed let us become engrossed. Do not weary, increase your efforts and sincerely repent.
Do not revert to former habits.
It is forbidden to act as though death does not exist; it only strikes once.
Fear death’s approach, which come with grief and sickness,
And pain and agony as fierce as the wind of the hot season.

In light of the foregoing, Asmâ’u is deserving of recognition as a versatile and competent Arabic Islamic poet but also (and more importantly) as the mother of the Hausa-Fulfude ajami tradition of poetry. An important measure of the importance and seminal value of this legacy is the fact that, even today in the morning of the twenty-first century, her poems are still being actively performed by oral artists who have committed them to memory as well as being circulated by professional and nonprofessional copyists as well as conventional publishers among the masses throughout northern Nigeria and even beyond, in southwestern Nigeria, especially among the Muslim community of Lagos, the former capital of Nigeria.
As a public intellectual, Asmâ’u worked assiduously to realize through her works the highest didactic ideals of poetry, in this instance, as an instrument for the development of an Islamic community energized by the ideal of the sunna or the straight path to Allah (God). Second, as a devoted Sufi mystic, she cultivated poetry as a vehicle for direct communication with God and toward the ideals of right knowing and right doing in practical social relationships and in the discharge of social responsibilities. Finally, and closely related to the foregoing, she championed the reformist ideals of her father, the shaykh’s Islamic revolution, and became an eloquent exponent and apologist for the shaykh’s emphasis on the defense of Islamic orthodoxy as articulated in the Qu’ran through the instrumentality of the Prophet Muhammad against centuries of wholesome “innovation” by generations of presumptive jurists and other commentators whose misplaced enthusiasm, in his view, had brought the religion of Islam into disrepute. In the last of these thematic preoccupations of her writings, Nana Asmâ’u does not only address matters of the moment, as they affected her own generation, but—with benefit of hindsight—appears indeed to be addressing the excesses of present-day Islamic fundamentalism that have tended to breed terrorism rather than uphold the ideals of the sunna as embodied in the name of the religion, Islam, meaning complete and unquestioning “submission” in peace and love to the will of Almighty Allah.

By the time of her death in 1864, Asmâ’u had so firmly established herself as an authoritative model for right conduct that she was from time to time invited, in her own right, to advise some emirs and even sultans on emergent matters of state and rules of conduct. By the same token, she felt empowered by the reverential contacts established with her by the ruling class that she was occasionally empowered to take the initiative of writing letters of advice and even condemnation to certain emirs.

Beyond the caliphate, Asmâ’u’s reputation and contacts extended to the states of western Sudanic Africa, including Mauritania. She was not just a public intellectual at the local level but an international scholar whose contacts and relationships encompassed the greater part of West and North Africa, the Sahara, the Nile Valley, the Horn of Africa, and the Mediterranean lands, including what we now call the Middle East.
Nana Asmā’u was not merely a committed writer, reformist apologist, and an eloquent ideologue, she was, above all, an unrelenting social activist who spent a good deal of her life as a teacher, communal leader, role model, and active agent for the mobilization of all sections of the Sokoto Caliphate toward the practical realization in the everyday life of the state of the various ideals so ably marshaled in her poetry and intellectual disquisitions.

First and foremost, Asmā’u established herself as the undisputed “mother of all” (Uwar Gari) in the caliphate society. She did so in recognition of her multifaceted leadership roles in the society as a malam of both men and women, advisor extraordinaire and plenipotentiary to the elite, role model to other women in the society, and active agent of social mobilization for communal action.

Asmā’u was particularly distinguished as a jaji (itinerant teacher) and as the mentor and tutor of a community of jajis through whom the key tenets of Sufi teachings about spirituality, ethics, and morality in the handling of social responsibilities seeped down to the lowest strata of the communal fabric. On the role of the jaji, Mack and Boyd comment:

Asmā’u relied on each jaji to act as a mentor and to bring groups of women to her. To each she gave a large malfā hat made of fine silky grasses. Usually worn by men, the hats have a distinctive balloon shape because they are intended to be worn over turbans. The late Waziri of Sokoto always wore one on formal public occasions. A malfā was also (and remains) one of the marks of the office used by the Inna of Gobir, the chief of women devotees of bori. Asmā’u deliberately took up the symbol, and by giving each jaji a malfā, she at once devalued its uniqueness and transformed what it stood for. From being symbolic of bori, it turned into an emblem of Islam. Asmā’u ceremonially bestowed a red “turban,” or strip of cloth, on each new appointee. Tied round the brim of the hat, the turban was further proof of the wearer’s authority and may have been ceremoniously wrapped round the hat by Asmā’u herself. (2000, 89)

In several poems, especially in “Sufi Women,” Asmā’u paints glowing images of the saintliness, power, and social action achievement of a coterie of women jajis, both within and outside the caliphate.

Reflecting on the above and similar images in Asmā’u’s poetry, Mack and Boyd assess that:
these images indicate a continued, accepted presence of women teachers in the Caliphate community. More importantly, such a presence is modeled on women’s roles that extend back to the period of the establishment of Islam, and Asmāʾu weaves into her work evidence of the historical precedent for such roles. (2000, 85, emphasis added)

Apart from her mentoring and control of the active network of jajis, by far the most important instrument for the social mobilization she instigated was the large and diverse army of disciples known as ‘yan-taru that she fostered. Literally, ‘yan-taru means “those who congregate together” or “the sisterhood” (Mack and Boyd 2000, 89); it has also been glossed as “bands of women students” (89).

Reading Nana Asmāʾu’s Today: Feminist or Simply Feminine?

Thanks to the pioneering efforts of Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack in collecting, editing, and offering English translations and preliminary critical commentary on the writings of Nana Asmāʾu, a great deal of enthusiasm has been unleashed in the past few years over the place and significance in the canons of African and Arabic-Islamic letters of this great nineteenth-century African poet, intellectual, and social activist.

By and large, and as one would expect in a world dominated by the canons of colonialist and Eurocentric criticism, the achievements of Nana Asmāʾu have been grossly minimized, unacknowledged, or subjected to stereotypical analysis in terms of the Western canons of feminist theory and feminist criticism—a critical model often pressed into service in discourse on structures of the imagination from non-Western cultures with completely different social ethos and traditional gender relations and that do not have any place for the panacea of feminism. A close reading of the commentaries of Boyd and Mack—the two persons who know more about Nana Asmāʾu than any other Western scholar—will show that they are not impressed by such superficial feminist interpretations of Nana Asmāʾu’s work. Thus, taken together with other evidence, it would appear that while a feminist reading of the poems may be tempting and even compelling, especially in light of Nana Asmāʾu’s outspokenness in a male-dominated world, her intellectual and moral leadership does not seem to have arisen from any feminist impulses or ideology. It seems in fact to be completely
in conformity with traditional feminine roles recognized both by Islam and by her own non-Islamic West African heritage. By and large, the emerging feminist perspectives on Asmā’u are not only palpably anachronistic but essentially distracting from the mainstay of her social empowerment and activism.

All too often scholars of the Eurocentric school have been reminded of the need to avoid pressing Eurocentric models into service in the interpretation of non-European cultural phenomena. The idea that other people—notably Africans and Asians—are in need of the presumed liberationist ideals of feminism, on the assumption that their women are invariably victims of male chauvinist social systems, is one nagging manifestation of this attitude. By and large, Western feminist and feminazi ideologues have ignored the increasingly well-established wisdom that beneath the sexist or male chauvinist veneers seen in a superficial observation of many non-Western cultures are centuries-old traditions of dual organization in which men and women “are neither equal nor unequal” (to borrow a phrase from D. H. Lawrence) (qtd. in Williams 1958 [1983], 211) but in which social responsibilities are distributed in terms of gender capacitance based on the complementarity and balance of traditional notions of femininity and masculinity. A close look at the cultural traditions of many precolonial West African peoples will reveal strong ramifications of this dualism and balance in their social ethos.

In West Africa, for example, critical reexaminations of gender relations in the precolonial past of major national groups, such as the Igbo, Hausa, Yoruba, Edo, Akan, and Dogon, have already yielded and continue to yield many surprises. These groups may—on the surface—have patriarchal or patrilineal systems in that politics and governance are dominated by the menfolk at all levels. But the womenfolk are not only unshackled but highly socially visible, active, free to pursue their own goals as women, and are indeed required by custom to fulfill certain important social responsibilities that are understood as feminine as an equal complement to the masculine roles expected of the menfolk. In other words, what we see in the precolonial ordering of social affairs among these national groups is not a hierarchical division of social responsibilities in favor of men. In Chinua Achebe’s classic novel Things Fall Apart ([1958] 1994), we not only learn of a gender-based division of work (“men’s crop” and “women’s crop,” 33, 52) but of similar gender-based ordering of everyday life, social roles,
and traditional knowledge. Thus there are “masculine (men’s) stories” and “women’s stories” (53–54), and there are even male ọchụ (felony) and female ọchụ (124). The outsider to Igbo culture may be tempted to adduce the existence of some kind of hierarchy in these gender divisions and may arrive at the facile conclusion that, because the men dominate the elite, the aspects of cultural phenomenon labeled “masculine” must be superior to those labeled “feminine.” But to arrive at such a conclusion, as many have done and continue to do in reading Achebe, is to completely misunderstand the novel. Why does the hero Okonkwo fail in the end? He fails because of his complete misunderstanding of the gender balance in his own culture, as manifested in his use of “feminine” epithets or the word “woman” as a convenient metaphor for everything he considers weak, foolish, unacceptable, or a recipe for failure. He is clearly oblivious to the fact that in his own Igbo culture, a woman who neglects her feminine responsibilities (nurturing and humanizing capacitance) and “acts like a man” is as likely to be denigrated by men and fellow women alike as ụwoke ọbọ m (my fellow man) as a man who neglects his masculine responsibilities (ordering and defensive capacitance) is commonly denigrated as ọgbala (woman) or ụwaanyị ọbọ m (my fellow woman). Acting on his superficial and literal understanding that femininity or feminine things can be equated with failure, because of the application of the odium ọgbala to his failed, ne’er-do-well father, Unoka, Okonkwo commits eight fatal errors in an attempt to prove himself a “man,” errors that culminate in his “bad death” by suicide.

The main difference between West African feminism and Western feminism is that whereas West African feminism is a pragmatic social theory that says that there are certain things that a woman can do but that a man cannot do and vice versa, Western feminism is romantic social theory that claims, rather unrealistically, that what a man can do a woman can do and vice versa. The term “feminism,” as it is used here, may be related to “womanism” in some ways, but the discourse on womanism in various women’s studies forums has rendered the term so obscure that it is better avoided. “Femininism” focuses our attention more sharply on issues of female capacitance in balanced equity with male capacitance. Clearly there are anatomical and physiological differences that make it impossible for men and women in any society and at any point in history to perform certain tasks. There are however other tasks in which both men and women can distinguish themselves in equal measure, for example, in the fields of
spiritual, educational, creative, and intellectual pursuits. Not surprisingly, we find in reading Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* that by far the most powerful spiritual, creative, and intellectual leaders in the traditional social order of the novel are women of the ilk of the priestess Chielo and her predecessor, Chika—two women before whom even the most presumptive of masculine men, such as the hero Okonkwo, stand intimidated. These realities are at the core of the dual organization based on gender among the Igbo and the other West African national groups mentioned earlier.

A case in point is the well-known 1929 Igbo women’s revolt against the British colonial regime in southeastern Nigeria. Incensed by what they saw as exploitative and ever-increasing rates of taxation that threatened the ability of families to put food on the table, they mobilized themselves, attacked, and reduced to rubble as many visible signs of British occupation as they could find—British quarters, offices, factories, trading centers, etc. Beginning from Olokoro, Umuahia, the “women’s war” spilled to the urban center of Umuahia and from there spread like wildfire to other cities across the region—Owerri, Port Harcourt, Calabar, and especially Aba (the hub center). At the end of the day, the British were so confounded by the power and resolve of the womenfolk that they commissioned two studies of Ibo women’s organizations, namely Sylvia Leith-Ross’s *African Women* (1939) and Margaret Green’s *Ibo Village Affairs* (1947). In his foreword to Leith-Ross’s *African Women*, 1939, Lord Lugard, the first governor-general of amalgamated Nigeria (1912–1918), was impelled by the phenomenal impact of the “women’s war” to write as follows about the Ibo woman: “She is ambitious, self-reliant, hard-working and independent . . . she claims full equality with the opposite sex and would seem indeed to be the dominant partner. The women’s councils (approved and trusted by men) enact laws for the protection of crops and enforce them by suitable penalties— includ-\-ing ridicule.” Indeed the same can be said of the power of femininity elsewhere in West Africa. One is reminded here of the mobilization of the army of market women in Wole Soyinka’s play *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1975) by their leader—Iyaloloja—that unambiguous symbol of the indomitable will and power of the womenfolk to override the menfolk in a situation in that men appear weak in the face of an external threat to age-old customs.

But closer to Asmā’u’s own native land is the evidence of the power and visibility of women among the neighboring Taureg people who dominated the environment in which the shaykh’s revolution was born. As Cynthia Becker has observed:
Taureg societies are believed to be the least Arabicized of all the Berbers in Africa and are the only Berber group to have retained a written language called Tifinaugh, which is used primarily by women to write short messages on household objects. Women have a high social status in Taureg society. The Taureg were traditionally a matrilineal society, but the influence of Islamic patrilineal institutions caused the Taureg to change many of their descent and inheritance patterns. However, some Taureg inheritance traditions continue to favor women. For example, Taureg women may inherit and manage livestock, own their own residential tents, initiate divorce, and receive male visitors without their husband’s permission. (2005, 103)

I am convinced that, by her close association with proximate, indigenous non-Islamic Hausa women, such as the Taureg, and by her adoption and adaptation of their traditional feminine modus operandi into the fabric of her community action network, Asmâ’u can be rightly described as an inheritor of their socially recognized femininist roles as warriors of peace and the conscience of the land. It would therefore seem fair to assert that her social activism is not so much a challenge to or protest against the structures of a sexist elite but a clear case of conformity with femininist roles that form part of her indigenous West African heritage and that does not, in her view, run counter to the reformist ideals of her father, the shaykh’s Islamic revolution.

As already stated, one major preoccupation of the shaykh’s Islamic revolution is the abolition of “innovation” and a return to Islamic “orthodoxy” as embodied in the Koran and exemplified by the saintly life of the Prophet Muhammad. Among the most destructive “innovations” against which the shaykh railed is the abuse and marginalization of women. Disregarding centuries of hadiths and scholarly commentaries on the message of the Prophet, the shaykh again and again emphasized the need to recognize the fact that Islam, in its pristine form, has a zero tolerance for any minimalization or denial of civic rights to the womenfolk. This is no romantic fantasy or mere ideological cant. A search of one of the online versions of the Qu’ran using the keywords “woman” and “women” will reveal to any skeptic that nowhere does the Qu’ran recommend or condone the seclusion, social marginalization, or any of the abuses to which modern Islamic women are subjected. As a matter of fact, the good book often talks of men and women as equally entitled to the eternal bliss of paradise and the
eternal damnation of hellfire depending on the conduct of their lives on earth. By the same token, earthly life is described as one that runs at its best when men and women are equally entitled to inheritance and opportunities to improve their lives toward the realization of an appropriate relationship to Allah toward their own salvation. What we see in representations of the modern Islamic woman, for example the CNN documentary on Afghan women, Behind the Veil, are the unfortunate “innovations” of the past few centuries, or in the case of the Hausa-Islamic Muslim women of northern Nigeria, a backslide into decadent Islam following the unfortunate intervention of British colonialism at the point of the effective takeoff of Shaykh Uthman dan Fodiye’s reforms.

In light of the foregoing, it is interesting to note that today, in the face of the growing disrepute of Islam as a male chauvinist religion, similar voices of reason are beginning to reverberate across the Islamic corridors of power. Thus from Saudi Arabia the following report, in a characteristic Eurocentric manner, is entitled “Feminism in Flower?” and appeared in Time magazine:

In a country where women are not allowed to drive, let alone vote, Saudi Arabia’s top religious leader took one small step towards gender equality last week when he banned the practice of forcing women to marry against their will. Calling such coercion “un-Islamic” and “a major injustice” the kingdom’s Grand Mufti, Sheik Abdulk Aziz Asheik, proclaimed that fathers and guardians who try to force their daughters into wedlock should be thrown in jail until the men change their minds. He made it clear that forced marriages originated as a pre-Islamic custom and are antithetical to Shari’a law, that stipulates that a woman must consent to a marriage or else it is not considered valid. (Rawe 2005, 11)

The Eurocentric assumption that this development in Saudi Arabia represents a feminist transformation of society, rooted in Western suffragate ideals, is the emphatic center of the rest of the report:

In the intensely patriarchal Saudi society, in which a woman made headlines last week for suing her father (for refusing to take her back into his house after she divorced her husband), it is not certain that even the Grand Mufti is powerful enough to change the status quo. But the Saudi
monarchy is strongly, if quietly supporting his action. A source close to Crown Prince Abdullah says that the defacto Saudi ruler sees the move as part of his effort to institute political and cultural reforms, and that allowing women to drive might be next on the agenda.

The ban is another sign that the push for democracy in the Middle East may finally be reaching women. Hundreds of Kuwaiti protesters last month demanded that women be given the right to vote. Women’s suffrage will be granted in Qatar when its new constitution takes effect in June. Women in Iraq are demanding a greater voice in the newly formed government there. And the Saudi government has even raised the possibility of granting women the right to vote in the next elections. Shibley Telhami, a Middle East expert at the University of Maryland at College Park, thinks the Grand Mufti’s statement on marriage could augur a trend. “If you start mobilizing the quiet majority by putting this on the agenda,” he says, “society starts to change.” (Rawe 2005, 11)

Clearly the accretions associated with the upsurge of Wahabbism and similar innovations are being recognized for what they are—departures from orthodoxy that need to be exorcized. In this sense, Asmā’u’s father, the shaykh, was clearly ahead of his age. In addition to repudiating the denial of other rights to women, he was emphatic on women’s inalienable right to equal education with the menfolk. He writes in his Nur al-albab:

One of the root causes of the misfortunes of this country is the attitude taken by Malams who neglect the welfare of the womenfolk, leaving them abandoned like animals, not having taught them what Almighty Allah has said they must be taught, for example the prayers they must know in their hearts and how to perform ablutions, prayer and the fast. Moreover they are not taught what they ought to know about trading transactions; this is quite wrong and a forbidden innovation. . . .

How can these Muslims allow their wives, daughters and slave women to remain lost and in ignorance while at the same time they are teaching their [male] pupils twice daily. . . .

It is obligatory to teach wives, daughters and female slaves: the teaching of pupils is optional and what is obligatory has priority over what is optional. (Qtd. in Boyd 1986, 128)
Elsewhere he restates his position in slightly different words and with slightly different emphasis:

Most of our educated men leave their wives, their daughters and their female relatives . . . to vegetate, like beasts, without teaching them what Allah prescribes they should be taught and without instructing them in the articles of Law that concern them. . . . The men treat their women like household utensils, that break after long use and are then tossed on the dungheap. This is a loathsome crime. How can they allow their wives, daughters and female dependents to remain prisoners of ignorance, while they themselves share their knowledge with students every day? In truth, they are acting out of self-interest. (Kleiner-Bossaller 1983, 115; qtd. in Boyd 1986, 128)

He then appeals directly to the women—an appeal that presupposes the emergence of a sizeable reading public of women in the future, following his revolution:

Muslim women, do not listen to the speeches of those who are misguided, who sow the seeds of fallacy in the hearts of others. They deceive you when they preach obedience to your husbands, without telling you of the obedience, that is primarily due to Allah and His Prophet. They seek only their own satisfaction, and that is why they impose tasks upon you, that the law of Allah and His Prophet never intended for you alone. These are the preparation of food, the washing of clothes and other duties they impose upon you, while at the same time they neglect to teach you what Allah and His Prophet have in truth prescribed for you. (Kleiner-Bossaller 1983, 115; qtd. in Boyd 1986, 128)

Or, as in another translation of the same passage:

Muslim women, do not listen to them when they mislead you, telling you to obey your husbands but omitting to tell you to obey Allah and his Prophet. They say that a woman’s place in Paradise depends on whether or not she has been obedient to her husband. Of course they only tell you that in order to make you do what Almighty Allah and his Prophet have not made obligatory, cooking, washing clothes and so on, while at the same time they do not require you to do things which Allah had said you must do. (Qtd. in Boyd 1986, 129)
For the shaykh, who concludes the above statement by asserting unequivocally that “a woman must be faithful to her husband openly and secretly” and that “this is agreed by all the Muslims,” the education of women carries with it a host of responsibilities that orthodox Islam, as seen by the shaykh, considers to be distinctively “feminine.” In keeping with these convictions, the shaykh went to incredible lengths to insure the education of his daughters and other women under his charge and to orient them toward performing these distinctively feminine roles.

In their assessment of Nana Asmā’u’s achievements in relation to scholarly Islamic tradition, Mack and Boyd rightly stress the fact that Asmā’u’s creativity, intellectualism and social activism were not only pulled off “without attention to her gender” but that her “life defied stereotypes” (2000, 13–14):

Asmā’u was accepted by the leaders of her society both within the Sokoto Caliphate and beyond because of her active engagement in the constructive development of her community, without attention to her gender. Even though the Shehu and the Caliph were Asmā’u’s father and brother, and her uncle and husband were close military advisers, Asmā’u’s renown spread as far as Mauritania, as shown by the reverential letters scholars wrote to her. It is clear that not only was she privileged in the Sokoto community by virtue of her blood ties, but she was revered there and beyond because of her spirituality, intellect, and literary capability. Her life was atypical and one that could readily be understood as a model for those less educated, less revered. A central figure in her community, Asmā’u offered guidance that was valued, welcomed, and esteemed by a wide range of individuals. Nana Asmā’u’s life defied stereotypes, but it was not an anomaly. In her time it was necessary and appropriate for her to be a Muslim woman who was not subordinated, a scholar without a university, a Sufi who did not retreat from the world. Her life demonstrated the practical side of Qadriyya Sufi devotion responsive to the immediate needs of a period of turmoil. Nana Asmā’u’s role as a mentor to others shows that she cannot be dismissed as an exception in her time; she was a woman to be emulated. (Boyd and Mack 1997, 282–83, emphasis added)

Take away the obvious contradictions in this passage (for example, “her life was atypical” versus “her life . . . was not an anomaly”), and what we have is
a picture of a woman who represents the quintessence of a fulfilled feminine life by reason of her exemplifying the realization of traditional communal expectations from the female elite. Her achievements are not so much the subject of Eurocentric feminist discourse than of a proper understanding of gender dualism in the Islamic world. As Mack and Boyd rightly observe:

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 Asmā’u and her students promoted in the community, and women’s roles were central to their promotion. By teaching women, Asmā’u was by extension training whole families in orthodox Sufi practices. (2000, 78, emphasis added)

In the final paragraph of their book *One Woman’s Jihad: Nana Asmā’u, Scholar and Scribe*, Mack and Boyd wrap up their reflections on the achievements of Nana Asmā’u as follows:

All this contradicts the views of those who have talked of “the men being Muslims and the women pagans” or the women being “on the periphery of the periphery of the Muslim world,” or women silently subverting “the Islamic rules which keep them in an inferior position.” Such perspectives have contributed to negative stereotypes about Muslim women, in that they are depicted as different from active, independent Africa women of other ethnic, sociopolitical groups solely because of religious constraints. Those views derive from a paucity of women’s voices in recorded history. The corpus of Asmā’u’s works can redress this situation, providing firsthand testimony to the active, necessary participation of women in Caliphate society. (2000, 91)

But apart from this, as already mentioned, Asmā’u was by no means isolated from direct contacts with, and influences from, active, independent African women of other ethnic, sociopolitical groups, especially the Hausa of the kingdom of Gobir, where the shaykh’s jihad was born. In the discharge of her “active, necessary participation . . . in Caliphate society,” she soon discovered and exploited gender-based balanced distribution of social responsibilities in her own indigenous West African heritage, a dualism of a pan–West African type that recognized, as Sufi Muslim ethos does, that “there was much that a woman not only could do, but was obligated to do in the promotion of the good of the community” (Mack and Boyd 2000, 78,
emphasis added). It was in the spirit of this recognition that she assumed the non-Islamic traditional West African title, Uwar Gari (mother of all), a title that in many ways represents a synopsis of the powerful role played by women as queens, queen mothers, or the conscience of the land in many traditional West African societies.

Summary and Conclusion

The points raised in the present paper about the significance of Nana Asmā’u’s achievements and legacy apply in many ways to practically all the topics around which the May 2005 conference of the Arab Women Solidarity Association was structured. They are particularly relevant to the discourse on dissident philosophy and feminism and the core question, Have women changed the rules for thinking? Feeding into this topic are other topics: Histories and heresies—Have women changed history? The postmodern fragmentation of knowledge—How can women think together? Dissident theology and politics—How have women challenged theocracy? Decolonizing the imagination—How have women transformed creativity and politics? Antiglobalization politics—How are women resisting economic and political domination at global and national levels? Challenges facing Arab women in the twenty-first century; women’s movements against gender, class, and neocolonial aggression; resistance by women in Iraq and Palestine; blood and oil—stolen ink—women who dare.

It would appear from our reflections in the present paper that there are several major lessons that women in non-European or Eurodiasporic societies can learn from the example of Nana Asmā’u, especially in their present-day struggle against socially repressive forces of sexism. The first is that such socially repressive forces of sexism may be forms of “innovation” that may well have created a disconnect from traditional respect and even reliance on feminine roles in the balanced and harmonious ordering of society. What such a rediscovery calls for is not feminist confrontation but a radical reach back to traditional “femininism” in the context of balanced gender-based dual organization of society. So far as the legacy of Nana Asmā’u is concerned, Western feminism is not only anachronistic but a grossly fallacious rush to critical judgment in light of what we know today of the social, religious, and intellectual milieu in which Nana Asmā’u flourished. Unlike feminism, femininism is by no means a socially divisive social theory.
Where feminism sometimes degenerates into a declaration of war against men, femininism is a stable social program of gender balance and harmony that recognizes certain social roles as inherently and inalienably feminine.

As we have seen, Nana Asmâ’u flourished in a transitional age during which Islamic decadence was under severe scrutiny and reformation by the jihad led by her own father, whose aim was to return Islam to the fundamentals of the vision and revelations purportedly received directly from Allah by the Prophet Muhammad.

Islam established itself in what is now northern Nigeria, among the indigenous Hausa populations of the area, as early as the fourteenth century. Successive Hausa kings had, at any rate outwardly, professed to be Muslims. But by the late eighteenth century, when the shaykh was awakened to the need for revolutionary change, the Muslim community had departed far from the original message of the Qu’ran and of the Prophet both in their ideology and conduct. The shaykh was to denounce these departures as unwholesome “innovation” that threatened the fundamental tenets of “pure” Islam.

One area of concern in the shaykh’s reformist agenda had to do with the position of women under the power of the prevalent innovations vis-à-vis the true intentions of the Qu’ran. If the Qu’ran draws any distinctions between men and women, it is on the basis of what is increasingly emerging as a basic dualism in the preindustrial social system wherein there is a division of social responsibilities on the basis of traditional concepts of femininity and masculinity. To fulfill her feminine roles, the woman is expected to draw from the same sources of social empowerment as the menfolk, namely education and so on. This is exactly what we see in the life, career, and example of Nana Asmâ’u.

DEDICATION
This paper is dedicated to Nawal el Saadawi (b. 1932), the great Egyptian woman physician, intellectual, novelist, poet, and social activist who over the past several years has championed the cause of African, Arab, and Islamic women’s freedom and solidarity.

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