A Plea to Saintly Women: The Life and Legacy of Nana Asma'u

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Introduction

Nana Asma'u bint Uthman (1793-1864) was a Muslim scholar and prolific poet from the West African Sahel. She was the daughter of Shaykh Uthman ibn Muhammad ibn Uthman ibn Salih (d. 1817), known as Uthman dan Fodio, the founder of the powerful Sokoto caliphate and one of the most esteemed scholars in the traditions of law, Sufism, and governance in the early modern period. Raised in a poetry-loving culture, Nana Asma'u used poetry to teach the Qur'an and transmit Islamic values, memorialize great people, and preserve her people's history. Asma'u's brother Muhammad Bello, who succeeded their father as caliph, also wrote many poetic and prose treatises in the Islamic sciences and avidly recorded the history of the Fulani people, especially the monumental changes made under the leadership of his father.

Asma'u lived through revolutionary times as well as the period in which Sokoto consolidated its authority. A steady presence, she outlived both her father and her brother. Her proximity to political leadership certainly influenced her desire to record her community's history—both their worldly and spiritual successes. But Asma'u's vision and leadership were accomplishments in their own right, as they were instrumental in spreading Islam in the region, assimilating new subjects into the empire, and championing education and literacy. Her poem "A Plea to Saintly Women," which is rendered at the conclusion of this paper, is exemplary. It is a handsomely crafted hagiography of pious Muslim women from the prophetic time to her own, interwoven with pious petitions to God to lavish forgiveness and grace upon her. It combines her vision of teaching through didactic poetry and her ardor for religious life, with a keen focus on women's prosperity.

This paper explores Nana Asma'u's life and work, and situates her within the overall story of Islamic civilization. Her life draws much-needed attention to pre-modern Muslim life outside of the Arab "heartlands," which typically dominate the Islamic historical narrative. Nana Asma'u's writings and educational

advocacy illustrate the embeddedness of Islam in Nigeria specifically, and West Africa generally. They are expressions of her profound faithfulness and depth of knowledge. With her life as a lens, we come to learn of the Islamic textual resources available in West Africa and the commitment of the West African scholarly class to reproducing knowledge that was relevant and intelligible to the laity both in language and style. Asma'u's contributions to Muslim thought in the region preceded major political and social shifts like British colonialism and the eclipse of the Islamic educational system by Europeanized models of schooling.

Asma'u is also a reminder of poetry's educational potential. She was a devotee of poetry and its capacity to communicate knowledge in a lasting way. As far as we can deduce from her philosophical commitment to poetry and belles-lettres, she believed them to be a unique and beautifully defining aspect of our humanity. We can imagine that she found great comfort and inspiration in Prophet Muhammad's ﷺ unparalleled eloquence, concomitant with his emotive and efficacious use of language.

Rather than discuss the better-known jihadi and anti-colonial Muslim movements of the more recent past, this paper focuses on the lesser-known but perhaps more enthralling history of the first Muslims in West Africa. This history uncovers nascent yet committed Muslim communities throughout West Africa that predate any state-led or quasi-state-led proselytizing efforts in the region. Simply put, Islam spread in West Africa more than a millennium ago much as it spread in the West today: through ordinary human interactions and through the charisma and piety of extraordinary individuals. Ahmad Baba (d. 1627), the renowned scholar of Timbuktu, is quoted by Uthman dan Fodio as saying "[Black Africans] accepted Islam without being conquered by anybody."[1]

[1] Lamin O. Sanneh, *Beyond Jihad: The Pacifist Tradition in West African Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 53.

Her life

Nana Asma'u enjoyed the privileges of high birth in a Fulani clan in what would become northern Nigeria. Her title, “Nana,” is a colloquialism given to female religious teachers, and indicates her role in public life. The ‘u’ customarily present at the end of her name is indicative of a local pronunciation and can double as a form of endearment; in parts of West Africa one will hear ‘Muhammadu’ and ‘Fatimatu.’ Her family was of the scholarly class, and her father was a charismatic and learned teacher who attracted students from beyond his community. Such was Uthman dan Fodio’s popularity that the sultan of the nearby state of Gobir attempted to hinder his preaching and stifle the community by disallowing conversion into Islam and outlawing distinctive Muslim dress. Later, the state of Gobir made an unsuccessful attempt on the shaykh’s life, which forced Uthman dan Fodio to migrate with his community. Evidently, the state of Gobir and the Muslims could not live separately in peace, and years of warfare ensued, concluding with the establishment of the Sokoto caliphate under the rule of Shaykh Uthman. Most of Asma'u’s life was lived after her father established his rule over the region. Born into her father’s Qadiriyya Sufi path, she exemplified discipline in worship and inner piety, doubling down on her gifts as an inheritor and disseminator of knowledge.

Figure 1: *The Sokoto Caliphate in West Africa Circa 1820*

Asma'u was likely named after the daughter of Abū Bakr (RA), who famously carried supplies to the Prophet ﷺ and her father during the hijra despite being pregnant and in great personal danger. Like her namesake, she was determined and indefatigable. Like her father, she was intelligent and a quick learner. By the age of ten she had memorized the Qur'an, and, due to her willingness and the opportunities afforded her, continued her education seemingly without obstacles.

Stories of her early life can be found in *Rawḍ al-Jinān* (The Gardens of Paradise), a biography of her father written by her husband Gidado with her assistance. Gidado was an affectionate nickname, meaning "beloved," which Uthman b. Abubakr Sambo Laima carried his whole life. Although not publicly known for Islamic scholarship, he was a gifted Arabist,[2] recognized for his strength of character, trustworthiness, and the weight of his responsibilities as *wazir* of the state. Gidado's father was a scholar and his mother was a distant relative of

[2] John Hunwick, "The Arabic Literary Tradition of Nigeria," *Research in African Literatures* 28, no. 3 (1997): 213, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3821003.

Uthman dan Fodio. Before marrying Asma'u, he was closely acquainted with her brother Muhammad Bello, as the two would travel long distances together to buy books. Scottish commander and explorer Hugh Clapperton visited Sokoto in 1824, where he met numerous high-ranking members of the Sokoto caliphate including Gidado, whom he describes as "excessively polite," "excellent," and extremely well-spoken in Arabic.[3]

Rawḍ al-Jinān recalls episodes of Asma'u's zeal for knowledge even when young, her inquisitiveness, and her close relationship with her father. Gidado recounts a story in which Asma'u's father tests his young daughter on her Tamajek, a Tuareg language that was good for general knowledge but hardly required for her education.[4] After stumbling on a couple of questions, she confesses that she only acquired her proficiency through eavesdropping on conversations. Shaykh Uthman dan Fodio advises her that if she wants to learn Tamajek, she will need to suspend her covert tactics and find a teacher. She would eventually become fluent in Arabic, Fulfulde, and Hausa, and conversant in Tamajek. Arabic was the language of the scholarly class, Fulfulde the language of her people, Hausa the language of her neighbors (who became subjects of the caliphate), and Tamajek the language of the nomadic Tuareg.

Asma'u was not alone in being a highly educated woman of the Fodiyo clan. Her education and that of others of her ilk supported the energetic *daʿwa* efforts of the state to usher non-Muslims into the fold of Islam and support the religious growth of Muslims. After the passing of her father, she was responsible for collecting and cataloging all of the shaykh's work, an essential task for preserving his legacy and entrenching his ideas in the new state. The Fulani signal the significance of this task by harkening back to the collection of the Qur'an after the passing of the Prophet ﷺ.

[3] Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1997), 198.
[4] Boyd and Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u*, 3.

There are several written exchanges between Nana Asma'u and male scholars and bureaucrats in the region. One such Mauritanian scholar, by the name of Al-Ḥājjī Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Shinqīṭī, wrote to Asma'u upon arriving in Sokoto on his way to *hajj*. In response, she crafted an Arabic poem welcoming him, praising him for embarking upon the *hajj,* and calling him her brother. The outpouring of glowing commendations from Asma'u toward al-Shinqīṭī and vice-versa suggests their acquaintance before his arrival. Her network likely extended even wider. Oludamini Ogunnaike describes how, through the pilgrimage to Mecca, "scholars of Timbuktu, Djenne, Borno, Kano, Katsina, Agadez, Pir Saniokhor, and Walata were also connected to and had intellectual and spiritual exchanges" with scholars of Cairo and Damascus such as Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī and Muḥammad al-Bakrī throughout the centuries.[5] Likewise, several West African scholars feature in the hagiographies and histories of the scholars of Damascus.[6] In another written exchange, (yet another) Mauritanian scholar boasted to Asma'u—as if to gain her commendation—about how his community also had women who attain the highest levels of Islamic education.

Her thought and work

As a gifted and prolific writer, Asma'u's surviving works give a great deal of insight into the values, socio-political circumstances, and prevailing sentiments of her time. In their *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u,* Jean Boyd and Beverly B. Mack highlight the paucity of literature in Asma'u's community: "Most of the Hausa poetic materials available in print are those written by men, and mainly works that date in the mid to late twentieth century. Evidence of the rich scholarly tradition of the nineteenth century northern Nigeria is only suggested by occasional academic studies or rare reproductions of one of the Shehu's (Uthman dan Fodio) works."[7] As a result, we must rely heavily on Asma'u's extant works to craft an understanding of her people. Her Hausa and Fulfulde (the language of the Fulani) works were written in Arabic script, which was the standard until its replacement

[5] Oludamini Ogunnaike, "Sufism, Islamic Philosophy, and Education in West Africa," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, 2020: 3, https://www.doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.592.
[6] Ogunnaike, "Sufism, Islamic Philosophy, and Education," 4.
[7] Boyd and Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u*, xxx.

with the Latin alphabet in the colonial period. The usage of Fulfulde in Arabic script, also known as Ajami, has declined so dramatically in the region Asma'u used to call home that it is rare to find people today who can decipher pre-colonial Fulfulde texts. Despite this, Fulfulde poems are still recited in cultural and religious life today—an indication that this West African poetry tradition stretches back at least hundreds of years.

Asma'u began her teaching career at the age of 14,[8] having memorized the Qur'an some four years prior.[9] This seems to have also been the same year she married Gidado, with whom she had six children. Asma'u's surviving works are almost entirely lyrical poems, so we might assume this to be her primary form of public writing. Perhaps she privileged poetry as a form of communication because of its ability to convey meaning persuasively and musically and also for its ease of memorization. It enchants while it informs. When a Bedouin recited poetry to the Prophet ﷺ, he responded: "There is magic in eloquence and wisdom in poetry."[10] The power of persuasive speech to change minds and hearts coupled with the hypnotic musicality of poetry were potent tools in Asma'u's capable hands.

Nana Asma'u's scholarly community, while literate, still prized the hallmarks of an oral-based culture, such as rhythmical exposition, cadence, parallelism, and repetition in the service of memorization. This dexterity in verbal expression was not only useful for communicating with the masses. It was also a tool for the scholar wishing to scaffold his or her knowledge through advanced mnemonic devices. All around were skilled poets and Arabists, including Asma'u's father Uthman dan Fodio and her brother Muhammad Bello. They produced more than 300 prose works and dozens of poems.[11] John Hunwick emphasizes that in West Africa, the ability to compose Arabic verse was "a hallmark of the accomplished

[8] Muhammad Dangana, "The Intellectual Contribution of Nana Asma'u to Women's Education in Nineteenth-Century Nigeria," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 1999: 288, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602009908716443.
[9] Chukwuma Azuonye, "Feminist or Simply Feminine? Reflections on the Works of Nana Asma'u, a Nineteenth-Century West African Woman Poet, Intellectual, and Social Activist," *Meridians* 6, no. 2 (2006): 54–77, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40338702.
[10] *Al-Adab al-Mufrad*, Book on Poetry, hadith 872.
[11] Hunwick, "Arabic Literary Tradition of Nigeria," 210–23.

scholar."[12] In Nigeria specifically, the history of Arabic writing stretches as far back as the 12th or 13th century to the first known writer: grammarian and poet Abu Ishaq Ibrahim al-Kanemi (d. 1212).[13] The fact that al-Kanemi was a grammarian in Arabic suggests that he was among others in his community to achieve advanced competency in Arabic, which in turn indicates that there must have been an audience for such a work.

A plea to saintly women

Nana Asma'u wrote "*Tawassul Ga Mata Masu Albarka*" (A Plea to Saintly Women) in 1837 in Fulfulde and Hausa, two great houses of poetry, though only fragments of the Fulfulde version are extant. Between 1810 and 1835, the principal years of Sokoto's expansion, large numbers of non-Muslim women came under Muslim rule, some becoming additional wives and concubines to Muslim men. As new members of this Muslim civilization, these women lost religious and cultural connections to the lives they had led before, not to mention changes in their day-to-day existence living under Muslim governance. Many Muslim women came under Fodio rule, some from non-Fulani tribes like the Hausa, whom Shaykh Uthman had been involved in teaching before he was exiled from Hausa territory in 1802.

In 1836, Muhammad Bello, Asma'u's brother and the caliph after their father, produced *Kitāb al-Naṣīḥa* (Book of Counsel), based on the texts at his disposal like Ibn al-Jawzī's (d. 1201) *Ṣifat al-Ṣafwa* (Attributes of the Exemplary) which in turn had relied upon the earlier work *Dhikr al-Niswa al-Mutaʿabbidāt al-Sufiyyāt* (Commemoration of Pious Sufi Women) by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d.1021).[14] In *Kitāb al-Naṣīḥa,* Bello instructs the new female members of Sokoto on society's expectations for women. He opens the text with concerns over women's values

[12] John O. Hunwick, "The Arabic Qasida in West Africa: Forms, Themes and Contexts," in *Qasida Poetry in Islamic Asia and Africa, Volume 1: Classical Traditions and Modern Meanings*, ed. Stefan Sperl and Christopher Shackle (Leiden: Brill, 1996): 83–98, 83.
[13] Hunwick, "Arabic Literary Tradition of Nigeria," 210–23.
[14] The observation that Ibn al-Jawzī used al-Sulamī's work as a resource is made by Professor Mahmoud Muhammad al-Tahani in the introduction to the Cairo edition of *Dhikr al-Niswa.*

moving away from restraint toward materialism. He then proceeds to tell stories of exemplary pious women. Bello asked Asma'u to translate and versify the work, presumably so that its content would have a broader reach.

Asma'u translated and versified the work, but she also recast it, accessing the same sources as Bello and choosing to focus solely on women's potential. Asma'u was already a poet at this time, and she regularly translated her own works to aid her teaching efforts. By embracing the Hausa language as a medium for teaching religion and morality, she showed a willingness to reach beyond her social and cultural circle, showing that Islam was not so foreign as to be incommunicable in the language of the people she hoped to serve. "*Tawassul*" would have been recited orally to mesmerize, foster community, and instruct. As has been noted by western scholars, there is little evidence of Islamic themes in Hausa poetry before the jihad led by Uthman dan Fodiyo, that is, prior to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Few Muslims, including scholars, knew how to write Arabic in Hausaland before the jihad, so written materials would have been hard to reproduce.[15] While Bello's work is titled with plain language, Asma'u's title is powerfully evocative. "A Plea to Saintly Women" belies a simple literary reading; rather, Asma'u meant that it be experienced as a prayer. She believed the women mentioned in the work are not just exemplars, but intimate teachers whose poetic memorialization brings them to life. Nana Asma'u hoped to activate wonder in her listeners and thereby inspire them to pursue formal and spiritual education. When that inspiration came, at the ready were Asma'u's legions of women teachers trained by her to impart foundational knowledge to the eager.

Around the time Nana Asma'u wrote "A Plea to Saintly Women," she was in her mid-40s, highly energetic, and a skilled rider. She enjoyed freedom as a person of rank in the caliphate. In 1840, Asma'u initiated a cadre of women teachers called the Yan Taru and devoted herself to teaching them the Qur'an and Islamic morality so they could teach the female masses. State leadership recognized that ordinary people were entangled in old traditions of superstition and their family structures

[15] Boyd and Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u,* xxviii.

were extremely hierarchical.[16] *Daʿwa* efforts like those of Asma'u's itinerant women teachers sought to bring to women the purity of *tawḥīd* and all the social benefits that came with adopting a Muslim way of life. These teachers—equipped with numerous rhyming stories of the *awliyāʾ*, companions, and messengers—were charged with teaching the basics of Islam. While women in the Fodio clan certainly had access to higher levels of learning than others,[17] Asma'u's initiation of the Yan Taru indicates that she perceived significant gaps in women's access to knowledge and teachers.

Asma'u wasn't alone in this perception. In Shaykh Uthman dan Fodio's writing, he affirms the right of women to education and chastises husbands who neither teach their wives themselves nor allow them to seek knowledge from others. He wrote in *Nūr al-Albāb* (Light of the Intellect):

> ...most of the ulama leave their wives, daughters and slaves neglected like animals without teaching them what Allah enjoins on them regarding their articles of faith, their ablution, their prayers and other things which Allah commands that they should be taught. Among these are the things permitted to them in their business transactions and the like…they treat their wives, daughters and slaves like household implements which are used until they are broken and then thrown onto the rubbish heap. Alas! How can they abandon their wives, daughters and slaves in perpetual darkness of ignorance while they daily impart knowledge to their students. This is nothing but error because they are instructing their students in the manner out of sheer egotism and hypocrisy. This is a grievous mistake.[18]

It must be noted that a woman such as Asma'u had unparalleled access to knowledge: she was the daughter of the most respected and well-connected learned man of her clan, and he expected her to inherit Islamic knowledge and serve as the head female teacher of women. However, as is clear from Shaykh Uthman's own words, it was not common practice for the male *ulama* of his locality to prioritize

[16] Dangana, "Intellectual Contribution of Nana Asma'u," 285.
[17] Jean Boyd, *The Caliph's Sister: Nana Asma'u, 1793–1865, Teacher, Poet, and Islamic Leader* (Abingdon: Frank Cass Publishers, 2005), xix.
[18] Dangana, "Intellectual Contribution of Nana Asma'u," 286.

educating their daughters. Shaykh Uthman's family included well-educated women like his mother and great-grandmother. Though not much is known about the education of his wife, Nana Asma'u's mother Maymuna, she was known as a free spirit with a great deal of mobility and access,[19] which undoubtedly left an impression on Asma'u. Perhaps in her interactions with everyday women through her various roles, she realized that many women were not uneducated for lack of will but rather a lack of resources. Part of that lack was "misguided" male figures, according to Asma'u's father, who said unequivocally:

> O Muslim women, do not listen to the words of the misguided ones who seek to lead you astray by ordering you to obey your husbands instead of telling you to obey Allah and His Messenger. They tell you that a woman's happiness lies in obeying her husband. This is no more than a camouflage to make you satisfy their needs. They impose on you duties which neither Allah nor His Messenger imposed on you. They make you cook, wash clothes and do other things which they desire while they fail to teach you that which Allah and His apostle have prescribed for you. Neither Allah nor his apostle charges you with such duties.[20]

Shaykh Uthman openly faced criticism from *ulama* who differed in their views on women's education, reasoning that women attending religious lessons risked harmful mixing with men. However, he argued that the certain evil of ignorance was worse than the potential evil that might come from gender-inclusive gatherings.[21] Shaykh Uthman's lessons were widely attended by men and women alike. Part of what made Shaykh Uthman such an effective leader was the fact that he was a visionary: he imagined what society could be like if men and women prioritized Islamic education and spiritual development. No wonder Nana Asma'u formally took charge of women's education in Sokoto, and records still exist of

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[19] Boyd, Jean. *The Caliph's Sister*, 6.

[20] Dangana, "Intellectual Contribution of Nana Asma'u," 286. Shaykh Uthman was working from within the Maliki *madhhab* and clearly subscribed to the opinion that wives were not obligated to perform domestic labor. This is not the only opinion regarding the duties of spouses within the *madhhab*, but evidently Shaykh Uthman considered it strong enough to use in his argument. See al-Mausu'ah al-Fiqhiyyah al-Kuwaitiyyah vol. 19 p.44 for further discussion.

[21] Dangana, "Intellectual Contribution of Nana Asma'u."

those whom she formally taught and the villages in which she spent time teaching.[22]

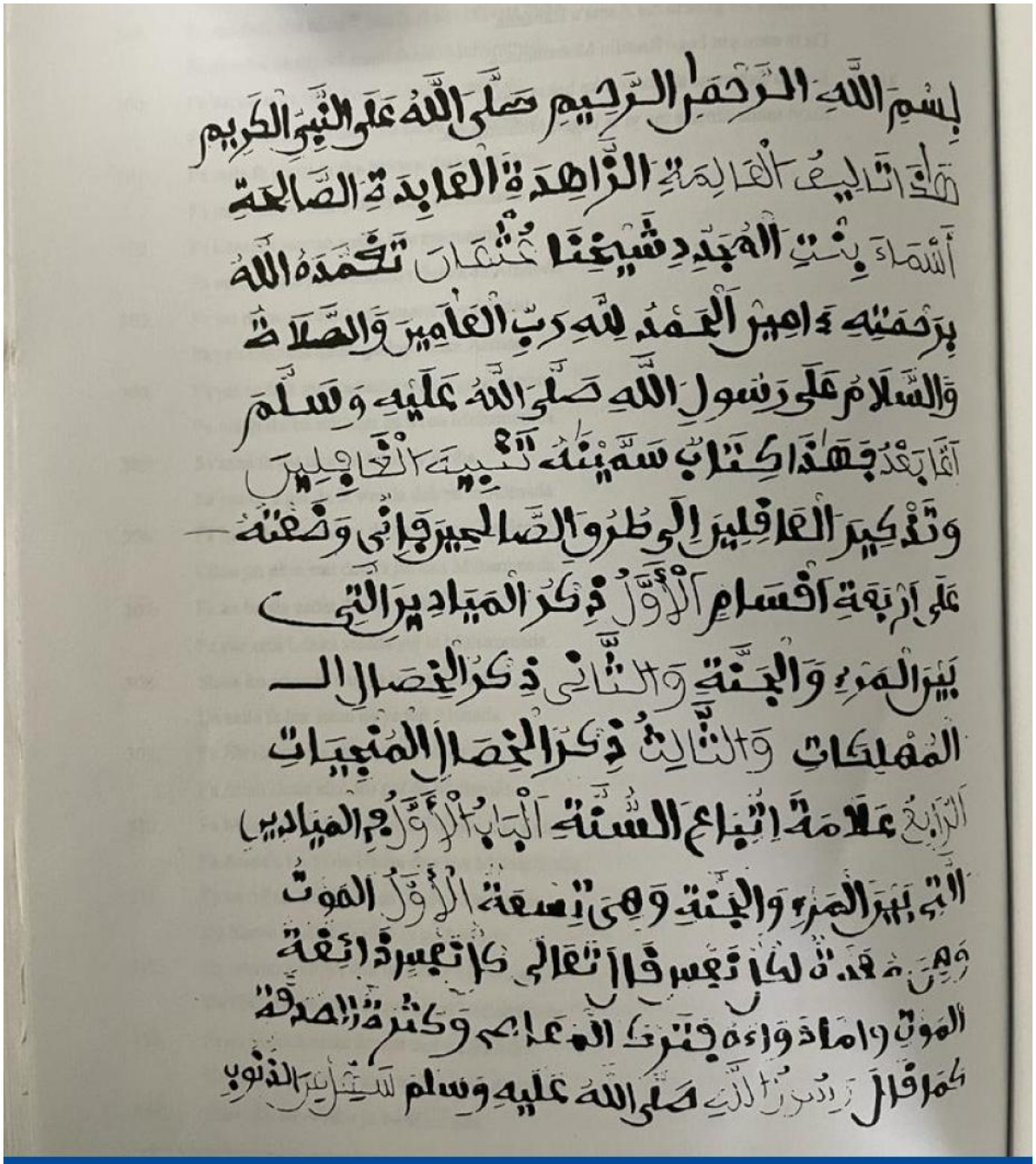
Through education, the Yan Taru organization could incorporate women into the larger community—making them more adept stakeholders in society and empowering them as the first teachers of their children. A teacher, known as *jaji,* wore a distinctive hijab called a *malfa*,[23] a highly visible mark of education that reaffirmed the central importance of knowledge in the Sokoto administration. By raising a cadre of educated women, Asma'u circumvented the critics of female education. Women could now learn from other women in the privacy of each other's homes, which handily removed a perceived obstacle to female education. After women achieved fluency in reciting poems, they were taught to write them in the Arabic script. Learning Arabic script was a gateway to the Arabic language and the Qur'an, and regular recitation of didactic poetry imparted to women tools for understanding and self-expression. Among Nana Asma'u's extant poetic works, "*Qasida fi Munaja*" (Instructional Poem), written in Arabic, Fulfulde, and Hausa, utilizes mnemonic devices to teach the name of every *surah* in the Qur'an. This poem serves as an introduction to Qur'anic memorization, functioning as memory pegs for students.

Warning for the negligent and reminder for the intelligent

In a succinct Arabic manual, titled "*Warning for the Negligent and Reminder for the Intelligent Regarding the Ways of the Pious*" (see an example of Nana's poetry below),[24] Asma'u delineates pertinent guidance for the believer hoping for felicity. She begins with "that which stands between man and paradise." Her framing addresses readers of two different levels of spiritual maturity: those who are in need of warning due to frequently succumbing to neglect and sloth and those who

[22] Boyd and Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u*.
[23] Dangana, "Intellectual Contribution of Nana Asma'u to Women's Education," 288.
[24] A manuscript of this work is found in *The Collected Work of Nana Asma'u.* This work was kept in the *gafaka* (leather bookbag) that contained other works by Nana Asma'u, stored in her home and kept by her descendants.

are in need of reminder due to having developed a spiritual practice. Asma'u manages to infuse the work with language that speaks to the internal state of both groups. For the neglectful, she empathizes with their fear and teaches them how to overcome that fear at every stage. For the intelligent, she bolsters their hope by recasting every cataclysm—death, the grave, the final judgment—as rites of passage on the path to felicity in the next life. This reframing harkens back to her introductory language: “That which stands between man and paradise.” Asma'u thus addresses the weariness that sometimes arrests the internal dynamism of the righteous and drains their zeal for a righteous life.



بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم صلى الله على النبي الكريم
هذا تاليف العالمة الزاهدة العابدة الصالحة
أسماء بنت العبد شيخنا عثمان تحمده الله
برحمته آمين الحمد لله رب العالمين والصلاة
والسلام على رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم
أما بعد فهذا كتاب سميته تنبيه الغافلين
وتذكير الغافلين الى طرق الصالحين وانى وضعته
على اربعة اقسام الأول ذكر الميادير التى
بين المرء والجنة والثانى ذكر الخصال الـ
المهلكات والثالث ذكر الخصال المنجيات
الرابع علامة اتباع السنة الباب الأول في الميادير
التي بين المرء والجنة وهي تسعة الأول الموت
وهي شدة لكل نفس قال تعالى كل نفس ذائقة
الموت واما دواءه فترك المعاصي وكثرة الصدقة
كما قال رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم للسائل عن الذنوب

Figure 2: *First page of Nana Asma'u's poem, "Warning for the Negligent"*

Asmau then lists eight habits destructive of the neglectful and the intelligent alike, though to different degrees. These are both habits of the heart and habits of action. Some people may be actively engaged in acts of greed, whereas others may suffer from hearts that harbor feelings of greed without acting on them. Asma'u mentions

antagonism toward others, pointless argumentation, greed, unfettered materialism, boastfulness, consulting with diviners and believing what they foretell, harmful association with *jinn,* and witchcraft. She goes on to mention eight redeeming habits, among them repentance, scrupulousness in worship, frequent remembrance of Allah*,* charity, fasting, patience, and maintaining good family relations. In this work she follows the method of *takhallī* and then *tajallī,* purifying the heart from negativity and adorning it with beautiful traits. She devotes the lengthiest treatment to the distinguishing characteristics of those who follow the Sunnah.

> Among the signs of those who follow the *sunnah* of the Messenger of God, may God bless him and grant him peace, is belief in and adherence to everything he brought, a commitment to loving him by imitating him in speech, action, character and sincere intention in all of these. Among the signs that one loves the Messenger ﷺ are following his commands, shunning his prohibitions, preference for his *sunnah,* avoiding innovation (*bid'a*) in religion and cultural customs that contravene his *sunnah,* striving to recite the Qur'an, understand it and act according to it, compassion for and striving to protect the Muslim community from harm, detachment from worldly affairs and preference for the hereafter, reverence when the Prophet ﷺ is mentioned (or concentration when making remembrance [*dhikr*] of the Prophet), may God bless him and grant him peace, honoring his family and companions, his places Mecca and Medina, longing to visit them, copious prayers upon him, adopting his character by doing what pleases God, opposing whoever opposes God's religion even if it be one's own father or son, compassion, forbearance, and forgiveness and patience with one's own soul in that which it dislikes.[25]

She describes these distinguished people as having "faith in everything he has brought forth; obedience to him in these things; obligation to loving him by imitating him in speech, action, and manners; and behaving this way with sincerity of intention." Whereas before she addressed fear and hope, in this section she speaks to love and describes those who savor following the example of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ. Among the signs that one has truly embraced the Prophet ﷺ is a preference, in all circumstances, for his Sunnah—humility,

[25] I have opted to translate this Arabic text from the appendix of manuscripts compiled by Boyd and Mack, p. 504.

generosity, moderation, taking refuge in God, and zeal that endeavors by any means to purify one's faith. While fear of God remains critical for the pious, Asma'u places special emphasis on zeal for God which is rooted in love and attraction towards Him. For her, this motivation better aligns with prophetic practice and promises a greater spiritual return. Joy and zeal for worship are also remedies for the spiritual apathy that threatens to settle into the believer. When one feels lost, fidelity to one's religious commitments is the rope that leads forward.

Asma'u's conviction, as is evident in this work and others, is that learning ought to be a transformative experience. A purely academic pursuit for the sake of acquiring information alone passes up the opportunity to attain the ethical and spiritual demeanor concomitant with studying the Islamic sciences. Shaykh Ahmadu Bamba of neighboring Senegal put it this way in various poems:

> Everyone who acts without knowledge is like a speck of dust in the wind
> And he who acquires knowledge without practicing it is a loaded donkey.
> …
> If your progress in knowledge does not lead to spiritual growth and detachment from worldly things
> You are regressing and harming yourself because you are distancing yourself from God Most High.
> …
> The only useful knowledge is that which one learns and teaches only for the love
> of God, Most High[26]

Poetic elegies: Reminder, transformation, and community

Poetic elegies make up a significant portion of Asma'u's composed works. While commonly thought of as straightforward memorialization of great individuals, they

[26] Oludamini Ogunnaike, "Learn, Live, Love: Ahmadu Bamba's Practical Epistemology and Pedagogy," Department of African and African American Studies, Harvard University, 8–9.

served a more dynamic purpose for Asma'u and her community. Asma'u delights in the person she describes and relishes in being a means for the listener to vividly envision the praised one. The people she memorializes embody the heights of human potential and their lives are instructive for her and her listeners. In "Plea to Saintly Women," she makes explicit the communal value of remembering the merits of those passed. She is especially effective in that panegyric by weaving together stories of women around the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, women throughout the centuries, and women who had passed during her lifetime. Through this method, she illustrates how these women learned from the memory of prior exemplars, and she sets the stage for her contemporaries to do the same. The many poetic elegies left behind indicate Asma'u's role as an orator for her people, for elegies serve a communal function and were intended for recitation aloud. The subjects of these praise poems are the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, prominent family members, and also members of the community whom Asma'u spotlighted for reasons always of their character and piety.

Nana Asma'u remembered in death

In 1978, Alhaji Muhammadu Magaji, a Nigerian Islamic scholar, heard a woman by the name of Yarbuga singing an elaborate, lengthy elegy to the memory of Asma'u. Magaji collected and translated into Hausa the works of Asma'u and other Fulani scholars.[27] Given the address of the speaker, it was thought to have been composed by Asma'u's brother, Isa, a century prior, around the time of her passing. In the poem, Isa describes going to see where Asma'u's body lay at her home with her husband Gidado, and barely being able to get through the crowd of people gathered around it. Everywhere were scenes of restless emotion. "Men were crying, no one was left unmoved, not even the animals." These remarks suggest the overwhelming reception of Asma'u by her community. Seemingly out of reverence, Isa never addresses Asma'u by her first name, but rather calls her "Nana" and "Inji," the former title given for her authority in public matters like teaching and administration and the latter for her authority in spiritual matters.[28] The title Nana

[27] Boyd, *The Caliph's Sister*, xviii.
[28] Boyd, *The Caliph's Sister,* 5.

was held by other women scholars in Timbuktu,[29] though its origins are unclear and early Arabic manuscripts of her work omit the title, instead referring to her with honorifics like *saliha* (righteous), *waliya* (saintly), and *zahida* (ascetic) and always as the daughter of Shaykh Uthman. He writes that after their father, Uthman dan Fodio, the children followed Asma'u's leadership. He compares her "light" to lightning that illuminates and arouses hearts from heedlessness. He describes her generosity to men and women alike, her care for orphans, her craft at reconciling affairs, and the mutual love between her and her family.

Note on the poem: Jean Boyd and Beverly Mack translated this Hausa/Fulfulde poem in the *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u.* I recast their translation to capture the style and rhyme of the original because rhyming poetry was an important teaching medium for Asma'u and a central tool in the scholarly tradition she drew from. I also attended to elevating religious language beyond perfunctory phrases, opting for language that reflected the deep well of spiritual knowledge Asma'u drew from. Due to the transmogrification of Arabic names when written in Fulfulde and Hausa, it appears Boyd and Mack were unable to trace the identity of some of the individuals mentioned in the poem. I compared the names in Asma'u's poem to two well-known biographical dictionaries of pious figures that appear to have been used by Asma'u and her ilk: Abd al-Rahman al-Sulamī, *Dhikr al-niswa al-muta'abbidat al-sufiyyāt* and Ibn al-Jawzī's *Ṣifat al-Ṣafwa.* Lastly, some lines were subsumed into others or left out for clarity and concision.

A Plea to Saintly Women

Nana Asma'u

Dear God, receive our praise and thanks
And bless Muhammad ﷺ of the utmost rank
Benedictions to his family and his friends
And those who follow him 'til time's end

[29] Boyd and Mack, *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u*, 14.

In this poem I will tell you about the pious
Toward whom I admit I am biased
I am mindful of them while I am still alive
May they remember me on the Day my soul is revived

The ascetic women are all sanctified
For their piety, all are magnified
For deliverance, they prayed ceaselessly
Friends, don't forget this so easily

I wrote this poem to assuage my heart
And remind you how they pined for God
The perfume of their yearning for God permeates
In every line of this poem I create

Of the Prophet's close ones I first shall speak:
Aisha, the noble daughter of the nobleman al-Siddiq

Friends, remember the name Zaynab bint Jahsh
She reignites the embers of my heart from ash
She exceeded in piety, according to Aisha
Loved and esteemed by the Prophet of *rahma*

Fātima al-Zahra al-Batul
Above all servants of Allah she holds rule
She possessed all the qualities of a flower in full bloom
Spun from the threads of Muhammad and Khadija's loom

Umm Hārūn[30] shown so bright

[30] From Damascus, Umm Hārūn was known as someone of exceptional piety among the notable scholars of her time, such as Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī. She made a habit of traveling from her home in Damascus to Palestine by foot, seeking remote locations for spiritual retreat. We don't know her birth and death date, but, given her association with al-Dārānī, we can assume she lived in the late eighth and early ninth centuries CE. See Abd al-Rahman al-Sulamī, *Dhikr al-niswa al-muta'abbidat al-sufiyyāt* (Cairo: Maktaba Khānajī, 1993), 64.

Habiba Adawiya[31] recited the Names[32] morning and night

Of Rabiʿa ʿAdawiyya's[33] piety I speak
Her fame is still at its peak
The Lady from Basra who saw what others could not
Brilliance of mind and heart, set apart

Rabiʿa's prayer was a thousand prostrations
By day and by night in the throes of lamentations
Pleasing the Prophet ﷺ was her sole consideration
On the Day of Understanding you will give her congratulations

Umm Dardā',[34] Mu'aza,[35] and Ruqayya of Mosul[36]
Umm Ayyūb,[37] Sha'wana,[38] and Rayḥāna al-Majnūn[39]

[31] Habiba Adawiya was a native of Basra, who likely lived in the generation after the better-known Rabiʿa al-Adawiya. She was known for keeping night prayer on the roof of her house. Rkia E. Cornell, *Early Sufi Women* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 1999), 202.
[32] The Names of Allah.
[33] Perhaps one of the pious women with the most name recognition after the wives of the Prophet, she is the only woman mentioned by name in Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhī's *Kitāb al-taʿarruf*, one of the earliest treatises on Sufi individuals in the tenth century CE. She was a teacher of Sufyan al-Thawri, who referred to her as *mu'addiba* and sought her wisdom in spiritual and religious matters. Her students and admirers have related copious wisdom from her. Ibn Jawzi claims to have written an entire book on her. Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 282.
[34] An orphan under the care of an Abu Dardā who used to sit in the circles of learning as a young girl, Umm Dardā' eventually became a teacher of *hadith* and *fiqh* and was known for keeping company with the scholars and teaching male and female students in Damascus. Muhammad Akram Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat: The Women Scholars in Islam* (Oxford: Interface Publications, 2006) 81.
[35] I could not determine the identity of this individual.
[36] Sifat al-Safwa mentions one of the sayings she was known for. Al-Jawzi, *Sifat al-Safwa,* (Dar al-Hadith, Cairo: 2000) vol.2, 358.
[37] I could not determine the identity of this individual.
[38] She was from a port city called al-Ubulla in Persia. She gave exhortations and recited the Qur'an as a teacher. Given her association with al-Fudayl ibn Iyad (d. 187/803), we presume she died in the eighth century CE. Al-Sulamī, *Dhikr al-niswa al-muta'abbidat al-sufiyya*, 44.
[39] Al-Sulamī records her as Rayhana al-Waaliha. She lived in the eighth century CE in Basra. Al-Sulamī, *Dhikr al-niswa al-muta'abbidat al-sufiyya*, 38.

Rabiʿa bint Ismail[40] of Damascus, the student of Hukayma[41]
Her husband who worshiped with the best said none could match her

Amrah the ascetic,[42] Aisha bint Ja'far,[43] Atika Ghanuyah[44]
Ubayda bint Abi Kulaib,[45] the wife of Abu Imran,[46] and Maryam of Basra[47]
Mu'aza bint Abdullah,[48] Maymuna Majnuna,[49] and Maymuna Sa'uda[50]

The Nishapuri Fatima[51] was zealous even to those enraptured[52]

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[40] Rabiʿa's husband, Ahmad ibn Abi Hawārī (d. 845), relates many stories of her sainthood and the sainthood of other Syrian women, from which al-Sulamī compiled his own work. Rabiʿa was independently wealthy and financed many students and aspirants. Hawārī reports that she would ceaselessly fast and pray and that he was moved to richer faith just by the sight of her. Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 314.

[41] Al-Sulamī describes her as a teacher or initiator of women into specialized knowledge, such as Rabiʿa bint Ismail. She lived in Damascus and was in communication with al-Dārānī. Al-Sulamī, *Dhikr al-niswa al-mutaʿabbidat al-sufiyya*, 53.

[42] Possibly Amra al-Farghana from Khurasan who lived in the tenth century CE. Al-Sulamī describes her as someone with impeccable character, presence, and insight. Asma'u also mentions a Mu'aza of Mosul and Majida who shared in this quality of asceticism; however, I could not locate these individuals. Al-Sulamī, *Dhikr al-niswa al-mutaʿabbidat al-sufiyya*, 87.

[43] Presumably the daughter of Ja'far al-Sadiq. She would have lived in the eighth century CE.

[44] I could not determine the identity of this individual.

[45] From Tufawa, near Basra, a contemporary of Malik ibn Dinar. Al-Sulamī, *Dhikr al-niswa al-mutaʿabbidat al-sufiyya*, 57.

[46] Boyd and Mack transliterate the name as "Ahhiratu Umratu" and identify her as "Amrah wife of Habibu." However, I believe this entry could be referring to the wife of Abi 'Umran al-Juni (*imra'a abi umran al-juni*), who has an entry in *Sifat al-Safwa*. In that entry, her son is recorded as having seen his mother tie her legs together with rags to prolong her nighttime prayers.

[47] A student of Rabiʿa Adawiya. Like her teacher, she was known for her *tawakkul*, strict adherence to night prayer, and emphasis on cultivating love for Allah. Al-Sulamī, *Dhikr al-niswa al-mutaʿabbidat al-sufiyya*, 33.

[48] Perhaps the first initiator of women into a spiritual sorority in Basra a century before Rabiʿa Adawiya. Known for sober and vigorous spirituality, she stressed asceticism, prayer, fasting, and night prayer. Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 61.

[49] The sister of Ibrāhīm al-Khawwāṣ, who was a companion of al-Junayd. She and her brother seem to have had a close relationship, which afforded her the opportunity to converse with men of a similar spiritual bent as her. She lived in Baghdad in the ninth century CE. Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 216.

[50] Unclear attribution. In this section of the poem, Asma'u lists a number of names without much detail about their character. The authors of *Collected Works of Nana Asma'u* acknowledge that parts of this poem are missing. This may explain the lack of descriptions for these women. However, it is also possible that Asma'u simply wanted to show her knowledge of these women and acknowledge that they are deserving of mention without lengthening the poem.

[51] Fātima of Nishapur is quoted anonymously in Kalābādhī's *Kitāb al-taʿarruf* and resurfaces in al-Sulamī's work with her statement properly attributed to her. Kalābādhī uses her words to confidently describe spiritual wayfaring (*sulūk)*. She instructed Bayazid al-Bistami and Dhu al-Nun al-Misri, so she must have lived in the ninth century CE. She frequented Mecca for *umrah* and general devotional purposes, and indeed ultimately died on her way to make *umrah*. Al-Misri relates wisdom from her and testimonies of her saintliness. Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 144.

[52] Even those enraptured by the love of Allah considered her zealous.

Nafisa bint Hassan,[53] by love of the Qur'an caged and captured
Cycling through the Qur'an in the trench of her grave
Which was dug by her hands for her own soul to save[54]
Born in Mecca, living in Medina, like her grandfather the Prophet
The ground of Egypt blessed by her ultimate deposit
For what might come from nearness to her come the prayerful and the profligate

I return to Fatima[55] the preacher, the teacher, daughter of Abbas Saiha
Mounting the steps of the mosque, her voice bellowed over the crowd
Enlivening the hearts they repented out loud
When shyness struck her she kept her efforts on the ground
But a shaykh dreamt of the Messenger telling her to reignite the crowd

I pray for their overflowing gifts to grace me
O God, make my repentance sincere and save me!
Let me not recite their names only to forsake me
I believe in Your promise and ask that You grace me

Perhaps by their piety, You will purify a sinning servant like me
And in the hereafter erase these wrongdoings of mine
How I've wronged myself! Only I know where I've crossed the line
With child-like hope, I beg forgiveness from the Divine
Now I turn to the women in this community of mine
Those who've died and those still alive

[53] Nafisa (d. c. 824) is a well-known descendant of the Prophet ﷺ and probably the best-known female scholar of hadith in Egypt. She is connected to Imam al-Shafiʿi (d. 820), who received hadith from her and sought her out for prayer, and it seems that before his passing, he requested that his body be carried to her home so that she might say a final prayer over him. See Nadwi, *Al-Muhaddithat*, 268. The Sayida Nafisa Mosque in Cairo is her burial place and is considered a place of spiritual refuge by many.
[54] To keep the remembrance of death near, she dug a grave and worshiped in it.
[55] Perhaps Asma'u returns to Fātima of Nishapur because she admires her especially. Fātima's entry in al-Sulamī's work is one of the longest, and she enjoys similar appreciation in Asma'u's poem. Fātima enjoyed wealth and independence—qualities that would have resonated with Asma'u.

My father Shaykh dan Fodio[56] I must first remember
Hawa[57] and Ayesha, ascetic wives and good-natured

Habiba burdened herself educating many women
A commanding presence, respected now and back then
Joda Kowuuri's knowledge of the Qur'an availed her everywhere
Biada's reclusiveness kept her secret near
The scholar Yar Hindu judged by the Qur'an
These are but a sampling from the Shaykh's clan

Many of our women committed the Qur'an to heart
Neither from piety nor preaching did they part
They were many and this poem is but an indication
As I near the end, consider this an affirmation
Of your potential should you have the aspiration
To achieve lofty stations and secure salvation

May we be reunited with those who have passed on
—all the special ones I mentioned in this psalm
With mother and father and all Muslims

Deliver us to splendor, O Lord of many gifts
For the sake of our Messenger ﷺ, without whom we're adrift
You who hears, I end my rhyme with this
Salutations on Ahmad or I'd be remiss
The companions and the faithful, grant them every bliss.

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[56] Such is Asma'u's reverence and appreciation for her father that she mentions him here. Perhaps this also serves as an acknowledgment and reminder that Uthman dan Fodio facilitated educational opportunities for women that allowed some to flourish.

[57] In this section of the poem, Asma'u turns her attention to memorializing women in her community who passed during her lifetime. Hawa was Asma'u's maternal grandmother and was likely a Qur'an teacher. The little that we know about these particular women is mentioned here and in other elegies Asma'u penned. In a sense, she offers an appendix to the work of al-Sulamī by adding these women to the names of those he mentioned 800 years prior, much as Ibn al-Jawzi used al-Sulamī's work two centuries later to write his own and include others who lived after al-Sulamī died.