

## Gender Balance and Arabic Cultivation: A Case Study of Selected Female Arabic Cultivators in Pre-Colonial Northern Nigeria

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### Abstract

*There is no doubt that gender question has been a subject of discussion in various disciplines for quite a long time now with great deal of discussion on the rights of women. Though, perspectives about gender issues vary from one community to the other, the general perspectives are what women are rarely recognized in most communities. In African traditional belief, for example women are labelled as witchcraft and in most cases, women are not allowed to go out during celebrations of some African festivals. Women had sometimes been portrayed as the sources of sin. Even, in the medieval time, European philosophers and scholars doubted whether the woman has a soul, if she were to have a soul, it should be similar to that of a slave certainly not like that of a free man possesses. Up to the 18th century, European women had no right to inheritance, no right to own property and they could not open bank account without written permission from their husbands. Looking at this gender discrimination, one would imagine what could account for this illicit belief. One school of thoughts opines that the philosophical teachings of Aristotle and Plato have greatly influenced the idea of gender discrimination. While other schools blame Islam for this. Sequel to the above, this paper intends to discuss the role of Islam in women's literacy, a Case Study of Selected Muslim Women in the cultivation of Arabic Scholarship in Northern Nigeria.*

**Keywords:** Arabic Cultivation, Muslim Women, Scholarship, Northern Nigeria.

### Introduction

The mission of the holy prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) marks the beginning of a historical change for women folk when they are given legitimate rights that provide them exalted position. Islam safeguards the rights of women in every single respect and reiterates that women are not servants or slaves rather they are wives and mothers of children of men and makes men realize their responsibilities and the rights they have to give to women. Thus, Islam establishes the rights of women and saves them from disgrace and humiliation. Evidence shows that the rise of Islam brings an eternal relief to women and recognizes them as equal partners to men. Islam with its rise attaches a great importance to education of female children; this enhances their position in the community where Islam governs. The injunctions for the equal right of women and men to pursue education are found in the traditions of the holy prophet Muhammad (S.A.W). For example, the holy prophet was reported to have said, "if we educate a man, we have only educated a person but if it is a woman, then we have educated a nation" (Opeloye 2006:4) Aisha, the wife of the prophet was a reputable female scholar in her time. She was a great teacher of *Hadith* literature. The prophet (S. A. W) was so concern about female education that he directed his companions to educate even their slave girls (Fuad 1970:30-31). It is also a historical fact that the lectures of the holy prophet Muhammad (S.A.W) were attended by large audiences of both men and women, and by the time of the prophet's death, there were many women scholars (Khayrat 1975:108). According to the tradition of the holy prophet (S.A.W), it is the duty of every Muslim, male and female to pursue knowledge throughout life, even if it should lead the seeker to China. (Darwazah, 1980:44) This reveals that Islam encourages women scholarship.

### Muslim Women and Arabic Literacy in Northern Nigeria

In the study of Muslim women literacy in Nigeria, it is not possible to give the account, achievements, influence and artistic status of all female scholars who emerged over a century, therefore, a systematic approach will be employed to discuss it. It is admitted that both foreign and indigenous scholars admired the literary production of scholars in Nigeria before colonial incursion. According to Alkali (1983:107) "women were given proper education during the reign of Mai Ali Ghaji. (1470-1503) He notes that "the princesses were well looked after and were given the necessary education which could prepare them for their future homes". The above assertion reveals that the education of Muslim women was very long in age in Nigeria, considering the time of Mai Ali Ghaji to the present time. The good tradition of women education in the Northern parts of Nigeria was sustained by the subsequent efforts

of the constituted authorities of Islamic governments up to the time of Shaykh Uthman b. Fudi whose system of caliphal administration produced many eminent female scholars (Umar, 1984:9).

In the first half of eighteenth century when Arabic literature began to flourish, notable female scholars also emerged. Al-illuri mentions Ruqayyah bint Alim as reputable Muslim female scholar who featured in academic scene in the second half of the eighteenth century. (Al-illuri, 1978: 94). Ahmad further strengthened the view of Al-illuri, when he regards Ruqayyah bintu Alim as the first female scholar who authored an academic work in Nigeria. In his words (1984:46), 'Ruqayyah al-Fullatiyyat bint 'Alim, was the celebrated author of a popular work titled "*al-karim yaqbal*" this work still enjoys the attention of Muslims particularly, Islamic students till today'. It is a work of multifarious themes, contained a reasonable number of poetic verses and Sufi vocabularies. The work combines elements of religious themes and local needs. Its themes and succinct verses have never ceased been admired by the readers. The work succinctly gives a colourful and valuable insight into the literary life of Hausaland in the first half of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century. Hawau bint Muhammad was another personage who featured in the academic field in the nineteenth century. In account of her given by Al-illuri, she was among of the early teachers of Shaykh Uthman. (Al-illuri, 1978: 94). In the intellectual bloom of Hausaland in nineteenth century, Asmau bint 'Uthman is another Muslim female scholar who occupied a prominent position.

Her literary fame rests on her miscellaneous works. She was one of the greatest female scholars with the most fertile minds and prolific scholarship throughout the nineteenth Century in Hausa land. She drew upon her personal experiences in her writings. The themes of her works were centered on socio-political/religious and economic situation of her period. She was the author of a popular work titled "*Tanbih al-Ghafilin wa Tadhkir al-a qilin ila Turuq as-salihin*". This work occupies the first place among the works of literary achievements of female Arabic scholars in Northern Nigeria. As rightly said by Malik (1999:15)

*It is pertinent to mention that the cultivation of Arabic literary scholarship in the nineteenth century in West Africa was not confined to male scholars only. Nana Asmau, the famous daughter of Sheikh Uthman Dan Fodio was one of the most learned of the Sheikh's children.*

The literary seed sown during the period of Sokoto caliphate germinated and came into full fruition throughout the nineteenth century. The period produced a number of other female scholars whose literary compositions are considered standard. In the account of female scholars that emerged in nineteenth Century, special mention was made to Khadijah al-Kubrah, Fatimah bint 'Uthman, Safiyyah, Maryam bint Shaykh Uthman and Asma bint 'Uthman. These female scholars were in the mainstream of social reforms in Hausaland. While assessing the social reforms introduced by these female scholars in the pre-colonial years, Ogunbiyi (1975:26) quotes late Junaid Wazir of Sokoto:

*One of them (i.e the daughters of Shaykh 'Uthman b. Fudi) was Asma' the saint, the upright, the ascetic, the worshipful, the learned, the pious and the spiritual councillor, may the Exalted Allah be pleased with her. "Of her sermons, there are uncountable 'ajami (non-Arabic) poems, and in praise of the prophet (may Allah bless and protect him) she has many poems. She did not relent her efforts in ordering the doing of good and forbidding the abominable and urging people to follow the Shar'iah and to emulate the sunna and to tie the bond of kinship and (to practice) good morals. She (may Allah be pleased with her) knew the Qur'an by heart, was continuously enduring the evils of people. She enjoyed exalted, sublime (Sufi) conditions. In short, her virtues are too numerous to be counted.*

Ogunbiyi explained that one of the Arabic poems of Asma bint 'Uthman is an elegy she composed and elegized on her friend Aisha, daughter of Umar al-Kammi, who happened to be her brother's wife, Sultan Muhammad Bello. Aisha Lemu (2003:639) stresses the literary and scholarship ability of Asmau bint Uthman Fodio when she also observed that:

*Nana Asmau was widely admired for her writings as a scholar and poet, her political, ideological and religious commitment, her social work and especially her teaching role. This involved women students who came in organized groups from far and wide in the principle of train-the-trainers. There is no indication of anything other than respect and administration for her roles in the development of an Islamic society. This took place before the colonial era when even the western countries had never heard of women's liberation or women's role in public life, administration or politics. Women were not even allowed to obtain University degrees in England until the 20th century.*

Apart from Asmau bint Shaykh ‘Uthman another female scholar whose her social influence and academic impact were reckoned by scholars was Aisha bint Umar al-Kammi. Her father was one of the closest associates of Shaykh ‘Uthman b. Fudi. He was usually listed with Shaykh Abudullah b. Fudi and Sultan Muhammad Bello on some occasions. He even took precedence over Muhammad Bello. (Ogunbiyi, 1975:26). According to Asmau bint ‘Uthman in the elegy that she composed on her, “Aisha bint Umar al-Kammi was a teacher, poet and social reform worker, a philanthropist and a woman mystic”. The ensuring academic florescence of female scholars was promoted and the production of elegant works was a symbol of cultural brilliance of female scholarship in Northern parts of Nigeria in the nineteenth century. From foregoing, it is evident that Muslim female scholars made a tremendous stride in the first half of nineteenth century. It is interesting to note that this tradition of women’s participation in the development of Islamic society, though widely in decline in later times, never completely disappeared, and reappeared in an unexpected times and places. In the course of distinguished academic career female scholars were well conversant with Arabic language. They exhibited the elements of Arabic works. It should be noted that, the Borno, Sokoto and Kano produced eminent female scholars. These female scholars did not relent in their efforts in writing academic scholarship.

### **Biographical Notes on Selected Female Arabic Scholars**

Although there was a considerable coterie of learned women before the jihad of 19th century in Hausaland, their literary activities were to a great extent overshadowed by the vast scholarly productions of the male scholars. The single extant literary work of female scholars of the nineteenth century is *al-Karim yaqbal* authored by Ruqayat bint ‘Alim. However, there was a considerable development in female scholarship in post *jihad* period, which many female scholars emerged. The biographies of the selected female scholars are as follows.

#### **Ruqayyah bint ‘Alim**

It will be very difficult to give a full account of Ruqayyah al-Fulattiy *bint* Muhammed b. Said because of paucity of information about her; hence her date of birth was not known. However, it is certain that she came from long chain of the Fulani tribes. Her father was a Fulani Muslim cleric in the eighteenth century who acquired high esteem in Islamic sciences with undiminished lustre. She attained proficiency in Arabic language and gained mastery in Islamic scholarship. She was very prolific and highly talented. This allowed her to participate in literary activities which were entirely confined to circle of men in most cases. At puberty, her father married her to a famous scholar of their tribe, Muhammad b. ‘Uthman b. Hamm who was regarded as the most learned Fulani cleric of the time. (Hashimi, 2008:23) The marriage was not only successful but also increased the fame of Ruqayyah in academic field. Ruqayyah learned more from her husband, which later made her to become a female scholar of remarkable standing. The marriage of Ruqayyah with Muhammad b. Said was blessed with children. Famous among her children was Hawau, who was also a woman scholar. Ruqayyah bint ‘Alim was an ascetic and woman saint. She preached ascetic way of life as a salvation and the only ticket to paradise after death. Anyone who reads her work “*alkarim yaqbal*” will be convinced that she was a woman of remarkable standing. Her work belongs to a class of literary production that surfaced in the eighteenth century. Most literary scholars pay fulsome tributes to her contribution to knowledge.

#### **Hawau bint Muhammad**

Another Muslim female scholar was Hawau *bint* Muhammad b. Uthman. The date of her birth is not currently known but it is certain that she was born around the first quarter of the eighteenth century (1730s C.E.). Her early age was passed through the traditional training of her time. She received the learning of the Qur’an from her father, Muhammad b. Uthman, a famous cleric of his clan. Therefore, Hawau was brought up in a scholarly environment. With the attainment of marriage age, she was married to Muhammad b. Salih b. Muhammad b. Fudi. According to al-Masr, (in Hashimi, 2008:23 Muhammad b. Fudi, the husband of Hawau was the most learned scholar among the Fulani cleric throughout Hausaland in the eighteenth century.). Therefore, Hawau was married to a home, in environment reputed for religious learning. The intellectual environment that she lived had a great impact on her, although, one cannot determine the extent of her knowledge, but according to al-illuri (1978:94). In account of her given by ‘Abdullahi b. Fudi she was the first teacher of her Sons ‘Uthman

b. Fudi and Abdullah b. Fudi. Thus, Hawau belonged to the literary circle of her time and a symbol of female scholarship in the period under study.

#### **Asmau bint ‘Uthman (1793—1864 C.E)**

Asmau bint ‘Uthman was one of the famous Muslim female scholars that emerged in pre-colonial Nigeria. She was called Nana Asmau for her reputation in learning. She was born around 1793 C.E (1208H). She was said to be the most brilliant among female children of ‘Uthman b. Fudi, and was the most prolific female writer of her time who distinguished herself in many intellectual fields. (Ogunbiyi, 1975:26). Her intellectual trait was apparent at the early age. She acquired a thorough knowledge of the Qur’an and Hadith. In addition, Nana Asmau had mastery of Arabic, Hausa and Tuareg languages that she employed these trilingual languages adequately in her writings. At the age of puberty, she was married to Uthman b. Abi Bakr popularly known as Gidado Laimu around 1807, a famous scholar and the Wazir and scribe of her father and later her brother Muhammad Bello. Her writings in Arabic are the best works that her fame rests with. She authored many works, but the popular ones are:

- i. *Tanbi h al-Ghafilin*
- ii. *Tabshiral-ikhwaan*
- iii. *Rithauu*

She embarked upon what may be termed as politico philanthropic activities which had tremendously mobilized women in the North. She planned out the distribution of cloths and food stuffs to the destitute and the needy. She also conducted mass literacy campaign as well as helping the orphans and widows. Nana Asmau became the teacher of all the girls and women in her family and also trained her younger brother, Isa in Quranic studies and Arabic. She travelled extensively with her father during the outbreak of Jihad in 1804 and lived in different places in Hausa land. Of all her scholarly works; her translations were the most important. She rendered many works of Shaykh ‘Uthman b. Fudi into Hausa from Fulfulde, thus helping the wider dissemination of the ideas of her father (Aisha Lemu, 2003:35). Without doubt, Nana Asmau was an outstanding female scholar, produced by the Sokoto Caliphate. She was described as a woman saint (*waliyyat*) she produced various works in Arabic, Hausa and Fulfulde. Her works covered various themes such as politics, governance, social reforms, admonition, domestic issues, panegyry and elegy. Apart from being a preacher, who enjoined people to do good and forbidding wrong things, urging people to follow the *shar‘iah* and emulate the *sunna*, she was also a *Sufi* woman, who enjoyed exalted sublime *Sufi* conducts. She left Sokoto in 1850C.E. after the death of her husband Laima Gidado to live with her son Waziri “Abd al-Qadr but she was returned to Sokoto in 1859C.E. and later died in 1864C.E. (Boyds 1989:51).

#### **Aisha bint Umar Al Kammu: (b.1793)**

Aisha bint Umar Al Kammu was another female scholar who surfaced in academic scene in the Northern Nigeria. She was born in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. She received the traditional Islamic sciences, studied the Qur’an and rudimentary knowledge of Arabic. When she attained the age of puberty, she was married to Muhammad Bello. She therefore moved from a scholarly maiden home to a scholarly marital home. Her marriage did not stop her intellectual pursuit; she acquired more knowledge from her husband. The elegy of Nana Asmau, chanted on her, shows that she was very deep in religious practice, and more so, she was knowledgeable in Quranic recitation and *Sufi* ordinances. Aisha bint Umar was no doubt a female scholar who also featured well in academic activities in the nineteenth century. She was widely admired for her writings. As a scholar and poetess, her social work and religious commitment are very great. She commanded respect and admiration for her role as a teacher, social worker and philanthropist. Although, she died at early age in life, but the legacies she left behind will not be defaced.

#### **Fatima bint ‘Uthman b. Fudi (1787—1838)**

Sayyidah Fatimah was born around 1787C.E./1202H. She was a full sister of Muhammad Bello. Her education passed through traditional Islamic sciences. Fatima like any of the children of her father was born in a scholarly home, reputed for Islamic sciences and religious devotion She received her early education under the feet of her father, later from her brother Muhammad Bello and from other members of her family. She married the army commander Ali Jedo. Fatimah was a scholar in her own right.

In addition to her Arabic writings, she also wrote poetry in Fulfulde. Her works contain philosophical reflection on life, especially when one attains the ages of fifty, (*Fi-man balagha khamsin*) sixty (*Wa-sithin*) and seventy (*Wa-sabin*). His second popular work titled: *as-salat ala l-nabi wa-fadail al-dhikhr* (invocation of the prophet and merit of recollection) (Hunwick, 1995:154). Fatimah was a teacher of her own family and her neighbours, she helped in the dissemination of knowledge in her community. She passed on in 1838C.E./1254H after a brief illness that struck her. She had to her credit poetic verses in Fulfulde.

#### **Maryam bint ‘Uthman b. Fudi (1810—1880)**

Maryam bint ‘Uthman was born around 1810C.E./1225H. She was born into a scholarly family, at time that the seed of jihad started to germinate and the institution of Sokoto caliphate was built. She received traditional Islamic sciences and her early education from her father Shaykh Uthman b. Fudi. Later, her studentship was spent under her elder sister Asma. She and her full brother Isa continued to learn under Asmau till she acquired from her what was sufficient for her. At attainment of puberty, she was married to a son of the Waziri of Sokoto, Gidado dan Laiman, and later to the Emir of Kano, Ibrahim Dabo (Darma, 1985:89—93). Maryam, being a scholar in her own right organised Arabic School in the palace of her husband in Kano. Maryam as a female scholar participated in the Kano State affairs and she was very influential in decision making. To show the depth of her knowledge, the Emir of Kano wrote to consult her about the time of the manifestation of the *Mahdi* when some of his subjects began emigrating eastwards in his expectations (Darma, 1985:89 —93). However, the death of her husband, the Emir of Kano, Ibrahim Dabo made her to return to Sokoto. She composed many poetic works and co-authored a book on traditional medicine with her sister, Asmau. Maryam was classified as a woman saint. She died in 1880 C.E./1296H and left behind five works.

#### **Khadijah bint ‘Uthman b. Fudi (1782 — 1856 C.E.)**

Khadijah bint ‘Uthman was born into a scholarly family of the Fudis in 1782 C.E. As members of her family were learned, she actually started what could be described as primary education in those days from them. She received her early education from her father. In an account of her studies, given by European scholar, Last (1967:43), she had mastery of Arabic, Fulbe and Hausa languages. She accompanied her father Shaykh ‘Uthman b. Fudi: on his hijra from Gobir to Gudu on February 21st, 1804. She was married to al-Mustafa b. Muhammad al-Turudi in the same year of the Hijra. Khadijah bint ‘Uthman wrote a good deal of poetry in Fulfulde. The themes of her works centered on goodness to parent (*Fi birr al-walidayn*), signs of the appearance of the expected Mahdi (*Fi dhikr alamat zuhur al-mahdi*), jurisprudence (*Fi l-fiqh*), elegy (*Fi ritha ‘zawjiha al-alim al-Mustafa*), Arabic grammar (*Fi ‘l-nahw*) and supplication prayer for Wurnu’s village (*al-du’a li qaryat Wurnu*). She was a scholar in her own right. Her son ‘Abd al-Qadir b. al-Mustafa was described to Barth in 1853 as the most learned of the present generation of the inhabitants of Sokoto. After an impressive academic life, Khadijah al-Kubrah passed on in 1856 C.E. and left behind six works.

#### **Conclusions**

It is evident in this paper that women were involved in academic tradition in Northern Nigeria before the colonial incursion. Though, the literary activities of pre-jihad period were overshadowed by the vast scholarly productions of the male scholars. However, there was a considerable development in literary activities of female scholars in the period that immediately followed *jihad*. The significance underlining the activities is that Muslim women were literate and they participated in academic activities of their time. It is noticeable in this regard that the literary works of female scholars are not only religious themes, but social matters are also treated. Today, the Arabic literary scholars pay fulsome tributes to their contributions to knowledge. In conclusion, this paper reveals that Islam encourages women scholarship and supports women advancement. Hence, the agitation for women empowerment today is in alliance with Islam, but Islam has already provided for it over one thousand four hundred years ago, raising objection to cruelty and discrimination against women.

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