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**Historical Narratives of Women's Contributions to Education in
Northern Nigeria**

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Abstract

From time immemorial, women have made tremendous contributions to the development of their respective societies. These vary greatly with each successive stage of human development. Northern Nigeria is patriarchal in nature which is a major feature of a traditional society where powerful cultural traditions undermine the rights of women. They are therefore discriminated upon from, in most cases, acquiring formal education. Girl's educational opportunities tend to be circumscribed by patriarchy, parent's preference of education of boys than girls. In spite of the social pressures on women such as early marriage, and other extraneous factors as well as practices, many women are breaking glass ceiling and contributed greatly in educational development in Northern Nigeria. This paper used a historical analysis to discuss women's contributions to education. The paper examined these contributions in tripartite structures: Pre-colonial, Colonial and Post-colonial and argued that Nana Asma'u bin Fodio's scholarly position and intellectual contributions to the development of women education were the major factors for the solid foundation of women education.

Key words: Northern Nigeria, Women, Education, Pre-colonial, Colonial, Post-colonial

Introduction

A woman plays the role of a mother, a wife and other functional societal role. At home, she plays an enormous role in shaping the future life pattern of the children. She is responsible for the upbringing, training and education of the children. Women play great roles in the

inculcation and promotion of education in the society since children are the leaders of tomorrow (Anka, 2006).

Northern Nigeria is located within a very deeply religious setting. The existence of Islamic education which had survived the intrusion of western education during colonialism has created a distinctive system where the majority of the players in the field are Muslim. Education is a critical factor in human life. It is a strong basic ingredient to the total development of people in societies. However, Northern Nigeria has the lowest percentages for formal (western) education and general literacy rate. Female involvement in formal western schooling in Northern Nigeria was extremely low. This was due to both cultural barriers against educating girls and resistance to western forms of education. For many years early marriage was popularly supported by most families and percentages of girls were rarely allowed to attend formal western schools or go beyond primary education. As such, greater percentage of the population especially the female could not read or write. (Badawi, 2009). These cultural attitudes of domination and marginalization of the womenfolk is observed by Ker and Okwori (1998) as follows:

In almost all cultures and subcultures in the country, there is a perpetual domination of men over the women. Families placed emphasis on the education of male rather than female- girls are used for economic ventures to facilitate payment of education of the males.

Furthermore, with the incorporation of Nigeria into the international economy as a supplier of raw materials, new patriarchal conceptions of the appropriate social role for women dictated by colonial administrators and missionaries changed the position of women socially, politically and economically. The introduction of western education also favoured only men. Schools were established to train men to serve as clerks, interpreters, etc, for the colonial administration. The schools that were established for the girls were geared towards making women good mothers, good housewives and epitomes of elegance and reticence (Sani, 2001).

In spite of the patriarchal nature of the pre-colonial society and the unfavourable educational policies of the colonial government towards women, some notable northern Nigerian women still emerged and became famous in various fields of endeavours through the activities of various Muslim women organizations. This paper examined women's contributions to education in Northern Nigeria in tripartite structures: Pre-colonial, Colonial and Post-colonial.

Women and Knowledge Production in the Sokoto Caliphate

The social and economic orientation of Northern Nigeria has been greatly influenced by her early contact with Islam which had become part and parcel of the society at the time of British advent. When the British arrived in the region in 1903, they found a hierarchical society, with centuries-old Islamic systems of law, education, and commerce. In Islam, seeking for knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim, male and female. In view of this,, the renowned scholar Sheikh Usman Danfodiyo was categorically clear on the affairs of women in relation to education, where he counseled them to seek for knowledge (Sokoto, 2013). The 19th century jihad and the subsequent establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate produced great scholars

including women. There are a lot of written works by women as opined by Buhari (2012) within the framework of the Sokoto caliphate. Over fifty books were written by women, enough to demonstrate the existence of a group of highly intelligent, educated articulated and determined women. Scholars (Boyd, 1989 & Kaura; 1990) have established that the conditions of women before the jihad were deplorable; their status was largely confined to the issues of marriage, enslavement and concubine. But with the outbreak of the Jihad and the efforts of the jihadist women education began to take its right shape. According to Bugaje (2015), Shehu was particularly moved by the pathetic position of women, who had been deliberately left ignorant and turned into chattels. In effect, the jihad culminated in the rise of a number of women scholars particularly within the Shehu's family. These women became versed in Islamic sciences and produced many works. Among these women was Nana Asmau whose contributions were what laid the concrete foundation of women education in Northern Nigeria (Kaura, 1990).

Nana Asmau was well known as an influential Islamic scholar. During the jihad she was a teacher to both men and women. She acted as a role model and encouraged other women in the caliphate to pursue education and influence local communities. The main contributions of Asmau were the formation of *Yan Taru* organization in 1830 for the purpose of facilitating women education. This organization consists of a network of Muslim women who had been trained as teachers under Nana Asma'u and had worked with her to educate women and children in Islamic religious and literary education (Ahmed, 2015). These women and girls came from different angles of remote areas to attend her classes and when they became well-educated, they returned to their towns to teach married women and those who were not able to attend the school. They were led by knowledgeable women called *jajis*. The result of this massive women's education campaign was the production of articulated scholarly women called '*Modibbo* (Omar, 2015) the learned. Before the formation of the *Yan Taru*, Asma'u began by teaching children and women of her household then extended to neighbourhood and then to the community as whole. Asma'u defined education as women's political space and used education as a tool for state-building.

Mack and Boyd (1990) observed that, "Asmau has established education for women which was skilled, fully organized and successfully administered even after her death." Sheikh Usman Danfodiyo had four wives, Hauwa'u, Maimuna, Aisha, and Hadiza, all prominent female scholars who were fluent in Arabic, Fulfulde and Hausa. These women together with their husband Sheikh educated their children in classical Islamic as well as domestic, education.

Other notable women scholars of the Sheikh Usman Danfodiyo family include; Khadija, Fatima and Maryam. These women served as vanguards of education. In the views of Kaura (1990), they played a great role in the dissemination of knowledge to their brothers and sisters. In order to effectively impart their knowledge to the entire communities of the caliphate, they composed poems in different disciplines of Islam. They also undertook translation on works of jihad leaders from either Arabic or *Fulfulde* into Hausa for easy comprehension by the majority

of people of Hausa land. Apart from female members of Shehu's family, other women in the caliphate contributed in women education as expressed in Nana Asmau elegies:

The teacher of women, Habiba

She was most revered and had great presence.

I speak of Aisha, a saint on account of her asceticism and determination

And Joda Kowuuri a Qur'anic scholar

Who used her scholarship every where

There were others who were upright in the community of the Shehu.

I have not listed them.

Very many of them had learned the Qur'an by heart.

And were exceedingly pious and zealous (Mack & Boyd, 1990).

Becoming a scholar in her own right, Asmau became the most prolific writer in West Africa renowned for her literary activities, and of women's education. It was not only the case that women were involved in such scholarship but even more significant was the fact women were instrumental in educating their children. Among the pupils Asma'u taught include her brother Isah (Mai Kware), who became a renowned scholar and Maryam (Uwar Daje) her sister, who took over Asmau's school after her death. Mack and Boyd assert that "Asma'u was a powerful historical agent whose teaching and writings have served as basis of knowledge for men and women into the modern day" (Mack & Boyd, 1990). Asmau'u was a pearl on a string of women's scholarship that extended in the Muslim world and without a doubt exemplar in her character and accomplishments. She has left behind a powerful scholarly legacy that serves as the model for women throughout the Maghreb, one that extends into contemporary times.

There were other women in other parts of the Sokoto caliphate who contributed significantly to teaching and scholarship such as in Katsina, Adamawa emirates and as well as Yandoto. Maimunatu Binta Qadhi Bazari was a jurist, Grammarian and *Sufist*. She authored some books both in prose and poetry. She was founder of famous Islamiyya School which is known for teaching children and women in Kastina. Bobboyi mentioned Amina the daughter of Muhammad Nakashiri b. Ibrahim (c.1877-1947) as a scholar and teacher to the ruling house of Adamawa (Bobboyi, 1995). Goggo Zaituna (c.1880-1950) was another educator that wrote a number of religious poems in Fulfulde language. Yandoto was a great centre of learning both prior to the jihad and after the jihad. It was a prominent Islamic centre like Timbuktu, Kano and Bornu. In spite of the neglect suffered by women education in pre-jihad Hausaland, Yandoto had produced female scholars of repute. In view of these, one can rightly assert that women's education resulted in major contributions to Sokoto's powerful, well documented history and literary productions.

Women and Education in Colonial Era

By the beginning of the 20th century the caliphate was crushed by the British colonial army. It was in March, 1903 that Sokoto fell to the invading force. After subduing the northern region by military conquest, the British established good relations with the Emirs and their people and adopted Indirect Rule through the Emirs. Change in education came slowly with the gradual establishment of few modern Government schools and teachers' colleges for boys and later for girls. The British gave limited encouragement to western education in the north. Although the policy of the British in the Protectorate was to discourage missionary activity, but it would appear that the policy was more in keeping with the desire to maintain Northern development strictly on native lines (Abubakar,1990).

Tibenderana citing Andrew (2009) observed that:

Colonial education was meant to maintain an inherently inequitable and unjust organization of production and political power, to make people useful in the new hierarchy and to not help them develop societal relationships which carried them beyond that social structure.

From all indications, colonial education in Northern Nigeria was aimed at preparing the traditional class, persons that could serve their ascribed roles in the colonial dispensation *vis-à-vis* preparing those of the lower class to fit into their subordinate positions while ignoring the women. The marginalization of elite Muslim women was institutionalized through the construction of British schools in the Northern Provinces. It was only in the 1930s that women western education started to emerge in the north with the establishment of Katsina Girls School (1933) and Sokoto Women Training Centre (1938), Tibenderana (1985). Although women were largely excluded from colonial schools, they continued to serve as educational and religious leaders during the first two decades of colonial rule. There was a proliferation of women's literary production, akin to the time of Nana Asma'u. This phenomenon suggested that the women had pursued education and writing on their own even when they were not visible in the colonial school. The British colonial administration in the region publicly asserted formal education as men's domain. However, Muslim elite women in particular-were able to negotiate power and retain autonomy with respect to their own education through the network of the *YanTaru*.

Boyd (1995) observed that:

When the British arrived in Sokoto Tamodi, Shehu Dan Fodio's granddaughter was the head of the teaching network. I have spoken to women who went to the *Hubbare* to be taught by Tamodi in the reign of Sultan Abdurrahaman before the British invasion, and am convinced of the claims made by the women scholars I have met.

The establishment of a women's training center in Sokoto in 1938 was another boost in female education in Northern Nigeria. The training center was established primarily to train Muslim

women teachers to assist the European teachers. Many of the women adopted teaching careers after graduation. These women teachers act as positive role models and mentors for girls in school, encouraging girls in their education and personal endeavours. By 1950, there was, in addition to the women' training centres, a Vernacular center in Sokoto established for training women in basic craft and communicative skills. At independence in 1960, few of the women had graduated and obtained the Grade Two Teacher's Certificate (Grade II and III) and by 1964 the girls' school in Sokoto became a Secondary School for girls (Knipp, 1985).

The establishment of the Queen Elizabeth School in Ilorin in 1956 by the then Northern Regional Government under the leadership of late Premier of the Region, Sir Ahmadu Bello as the first Girls Government Secondary School to be established in northern Nigeria was a response to the clamour for a special college that would provide sound education for girls in the region to improve girl-child education. Although most of the girls got married after graduation but few engaged in teaching in primary schools. Since then, many women in Northern Nigeria have had the opportunity to acquire some form of western education. Several of them who graduated from secondary schools have entered Universities and also graduated and took up teaching jobs. Today some of them have become respected scholars in their various fields. Umar (2004), notes that by the mid 1970s, there was a proliferation of female Muslim scholars in Northern Nigeria whose education stemmed from a convergence of several tracks and modern secular learning into a single educational system.

Post Colonial Era

The post independence era witnessed the emergence of women's organizations not only in northern Nigeria but in different parts of the country. Their aim was women's education and activism for their own betterment and that of their communities. Hajiya Laila Dogonyaro, advocated that there was the need to improve the quality of women's education. Considering that education is a basic necessity for the advancement of any society. Hajiya Laila was one of the founding members of *Jam'iyar Matan Arewa (JMA)* the first women's group established in Northern Nigeria in 1963. The main objective of the women's group was to help the less fortunate women in their communities. Later the body expanded its operations by establishing schools for nursery, Primary and Secondary students (Aka, 2012). The organization sought to bring together women in the north in order to teach the reading and writing of English and general domestic science. Other notable members of this organization include; Mrs Comfort Dikko, Hajiya Bamanga Tukur, Mrs Zakari and Hajiya Aishatu Jeda (Bawa, 2016).

Prior to the emergence of this organization, Hajiya Gambo Sawaba prominently fought for the exposure of female children in the North to western education. She was a renowned member of Northern Element Progressive Union (NEPU) political party which campaigned for women's education in both religious and secular spheres. Although Sawaba had a poor educational background and was married out at the early age of 16, she towered above her challenges to emerge as a social advocate of women education in Northern Nigeria (Bawa, 2013).

Several women's organization emerged in the early 1980s such as Women in Nigeria (WIN) and Federation of Muslim Women Association of Nigeria (FOMWAN) sought to educate women about their right. More importantly they became instrumental in promoting women's education and Islamic education. In the late 20th century, northern Nigerian women repeatedly said that women in the community needed to be literate so that they could know their rights and be sure that these rights were fulfilled.

The Federation of Muslim Women's Associations of Nigeria (FOMWAN) since 1985 the organization has worked to spread Islam through *da'awah* and advocate for Muslim girls' education. It engages in programmes to increase the retention rate of girls in school, continued education for married women and integrated literacy and vocational training into Qur'anic schools (Bawa, 2017). FOMWAN has been in the forefront of not only campaigning for quality schools and programs for the girl-child but has also provided and funded some of these schools. The low level of education among Muslim women in Nigeria and particularly northern Nigeria is what FOMWAN sought to tackle from its inception.

In the views of one of its founders, Balkisu cited in Danfulani (2012), stated:

It is a paradox that although education is compulsory in Islam, the education of women was not made a priority in many Muslim communities like Northern Nigeria where girls are either sent hawking on the streets or withdrawn from schools and married off early.

This state of affairs has hampered women's access to education, thereby creating a gender disparity in education. Just like Nana Asmau's women educational movement, FOMWAN has organized seminars and conferences challenging patriarchal ideology and promoting women's literacy and access to education. The importance of teachers as facilitators and motivators in teaching/learning enterprise has always been acknowledged. Teaching is often regarded as the mother of all professions and Northern Nigerian women are mostly in charge. Since 1977 when the National Policy on Education declared that the Nigerian Certificate in Education (NCE) would become the minimum qualification for entry into the teaching profession, Colleges of Education have been established to produce NCE teachers. A noticeable development since the 1980s has been the increasing number of female teachers in Northern Nigeria. Among the various Universities in Northern Nigeria, women lecturers are found in many disciplines and departments of the various faculties. Prof. Aisha Madawaki Isah is a distinguished educationist and academic. An indigene of the Sokoto State has devoted 37 years in teaching. She taught at various levels (Secondary, College of Education and University). Aisha has published extensively on the area of girl-child education, with particular reference to Sokoto State. It is important to state that through her scholarship she was able to educate and encourage parents to educate their children especially the girls who are mostly the disadvantaged. The hallmark of her contributions was continuing challenge on the restrictions of the education of women. It was no doubt in recognition of her erudition and scholarship that she was appointed a commissioner of Basic and Secondary Education by the present administration of Sokoto State. Apart from teaching and research, Prof. Aisha has supervised over 50 Masters Dissertation and

10 PhDs including the author of this paper. There are a good number of Northern Nigerian women especially the Hausa/ Fulani and Kanuri Professors in different fields as indicated in table the below.

Table 1: Some Northern Nigeria Female Professors in northern Nigerian Universities

S/ N	NAME	SPECIALIZATION	STATE	UNIVERSITY
1	Prof. Zainab Alkali	Literature	Borno	UNIMAID
2	Prof. Rukayya Ahmed Rufai	Education	Kano	BUK
3	Prof. Gaji Fatima Dantata	Education	Kano	BUK
4	Prof. Aisha Abdul Ismail	Political Science	Kano	BUK
5	Prof. Aishatu Abubakar Haliru	Mathematics	Kebbi	BUK
6	Prof. Hadiza Shehu Galadanci	Obstetric Gunea.	Kano	BUK
7	Prof. Talatu Musa Garba	Language Education	Kano	BUK
8	Prof. Fatima Batula Muktar	Botany	Kano	BUK/VC FU Dutse
9	Prof. Aisha Madawaki Isa	Educational Psychology	Sokoto	UDUS
10	Prof. Asabe Kabir	Literature	Niger	UDUS
11	Prof. Sadiya Omar Bello	Nigeria Language	Sokoto	UDUS
12	Prof. Maimuna Waziri	Analytical chemistry	Borno	F.U. Gashua
13	Prof. Amina Abubakar Bashir	Socio Linguistic	Borno	F.U. Dutse
14	Prof. Fanna Inna Abdulrahman	Chemistry	Borno	UNIMAID
15	Prof. Sadiya Sani Daura	English	Katsina	BUK
16	Prof. Binta Tijani Jibril	Economics	Kano	BUK
17	Prof. Ghaji Badawi	Library & information science	Kano	BUK
18	Prof. Ummu Ahmed Jalingo	Economics	Adamawa	BUK
19	Prof. Amina Zakari Mohammed	Home Economics	Kaduna	ABU
20	Prof. Khadijat Mahmoud	Educ. Psychology	Adamawa	ABU
21	Prof. Raliyat Bello	Educ. Psychology	Kaduna	ABU
22	Prof. Fatima Ja'afaru Tahir	Microbiology	Bauchi	ATBU
23	Prof. Halimatu Idris	Vet. Parasitology	Katsina	UNIABUJA
24	Prof. Ramlatu Daura	English	Katsina	ABU
25	Prof. Mairo Inuwa	Biochemistry	Kaduna	ABU
26	Prof. Aisha Indo Mamman	Haematology (Medicine)	Kaduna	ABU
27	Prof. Asma'u G. Saed	History	Kano	BUK

Source: Oral information obtained from staff of BUK, ABU, UNIMAID Universities.

These female professors have excelled in their fields of specialization and are contributing immensely to the development of education and nation at large. The role they play serves as a source of inspiration to the generation of young women.

Conclusion

This paper examined women contributions to education in Northern Nigeria in three historical epochs (Pre-colonial, Colonial and Post-colonial). Northern Nigeria has a long history of Islamic education and intellectual tradition with women involved. Islamic education has fostered traditions of Islamic learning that have produced outstanding Islamic scholars. This achievement would not have been possible without the role and contributions of Nana Asmau and other women scholars of the pre-colonial era. The educational programme left by Nana Asmau is still retained by educated elite women in Northern Nigeria and other parts of the country though in modern form. Through women's organizations elite women in Northern Nigeria have challenged the patriarchal notion and traditional practices hindering the education of girls' child. These women have become vanguards of women education through establishment of schools, organizing conferences and seminars, creating awareness, and lobbying government to ensure policies that will promote girls and women access to education. They have used their position as educators and administrators to create and open space to women and children education.

In conclusion, contrary to the dominant perception or understanding of most scholars on Muslim women in this region is their subordination by men and domination arising from the intersection of Islam and cultural, the paper has demonstrated that against all odds there are notable successful women of distinction who have excelled and contributed significantly in educational development not only in Northern Nigeria but Nigeria at large.

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