

December 2023



Dear Club Members,

Born 230 years ago Nana Asma'u was a Muslim philosopher. Her father was the Caliph of Sokoto in what is now northern Nigeria. He was an advocate of the rights of women to be educated, and have Nana the same education as her brothers. She continued her education to become a hafitha, a person who has memorised the Quran, and recognised as a spiritual and political leader.

When she became concerned about a rise in occult beliefs in rural areas she set up an education system called Yan-Taru, which means "the coming together" or sisterhood. The teachers were all women, and travelled in pairs, one was always a woman past childbearing age, and the other an unmarried girl. They travelled to rural villages teaching the local women using educational poems. These were written by Asma'u, and were designed to be learned by heart, and were the basis for more advanced learning. The poems established women's rights and were intended to be recited by the village women to their husbands. The teachers wore red turbans as a sign of their position, and the system was so successful that there are still Yan-Taru groups in some parts of Nigeria and in the United States.

They also spread Islam in to the newly conquered regions. Her family had established the Sokoto caliphate after winning the Fulani War, and were determined to convert the local populations to their religion. An estimated 1-2.5 million non-Muslim slaves were captured during the war, and were made to work plantations. Many of the conquered populations were forcefully converted to Islam. The Caliphate was probably the most developed in Sub-Saharan Africa at that time, and a period of economic prosperity led to a flowering of scholarly activity, that Nana was a part of. Systems were in place to look after the poor, and also ensure that Islamic scholars could be devoted to their studies. "Great Houses" took care of basic amenities like food and clothing. Food was prepared in the houses, which then acted like communal canteens. Clothing came largely from the payments from the other emirates in the caliphate and was redistributed to the community. This system helped Sokoto maintain a large scholarly community.

In her lifetime she was recognised as a fellow scholar, and became a counsellor to her brother when he succeeded to the throne. We still have access to 60 of her pieces of written work, who knows how many more have been lost over time. These were written over 40 years, until her death in 1864. During her lifetime the Sokoto state grew and thrived, by 1837 it had a population of up to 20 million people, making it the most populous in West Africa. The state stretched from modern-day Burkina Faso to Cameroon and included most of northern Nigeria and southern Niger. By 1901 the British had conquered southern Nigeria and began to move northwards, at the same time Germany was making efforts to conquer the area that is now Cameroon. In 1903 Sokoto was officially ceded to the British, and became known as Northern Nigeria. In 1914 it was combined with the Nigerian South to form the country we now call Nigeria, which gained its independence in 1953.

Nana's legacy isn't forgotten, she still remembered as a precursor to modern feminism in Africa, and many schools, organisations and meeting halls are named after her. Your fibre this month is inspired by the red turbans worn by the travelling teachers.

Happy Spinning

Katie

Fibre Content- In case your parcel is missing the label

Further Reading-

Sokoto Caliphate

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sokoto_Caliphate

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BKpUzuvEiMA>

Nana Asma'u

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yi5if2Dzw3Y>

<https://www.ascleiden.nl/content/library-weekly/nana-asmau>

<https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/42722>

<https://amazingwomeninhistory.com/nana-asmau-princess-poet-reformer-muslim-womens-education/>