



## An Appraisal of the Role of Female Muslim Scholars in the Development of Islam and Its Civilization in Gwandu Emirate of Kebbi State, Nigeria: A Historical Perspective

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### Abstract

*This study examines the often-overlooked contributions of female Muslim scholars to the growth and consolidation of Islam and its civilization in Gwandu Emirate, Kebbi State, Nigeria. Utilizing a historical and qualitative approach, the paper explores the intellectual, educational, and socio-religious roles of these women within the broader framework of Islamic reform initiated by the Sokoto Jihad leaders. Drawing upon historical documents, oral accounts, and lived experiences, the study highlights how women participated in Qur'anic and Hadith studies, Islamic jurisprudence, and da'wah, particularly through institutions like the Yan Taru movement. It reveals that female scholars were pivotal in advancing Islamic education and moral reform, innovating traditional methods, and fostering social change, despite minimal institutional support. Their resilience and dedication positioned them as vital agents in shaping Islamic identity and civilization in the region. The paper argues that recovering and recognizing these contributions is essential for reconstructing a more inclusive Islamic historiography and for inspiring contemporary Islamic educational practices among women.*

**Keywords:** Female Muslim scholars, Gwandu Emirate, Sokoto Caliphate, Islamic civilization, women in Islam, Islamic education.

### Introduction

The historical development of Islam and its rich civilization across different regions of the world has often been narrated through the contributions of male scholars, rulers, and reformers. However, such narratives tend to overlook or underrepresent the vital roles played by female Muslim scholars, especially within local and regional contexts. In the Gwandu Emirate of Kebbi State, Nigeria a prominent Islamic center in the western Sudanese region and one of the legacies of the 19th-century Sokoto Caliphate the contribution of women to Islamic scholarship, education, and socio-religious development holds a significant but underexplored place in history.

This study offers a historical appraisal of the role of female Muslim scholars in the development of Islam and its civilization in Gwandu Emirate. It seeks to examine the intellectual and educational participation of women, their roles in religious leadership, jurisprudence, transmission of knowledge, and the preservation of Islamic culture within the emirate. By doing so, it aims to highlight how their contributions shaped both the spiritual and social fabric of the region, challenged gender assumptions in Islamic history, and laid the groundwork for contemporary Islamic learning among women in northern Nigeria.

The research adopts a historical perspective, drawing from both primary and secondary sources, including archival records, oral traditions, and existing literature. Through this lens, the study endeavors to bridge the gap in Islamic historiography and bring to light the silent but significant voices of female scholars who helped sustain the legacy of Islamic civilization in Gwandu Emirate.

## Islam and Its Development in Gwandu Emirate

Islam, as both a religion and a way of life, has played a profound role in shaping the political, social, and intellectual history of the Gwandu Emirate, located in present-day Kebbi State, Nigeria. Gwandu stands as one of the historical centers of Islamic learning and administration particularly associated with the emergence of Sokoto Caliphate, under *Shaykh* 'Uthman bn Fodiyo. Before the emergence of Gwandu Emirate, Islam had already begun penetrating Hausaland from the 11th century through the trans-Saharan trade and the activities of North African scholars and merchants. However, its spread was initially limited to the ruling elite, urban centers, and traders (Hiskett, 1973). The social and political integration of Islam with Hausaland came later with the rise of Islamic reform movements famous among was nineteenth century Islamic movement led by *Shaykh* 'Uthman. The *Jihad* was launched with the aim of purifying Islam from un-Islamic practices and re-establish Islamic governance. Following the success of the *Jihad*, the Sokoto Caliphate reform was formed and divided into two main administrative regions, the eastern and the western regions. The former was administered from Gwandu. Gwandu Emirate was entrusted to *Shaykh* Abdullahi bn Fodiyo, the younger brother of *Shaykh* 'Uthman. As the *Amir* of Gwandu, *Shaykh* Abdullahi did not only govern the western region but also wrote extensively on Islamic jurisprudence, governance, and theology (Last, 1967). His works, such as *Diya' al-Sultan* and *Tazalim al-Umara'*, became foundational to the legal and administrative order in the Emirate.

Gwandu emerged as a vibrant center of Islamic learning, attracting scholars, students, and jurists from across the region. The ruling elite, under the influence of the Jihad leaders, emphasized Qur'anic education, *Hadith* studies, *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and Arabic literacy. Islamic schools (*makarantun allo* and *makarantun ilmi*) flourished across the Emirate. These schools were often attached to mosques and residences of their instructors, known as *Mallams*. The instructors (*Mallams*) in Gwandu, like in other parts of the region, did not only taught traditional Islamic sciences but also encouraged intellectual debates and legal interpretation rooted in the *Maliki* school of thought (Boyd, 1989).

## Islamic Scholarship and the Emergence of Female Muslim Scholars in Gwandu Emirate

Islamic scholarship has long been a defining element of the sociopolitical and cultural identity of Gwandu Emirate. It is a hub of Islamic learning under the intellectual and administrative leadership of *Shaykh* Abdullahi bn Fodiyo. Hence, the Islamic scholarship tradition of Gwandu was the aftermath of the 1804 Sokoto *Jihad* that was deeply rooted in the ideals of Islamic reform, education, and governance (Last, 1967). Islamic education in Gwandu followed the traditional *madrasa* and *halqa* systems, where learning was carried out in mosque premises, private homes of the local *mallams*, and under the guidance of learned scholars. The *Maliki* school of jurisprudence was the dominant legal focus, while knowledge of *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis), *hadith*, *nahw* (Arabic grammar), and *tasawwuf* (spirituality) were also integral to the curriculum (Hiskett, 1984).

Still on the education, the *Jihad* leaders advocated for mass literacy and knowledge acquisition for all, including among women. *Shaykh* 'Uthman asserted that "a woman may be learned and teach others, just as a man may be learned and teach others," thus legitimizing women's participation in Islamic scholarship (Boyd & Mack, 1997, p. 115). To actualize his ideals, *Shaykh* 'Uthman educated his daughter, *Nana Asma'u* (1793–1864), who later turned to be a prolific scholar, poet, and educator fluent in Arabic, Fulfulde, Hausa, and Tuareg. She produced religious poetry, translations, and educational manuals aimed particularly at women. She also founded a women education programme called *Yan Taru*, a network of trained women educators who traveled across the Caliphate to teach other women the basics of Islamic knowledge, hygiene, and moral conduct (Boyd, 1989). The *Yan Taru* system provided a platform for local women to become literate, especially in rural areas where literacy was low. This system complemented the efforts of the leaders of *Jihad* across various parts of the Caliphate, Gwandu Emirate inclusive (Fisher, 1970). Following the efforts of *Nana Asma'u* and the broader Jihadist philosophy, Gwandu Emirate witnessed the gradual emergence of local female scholars. These women, often the daughters and wives of prominent scholars and emirs, were raised in intellectually vibrant households and received education in Qur'anic sciences, Arabic, and sometimes Islamic jurisprudence (Sanusi, 2001). However, the identity and activities of selected Muslim female scholars who have contributed to the development of Islam and its civilization in Gwandu are provided in the subsequent section of this paper.

## The Impact of the Role of Female Muslim Scholars in Gwandu Emirate

The historical and contemporary impact of female Muslim scholars in Gwandu Emirate is profound, especially through their pivotal role in the dissemination of Islamic knowledge and moral education. Their contributions are most notably evident within the female *Islamiyyah* school system, a unique Islamic educational structure that has remained a cornerstone of Gwandu's Islamic civilization. This is evident in various ways.

Firstly, Female Muslim scholars in Gwandu, played a foundational role in the transmission and preservation of Islamic knowledge, particularly among women. The Islamic traditional learning method employed in their schools was structured and comprehensive. It began with Qur'anic education, starting from basic literacy in the Arabic script (*Babbaku*), advancing to phonetics (*Farfaru*), and culminating in full recitation and memorization (*Sabka*). These steps enabled women to become not only proficient readers but also experts in *Qirā'āt*, particularly the *Warsh* and *Hafs* recitations, and

in Qur'anic sciences (*'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*). The inclusion of *Tafsīr* (exegesis of the Qur'an) was another notable contribution. Female scholars taught classical commentaries, particularly those authored by *Shaykh* Abdullahi bn Fodiyo, such as *Ḍiyā'u al-Tawīl* and *Kifāh al-Ḍu'afā'u al-Sūdān*, thus preserving the intellectual heritage of the Sokoto *Jihad*.

Alongside Qur'anic education, *Hadith* and *Fiqh* (jurisprudence) were core subjects in the curriculum. These subjects were introduced early to students to promote a deeper understanding of Islamic practice and law. The *Hadith* teachings helped bridge the gap between textual knowledge and daily religious practice, as many Islamic rituals, such as ablution, are clarified only acts in *Hadith*. The study of *Fiqh* ensured that students were versed in both of worship (*Ibādāt*) and social interactions (*Mu'āmalāt*), including marriage, inheritance, and trade, critical areas for maintaining an Islamic way of life and community harmony. This rigorous educational foundation positioned women as religiously literate and spiritually grounded members of society. It also enabled them to influence moral and legal discourses within their communities, thereby contributing to the broader Islamic civilization of the region.

Secondly, in response to evolving societal needs, female Muslim scholars in Gwandu integrated modern educational techniques into the female *Islamiyyah* school system. One of the innovations was the introduction of a structured mode of admission. This allowed for differentiated learning for beginners, mainly unmarried young girls and advanced learners, mostly married, widowed, or divorced women with prior Islamic education. The scheduling, classroom resources, and lesson delivery were all adjusted to suit these categories, showcasing the scholars' adaptability to the social change of the time. This allows such female Muslim students to become so enlightened to the teachings and philosophy of Islam. Moreover, scholars like Malama Hafsatu Zako and Khadija Muhammad Dan-Maidaji adopted crossover teaching methods the impart Islamic knowledge rapidly into hearts of their students. They combined oral rote methods with blackboard teaching and written exercises. This enabled memorization and conceptual understanding, a practice that represents a fusion of traditional *halqah* methods with modern classroom pedagogy. The depth of the curriculum cover by these female Muslim scholars in their *Islamiyyah* became essential tools for moral reformation and spiritual empowerment among women in the Emirate.

Thirdly, the contributions of female Muslim scholars in Gwandu extend far beyond teaching and instruction. Their influence has directly influenced in the moral, intellectual, and social development of generations of women, many of whom have gone on to become educators, caregivers, and community leaders. Through their work, Islamic values have been preserved and reinterpreted for new generations, reinforcing Gwandu's Islamic identity as a beacon of Islamic learning and moral integrity. Despite a complete absence of support from the government, these female scholars choose to continue thrusting the Islamic values in the public and private life of their students to the extent that the magnitude of their sheer impact started manifesting in various aspects of life of young females living in Gwandu Emirate and its environs. This demonstrates their enduring sacrifices to the development of Islam and its civilization in contemporary time.

Through the above, it could be said that female Muslim scholars in Gwandu Emirate have significantly shaped the development of Islam and its civilization through a hybrid of traditional and modern teachings of Islam. Their contributions are visible not only in the domain of religious education but also in the social orientation of women, preservation of scholarly heritage, and sustained moral order in society. Based on the above, therefore, the paper recommends that:

- a) Government and Islamic institutions should formally recognize the contributions of female scholars by including their legacies in school curricular, public lectures, and national archives.
- b) There should be increased funding and infrastructural support for female *Islamiyyah* schools and community-based religious centers across Gwandu Emirate.
- c) Academic institutions and researchers should prioritize the documentation of oral histories and written works of local female scholars to preserve and promote indigenous Islamic knowledge.
- d) Training programmes and workshops should be organized for female Muslim educators to integrate modern teaching techniques while maintaining the authenticity of Islamic tradition.
- e) Local communities should be sensitized about the importance of women's roles in religious education to dispel gender biases and promote inclusive participation in Islamic scholarship.

## Conclusion

The role of female Muslim scholars in Gwandu Emirate is both historically significant and contemporarily relevant. From the early 19th century to the present day, women have actively shaped the intellectual and moral foundations of the Emirate through religious education, jurisprudential discourse, and social reform. Figures like *Nana* Asma'u set a strong precedent, establishing educational networks and curricular that empowered women spiritually and intellectually. This legacy continued through the *Islamiyyah* school system, where female scholars creatively combined traditional and modern pedagogical approaches. Despite limited governmental support, these women succeeded in nurturing a generation of morally upright and religiously literate female Muslims. Their contributions highlight the importance of inclusive scholarship and challenge monolithic gender narratives in Islamic historiography. As such, acknowledging and

integrating their roles into academic and religious discourse is not only a historical correction but also a means of enriching Islamic education and identity in Nigeria and beyond.

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