

on prayer, mysticism, legal matters, *fiqh* (which regulates religious conduct), and *tawhid* (dogma).<sup>69</sup> As such, Asma'u became a religious scholar "of the highest order, writing philosophical treatises and preaching the urgency of following the straight path of positive life [as exemplified by Muhammad], the *Sunna*."<sup>70</sup> Like her father, she lived a humble and simple life in harmony with hadiths about Muhammad. Nana Asma'u spent her life educating women from Islamic and traditional African religious (*Bori*) backgrounds, from educated and uneducated upbringings, and from rich and poor families. She spent over forty-five years writing poems and prose that sought to teach women how to live during wartime, to follow the *Sunna*, and to adhere to roles of women in the Qadiriyya community.<sup>71</sup> Like her father the Shehu, Nana Asma'u was a Sufi.

Nana Asma'u memorized the Qur'an, spoke four languages, and wrote prolifically.<sup>72</sup> Her message to other women concentrated on piety, patience, and kindness rather than material possessions. Character, not status, was another theme she advocated. One of her great innovations was to teach women who believed in *Bori*, a cult led by women which ministered to psychological, social, and emotional stress, to substitute Muslim remedies instead. Rather than ban *Bori*, she understood the greater power of persuasion. She enjoined others that "If you need rain, pray to God for it, not to pagan spirits."<sup>73</sup>

Nana Asma'u taught people in their own languages and instructed her own students, *jajis* (Hausa for itinerant women teachers), to do likewise—all in the spirit of expanding the *umma* (the Muslim community) as they understood it during Muhammad's time at Medina. She sought to recruit *jajis* from all ages and ethnic groups to convert others to Islam, to promote the education of women, and to harness their talents to maintain and expand the caliphate with Medina as its model.<sup>74</sup> Clearly, Nana Asma'u was one of West Africa's most influential nineteenth-century female leaders and arguably the Sokoto Caliphate's greatest woman. She exemplifies the presence of important women in pre-colonial West African societies.

## East Africa

As in West Africa south of the Sahara, Islam spread to East Africa by peaceful means through the actions of traders. After the initial success of Islam

in the seventh century CE, the Abbassid revolution of 750 CE triggered a new round of expansion toward Asia. Asia and East Africa had been connected by maritime trading routes since at least the Roman Republic. By the ninth century, Muslim traders sought deals in African ports from the Red Sea to Zanzibar.

## Swahili Culture

Despite the contrast with the overland trade routes of West Africa, there are similarities between what happened along the Swahili coast and the Sahel (both words are derived from the Arabic word for "coast"). In both regions trade resulted in cultural and ethnic exchanges, although Swahili culture survived the European colonial era with greater unity than Sahelian culture in the west.

In East Africa, Swahili traders relied on a type of single-masted ship called a *dhow* that could take advantage of ocean currents and seasonal winds in the Indian Ocean called *monsoons*.<sup>75</sup> The monsoon winds blew north and east toward Arabia and India from May to October, and then reversed to the south and west back toward the Swahili coast between November and March. By using the combination of winds and currents, sailors could make long round-trip voyages each year between Asia and East Africa. Their activities stimulated commerce all along the coast as farmers, craftsmen, laborers, and local fishermen generated goods for trade.<sup>76</sup>



A dhow in the Indian Ocean, near the islands of Zanzibar on the Swahili Coast. In East Africa, Swahili traders relied on the dhow, which could take advantage of ocean currents and seasonal winds.

Photo by Muhammad Mahdi Karim

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“Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” 1787 medallion designed by Josiah Wedgwood for the British anti-slavery campaign.

the traffic in humans in the same year.<sup>122</sup> In 1838, Parliament banned slavery throughout the British Empire. The Danes had prohibited the slave trade to their colonies even earlier in 1803.

The Atlantic slave trade formally ended in 1850, but the West was not yet finished with African labor. Before the last slave ship sailed, Europeans were settling parts of the African continent.<sup>123</sup> New colonies were about to be created amid a burst of European imperialism.<sup>124</sup>

## Section V Summary

- ✧ Forms of slavery existed in West Africa before the arrival of Europeans. One of the major differences between European and African societies was that in Europe people invested in land. In Africa, because Africans held land communally, individuals invested in slaves as private property. Large property owners in Europe gained status; Africans who owned many slaves held similar sta-

tus. In Europe, land was revenue-producing while in Africa slavery fulfilled that function.

- ✧ In Europe, slaves rarely held high status; in Africa, they could often gain status. Slave owners in the West held people as chattel, as property with no rights; slave owners in Africa often considered slaves as junior family members with some rights.
- ✧ Some scholars have argued that internal African conflicts contributed more to the rise of the Atlantic slave trade than did European pressure on maritime African societies to produce slaves.
- ✧ Although some African slaves entered Europe through trade with Muslims in the 700s, the slave trade began to expand with the Portuguese in the mid-1400s. In 1454 and 1456, the papacy approved Portugal’s slave trade on the grounds that the Portuguese were to advance Christianity as well. The Spanish first entered the transatlantic slave trade in 1518. By the early 1600s, slaves were being transported to Brazil, the Caribbean, and North America.
- ✧ Capitalists created chattel slavery to force humans to produce labor-intensive sugar on plantations first in the Mediterranean, and then outward into the Atlantic. Slaves often revolted against such brutal treatment.
- ✧ Unlike Europeans or Native Americans, Africans were often resistant to tropical diseases. Their strength in that sense contributed to their enslavement.
- ✧ Over the years the triangular pattern of the transatlantic trade developed: Africa provided the slaves for America; Brazil and the Caribbean produced sugar and molasses for North America; distillers from North America created rum for the European market; and the Europeans shipped cheap cargo to barter along the African coast for slaves.
- ✧ In the 1600s, the Dutch became the world’s leading maritime slave traders. They used Elmina Castle along the Gold Coast and transformed it into one of their most important trading centers in West Africa.