



PROJECT MUSE®

Privately Empowered

Edwin, Shirin

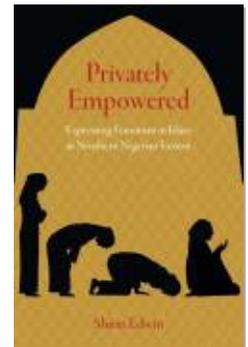
Published by Northwestern University Press

Edwin, Shirin.

Privately Empowered: Expressing Feminism in Islam in Northern Nigerian Fiction.

1 ed. Northwestern University Press, 2016.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/47802.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/47802>

Access provided at 6 Apr 2020 17:08 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Introduction



Conjugating Feminisms

African, Islamic as African-Islamic Discourse

Fiction is an act of willfulness, a deliberate effort to reconcile, to rearrange, to reconstitute nothing short of reality itself. Even among the most reluctant and doubtful of writers, this willingness must emerge. Being a writer means taking the leap from listening to saying, “Listen to me.”

—Jhumpa Lahiri

Islamic feminism is the unwanted child of political Islam.

—Ziba Mir-Hosseini

I focus on Arab women’s autobiographies and novels because it is there that one can most clearly see the individual creating alternative realities.

—miriam cooke

In 2001, Amina Lawal, a thirty-one-year-old Muslim peasant from Katsina State in northern Nigeria, was arrested on charges of adultery and sentenced to death-by-stoning, as laid down in the *shari‘a* or Islamic law.¹ She appealed the death sentence for two years before being acquitted by an Islamic appeals court in 2003.² Lawal’s case was not unique. The previous year, Safiya Husseini, another Muslim woman from Sokoto in northern Nigeria, was convicted on similar charges and condemned to death before being acquitted by an Islamic appeals court. Not unpredictably, details of these cases, especially the death sentence and the method, death-by-stoning, attracted the ire of the international community, from

international human rights groups, including women's rights organizations, to nongovernmental agencies, raining fire and brimstone on the purportedly archaic laws observed by twelve of the thirty-six Nigerian states that have adopted Islamic law.³ For years following these cause célèbres, European and American media scrutinized them as emblematic of the savagery sanctioned by Islam in northern Nigeria.⁴

Shortly after the international outcry over Lawal's and Hussein's cases, Islam in Nigeria found itself at the center of another storm when protests by conservative Islamic groups erupted against hosting the Miss World pageant in Abuja in 2004, believing the event would corrupt women's modesty. Famously, Nigerian Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka not only condemned the "Muslim fanatics" who opposed hosting the pageant on Nigerian soil as "psychopaths of faith" bringing "disrepute to the religion of Islam" by indulging in a "murderous orgy" to stop the beauty pageant, but also burnished his descriptions by calling Muslims "zealots," "religious stormtroopers," and "atavists of religion," among other invectives, who butchered innocents in the name of Islam and Muhammad.⁵ More recently, in April 2014, Islam in Nigeria took center stage again for the infamous kidnapping of over two hundred schoolgirls from their boarding school in Chibok in northern Nigeria; they had been abducted by the terrorist outfit Boko Haram.⁶ Attention to the abduction gained momentum with outpourings of military support and intelligence from international governments—including those of the United States and western European countries—to locate the missing boarders.

I use these three events as a window into understanding the declensions and revivals in the political and media-driven interest in Islam in Nigeria, which is the most populous country in Africa, with an estimated 170 million people, and also the largest Muslim country in Africa, with Muslims making up roughly half the population. In precisely the undisguised interest in such media-worthy snippets, this book identifies a thematic pattern of the all-too-familiar stance that Islam is oppressive and violent, particularly to Muslim women.⁷ As a result of this stance, the attention to Islam unstintingly pivots on Islamism, fetishizing its diverse forms—political Islam, Islamic activism, militant Islam, nationalist Islam, legal Islam, among others—in the attempt to proffer a solution on the putative oppression of women sanctioned by the religion. Only infrequently, however, are efforts made to peer into the private lives of Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa, even less so into the lives of Muslim women in West Africa who practice Islam in a myriad of secluded, private, and apolitical ways with no aspiration to participate in public venues in the form of memberships to groups or to engage in activism for legal reform or social change.

Privately Empowered argues that the rampant oversight of the ordinary lives of African Muslim women stems from the inordinate preoccupation with political, public, and organized approaches to the religion. African Muslim women's personal, private, and individual engagements with Islam are overlooked in Islamic feminist discourse just as Islam is ignored, when not disparaged, in African feminist discourse. To mediate the thematic and regional slippage in both African and Islamic feminist discourses vis-à-vis the African Muslim woman, I propose African-Islamic feminism: a theory, a thematic focus, and a reading practice that three Nigerian novelists who write in English—Zaynab Alkali, Hauwa Ali, and Abubakar Gimba—interpellate in their fiction, illustrating Muslim women's private, personal, and individual engagements with Islamic habits and rituals. In each of their novels that I examine in detail—Alkali's *The Stillborn*, *The Virtuous Woman*, and *The Descendants*; Ali's *Destiny*; and Gimba's *Sacred Apples*—and in their depictions of African Muslim women of various ages and sections of society—teenagers, middle-aged women, grandmothers, and matriarchs; students, professionals, and housewives; and rural and urban women—Alkali, Ali, and Gimba frequently explore repertoires of spiritual practice, including *ṣalāt*, *duʿā*, and *dhikr*, collectively known as *ʿibadāt* or forms of prayer; *shahādah* or Islamic monotheism; *hijāb* or veiling; and *akhlāq* or Islamic virtue, that hold no ambition other than securing personal and private satisfaction. African-Islamic feminism in *Privately Empowered* thus escorts Islamic feminism out of the Middle East and Arab world not only *regionally*, as much of the scholarship constellates on Muslim women in that region, into sub-Saharan Africa but also out of its political and public goals *thematically* into women's personal modes of spiritual engagement with Islam. Additionally, within the well-honed rubric of African feminist politics that tends to minimize and even deprecate the impact of Islam on African Muslim women, African-Islamic feminism repatriates the African Muslim woman to African feminist discourse. Considered together, the twin aims of African-Islamic feminism tutor a broader and sharper understanding of Muslim women, in general, and of African Muslim women, in particular.

The ineluctable relevance of African-Islamic feminism as it thematizes women's private and individual engagements with Islamic spiritual habits in northern Nigerian fiction in English can furthermore be evidenced in the fact that Alkali, Ali, and Gimba avowedly write in English in a region—consisting of parts of Nigeria, Chad, Ghana, and Niger—where Hausa is spoken by no less than fifty million people. The dominant literary genre in northern Nigeria is the thriving and immensely popular

Littattfan Soyayya or books of love, part of the ever-growing socio-literary phenomenon of Kano market literature, sold in the markets and streets of major northern Nigerian cities such as Kano, Zaria, Kaduna, and others.⁸ Although not of the *Soyayya* genre per se, nor in Hausa, the language of *Soyayya* fiction, Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's novels in English serve as windows into the Hausa society that is textualized in the more popular but rarely translated *Soyayya* fiction in Hausa. Indeed, Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's novels echo the dominant topoi of *Soyayya* books—interpersonal relations, romantic love, family, marriage, personal lives, Islam, and private affairs—to announce to a much wider audience of readers than those who read Hausa (written Hausa uses a roman script called *boko* or an Arabic script known as *ajami*), namely the English-speaking interlocutors in Nigeria, Africa, and beyond, that African Muslim women are not always politically or even publicly invested in Islam. As a result of this inspiration from an immensely popular genre that reaches out to no less than fifty million users of the Hausa language alone, Alkali, Ali, and Gimba amplify in English, the most widely spoken and official language of Nigeria, African-Islamic feminism as a potent literary canon.⁹ As fiction from northern Nigeria, their novels, therefore, are not only representative but indeed constitutive of African-Islamic feminism, focusing on African Muslim women's spiritual engagement with Islam as it yields “blueprints for the future” (to borrow miriam cooke's visionary expression, albeit in an apolitical sense), while imperatively meeting the challenges of the regular inattention to Islam in sub-Saharan Africa within Islamic feminist theories and Islam's denigration within African feminist discourse.¹⁰

There is a pervasive scarcity of scholarship on Islamic feminism in Africa, as Ousseina Alidou appositely remarks:

Study after study claiming to look at the experiences of women in the Islamic world was, in fact, confined to the Arabic and Asiatic regions. There is a scarcity of scholarly studies conducted by Muslim scholars or non-Muslim scholars of the West that focus on Muslim women of the so-called “sub-Saharan” African regions.¹¹

Roman Loimeier echoes Alidou when he limns the need for studies of Islam in Africa, given the outsized presence the religion has on the continent. He prescriptively states:

Knowledge of the existence of a multitude of traditions of Islamic learning has so far not been translated into a broader perception of African Muslim societies . . . Islam has, as of today, more than 450

million followers in Africa, constituting one of the largest agglomerations of Muslims on the planet, second perhaps only to the number of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. Due to their undeniable importance in numerical strength as well as political potential, Muslim societies in Africa deserve a thorough study that does justice to the complexity of Africa's historical and societal development.¹²

But the purpose of *Privately Empowered* is not to simply redress this regional imbalance by adding yet another inquiry to the scant critical iterations on Islam in Africa. Undertaking studies that fill the quantitative void is not likely to tip the scales in favor of Islamic studies on Africa. Instead, I contend that scholarship on Islam and on Islamic feminism in Africa is lopsided insofar as it is conceptually moored to the evolution, articulation, and subsequent dissemination of Islamic feminist discourse itself, the bulk of which remains tenaciously contextualized in the specific histories and events of the Middle Eastern and Arab regions of the Muslim world where the Islamic feminist movement evolved in tandem with the nation-state and derived many of its aims from pronouncements on gender in an Islamic state.¹³ In other words, in many Middle Eastern countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, and in the Mediterranean Middle East, as well as in North African countries such as Egypt and Morocco, Islamic feminism evolved from organized and collective (whether or not state-sponsored) efforts to articulate women's rights and functions.¹⁴ The tight embrace between Islam and the methods and aims of feminist movements has rendered the domain of women's activities irrefragably political and measurably public, indexed in rallies, demonstrations and activism, memberships to social groups, organizations, and legal reforms in virtually all spheres of life. Islamic feminism has thus grown in direct proportion to its politically, legally, and collectively activist labor. A manifest consequence of this phenomenon that I argue has assumed canonical status is the amplification of the Qur'an as a juridical reference for women's rights, overshadowing its significance as a spiritual resource. Such an approach disenfranchises the private, personal, and highly individualized dispositions of religious practice in Islam, thus further obscuring forms of Islamic feminism that do not conduce to public activity or roles.

Privately Empowered does not aim to discredit activist and political modes of feminist expression in Islam. With renewed critical conviction, it aims at broadening the approach to Islamic feminism so we may no longer remain circumscribed by the conceptual limits to feminism in Islam as imposed by a discourse on Muslim women that is both regionally and thematically narrow in its scope. A capacious African and Islamic

feminist discourse is particularly relevant today when we face many dangers to global and cultural tolerance, including religious extremism in the form of Islamophobia. A broader understanding of Islam and of Muslim women in particular, as I address in this book, outside the tenured rubric of feminism as connected to activism, foreign policy, politics, and publicly organized expressions of religion thus presents itself as a potential solution to the cultural impasse confronting us. My choice to examine Northern Nigerian fiction in English is therefore guided by my endeavor at broadening the scope and our understanding of feminism in Islam. By choosing a specific region to discuss African-Islamic feminism, namely Northern Nigeria in sub-Saharan Africa, where Islam, as Ousseina Ali-dou's and Roman Loimeier's comments above note, remains scantily studied, I aim to underscore the connections between underappreciated forms of feminist engagement and Muslims in other parts of the world. My choice of fiction in *English* from Northern Nigeria, where Hausa is also widely spoken, likewise conveys to a larger audience the underexplored aspects about Islam that influence Muslims in this predominantly Muslim region of sub-Saharan Africa. These understudied forms of feminist engagement are amply depicted in the fiction in Hausa. And finally, my choice to examine Islamic feminism in Northern Nigerian fiction in English is motivated by the operative point of the book, that in a region where twelve of the thirty-six Nigerian states have adopted Islamic law or *shari'ah*, rendering the legal presence of Islam very similar to politico-legal models in Islamic nation-states as in the Middle East, the lived presence of Islam in Northern Nigeria is in fact also expressed most pervasively by women in apolitical ways in the wildly popular literary genre of *Soyayya* fiction that stubbornly privileges themes on women's personal and private lives. In these connections then between the topoi of *Soyayya* novels in Hausa, whose Islamic and feminist tenor is translated by Northern Nigerian writers into their own novels in English, nests a blueprint for greater cultural and religious understanding.

As most Arab countries (Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Yemen) are also Islamic nation-states, the practice of converging in the religion as the foundation for laws, governance, and personal matters, where Islam is simultaneously a spiritual, legal, and political system, hearkens back to the personhood of Muhammad himself—a rare combination of statesman, spiritual leader, military commander, and adjudicator—and the plural functions of the Qur'an as a legal, spiritual, and political text. With much economy, John L. Esposito summarizes Muhammad's multifaceted role "as administrator, legislator, judge, and commander-in-chief as well as teacher, preacher, and prayer leader of the Muslim community."¹⁵ In

most Islamic nation-states, then, Islamic feminism has evolved as an extension of, if not in concert with, such systems, thereby institutionalizing its agenda as a public, social, legal, and activist manifestation of women's engagement with Islam. Most notably, Ziba Mir-Hosseini articulately traces the circumstances of the birth of Islamic feminism as the "unwanted child of 'political Islam'" to a recuperation not just of the *sharī'a* or Islamic law but of practice and interpretation of the law itself, namely of *fiqh* or Islamic jurisprudence and *tafsir* or exegeses of Islamic texts such as the Qur'an that had become saturated with patriarchy. She unequivocally locates the core methods of Islamic feminism in a grammar of justice and activism, calling Islamic feminists "gender activists" who, horrified by the unequal and unjust laws for women, reacted to rectify the patriarchal, literalist, and restrictive interpretations of the Qur'an by Islamists that lacked spiritual or legal sanction:

I believe that Islamic feminism is, in a sense, the unwanted child of "political Islam." It was "political Islam" that actually politicized the whole issue of gender and Muslim women's rights . . . Translated into practice, law and public policy, this meant going back to pre-modern interpretations of shariah, with all their restrictive laws about and for women. These gender activists, using Islamic arguments to critique and challenge the Islamists, brought classical *fiqh* and *tafsir* texts to public scrutiny and made them a subject of public debate and discussion, articulating alternative, gender-friendly understandings, indeed visions, of Islam. That marked the broadening, in terms of class, of the fledgling Islamic feminist movement.¹⁶

Mona Siddiqui also believes that challenging Islamists by *publicly* scrutinizing Islamic legal practice can expose the gender-friendly aspects of Islamic society, writing that "one of the methods of exploring the nature of Islamic society can be pursued through the dimension of its legal literature."¹⁷ Deniz Kandiyoti likewise convincingly locates the history of feminism in a symbiotic relationship between activism, social reform, and Islam in the Middle East in "anti-imperialist and nationalist struggles, a general move towards secularism, a new concern with social reform and modernity."¹⁸ Furthermore, in a country like Iran, as Valentine Moghadem succinctly puts it, "Islam is not a matter of personal spiritual choice but rather a legal and political system" to frame Islamic feminism within a visibly public, political, and activist agenda.¹⁹

On the other hand, vast populations—in fact, sizable majorities of Muslims—also live in societies that are not Islamic nation-states. In

sub-Saharan Africa alone, eighty to ninety percent of the populations in Mali, Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea, and Niger are Muslim. Interestingly, these countries are not politically organized or governed as Islamic nation-states; instead, their governments are modeled on European parliamentary systems and legacies of colonial legal structures. As Esposito and Emad El-Din Shahin put it, Islam is important because it is “an area that enjoys immense academic and policy interest.”²⁰ But, as this book argues, the academic interest in Islam is directly proportionate to the policy interest in it. So, Islam is of academic interest *because* it enjoys policy value. To then study women in such societies only where politics or government and religion coalesce in public activism, legal reform, and collective labor, as in the Middle East (regions of immense policy value to the United States and Europe), glaringly omits those nations that are, like Niger, The Gambia, and Mali, predominantly Muslim but not Islamically governed, and where Muslim women may express their feminism outside the rubric of public activity or the purview of the government.

If feminism is indeed only a function of political sponsorship and activist labor, as has been discoursed by Islamic feminists like Mir-Hosseini, Moghadem, and others, this would most naturally also be the case even in Muslim-majority states in sub-Saharan Africa. However, as Leonardo Villalón observes, only Mauritania is officially an “Islamic Republic.”²¹ Villalón ponders whether being a country populated by Muslims means that the political system should reflect Islam, and if so, how?²² He singles out Nigeria’s example where Islam can play an important role even if it is not officially connected to the governance of a country, which is also the case in other Muslim-majority countries like Senegal, Mali, Guinea, or Niger. Even during the early 1970s and 1980s when the *Izala* movement, or the Society for the Removal of Innovation and Reestablishment of the Sunna, emerged as the largest reformist movement in Islam in most parts of Africa, Islam remained peripheral to national affairs and governance.²³

Three key issues animating this book can be gleaned from these observations on the status of Islam in Muslim-majority states in Africa. First, Islam is politically and socially etched into the lives of Muslims in sub-Saharan Africa but nevertheless falls short of impacting the political governance of even Muslim-majority countries enough to compellingly question the academic and critical climate where, unless Islam in sub-Saharan Africa is of policy interest to the United States and the West as it is in the Middle East, even its demographically overwhelming presence fails to attract academic attention.²⁴ Second, the legal and political presence of Islam in sub-Saharan Africa is relegated to religious courts in matters pertaining to family and personal law, family codes, and

secularism. The legal system for a majority of issues remains modeled on European civil law (French or British). In such societies, then, where Islam is legally active only in a limited number of areas, Muslims may express their engagement with the religion in means and ends that are different from those espoused by their counterparts elsewhere and are not as strenuously voiced through lobbying, activism, and political change in the *sharī'a* as they are in Islamic nation-states, as in the Middle East. Finally, and as mentioned earlier, notwithstanding an overwhelming agglomeration of Muslims in the African continent, Islam is neglected in the vast literature and scholarship on Africa because the methods and aims of gender activism in the Middle East scarcely resonate with expressions of feminism in Islam in sub-Saharan Africa.²⁵

While they have of late become profoundly alert to the glaring absence of African Muslim women from mainstream Islamic discourse, Islamic feminists nonetheless view feminism in Africa through an analytic lens programmed to focus exclusively on Muslim women as activists or as potential beneficiaries of political and legal provisions in Islam. A signal instance is a collection of essays on Muslim women in Africa, edited by Margot Badran, titled *Gender and Islam in Africa: Rights, Sexuality, and Law*. Covering such diverse geographic regions as Morocco, northern Nigeria, Mauritania, and South Africa, the volume dwells on the political and legal ramifications of Islam in Africa. It canvasses topics ranging from women's political participation and activism, to the codification of *hudūd* laws (laws of crime and punishment) that occupied much media attention through Lawal's and Hussein's cases, to African Muslim women's organizations.²⁶ A solitary essay pertaining to the creative arts examines Somali popular songs. On the other hand, *Privately Empowered* holds the nexus between the state and Islam as responsible for this widespread neglect of Islamic feminism as a personal and private practice, not only thematically but also regionally, and intervenes to rectify it by studying African Muslim women's personal and not political engagement with Islam in Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's literary textualizations of Hausa society. African-Islamic feminism parries the excessively political, public, and activist articulation of feminism in Islamic feminist theories and the deprecatory tenor of African feminist discourse vis-à-vis Islam. It retools both African and Islamic feminist discourses through a close reading of private and personal engagements with Islam in the practice of Islamic rituals and spiritual habits in literary fiction where women do not aspire to political, public, or collective goals of social justice, legal reform, or even memberships to women's organizations. African-Islamic feminism establishes such ends as personal happiness and satisfaction, personal

success, and personal fulfillment that leaven African and Islamic feminist discourses to seek out new approaches, topoi, and goals for feminism. In other words, African-Islamic feminism is invested in the “biliteracy” of sources, traditions, and theories in that it borrows from both African and Islamic feminist discourses and lends to both as well.

Biliterate Voices: African-Islamic Feminism in Fiction

Zaynab Alkali, Hauwa Ali, and Abubakar Gimba conjugate African and Islamic feminisms by enfranchising personal, individual, and private modes of religious behaviors, observable in an engagement that draws from the Qur’an chiefly as a source for spiritual habits. In so doing, they compellingly reorient the field toward those repertoires of feminist expression that are not organized around activist, collective, or even public activity. Donald Wehrs calls this engagement with multiple levels of discourse, traditions, and sources of inspiration “biliteracy,” where African feminist writers recruit issues and solutions from multifarious modes of inspiration:

African novelists tend to inhabit in addition to two traditions, two modes of modernity as well, one suspicious of traditionalism, and one suspicious of modernity as embodied in the West. For African writers, bilingualism passes into “biliteracy,” being “biliterate” in the values and debates of two cultures. Such biliteracy permits these novelists to apprehend what issues irresolvable within one tradition may be approached through other traditions but it also illuminates for them what issues belong to differences between cultural traditions and what issues belong to differences between traditional and modern ways of life.²⁷

For Alkali, Ali, and Gimba, biliteracy lies in interpellating African-Islamic feminism as a diversification of the topoi and aims of Islamic feminism. When the award-winning, yet little-known Alkali insists that she presents women from an “Islamic perspective,” African-Islamic feminism gestures to using the Qur’an as a normative source of all knowledge, more for its spiritual uses for prayer, ritual, and the fulfillment of spiritual habits than as a legal reference for women’s rights or gender equality.²⁸ Following this biliterate approach of drawing from multiple sources toward multiple aims, my analyses of their novels rest on the premise that the practice of Islam for African Muslim women may not be a conscious

effort to publicize or organize religious issues in forums or activist platforms. Through personal, private, and highly individualized engagements of Islamic practice—Islamic faith or monotheism or *shahādah*; forms of prayer *ṣalāt*, *duʿā*, and *dhikr*; Islamic behavior or *akhlāq*; and veiling or *hijāb*—Alkali’s, Ali’s, and Gimba’s protagonists employ Islamic practice as a conduit for personal satisfaction or as a goal in itself. My analyses focus on the following: the most palpable ways of knowing the materiality of Islam in an African Muslim woman’s quotidian existence; the kinds of Islamic activities African Muslim women engage in besides publicly and socially rallying for change; the reasons for which women approach the Qur’an in addition to as a reference for legal justice; the ways African Muslim women engage Islamic practice to express feminism in the private, personal, and individual performance of rituals and spiritual habits; and, finally, the purpose behind performing rituals and spiritual habits. An overriding notion threads the analyses ahead: African Muslim women’s intimate, private, individual, and personal interactions in the repertoire of rituals, spiritual practices, and habits that I study in Alkali’s, Ali’s, and Gimba’s fiction—Islamic prayer, faith, virtuous disposition, and veiling—most closely indicate women’s own feelings and thoughts on Islam.

Alkali’s, Ali’s, and Gimba’s novels consistently keep Islam alive in their thematic depictions of spiritual practice by ordinary Nigerian Muslims. The tenor of their narration markedly reveals feminism in Islam where women’s lives unfurl in tandem with the religion in its quotidian minutiae. Their references to the Qur’an and the *ḥadīth* (reports of Muhammad’s words and deeds) and their illustrations of the observance of spiritual habits could be read as ostensibly inconsequential as they pertain to the private and personal domain of women’s lives.²⁹ However, these instances of the private, individual, and personal engagement with religion respond to key concerns in the theoretical formulations on African feminism, namely ignorance of African societies that is perpetuated by a lack of appreciation for Africa’s diversity, resulting in a misrepresentation of African cultures. Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí laments that “American sociology is unaware of Africa” and that there is inadequate acknowledgment of the diversity of African social systems: “The characterization of a vast continent of diverse nations and peoples as if it were one village can be termed the ‘villagization of Africa.’”³⁰ In addition, Ifi Amadiume notes the lack of research on African societies that has led to inaccurate assumptions about the continent and about African women in particular, writing that “a great deal of what anthropologists and Western feminists were saying about African women’s lack of power was incorrect.”³¹ Alkali, Ali, and Gimba inexorably respond to all three aforementioned concerns by

first informing readers of the ineluctable influence of Islam on Nigerian Muslims while simultaneously addressing misrepresentations of Muslim women's lives with a firsthand record of the Islamic feminist presence in sub-Saharan Africa. By focusing on Islam, their fiction also furnishes African feminist theory with precisely that specificity—the African-Islamic feminist voice—without which African feminist theory itself would be incomplete. And finally, by shifting focus from the Middle Eastern regions to Islam in northern Nigeria, their fiction prospectively announces theoretical and thematic reconfigurations for Muslim women and Islamic feminists all over the world.

Little before Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's first publications in the eighties, the Senegalese novelist Mariama Bâ and her compatriot Nafissatou Diallo famously wrote about African Muslim women, laying the crucial foundation for the African-Islamic feminist voice with the iconic novels *So Long a Letter* (1979) and *A Dakar Childhood* (1980), respectively, putting the socio-spiritual fabric of a predominantly Muslim West Africa front and center in African letters. Critical attention to the African-Islamic feminist voices of both Bâ's and Diallo's writings remains scarce even decades after their publication.³² Both Bâ and Diallo express a private rather than a public or political engagement with Islam in their texts, focusing largely on their protagonists' private practice through prayer, ritual, and Islamic habits for personal goals and satisfaction.

Alkali, Ali, and Gimba have been writing since the early 1980s, garnering brisk accolades in Nigeria for their literary output. But none have received the recognition they deserve outside West Africa.³³ Better known than Gimba and Ali, Zaynab Alkali was born in Borno in Nigeria. She attended Queen Elizabeth Secondary School in Ilorin, and completed her university education at Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria and Bayero University in Kano. Having held various teaching positions at Ahmadu Bello University, University of Maiduguri, and Bayero University, she later worked for the National Primary Healthcare Development Agency and is currently deputy vice-chancellor at Nasarawa State University, where she also teaches African literature and creative writing. Her first novel, *The Stillborn* (1984), won the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) prize in 1985. She then wrote *The Virtuous Woman* (1987), followed by *Cobwebs and Other Stories* (1997), a collection of short stories that has also been translated into German, and more recently authored two more novels, *The Descendants* (2005) and *The Initiates* (2007).

Virtually unknown outside Nigeria, Hauwa Ali, author of the two novels *Destiny* (1988) and *Victory* (1989), was born in Gusau in Sokoto in northwestern Nigeria.³⁴ Winner of the Delta Prize for fiction for *Destiny*,

Ali's writing captures the simplicity of the rhythms of everyday Muslim life in northern Nigeria. She died in 1994. Likewise, little is known of Abubakar Gimba beyond Nigeria. Author of several novels—*Trail of Sacrifice* (1985), *Witnesses to Tears* (1987), *Innocent Victims* (1988), and *Sacred Apples* (1996)—and a collection of short stories, *A Toast in the Cemetery* (2002), among others, Gimba was born in Nasarawa in central Nigeria, and held degrees from Ahmadu Bello University and the University of Cincinnati. He was also a permanent member of the Ministry of Economics and Financial Planning of Nigeria. His early career in the Nigerian civil service and finance ministry served as the contexts of his novels *Trail of Sacrifice* and *Innocent Victims*. He held a variety of posts in banks in Nigeria, served on numerous boards and committees for economic planning and financial administration, and was the president of the Association of Nigerian Authors. Gimba was also awarded the Order of the Federal Republic (OFR), one of the highest Nigerian awards of merit in recognition for his service to the nation. Gimba died in 2015.³⁵

Alkali, Ali, and Gimba stand on Bâ's and Diallo's shoulders, potently emblemizing Muslim women's priorities, failures, and successes, calmly yet relentlessly documenting the lives of Nigerian Muslim women in their fiction, and modulating a voice in an African-Islamic tenor on the important, if apolitical, issues facing Muslim women. *Privately Empowered* is the only book-length study on Alkali's, Ali's, or Gimba's work as critical interest in them remains limited to biobibliographical studies or encyclopedic entries.³⁶ Moreover, rarely have writers from northern Nigeria thematically sustained Islam and Islamic culture in their oeuvres. Even the well-known Nigerian novels on Islam, notably Ibrahim Tahir's *The Last Imam* (1984) and, more recently, Mohammed Umar's *Amina* (2005), are but lone productions.

Interpellating African-Islamic feminism as biliteracy that mediates Islamic and African feminist theories in order to privilege personal modes of Islamic engagement is not without its share of challenges. Any attempt to discourse on African-Islamic feminism is beset by vexing debates about Islam's presence in Africa that undergird the widespread hostility toward Islam in the works of African feminists. Coalescing in the incommensurable spat over "authentic," or indigenous, versus "foreign," or external, these fundamental challenges are further discussed in chapter 1, as they were canonized by the protracted tirade between Wole Soyinka and Ali Mazrui. As I demonstrate in greater detail in the next section, an approach to the African-Islamic feminist framework must disentangle not just the persistent preoccupation with politics and Islam as found in Islamic feminist scholarship on the Middle East and Arab world, but also

the profoundly limited understanding of the place of Islam in the lives of African Muslim women. The prevalence of rhetorical and methodological strategies that scant African-Islamic feminism by de-emphasizing and even denigrating Islam in an agglomeration of millions of Muslims in Africa and drawing from an extremely parochial sample of Muslim women called to stand in for the “Muslim world”—whose feminist goals may or may not resonate with Muslim women elsewhere—is writ large in the following examples. These are two dueling challenges that *Privately Empowered* confronts head-on.

Rhetorical and Methodological Oversights: (Middle Eastern and Arab) State over Spiritual; Africa over Islam

The privileging of Muslim women’s issues in the Middle East and Arab region is not easily discerned, as African Muslim women’s feminism continues to be read through a critical and theoretical lens that has more relevance to the Middle East and Arab world and to women’s histories and issues—political participation, legal reform, activism, and public activity—in that part of the world. I cite several prominent strategies by well-regarded theorists of Islam and gender to exhume the tenured rhetoric that abets the ellipsis of thematic constructs outside the realm of politics and the Middle East. In her useful collection of essays on gender in Islam, Amira el-Azhary Sonbol studies the variety in Muslim women’s lives in order to lament the ways in which they have been exoticized in Western literature. She pertinently evokes the “Orientalist” tendency—the persistence of ill-matched paradigms and hypotheses—in the study of Muslim women that examines and consequently misrepresents Muslim women:

Perhaps because it is still a young field, the study of women of the Islamic world can be subsumed by paradigms and hypotheses that were based more on the concrete experiences of their sisters in the West or “constructed” and “imagined” histories of women in the East or in Africa. *The deficiencies in historical research allowed for stereotypical images privileging outward manifestations like veiling to give an impression of passiveness and backwardness.* The eye beholding, concluding, and portraying impressions of women’s lives used general criteria familiar to women’s struggles in other cultures whose grids of conceptualization and cultural symbols differed from the culture being studied.³⁷ (emphasis added)

El-Azhary Sonbol most perceptively connects deficient research into Muslim women's lives with the stereotypes it has spawned. She makes several more coruscating observations about "West-centric" attitudes that model Muslim women's lives on the history of Western women with proleptically negative and dismissive perceptions to justify the need to "untangle the past."³⁸ Her well-meaning evaluation of the "Islamic world" competently touches on the need for the all-important "grids of conceptualization" in research methods for fairer contextualization.³⁹ But in the impressive range of topics covering Islam in Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey, with a lone essay on Algeria and about six papers on the Ottoman period in Egypt, El-Azhary Sonbol's collection of twenty-four essays misses out on the rest of Africa as part of this "Islamic world." Despite opening her effort by writing "the articles in this edited volume are concerned with sources for studying the history and life of women in the *Islamic world*," African Muslim women (barring those in Algeria and Egypt) are conspicuously absent in her work (emphasis added).⁴⁰ They are also absent in miriam cooke's work when she writes that "*Arab* women respond to each other, test local possibilities, plug into transcultural concerns," and that "Examining *Arab* women's rhetorical strategies has shown me how we *all* belong to multiple communities simultaneously," and of networking in Islamic feminism (emphases added).⁴¹ Perhaps because, as cooke professes,

I focus on Arab women's autobiographies and novels because it is there that one can *most clearly see the individual creating alternative realities*. Alternative does not mean separate or irrelevant. These reflections on personal experience and forays into fiction may provide the blueprints for the future.⁴² (emphasis added)

The assertion that Arab women's rhetorical strategies provide a pattern for important transnational and transcultural connections through the fiction of such writers as Nawal El-Sadaawi, Zaynab al-Ghazali, Alifa Rifaat, and Assia Djebar, among others, which can be used as "blueprints for the future," is assumptive at best. A point about North African countries such as Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt must be made here as they are geographically closer to the Middle Eastern region and share much in common with the histories, politics, and cultures of the Middle East. Though geographically located within the African continent, these countries are often made to stand in for Islamic communities in Africa, as is widely seen in several notable works on Islam and gender. In fact, many well-known studies on Islam and gender in Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and

Algeria tend to align themselves with the historical and cultural contexts of the Middle Eastern region. Leila Ahmed's benchmark study on Islam and gender, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, which I discuss in detail in chapter 1, is perhaps one of the best known examples of this approach and tendency that contextualizes the study of Muslim women, particularly in Egypt, within the Middle Eastern and Arab world.⁴³

Saba Mahmood's work on the activities of the mosque movement in Egypt and in the surrounding Middle Eastern region that is part of the Islamic Revival demonstrates impressive effort to rethink the political and pertinently expand the scope of Islamic feminism by validating activities centered on ethical reform rather than on state-sponsored political change (as understood by such predictable political activities as state building, electoral reforms, or juridical changes).⁴⁴ Mahmood convincingly argues that the activities of trained Muslim teachers, or *dāi'yāt*, engaged in disseminating Islamic knowledge in Egypt's mosques demand appreciation of Islamic feminist piety that has not been adequately explored in theories of the feminist subject:

The women's mosque movement is part of the larger Islamic Revival or Islamic Awakening (*al-ṣaḥwa al-Islamiyya*) that has swept the Muslim world, including Egypt, since at least the 1970s . . . [emerging] when women started to organize weekly religious lessons—first in their homes and then within mosques—to read the Qur'an, the *hadith*, and associated exegetical and edifying literature.⁴⁵

In grounding the context of the piety movement in Egypt and the surrounding Middle Eastern region that she calls the "Muslim world," however, Mahmood omits similar projects of moral and ethical reform such as the *yan-taru*. Dating back to the sixteenth century in northern Nigeria, and later systematized in the nineteenth century in the Sokoto Caliphate by Usman dan Fodio's daughter, Nana Asma'u, the *yan-taru* movement formed the intellectual backbone of spiritual empowerment for Muslim women and children. Similar in purpose and scope to more contemporary piety movements in the Middle East, with even similar agents, the itinerant teachers of the *yan-taru*, known as *jajis* in Hausa, dispersed spiritual and practical knowledge through lectures and performances in the far corners of the Sokoto Caliphate to enhance Muslim women's spiritual engagement with Islam.⁴⁶

More recently, and in a well-received analysis of Islam and gender in the "Muslim world," noted anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod re-engages

with some of her earlier ethnographic research on Muslim women's oral poetry in a Bedouin community in the Western Desert to write against the impulse in Western media, public attitudes, and the academy that typifies "cultures through social scientific generalizations" about the "common Western story of the hapless Muslim woman oppressed by her culture."⁴⁷ In her "look across the Muslim world" to show that the "winds of change" are in favor of privileging the stories of "non-elite women," Abu-Lughod's chapter dedicated to "honor crimes" around "the Muslim world" features societies in Egypt, Lebanon, Pakistan, and even Jordan that, ironically, as *Privately Empowered* contends, themselves enjoy "elite status" in Islamic feminist discourse.⁴⁸ Within this longer conversation about honor crimes in the Islamic world, Amina Lawal, who was tried and acquitted by a *shar'ia* court for adultery in northern Nigeria, is parenthetically referenced: in a note on "Shari'a law," "the most famous international case was that of Amina Lewal [*sic*] in Nigeria" in the "Muslim world."⁴⁹ The tendency to frame Islamic feminism in little beyond its public and activist mold is vividly envisioned in Abu-Lughod's conclusion of her complex investigation of women's rights in the Muslim world, where she applauds the emergence of a Muslim woman whose work is patently public, legal, and activist and who pursues change at such forums as the United Nations by writing articles, conducting outreach, and quoting from Islamic law:

A new type of feminist . . . She quotes fluently from the Qur'an, is familiar with Islamic law, invokes precedents from early Muslim history, writes sophisticated articles on the UN Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), arranges conferences on Google calendar, conducts online surveys, and draws from a wide range of experiences of organizing for change.⁵⁰

Public visibility and activism are undoubtedly valued more than private and passive piety as Margot Badran asserts in the case of Egypt, by writing that "religiously observant women who shun the limelight and seem to ask for nothing more than pious, passive lives are also compelling acknowledgement of their membership in communities that until recently had blocked women's public presence."⁵¹

In Africa itself, a continent of no less than 450 million Muslims, African feminist discourse has not been kinder to the African Muslim woman either, for the African feminist Filomina Chioma Steady disavows the impact of Islam on African Muslim women's lives by noting that "Islam

never became entrenched as a way of life . . . In fact, the effects of colonial administration have been of greater significance on African societies . . . The impact of Islam on the majority of African women in the diaspora has been minimal.”⁵² Most strikingly, the Ghanaian writer and feminist Ama Ata Aidoo talks of the *hijāb* and practices such as circumcision and seclusion in much the same way to discredit any serious engagement that African Muslim women may manifest vis-à-vis Islam. Aidoo mockingly writes:

Today, it is not at all easy to imagine the coastal West African woman bearing with any equanimity even the thought of the heavy black veil, the burden of the purdah, circumcision, infibulation, and so forth. But even for the West African Moslem woman, the veil is no more than a couple of meters of an often pretty gossamer fabric. This she normally and winsomely drapes over the back of her head and her shoulders. Indeed, the effect of this type of veil is to make its wearers look more attractive and decidedly unhidden. In this, West African women seemed to have more in common with Islamic women in far-away places like the Indian peninsula and the rest of Asia than with their sisters to their immediate north.⁵³

When defending these practices—polygamy, circumcision, and child marriages in African societies—however, the African theorist, like Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, warns against ethnocentric misrepresentations and calls for placing these customs in “their cultural and social contexts that would allow Westerners to discern their meaning from the perspective of African societies.”⁵⁴ But for Aidoo, the practice of the same institutions among African Muslim women is a clear sign of their grinding oppression. And in the words of ‘Zulu Sofola, another African theorist, Islam engineers the “de-womanization” or degradation of the African woman and strips her “of all that made her central and relevant in the traditional African socio-political domain.”⁵⁵ Sofola’s, Steady’s, and Aidoo’s astringent assessments reveal that Islam in Africa, particularly in African feminist discourse, is the “Other” culture, not sufficiently African, that sets the African Muslim woman apart from her African sisters, and her proximity to Islam is inversely proportionate to her emancipation. So the impact of Islam on African Muslim women is negligible, as Steady claims, and is oppressive, if Aidoo is to be believed. For Sofola, as is clear from her choice of words, the African Muslim woman cannot compatibly express her feminism in Islam as the religion degrades her womanhood.

The purpose of citing these rhetorical and methodological elisions is meant to reveal how enduringly the categorizations of the Middle East and the Arab world as “Muslim” and as stand-ins for “Muslim societies” the world over persist. Secondly, these strategies elide modes of Islamic feminism in West Africa, such as the *yan-taru* movement, that could be similar in scope and purpose to contemporary and more widely publicized forms in the Middle East. Furthermore, as seen in their recurrent vocabulary, these studies appear mostly concerned with the power of women’s public service, activism, or the “social life of Muslim women’s rights,” as Abu-Lughod titles one of her chapters, in such venues as the United Nations and Google and through such media as Islamic law and online surveys.⁵⁶ For African feminist theorists, Islam is not a welcome presence in the continent as it is regarded as synonymous with oppression and is best ignored since it has negligible impact on African Muslim women, as Steady claims. To Aidoo, the regions in Africa with fewer Muslims are also the friendliest to women’s well-being, notwithstanding the commonality of many practices such as polygamy and child marriages among African Muslim and non-Muslim societies. The presence and recurrence of these postures have acquired a level of theoretical sophistication whose exclusionary tenor forecloses the possibility of genuinely attending to an African-Islamic feminism that responds to the theoretical shortcomings in both African and Islamic feminist discourses.

Twin goals animate this study to countervail postulations that the African Muslim woman cares little for Islam or finds its presence degrading to her womanhood and theorizations of the Muslim woman who quotes fluently from the Qur’an, conducts surveys on Google, embraces rather than shuns the limelight, and engages in activism on behalf of other women. The African-Islamic feminist that *Privately Empowered* examines voluntarily and willingly seeks out Islam and the Qur’an to organize her life for personal and private ends. She uses the Qur’an but may not be able to quote fluently from it. She may not even be conversant in Islamic law, engage in *sharī’a* activism, write sophisticated articles for the United Nations, coordinate conferences on Google calendar, or conduct surveys to initiate change. Not even in a society where twelve of the thirty-six Nigerian states observe Islamic law. In such societies, under the profound socio-spiritual imprint of Islam in Nigeria, embedded in the long history of the religion in the region, the African-Muslim woman expresses her feminism in sites such as Kano market literature—and the *Littattfan Soyayya* or books of love, in particular—that throw into sharp relief the import of Islam in her personal life with no allusion to its overwhelming legal, political, or economic presence. Alkali, Ali, and Gimba borrow

and translate into English the topoi of the *Littattfan Soyayya* and the culture of Hausa society—love, marriage, domestic affairs, interpersonal relations, education, and Islam. To these ends, I focus on the origins of the Sokoto Caliphate, founded by Usman dan Fodio; the ethnic, legal, and religious complexion of northern Nigerian society; and the influence of such popular forms of expression, particularly for Muslim women, as the *Soyayya* books, as a framework that compels attention to feminism in Islam that women voluntarily and willingly turn to and return to for personal fulfillment and spiritual satisfaction.

Islam in Northern Nigeria

Consisting of over two hundred ethno-linguistic groups, Nigeria's population is diverse and disparate with roughly half of it being Muslim, concentrated mostly in the northern and southwestern parts of the country.⁵⁷ The two main ethnic groups of the Northern region are the Hausa and the Fulani. The Fulani were a nomadic herding people who lived in the region between the Senegal River and Guinea Highlands, and were gradually Islamicized over a period of several centuries as they moved around and interacted with the Hausa in the areas near northern Nigeria. Though the Hausa and Fulani groups originated in different regions of Africa, over time, and perhaps because of their common adherence to Islam and intermarriage, they became often referred to as Hausa-Fulani, one group with Islam as the chief marker of their identity. The Hausa, one of the largest ethno-linguistic groups of West Africa, make up roughly 21 percent of the Nigerian population and are concentrated in the northern part of the country and also in southeastern Niger. The Nigerian Hausa are mostly settled within the Guinea and Sahel savanna zone. African-Islamic feminist Ayesha Imam notes that the majority of the population is smallholding rural cultivators but there is an increasing penetration of capitalist activity in the agricultural production with the acquisition and control of land by large capitalist farmers. In the urban areas, Imam identifies the presence of a wage-earning proletariat, dependent on work in the manufacturing, civil service, trade, and service enterprises.⁵⁸

The Hausa are predominantly Muslim; as Ousseina Alidou points out, “as much as Islam is part of Hausa religious identity, it is equally an important marker of their cultural identity.”⁵⁹ So pervasive is the influence of Islam that Alidou believes “even the tiny minority of the Hausa subgroups who are still animist or Christian tend to be Islamic in cultural practice and they have been assimilated to the majority Hausa

Muslim community.”⁶⁰ This sentiment is also reflected in Abdul Rasheed Na’Allah’s apposite remark that “it is not uncommon for people of Kano, a community of nearly 100% Muslim population, to refer to anything meant for the populace as things meant for Muslims.”⁶¹ With regard to Muslim women, Novian Whitsitt insightfully observes that the reality of Hausa feminism is Islam, for most Hausa women cannot conceptualize their feminism without factoring in the significance of Islam. Their Islamic identity, argues Whitsitt, supersedes any other allegiance: “the single most important consideration in the construction of Hausa feminism is the significance of Islam, given that the religious faith colors almost every aspect of social relations.”⁶²

Islam first made inroads into Hausaland sometime between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries when the king of Kanem is said to have converted. Strong influences from the kingdoms of Songhay and Mali in the fourteenth century, and later by the pastoralist Fulani in the fifteenth century, also led to the rapid Islamization of the northern parts of Nigeria. The first Hausa ruler to convert to Islam was Yaji of Kano in 1370. Ibrahim Yaro Yahya argues that the gradual acceptance of Islam facilitated the art of reading and writing that in turn accelerated the dissemination of the religion and its cultural achievements, spearheaded largely by the emergence of a

learned class of people known as *malamai* (scholars or teachers) who developed a unique system of learning, mainly in two phases: the first phase is the search for mastery of the Koran in *makarantun allo* (Koranic schools), and the second phase is the search for specialization in such branches of knowledge as jurisprudence, theology, syntax, logic, law prosody, and the sciences of astrology and mathematics in *makarantun ilmi* (*ilmi* schools).⁶³

John Paden writes that the duties of a *mallam* are to “preach, teach, reform, educate, and enlighten the members of the public in all aspects of Islamic religion,” and in “a society where religion permeates all aspects of life and morals, the functioning of the mallam class becomes paramount.”⁶⁴

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Islam lost ground and stagnated in West Africa as the Songhay Empire collapsed, leading to the formation of many small Islamic theocracies. Hawthorne Emery Smith points out that “many people who claimed to be Islamic were so for the social advantages only: they were really no more Islamic than their ancestors had been hundreds of years earlier.”⁶⁵ It was at this time that the West African *jihad* movements began to reverse the stagnation in Islam

under none other than the Fulani of Hausaland, led by Usman dan Fodio, who spurred the reformist movement to “model the Islamic community on the early Islamic Ummah which existed during the era of the first four caliphs, often called the ‘Golden Age of Islam.’”⁶⁶ When the British came to Nigeria, the caliphate established by dan Fodio, the Sokoto Caliphate, was “a thriving African-Islamic socio-political culture,” states Smith.⁶⁷ The emirate rule had become institutionalized and the system was so well entrenched in northern Nigeria that the British decided not to tamper with it, making indirect rule the only feasible strategy for colonial administration.⁶⁸ Toyin Falola calls the caliphate “one of Nigeria’s last great empires.”⁶⁹ Furthermore, Ousmane Kane effectively describes the socio-spiritual demographics in northern Nigeria at the start of British rule by noting that the non-interference on the part of the colonial administration in Islamic zones, particularly in the Sokoto Caliphate that Lord Lugard, the Governor General of Nigeria (1914–19), had organized as the northern protectorate of Nigeria, witnessed a “spectacular growth” in Islam in the region.⁷⁰

Under dan Fodio, Islam grew not only as a religious identity for the Nigerians, but also as a great unifier of economic activity, political organization, cultural stability, literacy, and trade. By all accounts, as Yahya points out, the *jihad* period is considered the most outstanding era of mass education and intellectual awakening in Hausaland, marked by “an unprecedented growth of the Ulama (scholars) and itinerant preachers.”⁷¹ The ancient Muslim city of Kano, now one of the two largest cities of modern-day Nigeria, is situated in the northern part of the country. It was the most important and populous town in the Sokoto Caliphate. Although the Sokoto Caliphate lasted only until 1903, when it was defeated by the British and the French (with the portion of the region taken up by the British being called the Protectorate of Northern Nigeria), its religious and cultural legacy is still palpable, with the title of sultan being given to the spiritual leader of the region.⁷² The present-day Sokoto state, created in 1976 and located in the northeastern corner of Nigeria on the border of Niger, is named after the Sokoto Caliphate. The capital is the town of Sokoto where dan Fodio lies buried. The Hausa and Fulani continue to be the dominant ethnic groups in the state.⁷³

As a consequence of the adoption of the *shari‘a* by twelve states in northern Nigeria, Islam suffuses every aspect of public and private life, animating governance, economic relations, and social order, from usury-free economic transactions and activities to Islamically-influenced laws governing property, wealth, and economic relations. Politically, as well, Islam impacts the structure of governance under the *shari‘a* with the

states electing a Muslim ruler, responsible for the proper governance and administration of Islamic law. Smith identifies the reason for the thriving popularity of Islamic law, citing the need for legal stability: “The relevance for Islamic law is boosted by the growing disillusionment with the performance of the Western political models with which Nigeria has been experimenting since independence in 1960.”⁷⁴ Furthermore, the popular push for *sharī‘a* has been justified on the basis of the majority opinion of the people who feel that the legal arrangement where a secular legal system is imposed on a people who are not secular is unfair. Aminu Maigari, chairman of the Concerned Citizens’ Committee that toured the thirty-four local government areas of the state to mobilize Muslims for the adoption of *sharī‘a* in Katsina, discloses and endorses the majority view:

Because predominantly the people of Katsina are Moslems. You cannot take the law that protects the minority and put it on the majority. In Katsina, we are up to five million people, but only about 40,000 people are non-Moslems and you bring foreign law to be imposed on them. Then you are not doing justice to the society and this is not society.⁷⁵

Most recently, the Islamic Development Bank, headquartered in Saudi Arabia, invested \$470 million in the education of the *almajiris*, or pupils of the Qur’anic schools in northern Nigeria.⁷⁶

As Robert Dowd notes, it is in Nigeria that Muslim women are most organizationally and politically engaged in democracy and just governance, more so than in any other sub-Saharan country.⁷⁷ The Federation of Muslim Women of Nigeria (FOMWAN), the umbrella organization for the network of Muslim women’s associations in Nigeria, is known to empower Muslim women in Africa and in Nigeria through Islamic outreach, or *da‘wa*, with broad foci on the improvement of women’s socioeconomic status, literacy, health, education, and social service. In addition, Women Living under Muslim Law (WLUML) works to educate Muslim women in West Africa and Nigeria about their rights and encourages faithfulness to Islamic law in Muslim communities, as does the Muslim League for Accountability (MULAC), which rallies against corruption to enforce responsive governance in Nigeria. In addition, groups such as BAOBAB for Women’s Human Rights (founded in 1996) in Nigeria advance the rights of and rally legal support for women who live in Muslim societies through the services of lawyers and social workers.⁷⁸ Hussaina J. Abdullah painstakingly details the impressive work and transformatory efforts of a host of activist and nongovernmental

organizations in Nigeria, including Women in Nigeria (WIN), BAOBAB, Women's Justice Program (WJP), and the Women, Law and Development Centre (WLDC), among others.⁷⁹

And yet, the overwhelming presence of Islam in urban Hausa society percolates into everyday life most prominently through two significantly apolitical phenomena: oral literary productions of which Hausa storytelling within the household is the most well-known genre, and Kano market literature, called *Littattfan Soyayya* or books of love, a genre of popular romance fiction in Hausa that dwells on such topics as love, romance, and the adventures of young lovers. The magnitude of the Hausa literary movement, as I briefly trace below its history and phenomenal success, on all levels of literary, commercial, social, and religious life, is unarguably breathtaking. My interest in this extremely successful commercial and literary movement lies, however, in its ingenious capitalization of the personal, private, and individual dimensions of the predominant topoi—the personal and private lives of Hausa women—that underwrite *Soyayya* fiction. Quite simply, it is the interest in women's personal, private, and individual interactions with Islam that redounds most significantly to the success of Hausa prose fiction.

Following a hiatus in Hausa prose writing in colonial times in the 1930s and 1940s, notes Abdalla Uba Adamu, Hausa literature, particularly the Hausa novel, received a shot in the arm that led to its revival on an unprecedented scale in urban parts of northern Nigeria, particularly in urban Kano. Adamu ascribes the unforeseen interest in indigenous literature among Hausa youth in the mid-eighties to their avid spectatorship of television melodramas (notably *Bakan Gizo* and *Farin Wata*) on romantic love, the adventurous sagas of young lovers, forced marriages, and family affairs, which catalyzed the Hausa youth to focus on romantic iconography, adventure, and the intricacies of familial and marital relationships in their creative pursuits.⁸⁰ One of the most tangible outcomes of this interest in televised melodramas, observes Adamu, was the formation of drama clubs, theatre societies, and neighborhood drama associations such as the Gyaranya Drama Club (GDC), among others, where writers looked to transform their written scripts or sketches into stage performances. Largely inspired by thematic motifs from Hindi cinema of the 1970s—song-and-dance routines, romantic plots, action and adventure sequences, and fantasy—against a Hausa backdrop of language and society with Hausa lyrics, dialogue, and actors, many budding dramatists churned out scripts and dramatic sketches about Hausa society, eager to see their writing on stage. Lack of capital to theatrically produce such shows and grow the dramatic wings of the Hausa literary movement,

however, led these aspiring writers to turn to publishers, where they were also met with a lukewarm response to publishing Hausa fiction, primarily due to the paucity of interest in romance as a theme and in the Hausa language. The authors finally sought to privatize publishing through printing presses started by well-established local businessmen who were keen to reap profits from the potential market among newly literate Hausa youth but also promote indigenous literature. It was becoming clearer, as Adamu points out, that it was easier to write a novel about Hausa society than to mount a drama or stage a play on it.

Abetted by cheap production costs, easy availability of computer printing technology, and the ability to market through small shops and stalls first in the streets of Kano and then in other towns (hence the eponymous epithet “Kano market literature”), a novel could sell between ten to twenty thousand copies in a matter of weeks and up to one hundred thousand copies in a few years.⁸¹ *Soyayya* fiction was also the lucky beneficiary, notes Yusuf M. Adamu, of a symbiotic boost in popularity from radio programs (*Shafa Labari Shuni*, in particular) on Radio Kaduna Nigeria and Radio Kano that aired readings of manuscripts and published novels to advertise writers coinciding with the establishment of specialist literary magazines, such as *Wakiliya* and *Marubuciya*, devoted to news, reviews, and reports on *Soyayya* novels.⁸² Consequent to its unprecedented popularity, the Hausa literary movement transitioned into a much larger and equally market-driven business of home videos, films, and video production on *Soyayya* topoi. The pervasive impact of the Hausa literary movement even resulted in the formal bifurcation of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA), Kano into two branches—one for writers in Hausa and the other for writers in English—thereby becoming the only ANA branch to support writers in a language other than English. Abdalla Uba Adamu writes: “Kano ANA is the only branch in Nigeria to cater to two language formats. Perhaps this has been because Kano, and Hausa writers generally, have produced the largest amount of prose fiction of any group in the country.”⁸³ And building on this momentum, explains Abdalla Uba Adamu, ANA Kano has also entered into dialogue with Hausa writers in *ajami* (the Arabized script of the Hausa language) who write Islamic literature, pamphlets, and prose on prayer and other aspects of Islamic life.

Most strikingly, this revolution in book production and consumption, its record-breaking sales, and its ecstatic reception by Hausa youth spurred young women to become literate in the roman script of Hausa (the *boko* script) to be able to read this fiction, and to eventually take up writing their own novels. Both Yusuf M. Adamu and Abdalla Uba Adamu

credit the government-sponsored Universal Primary Education scheme of 1976 that increased literacy among the Hausa youth that accompanied the success of the Hausa literary movement, and in turn pushed more youth, especially women, to become literate. By 2002, the most popular authors of *Soyayya* fiction, specifies Yusuf M. Adamu, were women, and the biggest audience for these novels remains women. Some of the most successful Muslim Hausa women writers—Balaraba Ramat Yakubu (author of *Budurwar Zuciya*, 1985, whose title is translated as *The Tender Heart*) Maigari Ahmed Bichi (author of *Kishiya ko Suruka*, 2005, whose title translates as *Rival or Mother-in-Law?*)—are notable alumni of the adult literacy program run by the Kano State Agency for mass education.

Both the unmatched success of *Soyayya* fiction and its impact on women's literacy and even literary careers, I contend, are embedded in the preeminence of the types of topoi of *Soyayya* novels. In other words, the Hausa literary movement was able to take the socio-literary landscape in Northern Nigeria by storm by precisely capitalizing on the personal, private, and individual ways in which the youth, especially women, could deal with the most crucial problems in their lives—education, marriage, and self-improvement. Abdalla Uba Adamu and Yusuf M. Adamu concur that in contrast to Hausa novelists of the early decades of the twentieth century, among the new wave of Hausa writers, particularly during the revival of the Hausa literary movement in the mid-eighties, there was a marked shift from writing about Marxism, social problems such as drug abuse, unemployment, and poverty to addressing the “emotional” concerns of the Hausa youth. To this end, and heavily influenced by Hollywood and Hindi (Bollywood) cinemas, *Soyayya* authors increasingly endorsed themes on romance, parental authority, marriage, and urban youth and their problems to the extent that they have been criticized for their insistent preference for “light” themes in their novels. At literary conferences, they have been urged to incorporate “more important problems such as corruption, nepotism, hunger, and poverty,” and consequent to such criticism, have even been labelled as “inferior.” Yusuf M. Adamu, himself an established writer and the author of two *Soyayya* novels, *Idan So Cuta Ne* (1989) and *Ummul-Khairi* (1995), responds to such critiques by clarifying that these novels most faithfully portray the “emergent social change” in Hausa society, indexed in the swelling desire among Hausa youth for education, self-expression, independence from parental fiat in marital decisions, and an overall spirit of freedom and adventure in a conservative authority-driven society.⁸⁴ *Soyayya* authors, therefore, feel that such themes most directly and effectively mirror issues facing Hausa youth.

Furthermore, as Abdalla Uba Adamu cogently argues, it is precisely the preoccupation with the personal, private, and individual nature of such themes that also led to the establishment of the Hausa feminist movement as *Soyayya* authors Talatu Wada Ahmed, Balaraba Ramat Yakubu, and others have persistently thematized Islamic feminism in their novels through topics pertaining to Muslim women's education, marriage, and interpersonal relations. In their romantic bestsellers, such as Talatu Wada Ahmed's *Rabin Raina* series of three novels (title roughly translated as *My Soulmate*), the protagonists are all pious and educated Muslim women, "religious, obedient, respectful, and cheerfully carry[ing] out their household chores," as Abdalla Uba Adamu intimates, eager to continue their education or to choose their own spouses by Islamically negotiating with the influences of their personal and private domain, namely their parents, fiancés, or husbands.⁸⁵ In Talatu Ahmed's *Rabin Raina II*, for instance, Abdalla Uba Adamu helpfully explains that the protagonist is a Muslim school dropout who is assisted by none other than her Muslim fiancé to complete her education and successfully procure employment. To assist her in her endeavors, her fiancé even tutored her at home. The core focus of these topoi is not only that throughout these novels, considered as vanguards of Hausa feminism, the heroines are Islamically observant, respectful, and dutiful women who craft their desires for self-improvement within the familial fold, but that the private, personal, and individual domain of their problems is chosen precisely to convey issues most relevant to Hausa women. Although Abdalla Uba Adamu's figures show that of the five hundred-odd Hausa novels published between 1997 and 1999 only about 35% of the books strictly thematized love or *Soyayya* themes, the rest focused on equally personal themes such as family, polygamy, interpersonal relationships (disagreements, quarrels), obedience to parents, patience, perseverance, and marriage. As Adamu suggestively states, "the determination of the central theme is purely personal."⁸⁶ That is, a writer may ostensibly emphasize a *Soyayya* topic but also include another theme, such as a moral one to warn the public about monetary greed or deception, to highlight the primacy of his or her sense of judgement about what is most reflective of Hausa society when selecting the dominant topos of the novel.

The biggest criticism of the levity of *Soyayya* themes, then, in fact counterintuitively underscores their relevance to Hausa society, for the authors persist in centralizing the personal and private domain of women's lives, namely their *personal* choice in choosing a spouse and in pursuing self-improvement, in their novels. Ultimately, the Hausa literary movement is not so much market-driven, as gauged from its commercial feasibility,

as it is audience-driven, judging from the readers' abiding preference for certain kinds of topics. Briefly, the audience and its preference for some themes more than others underwrite the market. If the Hausa literary movement's most successful and popular proponents and its largest audience, namely women, insist on writing and reading on topics they believe are most relevant to Muslim women, the movement then not only reflects the literary and commercial value of the personal and private domain but also emphasizes the under-studied fact that the personal and private empoweringly serve as the motor for an entire socio-literary apparatus.

On the same issue of the currency of themes about Hausa women, Novian Whitsitt identifies that *Soyayya* writers portray "the reality of Hausa youth confronting dramatic social change."⁸⁷ Specifically, for *Privately Empowered*, the issues that are taken to be socially and realistically relevant are in fact drawn from the personal and private realm of Hausa women's lives. Whitsitt reports these writers asserting that their novels serve as "vehicles for the social concerns for the writers"; as such, it is possible to state that precisely the private, personal, and individual dimensions of the lives of the Hausa gather relevance on the social scale as hundreds of writers thematize the issues most pertinent to Hausa culture.⁸⁸ A popular blog on the themes of *Soyayya* books reiterates this by stating that Kano market literature is widely influential

not simply because the books are about love, but because they tackle issues that speak to the reality of Hausa youth and in particular Hausa women of today. *Littattafan soyayya* may deal with the difficulties that lovers face, from nosy family members or parents who oppose the relationship, but they also often offer advice on maintaining healthy marital relations and deal with more complex and difficult issues such as polygamy, forced marriages, purdah, the importance of educating female children and the issue of HIV/AIDS and its spread in the region. These are all topics that are relevant to contemporary society in Northern Nigeria, and in this sense *littattafan soyayya* can be seen as not only representing society but also offering critique and advice.⁸⁹

It merits noting that these issues—love affairs, marriage, personal lives, interpersonal relations, polygamy, female education, and seclusion—fall within the purview of Islamic law and assume an eminently political and public texture when voiced in conventional methods of political activism, organizations, or support groups. Whereas when channeled through the *Littattafan Soyayya*, as hundreds of Hausa women take up writing on

the same themes to educate, advise, and entertain about the personal and private facets of Hausa life, they consequently foreground the quotidian aspects of Muslim women's lives with no expressly political or public ambition other than to chronicle a way of life profoundly marked by Islam.

In the nature of the *Soyayya* themes and the aims of *Soyayya* writers in the heart of Islamic states, despite being in English, Alkali's *The Stillborn*, *The Virtuous Woman*, and *The Descendants*; Ali's *Destiny*; and Gimba's *Sacred Apples* are tendered in the spirit of Islam's presence in women's personal and private lives. As I discuss more fully in chapter 5, Ali's *Destiny* is perhaps closest in style, presentation, and length to the *Soyayya* novel. *Destiny* could very well be one of those rare *Soyayya* novels in English and, therefore, not considered by critics as serious literary work. Not coincidentally, the "native idiom" of Alkali's novels, as she calls it, refers less to the language of communication per se than to the texture of the issues she discusses in them. Stating that her work possesses the orality of Hausa culture and *literary traditions*, Alkali transcribes into English what is said by her characters speaking another language, thus presenting as the "native idiom" issues that most scrupulously illustrate the cultural landscape of northern Nigeria:

I find writing in English agonizing, to say the least, especially when it comes to dialogue. My characters in "real life" do not speak in English and in the act of translation, the native idiom is completely lost, as are the meanings of certain expressions. Naturally, I would feel more comfortable writing in my own language, but the audience, as you know, would be limited.⁹⁰

And Gimba's reasons for using English as the medium of his prose are the facility of its use among his readership:

My choice of writing in the English language and not in any of Nigeria's many languages was conscious and deliberate. As the official language of instruction in our education system . . . I feel that there is a definite readership in the English medium . . . I prefer English in view of the fact that the issues I address and the readership I have in mind may be more at home in English than any other language.⁹¹

The "native idiom" is that of the issues of an Islamic context, namely the Islamic context of the Hausa—women's personal, private, and individualized engagement with Islam beyond the political dimensions of their activities—that powerfully emerges in Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's work

in a language that has a relatively diffuse readership but in genres and themes most reflective of Hausa society. Activating biliteracy, or multiple sources of inspiration and traditions, *Privately Empowered* studies northern Nigerian fiction in English, in Hausa society, deriving information from *Soyayya* books, outside the popular regional locations of the Middle East and Arab world and outside political and public topoi for social reform. Indeed, it reconciles the African Muslim woman's feminism with African feminist politics to emphatically front the futurity of African and Islamic feminisms in African-Islamic feminism.

Divided into five chapters, with each focusing on a specific novel by Alkali, Ali, and Gimba, each analysis pivots on the personal, private, and individual modes of a particular Islamic spiritual practice by African Muslim women, arguing that their expression of Islamic feminism bears no political or public ambitions. The opening chapter, "Connecting Vocabularies: A Grammar of Histories, Politics, and Priorities in African and Islamic Feminisms," begins this work by tracing the evolutionary concepts of both African and Islamic feminisms to expose the rather innumerable challenges African feminist theory has overcome, ranging from a complete absence of Africa in the social sciences to racist and ethnocentric scholarship on African women, calling for, as in the powerful words of Carole Boyce Davies, "a specific African feminism with certain specific needs and goals arising out of the concrete realities of women's lives in African societies."⁹² Toward the latter goal of factoring African women's realities, African feminists labored to explain African feminism through mutually allusive and overlapping terms like *Umoja* or togetherness, African womanism or feminism that derives from the African environment, nego-feminism or a feminism of negotiation and exchange, and motherism that grows out of harmony with the African environment. Likewise, a multitude of Islamic feminist thinkers have commendably grappled with the history, politics, and nature of Islamic feminisms to provide this complex weave of feminism with some semblance of usable, if political and activist, frameworks such as the theorist miriam cooke's "sharia activism" and the Egyptian feminist Hiba Rauf's evocative formulation that the "private is political."⁹³

Both Islamic and African feminist studies nonetheless remain ill-served by their incomplete appreciation of what I call the African-Islamic feminist dimension. By focusing only on the Middle East, as do Islamic theorists, conceptually limiting themselves in the process to women's public and political activities, and by discursively excluding the African Muslim woman's positive engagement with Islam from African feminist discourse, as do African theorists, African and Islamic feminist theories

falter in the application of some of their own key injunctions to the African Muslim woman. Mediating African and Islamic feminist itineraries, the first chapter articulates the framework within which Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's fictions situate themselves in the composite space of African-Islamic feminism to repatriate the African Muslim woman to African feminist discourse as an African Muslim womanist, an African Muslim nego-feminist, and an African Muslim motherist. For the African Muslim woman, as this chapter contends, her African and Islamic environments are not dichotomous as she embraces both. Furthermore, using three examples—Nana Asma'u and Amina of Zaria, models of Islamic feminism grounded in African history; the practice of physical seclusion or *kulle* in Hausa; and oral storytelling that Hausa women develop in the domain of their households—the first chapter argues that the African Muslim woman's roles in society belie conventional understanding of the nature and aims of Islamic feminism. Together, *kulle* as practiced in northern Nigeria, the goals of Nana's and Amina's political leadership, and oral storytelling enjoin a fuller exploration of feminism, especially by Islamic feminists in the Middle East and Arab world who rather strenuously focus only on public, political, and legal aspects of women's rights in Islam as venues of feminist expression. In so doing, this chapter maps Nigerian Muslim women's feminism on a matrix of methods and goals to stage African-Islamic feminism as a mutually beneficial conjugation of both African and Islamic feminisms in the futurity of feminisms.

Chapter 2, "Noetic Education and Islamic Faith: Personal Transformation in *The Stillborn*," addresses a woman's individualized and personal response to religion in a small village in northern Nigeria in Alkali's first novel, *The Stillborn*. As Islam is never part of the main protagonist Li's practice or personal choice in the first half of the story, this chapter studies the example of women whose personal engagement with Islam is a function of noetic transformation, a result of personal cognition. Alkali mentions that when she created Li, she thought that "she would come out a typical ordinary Northern Nigerian woman who has to grapple with the strange ailment called culture conflict."⁹⁴ But, as this chapter contends, Li's journey from an adolescent seeking an education to a mature young woman is not entirely divested of a spiritual conscience that transforms her both emotionally and psychologically. Through the Islamic notions of *aqiliyyah* or cognition, and the resultant *nafsiyyah* or disposition, Li is spurred to accept Islamic monotheism or *shahādah* as the foundation not only for her personal Islamic praxis but also for her future relationships and actions. Moreover, Li's acknowledgement of Islamic monotheism, as this chapter argues in greater detail, is also actuated by her realization of

her sister Awa's contributions to Li's success, not hitherto appraised as an example of Islamic feminism. Awa's uncomplaining adherence to Islam has been unanimously read by critics as a sign of Islamic indoctrination of subservience. Surprisingly then, as a little-discussed nego-feminist, Awa is an example of both African and Islamic feminist orientations as she negotiates, compromises, and coordinates with her African and Muslim environments in the pursuit of her goals. Li's own acceptance of *shahādah* can also be read through the lens of *Umoja* and even motherism as her acceptance of Islam follows her efforts of harmonizing her environment—her family and her husband—in the expression of her feminism. Equally, Li's transformation is an example of stiwanism or her active involvement in personal change.

Chapter 3, “Historical Templates and Islamic Disposition: Personal Journeys in *The Virtuous Woman*,” delves into a physically handicapped Muslim teenager's private engagement with Islam from a small village in northern Nigeria as she matures into a young woman in Alkali's *The Virtuous Woman*. While the preceding chapter examines the process of acquisition of an Islamic personality—the ways, circumstances, and people that engineer Li's acquisition of Islam—this chapter dwells on the enactment of an Islamic personality by Nana Ai, the seventeen-year-old physically challenged main protagonist of *The Virtuous Woman*. In contrast to Li, Nana Ai already embodies an Islamic disposition, and manifests it through *akhlāq* or Islamic virtuous disposition, an ensemble of desirable virtues and qualities. As the organizing principle of her personality, *akhlāq* drives Nana Ai's decisions during the long journey back to her school after the holidays in her encounters with diverse people and situations on the way, including managing her own physical handicap with dignity. As Nana Ai deals with difficult travel companions, a tragic accident, and her feelings for a young man she has befriended on the journey, Bello, along with her own emotions of poor self-esteem on account of her physical disability, her use of *akhlāq* to guide her choices brings to the fore the purpose of an Islamic framework in tempering the emotional and physical maturation of a teenager. Critics relegated the novel to children's fiction, of the “school-girl adventure” genre. However, the novel, as this chapter shows, is a deep reflection of mature feminism as it delves into Nana's virtuous disposition, including her emotional conflicts. Nana's maturity, wisdom, and flexibility help her to ably negotiate diverse circumstances and people; the ability to be feisty and conciliatory and adapt to a broad range of emotions in being cautious and yet decisive, while grappling with poor self-esteem, all within the Islamic framework of *akhlāq*, imbues, moreover, her nego-feminist, motherist, and womanist stance.

Chapter 4, “Spiritual Legacies and Worship: Personal Spaces in *The Descendants*,” discusses the Islamic thrust of women’s purposeful engagement of Islamic rituals, spiritual habits, and observance of forms of worship or *‘ibadāt*—*ṣalāt*, *du‘ā*, *dhikr* or prayer—for the satisfaction and fulfillment of personal goals through a close reading of Alkali’s novel *The Descendants*. The novel details the story of the Ramta clan in northern Nigeria. Headed by Magira Milli, the main protagonist of the novel and a charismatic matriarch—leader, decision-maker, and visionary—not typically expected by critics of the novel to exist in northern Nigerian society, the Ramta family is influential and affluent, but also quite largely uneducated. Magira’s charge then comprises of ensuring the education and professional success of her granddaughters. Magira relies on her Islamic practice—*ṣalāt*, *du‘a*, and *dhikr*—to accomplish her personal goals. She uses the space of her prayers, especially during the *du‘a* or supplication and *dhikr*, or a form of prayer involving constant remembrance of Allah, to strategize her moves and plans on transforming her family’s future. In addition to drawing emotional sustenance from her prayers, Magira turns to prayer for spiritual and emotional respite as she stewards the heavy burden of her family’s responsibility. Although the critical apparatus of the novel claims that Alkali’s depiction of a matriarch in Hausa society is subversive in that the conservative Hausa society does not encourage women’s leadership, this chapter corrects such a reading by contending that Magira’s character is more illustrative of Hausa society than subversive as the personal, private, and individual domains of women’s Islamic engagement have not been sufficiently evaluated, something *Privately Empowered* does by rectifying such readings. Other female characters in the novel, Magira’s granddaughters—Seytu, Peni, and Mero (Magira’s granddaughter-in-law)—are doctors, housewives, businesswomen, and even those who fail professionally and personally. Through the diverse roles and ambitions expressed in Magira’s, Seytu’s, Mero’s, and Peni’s personalities and varying engagements with Islam, Alkali exposes the vicissitudes of personal and spiritual commitments that can be plotted on a broad spectrum of Islamic engagement. Within this spectrum of Islamic engagement also emerge the African Muslim woman’s commitments to various African feminist orientations such as her active involvement in change, or *stiwanim*; her ability to initiate her own agendas, or African womanism; dialogic action with her surroundings, or *Umoja*; and her genuine embrace of all differences, or motherism.

Finally, chapter 5, “Frequent Functions and References: Personal Solutions in *Sacred Apples* and *Destiny*,” most poignantly intervenes in the common critical stance on Islamic feminism in Africa, that of women’s

revolt against Islam when facing persecution and injustice, in Gimba's *Sacred Apples* and Ali's *Destiny*. Gimba's and Ali's protagonists, Zahrah and Farida respectively, experience severe emotional duress in their personal lives, particularly in their marital relationships. But instead of directing their bitterness toward Islam or resorting to assistance from women's organizations to counter the injustice in their lives, both women resolutely turn to the religion through a deeply-felt and personal desire to heal their losses, emotionally recover from personal setbacks, and reconstruct their lives and futures. Deploying *ṣalāt*, or the canonical prayer, and *dhikr*—a form of prayer involving constant remembrance of Allah and a reconnection with the Qur'an for answers on personal matters, especially when debating about polygamy and marriage—Zahrah and Farida abidingly grow in their reliance on Islamic praxis. The means for Zaharah's and Farida's happiness and satisfaction—*ṣalāt*, *dhikr*, polygamy, and education—inhere within their environment, which is conditioned by both African and Islamic influences and actors, including men, as the two African Muslim women actively partake in *Umoja*, stiwanism, African womanism, and nego-feminism to negotiate, coordinate, and ably manage difficulties in their personal matters.

African-Islamic feminism thus discursively intervenes in each chapter through personal, private, and individualized modes of Islamic practice as a conduit for personal satisfaction, bearing no public, political, or activist agenda. It intervenes, moreover, to address tendencies in both Islamic and African feminist theories that obscure women's personal engagement with spiritual practice or vilify the impact of Islam on African Muslim women. By mapping, as a point of departure, the trends in African feminist and Islamic feminist theories that have evolved from responses to colonial ideologies hostile to African Muslim women and eclipse the African Muslim woman's engagement with Islam, either by de-emphasizing its influence in her life or by stubbornly examining themes that are contextually relevant to societies in the Middle East, the following chapters seek to mediate a mutually beneficial conjugation of these two discourses and repurpose Islamic feminism.