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Privately Empowered

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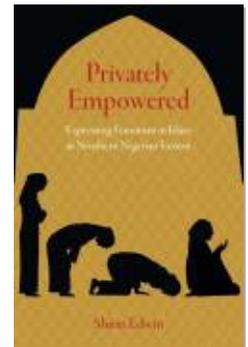
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Chapter 1



Connecting Vocabularies

A Grammar of Histories, Politics, and Priorities in African and Islamic Feminisms

A major flaw of feminist attempts to tame and name the feminist spirit in Africa is their failure to define African feminism *on its own terms* rather than in the context of Western feminism.

—Obioma Nnaemeka (emphasis added)

Because gender is preeminently a cultural construct, it cannot be theorized in a cultural vacuum, as many scholars tend to do.

—Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí

By simply living their lives, Muslim women are causing the Muslimwoman to crumble.

—Margot Badran

In a country like Iran, Islam is not a matter of personal spiritual choice but rather a legal and political system.

—Valentine Moghadem

One of the problems with current discussions of Islam and feminism is ahistorical generalizations.

—Afsaneh Najmabadi

This chapter presents a conspectus of African and Islamic feminist theories to historicize the evolutionary trends in their methods and agendas. It surveys the historical and ideological circumstances—European

colonialism, ethnocentrism, and an improper appraisal of African and Muslim women's situations—that motivated African and Islamic feminists to articulate such key discursive concepts as African womanism, *Umoja*, nego-feminism, stiwanism, and motherism, for African women and women's legal rights, public roles, and political participation as promulgated in the Qur'an, for Muslim women in the Middle East. In so doing, this chapter unravels the systematic de-emphasis of African Muslim women and of goals expressed through methods other than public and political activity by discursive practices in both African and Islamic feminist discourses. In their treatment of the "Muslim world," Islamic feminists elliptically reference Africa. *Privately Empowered* attributes this negligence to the fetishization of political and public engagements in Islam as is the case in most societies in the Middle East that are Islamic nation-states. As for African feminism, African theorists uphold Africa's plurality but excoriate Islam's influence on the African Muslim woman and call Islam "religious colonialism."¹ The African feminist injunction of "building on the indigenous," as Obioma Nnaemeka confidently recommends, where "African worldviews are capable of providing the theoretical rack on which to hang African literature," woefully falls short when African feminists read African-Islamic feminist literature, since Islam, as made plain in 'Zulu Sofola's words, "de-womanized" the African woman.² To a fortiori claim that Islam is a form of religious colonialism for African women has calamitous consequences for African literary theory. For one, it inaccurately arms the African Muslim heroine with an aggression and intense hatred associated with colonialism, inscribed, in this case, in Islamic systems, in its putative patriarchy and sexual subjugation that she must overcome for emancipation. Just as African feminists denounce European theorists for not factoring in their realities, "fantasizing a measure of superiority over African and other Third World women," as Ifi Amadiume rightly points out, and disrespectfully trivializing African realities, oddly enough African feminists themselves shrink from the idea of including African Muslim women in key feminist formulations despite promoting an inclusionary expression of African feminism.³

A biliterate African-Islamic reading of Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's fiction reveals that the African Muslim woman embodies key qualities of each of the foundational concepts of African feminist thought—*Umoja*, African womanism, nego-feminism, stiwanism, and motherism—with an eye to abiding by her Islamic faith, for her African and Islamic identities are not mutually exclusive. Specifically, then, the African Muslim woman is an African *Muslim* womanist, an African *Muslim* nego-feminist, an African *Muslim* stiwanist, an African *Muslim* motherist, and so on. Paraphrasing

Nnaemeka, the African-Islamic worldview, I contend, is precisely the rack on which to hang the African Muslim woman's feminism that draws from her African *and* Islamic environments. This biliterate presence and function of African-Islamic feminism in Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's fiction emerges through a closer look at three examples of feminism in Islam in northern Nigeria—the pivotal roles and goals of Nana Asma'u and Amina of Zaria's leadership, the practice of seclusion (*kulle*), and Hausa oral storytelling—not only because they question conventional wisdom about the goals of leadership, the acquisition and use of linguistic skills, and economic autonomy in unusual ways, but more importantly because they mirror the personal, private, and individual engagement with Islam illustrated in Alkali's, Ali's and Gimba's fiction to instantiate African-Islamic feminism in apolitical means and ends. The African-Islamic feminist lens allows us, moreover, to ask where in patriarchal societies—northern Nigeria—do African Muslim women turn for personal, private, and individual fulfillment? If indeed, as African feminists—'Zulu Sofola, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, and Ama Ata Aidoo—insist that African Muslim women feel abused particularly by “patriarchal” and “sexist” Islam, then in the privacy of their homes, with no one watching or listening, African Muslim women would have no problem in abstaining from Islamic habits and rituals. More to the point, what does African Muslim women's voluntary and willing practice of Islamic rituals and spiritual habits reveal about their own feelings and thoughts about Islam? A reading of Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's depictions of African Muslim women's voluntary and willing deployment of Islamic rituals and spiritual habits—prayer, veiling, virtuous behavior, and Islamic monotheism—therefore, produces surprising conclusions for African feminist theorists and Islamic feminists alike.

Catechizing conventional wisdom about economic activity in seclusion, education, and the goals of political leadership is vital to a reading of Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's novels as it teases out, counterintuitively, the African Muslim woman's recruitment of spiritual practices and rituals to give expression to her feminism. Repatriating Nana Asma'u and Amina of Zaria to the list of those Aidoo calls “some of the bravest, most independent, and most innovative women this world has ever known,” from which Nana Asma'u and Amina are conspicuously missing, may not qualitatively modify African feminist thought.⁴ Rather, a closer look at the goals of Nana's and Amina's leadership defamiliarizes the aims of political leadership as limited to public and social participation for women. Similarly, it is not to emphasize economic autonomy in the fact that secluded Muslim women control the local market from even behind

closed doors or are linguistically talented without ever stepping into a school, but to wonder, following biliteracy in exploring multiple sites of sources, themes, and aims, that if these modes of engagement can impact leadership, the economy, and even education, then personal, private, and individual engagements with the religion must yield expressions of feminism that have not been sufficiently evaluated.

Invoking these notable examples, I hypothesize the following: if women can be autonomous even without stepping out of the confines of their homes both economically and linguistically, as is manifestly the case in parts of northern Nigeria because of *kulle*, then they can also express their feminism without subscribing to political activism and public roles through personal, private, and individual engagements with Islam. Leadership, likewise, need not mobilize women for greater public participation and political activity. It can, using Nana Asma'u's and Amina of Zaria's examples, promote faith and right living in Islam within the familial fold. The private need not be political, as the Egyptian feminist Hiba Rauf suggests. It can remain just that—private and personal. Therefore, in Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's fiction, women may engage Islam not for public expression, legal reform, or political leadership but to organize personal and private affairs through a repertoire of spiritual habits—*ṣalāt*, *duʿā*, *dhikr*, *akhlāq*, *shahādah*, and *hijāb*. Or quite simply, they may not approach Islamic practice for these ends at all but simply perform their religious duties for spiritual and personal fulfillment. This repertoire of spiritual expressions, performance of prayer, rituals, and Islamic habits serves as the most accurate index for discerning what Muslim women think and feel about Islam. Such a means of Islamic feminist expression that *Privately Empowered* locates within the contours of African-Islamic feminism pointedly emerges in Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's novels in their protagonists' practice of Islamic rituals and spiritual habits.

African Feminist Thought: A Corrective to Eurocentrism

African feminist thought passed through a twofold process in its development: identifying the weaknesses of European and American feminisms to refute the application of ill-matched concepts to African societies and developing a feminist discourse that is accountable to African women's realities. African feminists aver that African feminism must be defined on its own terms, in frameworks cohering with the realities of African women and their environment rather than importing concepts from elsewhere. The most daunting task, as will become evident in the

following pages, was to identify and conceptually parry the misrepresentations of African women's realities, for the single most prominent idea expressed in the work of African feminists unequivocally describes Euro-American scholarship on African women as little more than an extension, a continuation, of colonial racism. Undoing the colonial grasp on feminist discourse on African women became the first salient feature of African feminist thought. As Oyèwùmí competently puts it, colonialism "spurred, commissioned and sanctioned scholarship on Africa" that was produced during a period of "unprecedented European domination of non-European peoples."⁵ It then exported "gender imperialism" to other cultures, a discourse that contained the same racism and ethnocentrism of the European colonial enterprise, turning feminism into a natural heir of the production of an unmistakably imperialistic discourse on Africa.⁶

To deter researchers from making overly generalized pronouncements and without an explication of sociocultural histories and contexts of African realities, Oyèwùmí adduces gender—the very concept that she claims lies at the heart of Western feminist scholarship and whose episteme is radically different from its African conceptualization—to substantiate the urgent need for an informed approach to African women's issues. She argues that whereas gender has been "a fundamental organizing principle in all societies" and in Western culture gender is primarily "bio-logic," "woman" as a biological category did not exist in Yoruba communities in Nigeria "prior to their sustained contact with the West."⁷ Furthermore, in Western societies, claims Oyèwùmí, "biology provides the rationale for the organization of the social world" as a result of which social categories of gender in Western feminist scholarship on African women derive also from the Western assumption that "physical bodies are social bodies" because gender and sex in Western societies are understood as inseparable and synonymous.⁸ In contrast to this notion, in Yoruba societies, avers Oyèwùmí, gender is premised not on biology but on social facts: "Biological facts do not determine who can become the monarch or who can trade in the market . . . hence the nature of one's anatomy did not define one's social position." Nevertheless, because of poorly informed scholarship, ethnocentrism and even racism, varied meanings in social arrangements, and the implications of gender and social relationships, many other African institutions—such as polygamy, arranged marriages, levirate, and child betrothal—continues Oyèwùmí, are misrepresented as misogynistic and barbaric by Westerners.

Along similar lines, Ifi Amadiume's benchmark study *Female Husbands, Male Daughters*, an anthropological disquisition on the Nnobe peoples of

the Igbo society of Western Africa, powerfully reproves the ill-informed episteme of Western feminist theories on Africa and its methods of generalizing African cultures by terming it “disrespectful trivialization”⁹:

When in the 1960s and 1970s female academics and Western feminists began to attack social anthropology, riding on the crest of the new wave of women’s studies, the issues they took on were androcentricism and sexism. . . . The methods they adopted indicated to Black women that White feminists were no less racist than the patriarchs of social anthropology whom they were busy condemning for male bias. They fantasized a measure of superiority over African and other Third World women. . . . It baffles African women that Western academics and feminists feel no apprehension or disrespectful trivialization in taking on all of Africa or, indeed, all the Third World in one book.¹⁰

Terming the ethnocentric Euro-American scholarship on Africa as “new imperialism,” Amadiume persuasively argues that Western scholars were guilty of assuming the catholicity of Western episteme.¹¹

Therefore, to counter this discursive evacuation of the particularities of the African environment, African feminists paid meticulous attention to the fact that although women across the world share common concerns and causes, African women faced a different order of priorities.¹² As a result, the second salient feature proposed by African feminists was to judiciously focalize the plurality of African women’s situations. Obioma Nnaemeka eloquently underlines plurality as an indispensable factor in the study of African feminism, writing that it “speaks literally thousands of different languages across the African continent.”¹³ She insists, with Oyèwùmí, that African women must be studied within the context of an “African environment,” where African feminism is rooted culturally and philosophically.¹⁴ These two key injunctions—countering overly generalized, thinly pertinent, and racist pronouncements and defining African feminism within the pluralistic African environment, inhering to the realities of African women—fittingly provided the ideological impetus to reconfigure Western-derived discourse on African women. The first step in countering Euro-American scholarship, therefore, as Nnaemeka suggestively states, is to proactively describe African feminism:

To meaningfully explain the phenomenon called African feminism, it is not to Western feminism but rather to the *African environment*

that one must refer . . . It has a life of its own that is rooted in the African environment. *Its uniqueness emanates from the cultural and philosophical specificity of its provenance.*¹⁵ (emphases added)

To this end, African theorists look with favor on key terms such as African womanism, *Umoja*, nego-feminism, stiwanism, and motherism, among others, to explain African feminism. Although these terms focus on a particular viewpoint by a specific African feminist theorist, they are mutually allusive in that they overlap, interconnect, and intersect as each of the African theorists who forwards these terms—Chikwenye Ogunyemi, Mary Kolawole, Obioma Nnaemeka, Catherine Acholonu, and Molar Ogundipe-Leslie—acknowledges the meaningful contributions of these descriptions in the discourse on African feminism.

African Womanism: Locating African Peculiarities

Even as African theorists extrapolate African-American feminist ideas to the environment of the African woman—as does Chikwenye Ogunyemi's extension of the African-American feminist bell hooks's concept of "womanism," a form of feminism for the Black woman who is doubly marginalized by her own society's sexist attitudes and the White world outside it—Ogunyemi feels that "feminism and African-American womanism overlook African peculiarities."¹⁶ She therefore asserts "a need to define African womanism," for the African woman knows that "she is deprived of her rights by sexist attitudes in the black domestic domain and by Euro-American patriarchy in the public sphere."¹⁷ As a "counterdiscourse," then, African womanism revises "black men's and white women's discourses."¹⁸ So while womanism is particular to the Black woman everywhere, concedes Ogunyemi, it is only when the African woman, in particular, names herself meaningfully as she has always done in her cultures that she is able to historicize and focalize her politics.¹⁹ In other words, an African womanist anchors her feminism in the initiative to name herself instead of leaving it to others (especially to Euro-American feminists or to legacies of colonial ideologies), and she situates herself in African history (her local environment), that which Ogunyemi terms as "African peculiarities."²⁰ A number of vocal strategies, symbolic of women's figurative actions to militate against patriarchy—*kwemu*, a vernacular theory; palaver-*palava*; and a spate of textual excursions into women's spaces or the "discursive universe," as Ogunyemi calls it—abet the African womanist initiative.²¹ Ogunyemi thus prescriptively concludes that

African feminism's "feisty spirit" is aimed at "confrontationality" and at making the African woman a "spokeswoman" who must establish a "counterdiscourse" to break centuries of silence imposed by colonialism and African patriarchy.²² Not unlike Irene Assiba D'Almeida's conceptualization of African women's writing as a "prise d'écriture," on the one hand, African women wrest writing in the sense of a militant appropriation or seizing, "the deliberate action of those who take up arms to seize power."²³ Through a panoply of terms on militancy, aggression, and battle, these assertions frame the ideological agenda of African feminist discourse as an act of political and literary confrontation.

Within the framework of a "counterdiscourse" on Western feminism, then, as Ogunyemi continues, African womanism is a

conciliatory spirit, . . . to buttress the cause of peace and progress . . . because, when all is said and done, we still have to live with our fathers, uncles, husbands, sons, friends, lovers, and male relations. This spirit of complementarity is central to . . . womanism.²⁴

In other words, Ogunyemi's opposition to Western feminism is meant to underscore African womanism's "flexibility, maturity, a maternal disposition" or "African women's inclusive, mother-centered ideology with its focus on caring—familial, communal, national and international"—as its cornerstones.²⁵ This flexibility means that African women can be "pacifist" but also "cunning," "firm and truculent" but also "sassy" enough to question the culture around them.²⁶ Finally, African womanism eschews antagonism vis-à-vis men. African feminists—Carole Boyce Davies and Filomina Steady—concurrently insist that African feminism is a "less antagonistic feminism" and that it seeks men's cooperation to challenge female subjugation by "yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation."²⁷ As both a confrontational and conciliatory politics then, African womanism's complex inclusionary positions can be sighted when interpreting African feminist literature, including reading between the lines:

The vital unity of a people evolving a philosophy of life acceptable to both men and women is a better approach to the wo/man *palava* than a debilitating and devastating political struggle for women's liberation, independence, and equality against men, to prove a feminist point. This inclusionary and very African stance demands strategies in reading the novels and sometimes necessitates probing on several levels to reach the subtexts.²⁸

Ultimately, through meaningful dialogues with men and other stakeholders of the African environment, womanism “aims to establish healthy relationships among people, despite ethnic, geographical, educational, gender, ethical, class, religious, military, and political differences.”²⁹ Ogunyemi then takes African womanism’s central ideas—the African woman’s “inclusive, mother-centered ideology” and its “flexibility, maturity and a maternal disposition,” in particular, aimed at establishing “healthy relationships among people” and a philosophy “acceptable to both men and women”—to read a number of African feminist novels, including Alkali’s *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman*.³⁰

Surprisingly though, Ogunyemi reads African Muslim women in African-Islamic feminist literature as observing “the inequities of the religion” as Islam makes “sexist demands” on the women.³¹ Ogunyemi finds it oppressive that the Muslim female protagonists remain hidden, invisible, and unheard behind a veil. She declares “misogyny and male self-centeredness” as features of “Islam’s oppression of women,” and Islam itself as a bastion of female oppression in African-Islamic feminist literature.³² Ogunyemi’s reading of African-Islamic feminist texts markedly departs from the African womanist script she recommends for African feminist texts, in general, for as I discuss further in chapter 2 in a close reading of Alkali’s *The Stillborn*, African Muslim women in Alkali’s, Ali’s, and Gimba’s fiction find little reason to complain about the religion. And finally, the Muslim women, as Alkali’s, Ali’s, and Gimba’s novels illuminate, are anything but hidden, invisible, or unheard. In fact, reading *The Stillborn*, and all the other novels chosen for study in *Privately Empowered*, within an African-Islamic framework repatriates the African Muslim woman’s expression of feminism to African feminist discourse because African Muslim women, like the African womanist, meaningfully interact and dialogue with their Islamic environment and men to proactively develop their feminism. The overriding question, therefore, is whether African Muslim women attribute their personal, private, and individual problems to their practice of Islam. In the myriad of emotional, psychological, and spiritual problems African Muslim women face, do they view Islam as a hindrance *or*, as my analyses of African-Islamic feminism show, as an instrument that facilitates and eases them toward solutions to personal challenges? In continuing the discussion on describing and explaining African feminism, however, Mary Kolawole points out that the term “feminism” does not even have a synonym in most African languages, leaning toward “African womanism” that is an “Afrocentric conceptualization of African women’s reality,” but preferring the term *Umoja*, which she coins to privilege African feminism as “self-identity and a strong drive for cultural self-retrieval.”³³

Umoja: Dialogic Action and Self-definition

Kolawole reprises Ogunyemi's identification of the sources of "multiple subjugation" of African women by "patriarchy, tradition, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism and gender imperialism" that thwart her efforts of self-assertion.³⁴ To effectively counter "destructive traditions" and "imperialistic images of the African" in "Western feminism," Kolawole proposes dialogic action, a "coalition" with men and other actors and influences in the African environment that can address the multivalent layers of the African woman's "plurality of perspectives."³⁵ This plurality comprises of diverse attitudes to the woman's question, traditional, modern, national, international, religious, and ethnic interventions that impact African women's lives. Kolawole forwards the term "*Umoja*," the Swahili word for "togetherness, unity or coalition," as a way for dialogic action that "enhances the accommodation of diverse attitudes to the woman's question without undermining one's African identity. It underscores harmony in diversity and underlies the theory that African women's consciousness is a mosaic."³⁶ Unmistakably then, African womanhood, as Kolawole's metaphorical mosaic, reinforces its multidimensional ability to absorb and manage a variety of values. Most interestingly, Kolawole details marriage, motherhood, and family values as the canons of African womanhood. She continues:

African women's self-definition focuses on positive collectivity as opposed to individuality. It also endorses the overt manifestation of womanhood and motherhood with no apologia. Consequently, the average African woman's exaltation of marriage and family values and assertion of feminine outlook are important canons of African womanhood.³⁷

In sum, *Umoja* is "wholesome self-expression" of African womanhood that respects "the family unit and motherhood," but its aim is to foster self-emancipation not just for women but for all Africans.³⁸ It is, as Kolawole asserts, "positive coalition" that "does not seek to achieve emancipation by hating men or non-Africans or people of other races."³⁹

The chief features of African feminism as *Umoja* are consistently present in Alkali's *The Stillborn* and *The Virtuous Woman*, and in Gimba's *Sacred Apples*. To briefly gesture to the African Muslim woman's use of *Umoja* here, each of the protagonists I examine in the novels—Li in Alkali's *The Stillborn* in chapter 2, Nana Ai in *The Virtuous Woman* in

chapter 3, and Zahrah in Gimba's *Sacred Apples* in chapter 5—works in coalition with men in constructing her feminism. Nana's grandfather, Baba Sani, encourages her education; Zahrah's second husband Nousah and her half brother Ya-Shareef support her professional endeavors; and Li rebuilds her marriage by returning to her estranged husband Habu Adams soon after professing faith in Islamic monotheism. These women use a repertoire of spiritual habits such as Islamic monotheism, virtuous behavior, and Islamic prayer to shape their feminisms while working with men in the pursuit of their goals. Furthermore, the protagonists in the fiction under analysis here—Li, Nana Ai, Zahrah, and others—craft their feminisms in Islam within the core canons of *Umoja*, namely marriage, motherhood, and family.

Nego-feminism: Meaningful Flexibilities

On similar lines of dialogic action within an evolving African environment, Nnaemeka identifies in the African woman her unique ability to adroitly negotiate and navigate through challenging situations. Also known as “nego-feminism” or “feminism of negotiation,” “negotiation has the double meaning of ‘give and take/exchange’”:

African feminism . . . knows when, where and how to detonate patriarchal land mines; it also knows when, where and how to go around patriarchal land mines. In other words, it knows when, where and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts. For African women, feminism is an act that evokes the dynamism and shifts of a process as opposed to the stability and reification of a construct, a framework.⁴⁰

With Ogunyemi and Kolawole, Nnaemeka builds on the indigenous and roots African feminism in the African environment that “challenges through negotiation, accommodation, and compromise.”⁴¹ To explain the supple qualities of nego-feminism, Nnaemeka recruits the metaphor of a chameleon that shifts its color and adjusts to its surroundings to survive, move forward, and thrive. Furthermore, in minutely observing the chameleon's movements, Nnaemeka notes that it is “cautious, goal-oriented, accommodating, adaptable, and open to diverse views.”⁴² A nego-feminist must strategically embrace all of these qualities if she is to survive in an environment of multiple mutations, differences, and disruptions both within the African environment and outside it.

Revealingly, Nana Ai in Alkali's *The Virtuous Woman*, as I discuss more fully in chapter 3, displays unmatched patience, caution, and dignity on the journey she undertakes back to school from her village by using the Islamic framework of *akhlāq* when dealing with people and tragic situations, as does a nego-feminist. Likewise, resolute in her aim of pursuing an education, Ali's heroine Farida in *Destiny* in fact firmly proclaims that none other than God (Allah) will make her dream of education a reality—she patiently bides her time and prays regularly in the interim for her moment of success. Alkali's little-discussed nego-feminist, Awa, in *The Stillborn*, furthermore embodies extraordinary abilities to nimbly negotiate, accommodate, and compromise with changing situations and people as she responsibly cares for her family, including her sister, Li, all while finding no reason to complain about the Islamic framework of their lives.

Stiwanism: Inclusion and Participation for Social Change

In evoking the well-known metaphor of mountains as obstacles to identify hurdles that African women must surmount in their struggle for autonomy and liberation, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie extends and particularizes Mao Zedong's image of the Chinese man with three "mountains," or burdens, on his back to the situation of the African woman whose suffering is "a product of colonization and neo-colonialism, comprising poverty, ignorance, and the lack of scientific attitude to experience and nature."⁴³ To Mao's three hurdles—"foreign intrusions," or oppression from outside, "feudal oppression or authoritarianism," and the Chinese man's "backwardness"—Ogundipe-Leslie adds three more, namely the African woman's race that contributes to "imperialism and neo-colonialism"; man, "who is steeped in his centuries-old attitudes of patriarchy"; and the African woman herself or her negative self-image that has led her to interiorize patriarchy and gender hierarchy.⁴⁴ Ogundipe-Leslie is particularly concerned about the "so-called voicelessness of African women" that gives rise to what she terms as "ventriloquisms" by "women of European descent." In other words, Ogundipe-Leslie feels that Euro-American feminists make no effort to explore what African women have to say about themselves or think it worthwhile to listen to them. Therefore, African women, continues Ogundipe-Leslie, are called upon to "play the role of ventriloquists' puppets, speaking to other people's agenda."⁴⁵

To overcome these daunting hurdles and to pursue an exploration of "feminism in an African context," in the "tradition of the spaces and strategies provided in our indigenous cultures for the social being of women,"

as Ogundipe-Leslie puts it, she advocates the term “stiwanism,” deriving from the acronym STIWA, or Social Transformation Including Women in Africa. Resisting imitation of Western feminism, stiwanism pays careful attention to the needs of African women aligned with African traditions via strategies organic to African indigenous feminisms. A “stiwa” feminist conceives of feminism not only as inclusion but also as participation in the “social and political transformation of Africa.”⁴⁶ Stiwanism includes issues around a woman’s “body, her person, her immediate family, her society, her nation, her continent and their locations within the international economic order.” It is sensitive to specificities and perceptively asks, when speaking of an African context, “do we mean: a Christian or a Muslim Africa . . . ?”⁴⁷ Ogundipe-Leslie rightly insists that Islam “demands our respect in its own right” as one of many actors in Africa’s plural environment.⁴⁸

However, when Ogundipe-Leslie specifies the first “mountain” in the way of the African woman’s social transformation, Christianity and Islam top her list of “foreign intrusions” for their destruction of the indigenous religious order: “In the religious cultures of societies, colonization introduced Christianity which destroyed the old religions or subverted them, as did Islam.”⁴⁹ She concludes that both religions were indirectly responsible for “prostitution, vagrancy, mass proletarianization, lack of self-respect and self worth etc.” in Africa.⁵⁰ Although both Christianity and Islam assign subordinate roles to women, argues Ogundipe-Leslie, Islam is so patriarchal that “the very idea of female leadership in Islam is inconceivable.”⁵¹ Unrelenting in her condemnation of European colonization and Islam for destroying and subverting traditional societies, Ogundipe-Leslie furthermore blames them for “politically and legally creating new oppressed and subjugated status and roles for women,” resulting in the cataclysmic creation of “economic and emotional voids.”⁵²

Such contumely against Islam is familiar and recurrent. It can be countered not by merely demurring, but by first identifying the manner in which Islam is consistently de-emphasized, minimized, to tendentiously credit other influences on African Muslim women, namely African indigenous institutions. Such subtle gestures that discount Islam’s impact on African Muslim women are more challenging, I believe, but also soluble insofar as biliterate modes of engagement—African and Islamic—are recruited to calibrate African-Islamic feminism. Three brief examples exemplify the concern that female leadership, economic autonomy, and social mobility are attributed not to their congruence with Islamic beliefs and practice but to the fact that traditional African institutions inherently promote women’s emancipation. Ogundipe-Leslie writes:

Even in purdah, in Islamic northern Nigeria, where, in the early nineteenth century, Islam took away many of the historically established and strong social rights of the Hausa women driving them indoors, even there, women work in purdah and sell their products through emissaries.⁵³

A closer look reveals that Ogundipe-Leslie is not lauding Islam's encouragement of women's economic activity. Rather, she is attributing such an occurrence to the emancipatory features of African indigenous societies that promote women's economic activity and social rights. Toward a similar end, Sabine Jell-Bahlsen explores power relations in indigenous African societies and employs a polarized vocabulary to declare that Islam and Christianity "are historically associated with *foreign* power structures, ascribing a well-known *subordinate* place to women that *contradicts* precolonial African religious beliefs and their social manifestations" (emphases added).⁵⁴ Enid Schildkrout's sophisticated inquiry into the dependence and autonomy of secluded Hausa women in northern Nigeria claims that "religion has thus played a part in curtailing the economic roles of women in many parts of the Islamic world."⁵⁵ Therefore, as Schildkrout continues, notwithstanding the "ubiquitous adoption" of purdah, what women in Kano "seem to be continuing is the long West African tradition of female involvement in economic life."⁵⁶ To summarize this pervasive theoretical stance, it is easy to see that African feminists persistently other Islam on the charge that it brought with it patriarchy to a historically matrilineal society and snatched many of African women's historically strong social rights. To Ogundipe-Leslie, Jell-Bahlsen, and Schildkrout, if African Muslim women are able to enjoy any degree of autonomy and social success, they owe it not to their adherence to Islam but to their African traditions that predated Islam. I respond to these postures after briefly examining one more dimension of African feminism, namely motherism, as several features of African feminism—the African woman's collective cooperation with men, her adaptable flexibility and navigational prowess in managing diverse attitudes, her fostering a meaningful dialogue with her African environment, and her initiating her self-naming in African womanism, *Umoja*, nego-feminism, and stiwanism—resonate in Catherine Acholonu's idea of motherism.

Motherism: Humanistic Feminism

Catherine Acholonu promotes a humanist approach to African feminism by detaching herself from its more radical and aggressive avatars for

solving “women-related problems.”⁵⁷ In particular, she distances herself from the Western imperialistic view that gender determines socio-economic status by clarifying that it is economic power in Africa that defines social status: “The truth is *what determines social status in Africa*, in all parts of Africa, is *economic power*, and hardly gender”⁵⁸ (italics in the original). As for African-American womanism, continues Acholonu, it omits “vital concepts such as the family, the child, nature, mothering and nurture.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, excessively radical, bitter, and pessimistic visions of African feminist writers, argues Acholonu, such as the Nigerian Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa, who portray male characters in “exaggerated states of idiocy, irresponsibility and insensitivity” have also filtered through into the criticism of their novels, negatively impacting the “reader response” to their work that views the African woman as a violent radical.⁶⁰ As a consequence of these three miseducated opinions that inscribe unreasonable aggression in the African woman in her unfounded opposition to males, in female subordination owing to gender and not to economic power, and in opinions that overlook the centrality of motherhood and family, Acholonu argues that Eurocentric feminism continues to dominate the African feminist agenda.

As a corrective, Acholonu proposes a more humanist conceptualization of African feminism and applies it even to African literary criticism, where writers

must be able to strike a balance between outright aggressive radicalism and finding a hologrammatic approach, a dynamically organic approach to writing that will encourage mutual understanding, cooperation and acceptance among the sexes . . .⁶¹

At the core of such humanism or “man/woman relationship” is the concern for the “African experience of its characters; the Afrocentricity of its setting,” particularly “the concern for the female experience in it.”⁶² As a terminology, such complementarity and cooperation between genders in the harmonious construction of women’s issues is “motherism,” deriving from Africa’s status as the mother continent of humanity. A motherist feminist, a man or woman, plays multiple roles, including ordering, re-ordering, creating, building, and rebuilding.⁶³ Embracing the entire gamut of human struggle, a motherist regards the whole of humanity as her constituent:

A MOTHERIST loves and respects all men and women irrespective of colour, race, religion, ethnicity; a motherist respects all cultures

and religions . . . A motherist protects and defends *family* values . . . a Motherist is a man or woman committed to the survival of Mother Earth as a hologrammatic entity. The weapon of Motherism is love, tolerance, service, and mutual cooperation of the sexes, not antagonism, aggression, militancy or violent confrontation, as has been the case with radical feminism.⁶⁴

Most of all, a man may also be a motherist as the concept pertains more to a disposition than to biological identity. Motherism values cohesive action and a conciliatory stance rather than confrontational politics, and therefore embraces humanism, universalism, and “male/female cooperation.”⁶⁵

However, Acholonu does adopt a confrontational position vis-à-vis one of the many spiritual and cultural components that constitute Africa’s plurality, namely Islam. She labels it as a form of “religious colonialism,” equating it to European colonialism on the charge that it subverted African indigenous systems.⁶⁶ Acholonu polemically claims that Islam imposed “fetters” on African Muslim women, equating polygamy in Islam to prostitution in harems as women have “no identity of their own” because

men make *harlots* of their daughters or sell them off to the highest bidder in order to enrich themselves. Women are gathered in harems in tens and hundreds to please the men, for sexual pleasure only . . . *Harems cannot be compared with polygamy in traditional Africa.* In polygamy a woman retains her personal autonomy and freedom of choice and action . . . A harem woman is a *sex object*, bought with the sole intention of providing pleasure to the man.⁶⁷ (emphases added)

Acholonu somewhat tendentially contrasts precolonial female autonomy of Muslim Yoruba women (explicitly attributable to female emancipation inherent in Yoruba society) with the social demotion and ignominy of Muslim women in Hausa society (attributable to the institutionalization of sexism and female subjugation in Islamic law), in addition to pointing out the lukewarm reception of Islam by African Muslim women:

In places where Arab culture did not become entrenched as a way of life, the women still enjoy the relative autonomy provided for them by their own traditional African way of life. Thus, we find that whereas Islam did/does not limit the autonomy and freedom of the Yoruba woman, it has placed many Hausa women in positions of confinement and the lower rung of the society.⁶⁸

Therefore, in polygamous situations, concludes Acholonu, whereas Yoruba Muslim women (in Southern Nigeria) are able to salvage their autonomy and dignity because of the inherently women-friendly safeguards in traditional African institutions that are conspicuously absent in the observance of similar institutions in predominantly Islamic communities in Africa, the Hausa Muslim woman is condemned to a life of ignominy and social demotion in a polygamous “harem.”

Likewise, in her claim on the relatively unproblematic and welcome compatibility of economic power and social status that is attributable to indigenous African systems, Acholonu writes “even in the Muslim North, rich women and the Alhajahs are great socio-political and socio-economic power brokers.”⁶⁹ Acholonu’s tone, concessionary choice of words—“even in,” “entrenched”—and aims can be placed squarely on top of Ogun-dipe-Leslie’s, Aidoo’s, and Steady’s bruising remarks that African traditional institutions are friendlier to women’s social progress, that *even* in Islamic communities in Africa, Muslim women owe their wealth, social status, and well-being to indigenous systems, and that in places where Islam did not become “entrenched” as a way of life, women are happier, freer, and richer.

A biliterate, reconciliatory, African-Islamic feminist reading of Alkali’s, Ali’s, and Gimba’s fiction, to respond to the minimization of Islam’s compatibility with women’s emancipation, produces two things. First, the African Muslim woman need not be one or the other—African or Muslim—she instantiates both. Islam is not, as African theorists have been rather unconvincingly treating it all along, a foil to the African Muslim woman’s African womanhood, for she crafts all her talents for self-development toward “wholesome self-expression,” to appropriate Kolawole’s resonant terms, within her African *and* Islamic environments. All of the above African articulations of feminism—*Umoja*, nego-feminism, stiwanism, motherism, and African womanism—vociferously advocate the African woman’s proactive engagement with her environment. In the case of the African Muslim woman, her environment is profoundly conditioned by Islam. As a result, she consolidates both these coexisting components of the African environment, becoming an African Muslim *nego-feminist*, an African Muslim *womanist*, an African Muslim *stiwani*, and an African Muslim *motherist*.

Likewise, and this is the second crucial point of African-Islamic feminism, what obtains from an African-Islamic reading of African feminist literature is that even in such patriarchal societies as those found in northern Nigeria, where Islam is said to have snatched women’s historically strong social rights, of all the possible resources, Muslim women

instrumentalize none other than their Islamic practice—spiritual habits and rituals—to organize their personal and private lives. The following examples briefly illustrate this point. As I discuss at length in chapter 4, Magira Milli in *The Descendants* displays leadership, courage, and adaptability to situations and people as she manages the affairs of her entire family, drawing inspiration, sustenance, and energy by turning and returning to prayer—*salāt* and *duʿa*. Zahrah’s example in *Sacred Apples*, as my study in chapter 5 makes plain, shows that African Muslim women do not always feel socially or culturally demoted in polygamous situations. Zahrah’s second husband, Nousah, is already married when he proposes marriage to her. Zahrah engages the Qur’an and Islamic literature to work through her ambivalence and hesitation vis-à-vis polygamy before accepting Nousah’s proposal. In Li’s case in *The Stillborn*, as I argue in chapter 2, it is through her acceptance of Islam that she also comes to meaningfully interact with her family and environment, which she despises at the start of the story. Notwithstanding the exhortation to be proactive and not reactive, as Nnaemeka recommends, in explicitly distinguishing their agenda from that of Western feminism and warning against ethnocentric “sisterhood,” when reading the African Muslim woman’s feminist activity, however, these same theorists reveal tones that can be termed as ethnocentric and even racist vis-à-vis African Muslim women.⁷⁰ The “inclusionary” foundational concepts of African feminist thought—African womanism, *Umoja*, motherism, stiwanism, and nego-feminism—are momentarily set aside when platonically evoking the presence of Islam to celebrate Africa’s bewildering diversity.

My focus here is that such a standpoint has gloomy implications for African-Islamic feminism, as sighted in the diffuse critical corpus by African feminist theorists on African Muslim women, for it pivots on the undiminished currency of a rather friable notion that Islam is foreign to Africa. It is, as Amina Mama calls it, “somebody else’s religion.”⁷¹ The heft of the critical scaffold on Islam in Africa thus lies in the tenuous dialectic between indigenous (intrinsic to the African continent) and foreign (originating elsewhere or external to the African continent). All critical postures, particularly African feminist, as seen above, derive from this overly simplistic equation, including the repugnance for the religion on the pretext that it is patriarchal, patrilineal, misogynistic and it denies women freedom, education, and social rights, evolving into some of the most deprecatory interpretations, such as equating Islamic customs to prostitution and human trafficking.⁷² The historical and investigative foci of the nature of African social systems, in an effort to unearth the deterioration of African societies, invariably constellate around two incommensurable

conflations: European colonization of Africa and the arrival of Arabs in Africa that predated European colonialism.

In this regard, Wole Soyinka's bald critique on Islam in Africa must be briefly mentioned here, for it has single-handedly added the greatest discursive weight to critical iterations on the virtual illegality of Islam's presence in the continent. Soyinka's persistent assessment of the religion that enslaved an entire continent, positioning Islam as a contestant in a soul-grubbing match—"the contest for the African soul by the two religious superpowers," "first by Islamic, then Christian invaders"—unravels the predicament at the core of the polemics on Islam in Africa in his declaration that "the cross-over line considered between a free man and a slave was often contiguous with a readiness for conversion."⁷³ Although Soyinka's infamous altercation with the Kenyan critic Ali Mazrui, which I mention below, is often considered as the point of departure on the weighty polemic on Islam in Africa, I believe that Soyinka's nuanced censure of the religion can be traced back to a decade before he tangled with Mazrui and before he received the Nobel Prize in 1986. This conjuncture in 1976 that predates his influential argument with Mazrui is just as crucial as it represents and constitutes the critical pattern deployed by African feminist critics in their analysis of Islam in Africa, and therefore is more reflective of the stance of the African critical apparatus vis-à-vis Islam. Briefly, Soyinka's standpoint in his essays on African literatures in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, in 1976, can be plotted on three main axes. First, he identifies the coordinates of the African socio-spiritual sphere as an unremitting competition between indigenous African religions, Islam, and Christianity. Next, he identifies works of Islamic vision that employ "aggressive or subtle influences upon African indigenous values," and finally he locates works on Islamic ideology that illustrate an Islamic "sensibility that occasionally, very occasionally suggests the animism of traditional beliefs."⁷⁴

Armed then with this well-heeled notion of a tripartite combat raging between Islam, Christianity, and the relatively peaceful African indigenous religions, in which Muslims are merciless proselytizers who, if looking for humanism, can find it in indigenous African systems, Soyinka's Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1986, reiterating the notions of Islam vying for the soul of the African and of Muslims as invaders on African soil, is quite familiar. In his speech, he unsurprisingly reprises his views on Muslims as slave traders, despots, and fundamentalists (referring to the Sudanese leader el-Nimeiri and Libya's Gaddhafi) who denigrate "African authentic spirituality," and predictably recapitulates the tensions between Islam and other African religions as indigenous and foreign, authentic and alien.⁷⁵

In the same vein of competition between these spiritual systems, Soyinka then criticizes the television series on Africa directed by the Kenyan critic Ali Mazrui and produced by the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) as “another expensive propaganda for the racial-religious superiority of seductive superstition” in that Mazrui expressly de-emphasizes, even denigrates, authentic African cultures to portray Africa as an Islamic (Arabized) continent since Mazrui is Muslim, or an “alienated African.”⁷⁶ With this statement, Soyinka inaugurated the protracted broadside with Mazrui on the validity of the presence of Islam in Africa. The altercation between Soyinka and Mazrui took place in the form of essays in academic journals where each of them defended his point of view about religions in Africa. In his defense, Mazrui suggests that he had no intention of eclipsing the indigenous tenor of African cultures or of embellishing the Islamic influence on the continent to the detriment of the former. He does nonetheless suspect the provenance of Soyinka’s critique as the Nobel laureate’s distaste, even prejudice, for religion or “seductive superstition” that has little relevance to contemporary Africa.⁷⁷ And Soyinka dauntlessly re-equips himself with a lexicon, by now familiar and predictable, to declaim that Islam “subverted” many African practices and “alienated” the African from his environment and traditions.⁷⁸

In Soyinka’s scathing comments on the desire for purported “racial-religious superiority” by Islam and Muslims and in the dialectic of authentic versus foreign and African against Arab, however, one senses the inability and perhaps unwillingness on the part of African theorists to uncouple Islam and Arab culture or to see it as anything less than an embattled existence between Islam and Christianity for African converts. The only way, it seems, Soyinka, Ogundipe-Leslie, Acholonu, and Sofola, to name but a few of Islam’s harshest critics, have continued to engage with Islam is by insisting, in antagonistic, competitive, and belligerent terms, that the African is the other to the Arab, that Islam and Christianity are “other cultures,” to maintain the salvo of oft-repeated brickbats.⁷⁹ It is no accident then that the warp and woof of the postulations of a number of African feminist theorists reveals a pattern similar to Soyinka’s musings on Islam and its African practitioners. As discussed above, in their efforts to deconstruct the African woman’s socioeconomic and political status in the process of “self-retrieval” and “self-naming” and toward a humanistic African feminism, prominent African feminists—Aidoo, Ogundipe-Leslie, and Schildkrout—have turned to historical African social and spiritual systems in ways that often repeat Soyinka’s ideological itinerary vis-à-vis Islam.⁸⁰ In response to this prolonged diatribe on Islam in Africa and the many excellent questions that Soyinka and Mazrui’s exchange has

pertinently, if self-servingly, broached, it is more meaningful to examine whether such a critical stance is an isolated occurrence. It is not. What implications then does it have for African Muslim women to explore what African Muslims themselves think and feel about Islam as portrayed in Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's fiction? It merits exploring, for instance, if the question of the authenticity of Islam in Africa enters the minds and praxis of African Muslim women themselves or if they feel enslaved, as Soyinka would have us believe, to practice Islam. Such postures that codify the means and aims of the practice of Muslims discursively, rhetorically, and textually suffuse even the Islamic feminist discourse that uniquely valorizes the political, public, collective, and legislative dimensions of feminism in Islam.

Islamic Feminism: Evolving Consciousness beyond the "Muslimwoman"⁸¹

This section focuses on the manner in which some themes accrued salience as the goals of Islamic feminism in the Middle East for women's groups crafting agendas around public service, political activity, and activism. An abidingly influential goal of Islamic feminism, as this section demonstrates, is the inordinate conscription of scriptural literature, the Qur'an and *hadith*, as primarily legal rather than spiritual references to advocate for women's rights and gender justice. From its earliest articulation, then, in its eagerness to counter colonial legacies on Muslim women in the Middle East, most notably the tendentious colonial belief that Islam was injurious to Muslim women's social emancipation, Islamic feminist theorists labored to encode women's contributions to society as public, visible, and viewable activity. The most tangible way Islamic feminists were able to do this was by stretching Islam's stance on spiritual egalitarianism to mean gender egalitarianism. Inscribing even the Qur'an within the same grammar of justice and rights, within a "movement" animated by Muslim women as its agents, Islamic feminist theorists defined an unchanged calculus of goals—sexual freedom, gender equality, and public participation—around intersections of nationalist, state-oriented or Islamist, and activist labor, primarily contextual to the Middle East. In its reading of Alkali's, Ali's, and Gimba's novels, however, *Privately Empowered* defamiliarizes such goals by foregrounding the spiritual functions of the Qur'an that facilitate the accomplishment of personal and private goals. In so doing, it shifts the encryption of participation in community affairs as publicly viewable activity to private, personal, and individual channels.

As programmatic offsprings of reactions to colonial and intellectual impositions, both Islamic and African feminist discourses trace their earliest expressions to a counterdiscourse on the ethnocentric articulations in Euro-American scholarship on Islam and Africa respectively. Zakia Salime asserts that both “‘feminism’ and ‘Islamism’ have genealogies rooted in colonial representations about Islam” and that gender lay at the center of colonial pronouncements on Islam in Islamic societies.⁸² The question of women’s oppression in Islam, avers Salime, was instrumental in legitimizing the colonial discourse on women’s emancipation, their participation in public life, and, of course, on several hot-button topics, most significant of which was the use of the *hijāb* by Muslim women.⁸³ Leila Ahmed’s field-defining historical inquiry *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, on the lives of Muslim women in pre-Islamic Arabia till the early twentieth century, expertly engages with the nefarious connections between colonialism and feminist discourse as employed by British colonial administration to discredit Islam, Islamic practice, and Muslims, in general, in much of the Middle East, and in Egypt in particular:

Male imperialists known in their home societies for their intransigent opposition to feminists led the attack abroad against the “degradation” of women in Muslim societies, and were the foremost champions of unveiling.⁸⁴

But the systematic codification of Islamic practice as inimical to Muslim women’s interests did not originate with the British in Egypt. Ahmed traces the precipitous disappearance of Muslim women’s sexual freedoms and publicly viewable autonomy in Islamic societies to the first Islamic community during Muhammad’s lifetime, which was upheld from thereon in subsequent Islamic dynasties that ruled much of the Middle East and the Arab world:

Their autonomy and participation were curtailed with the establishment of Islam, its institution of patrilineal, patriarchal marriage as solely legitimate, and the social transformation that ensued. . . . Implicit in this new order was the male right to control women and to interdict their interactions with other men. Thus the ground was prepared for the closures that would follow: women’s exclusion from social activities in which they might have contact with men other than those with rights to their sexuality; their physical seclusion, soon to become the norm; and the institution of internal mechanisms

of control, such as instilling the notion of submission as a woman's duty. The ground was thus prepared, in other words, for the passing of a society in which women were active participants in the affairs of their community and for women's place in Arabian society to become circumscribed in the way it already was for their sisters in the rest of the Mediterranean Middle East.⁸⁵

Locating women's exclusion from the social sphere and the loss of their sexual and social autonomies specifically in the contradictory presence of two competing voices within Islam, Ahmed believes that Islam's spiritually ethical vision is at variance with the inequality between the sexes in the marriage structure that it established. She unequivocally states: "The egalitarian conception of gender inhering in the ethical vision of Islam existed in tension with the hierarchical structure instituted by Islam."⁸⁶ For Ahmed, the spiritual egalitarianism (the equal expectation of prayer, observance of rituals and piety, and the corresponding reward for such behavior) that Islam unambiguously emphasizes in the Qur'an stretches into the "identicalness of men and women" implied in *ḥadīth* literature (identical human biology in terms of the male and female contributions to conception) that is discordant with the pragmatic regulations of the religion as its androcentric rulers and lawmakers don't quite always privilege the egalitarian ethic of the Qur'an.⁸⁷

Ahmed's demonstration of female subjugation, inaugurated by Muhammad's actions and gradually institutionalized by the Islamic community in much of Arabia following his death, and her insistent encoding of active social participation as a visibly public and viewable activity, I would argue, sow the very first seeds of a discursive impulse that has resulted in the obscuring of Muslim women's issues outside Middle Eastern societies. Ahmed's view on Islam's curtailment of Muslim women's autonomies is notional, at best, as it limits the scope of Muslim women's contributions to society. She lists, for instance, warfare, presence in mosques, and public performance of the arts, among other activities, from which women were increasingly absent in the first years of the Islamic community and following Muhammad's death.⁸⁸ Secondly, Ahmed's focus remains limited to the Middle East. When she lists the loss of women's powers—the loss of matriliney, women's physical seclusion, men's control of women's sexuality—institutionalized primarily as mechanisms of male control, she describes a society and culture very Middle Eastern in habit and practice: "women's place in Arabian society [became] circumscribed in the way it already was for their sisters in the rest of the Mediterranean Middle East."⁸⁹ As my discussion on some of the same practices in northern

Nigerian Muslim societies reveals, restrictions on physical movement are empoweringly inscribed by women in the observance of Islam and their long involvement in economic and creative activities. Although Ahmed maintains that Islam consistently undergirds an ethically egalitarian vision and that it is the interpretive stress on gender inequality—the sexual hierarchy instituted in marriage in Islam—that led to women’s literal and ensuing figurative exile from community affairs, it is the same interpretive stress that Islam does not require women’s physical seclusion or interdict their participation in public activity in northern Nigerian societies that has prevented African Muslim women from encoding active contributions to society within publicly manifest activities. It is the same interpretive stress, then, that incurs in us an appreciation of the privately empowering and enabling ways African Muslim women engage with Islam for economic and creative involvement. It is perhaps also for the same reason that gender egalitarianism, as my reading of *The Virtuous Woman* in chapter 3 reveals, and as Alkali provocatively states, is irrelevant as the quality of the human being matters more. As Alkali sketches her protagonist Nana Ai’s personality, she insists on the overall quality of the individual and not on a woman’s efforts for identicalness with men.

Islamic theorists attribute restrictions on women’s physical mobility to the degrees of interpretive stress on Islam’s hierarchical sexual relations in marriage, as Ahmed blames Abbasid society for secluding women and evacuating them from mosques, battlefields, and all arenas of the “community’s central affairs.”⁹⁰ Along with Ogundipe-Leslie and Acholonu, a number of African theorists of note have held that Islam drove African Muslim women indoors to the detriment of historically strong social rights accorded to them by African indigenous systems. Within the counterdiscursive provenance of Islamic and African feminist theories as discourse to refute colonially motivated and ill-informed perceptions of Muslim and African women respectively, the overriding question about the concerted approach to these defining topoi—gender equality, veiling, seclusion, and social rights—may again be posed. Since African theorists regard Islam as oppressive, and Islamic theorists in the Middle East hold androcentric interpretations of Islam as responsible for rendering women invisible in the public sphere of life, do secluded African Muslim women also believe that Islam’s influence on their lives—especially since the religion does not mandate physical seclusion—hampers their participation in the community’s affairs and their active social contributions to society? And by extension, for non-secluded African Muslim women, do only political and public and activist channels yield participation in community affairs, if this is at all a goal of their feminist engagement with Islam?

The insistence that such radical egalitarianism is upheld in the Qur'an, explains why, as Badran traces the evolution of Islamic feminism in Egypt, feminism in Islam in the Middle East and the surrounding regions rapidly developed as inseparable in means and purpose from legislative and political goals. The tight embrace between politics, Islam, and nationalism, argues Badran, enabled Islamic feminists to recruit political discourses to legitimize their own agendas, gradually broadening the scope of Islamic feminism to include social justice and gender equality as its principal aims while incorporating "intersecting Islamic, nationalist, and humanitarian (later human rights), and democratic discourses."⁹¹ As a result, continues Badran, "Islamic feminism uses Islamic discourse as its paramount—although not necessarily its only—discourse in arguing for women's rights, gender equality, and social justice."⁹² Forced to review their roles as "citizens of the national state (*waṭān*) and as members of the religious community (*umma*)," Muslim women began to view Islamic feminism as a "rights-centered feminism," and themselves as "as active participants in national liberation and revolutionary movements."⁹³ Mir-Hosseini provides the clearest articulation of the historical role of politics in Islamic feminism in the Middle East and Arab world when she asserts that "political Islam gave them [the women] the language to sustain a critique of gender biases in Muslim family laws in ways that were previously impossible."⁹⁴ As social justice and gender equality became enshrined as goals of Middle Eastern and Arab Islamic feminist agendas, so did the means; political Islam and Islamism, in Badran's words, "connoted *activist* politics directed at eradicating injustice and corruption at the state level by replacing 'secular states' with 'Islamic states'" (emphasis added).⁹⁵ Irrefutably then, as Badran writes, the notion of Islamic feminism, continually articulated as an activist and rights-seeking movement, has grown from its very definition as a retort to "patriarchal interpretations and practices of Islam [to] offering in its stead an egalitarian reading of the Qur'an."⁹⁶

Unsurprisingly, a feminist reading of the Qur'an develops within the same grammar of rights, justice, and equality that co-opts the Qur'an as primarily a reference for women's equality in all spheres of life. Islamic feminists, therefore, seek it out to emphatically anchor gender rights and social justice in a hermeneutic reading of its verses. In this vein, Amina Wadud claims that women have been treated as a "sub-category" of the social order in which justice is administered, and the Qur'an serves as the text that helps solve this imbalance: "from the Muslim perspective, the Qur'anic world-view provides the most efficient avenue for comprehensive alleviation of problems of oppression and should, therefore, remain

ever-present.”⁹⁷ In her influential approach to Qur’anic hermeneutics, Wadud underscores the “‘reading’ of the Qur’an that would be meaningful to women living in the modern era.”⁹⁸ It involves studying its context, the grammatical composition of a verse, and the whole text or its worldview in order to foreground its egalitarian message by recognizing that it “does not support a specific and stereotyped role for its characters, male or female.”⁹⁹ Wadud further adds that the Qur’an is a “moral history” and proposes moral values that are “transcendental” in nature.¹⁰⁰ She thus elaborates on the ethos of the Qur’an, a concept that honors the human role of women, not necessarily a gender-specific role, deriving from the Qur’anic term “nafs,” which treats humans—men and women—first as individuals with regard to their recompense, actions, and qualities, the conclusion that “there is no distinction between male and female with regard to individual capacity . . . with regard to personal aspirations, they are also the same.”¹⁰¹ Hence, even when positing Islamic feminism as a discourse that unfolds within a “religious framework,” “expressed in a single, or paramount, religiously-grounded discourse taking the Qur’an as its central text,” as Badran states, the emphasis on feminism as a struggle, a fight for equality and justice, obtains:¹⁰²

In developing their feminist discourses, women have looked to the Qur’an as Islam’s central and most sacred text, calling attention to its fundamental message of *social justice* and human equality and to the rights therein granted to women.¹⁰³ (emphasis added)

This mood is best captured in cooke’s pithy formulation of Islamic feminism as “sharia activism.”¹⁰⁴

Claiming to move away from feminism’s goals of legal reform and political activity, as Badran, Wadud, Mir-Hosseini, and others have strenuously favored *sharī‘a* activism, Saba Mahmood’s elegant study on the mosque movement examines the larger Islamic Revival (or Awakening) in present-day Egypt, turning to the role of religion in inculcating spiritually virtuous behavior that suffuses all manner of existence. Through explicit observance of such strategies as are taught by the teachers of the mosque movement, participants—Muslim women of various ages, classes, and sections of Egyptian society—acquire behaviors that will eventually become part of the larger focus of social life, community, and state. Mahmood’s meticulous analysis pivots on a socially organized movement where women collectively adopt such skills through classes in mosques, explicit instruction from trained teachers, collective participation in lectures, discussions, and conscious techniques on Islamically correct behavior to

“ground Islamic principles within the practices of everyday living.”¹⁰⁵ The women’s mosque movement emphasizes the interiorization of feelings, even thoughts, through the exterior, physical actions, or gestures. Mahmood’s study is situated well within the activism of collective organizations under the stewardship of learned Muslim women—the *dā‘iyāt* or religious preachers or teachers—who impart to the participants skills and strategies in the finer aspects of Islamic practice. Mahmood intimates that the mosque movement is an important subset of the trend in the Islamic Revival; belonging to the network of “socioreligious nonprofit organizations that provide charitable services to the poor and perform the work of proselytization,” it organizes its activities under socioreligious activism or *da‘wa*, “an umbrella term . . . to urge fellow Muslims to greater piety, and to teach one another correct Islamic conduct.”¹⁰⁶

In contrast to the methods of the mosque movement, the Egyptian feminist Hiba Rauf, also known as Heba Rauf Ezzat, conceives of an innovative approach to Islamic feminism by calling life in Islam a “very political existence,” ironically banishing the divide between private and public.¹⁰⁷ Rauf provocatively declares that the “private is political,” gesturing to the family as a springboard for Muslim women’s greater political and social participation for subsequent state reform.¹⁰⁸ Mir-Hosseini has similarly stated that the “personal is political” to argue against the possibility of divorcing politics from religion.¹⁰⁹ Borrowing from the influential Islamic thinker Sayyid Qutb’s idea that the family is the basis of society, Rauf’s proposition is innovative not because it disavows putative political functions by turning inward to the space of the family or the private. Rather, it is novel because it engages the porosity of the public-private division to render the political as both a means to and an end of the feminist process in Islam. In this sense, women’s (political) functions in the family are the means for their eventual (political) role in society and the state. Rauf’s logic rests on the simple self-evident truth that the caliph, or head of the Islamic state, functions with the assistance of a council of elected members, or *shūrā*, in consultation that underwrites political governance in Islam. Just as the caliph is the head of a state and as people endorse his leadership based on consultation and his ability to reasonably and wisely perform his tasks in accordance with Islamic principles, the family provides analogous opportunities as its affairs are also conducted using the principles of consultation, discussion, and action. By extension, therefore, the family serves as the platform for women to be publicly political.

In an interview, Rauf clarifies her innovative model on women’s political roles: “Social movements cannot be understood in an Islamic social

system without analyzing the extended family as an economic and political unit.” She effuses about the analogy of the family and the state:

You can't have a totalitarian patriarchal system in a family in Islam. The family should be run by shura. The same values and laws count in the public and the private arenas. Marriage is like voting for or choosing the khalif (the successor of the prophet). We do have a family head but he is like the khalif and should be chosen freely. If he is unfair, he should be denied the right to be the head of the family, as people can withdraw their homage to their khalif, women can divorce their husbands.¹¹⁰

Briefly, the family, “a micro-process of the state,” is the legitimate instrument for political power.¹¹¹

Though Mahmood distinguishes between the aims and methods of the mosque movement and Rauf's stance that religion should be practiced to play a greater role in society, to engender, as Mahmood terms it, “a certain kind of polity” and social change, and since the mosque movement, she claims, “fails precisely to make this linkage, keeping matters of worship and piety incarcerated within what for them is a privatized world of worship,” the mosque movement, as I will discuss further in chapter 3, also falls within the purview of socially organized and conscious efforts to preach and practice religion.¹¹² Its methodology is not as privatized, for it is a conscious effort, learned collectively and publicly through pedagogically imparted techniques by skilled instructors. I also elaborate on Rauf's theorization of Islamic feminism more fully in my reading of *The Descendants* in chapter 4.¹¹³ A biliterate framework for African-Islamic feminism that is both historically and conceptually relevant to African Muslim women may, however, address the theoretical inertia beyond the political, public, and viewable avatars of women's activity, particularly outside the Middle East and its neighboring regions.

African-Islamic Feminism: Biliteracy in History, Themes and Goals

The relevance of a sustained personal, private, and individual engagement with Islam, I believe, can be best understood by reframing both the means by and ends for which African Muslim women interact with Islam. Since my study draws attention to personal, private, and individual modes of interaction with Islam in contrast to the political and public ways, the means of interaction are discernibly established. To complete

the other half of this equation, the ends, or goals, must also be reframed and redefined, for reframing the goals returns renewed focus to the relevance of the means of spiritual engagement or, quite simply, the personal, private, and individual ways of interacting with Islam. Toward this rather reflexive end, I invoke three examples from Hausa society—the goals of Nana Asma’u’s and Amina of Zaria’s leadership, women’s oral Hausa storytelling, and secluded Hausa women’s economic activity. Reframing the goals means shifting emphasis from African Muslim women’s entrepreneurial resourcefulness from *even* behind closed doors and from their unique linguistic talent and expertise in oral storytelling, for these have been amply documented by numerous researchers, including Polly Hill, Beverly Mack, and Ayesha Imam, whose work I, too, rely on in probing the African Muslim woman’s personal engagement with Islam. My reframed focus instead lays emphasis more on the goals of women’s economic and creative activities. In other words, in my study of these three examples, I find Muslim women *relying on*, *recruiting*, and *maintaining* personal, private, and individual ways to promote their undertaking of these activities toward different ends. I therefore repatriate Amina of Zaria’s and Nana Asma’u’s names to the list of African female leaders not to prove that African Muslim women were and are indeed great leaders, but to emphasize the goals of their exemplary work geared toward the personal and private in Islam. Moving onto physical seclusion or *kulle*, I focus on women’s ability to *mobilize* precisely the personal, private, and individual ways to control the local economy without economic control or autonomy being the aspired end of their economic activity. And, on the same lines, I show how personal, private, and individual talent, geared most importantly toward fulfilling maternal duties, serves as the *fulcrum* of education for an entire society in Hausa oral storytelling to foreground and broaden the discussion on Muslim women’s feminisms.

Nana Asma’u and Amina of Zaria: First Feminists in Faith and Right Living

The Hausa, who have historically been Muslim, boast of a long line of women leaders, as David Jones observes:

Among the (neighboring) Hausa, women commanders led migrations, founded cities and conquered their enemies. . . . The Hausa Empire composed of seven states—Daura, Kano, Gobir, Zazzau,

Katsina, Rano, and Garun Gabas—came into existence in A.D. 1050, the end product of continuous rule by a line of seventeen queens.¹¹⁴

Chief among the seventeen queens was Queen Amina of Zaria or Zazzau, who ruled Kano in the early fifteenth century. Her reign lasted for about thirty-seven years. Oral traditions uphold Amina as a brave queen who fearlessly fought for her people and brought organization and stability to her kingdom. Marilyn French notes that Amina was the first ruler to unify the Hausa empire.¹¹⁵ She is mentioned in numerous chronicles and oral accounts that acknowledge her reign and political contributions. Dan Fodio's son, Muhammad Bello, the Caliph of Sokoto, credits her as being the first to establish government among the Hausa. Jones delves into Amina's role in a long account of her accomplishments and her legacy:

In the sixteenth century, the Hausa Empire was led by Queen Aminatu (also known as Amina), the senior daughter of Queen Bakwa of Turunku, the queen of Zazzau . . . Aminatu took control of the Hausa in 1536 and reigned until 1573. Her first efforts were directed toward territorial expansion, leading a twenty-thousand-man (and woman) army, she annexed several non-Hausa states. For thirty-four years, she commanded and protected her realm with a firm hand. The remnants of several fortresses seen in central Africa today are still identified with her name. Queen Aminatu forged trade routes through the Sahara to North Africa, and tradition credits her with introducing kola nut into local cultivation. Nigeria honored the eminent queen by erecting a life-sized equestrian statue of her, sword raised, on the grounds of the National Theater in Lagos. Modern citizens of West Africa have demonstrated their regard for the great Hausa queen by naming many educational institutions after her.¹¹⁶

Several aspects of Muslim women's leadership can be gleaned from this lengthy description of Amina's reign in that she wore many hats: She was an able ruler, relentlessly expanding her kingdom by annexing other kingdoms. She built fortificatory walls around Zaria, known as *ganuwar Amina* in Hausa, or Amina's walls. She was an efficient economist who developed trade and agriculture for her kingdom. She ruled for no less than three decades, during which time she excelled in all areas of political administration and warded off numerous threats to her sovereignty from local kingdoms. Amina is remembered to this day for her powerful personality, consecrated in her statue, brandishing a sword and mounted on a horse, several similar public sculptures, and even commemorative

stamps in Nigeria to memorialize her political stature. Nor have her contributions disappeared from the annals of Nigerian history, for she also lives in the educational institutions named after her as a testament to her multifaceted talents—a role model of leadership, courage, and abilities for Hausa women today. Amina continues to inspire as Hausa girls learn about her in African history.

Amina's example is thus a useful rejoinder to the oversight of African-Islamic leadership by regions that arrogate to themselves pioneering leadership in Islamic feminism. Ahmed, for instance, titles one of her chapters "The first feminists."¹¹⁷ Appositely rooted in the demographic changes in Egypt in the nineteenth century, she then identifies Egypt as a "mirror or precursor of developments in the Middle East in this period," when activists wrote in women's journals and in the mainstream press:

They founded organizations for the intellectual improvement of women, the Society for the Advancement of Woman . . . Another, the intellectual Association of Egyptian Women . . . Others followed, the Society of the Renaissance of Egyptian Woman, the Society of Mothers of the Future, . . . the Society of the New Woman. A lecture series for women, held at Egyptian University on Fridays . . .¹¹⁸

In providing names of the "first feminists"—Huda Sharawi, Mai Ziyada, Doria Shafik, and Zeinab Al-Ghazali—as eminent examples of the divergent voices in feminism in Egypt, Islamic feminism bears the imprint of a Middle Eastern society and its agendas.¹¹⁹

Moreover, Amina is not the only first feminist for African Muslim women. Nana Asma'u's extraordinary intellectual, organizational, and religious contributions also left an indelible imprint on Islamic feminist history in West Africa. African-Islamic theorist Ayesha Imam historicizes the tone for Islamic feminism in West Africa by acknowledging Asma'u's iconic role and that the earliest Islamic societies in northern Nigeria laid the foundation for Muslim women's positions in West Africa that persist even to this day: "Dan Fodio felt strongly that women have a right to education, both religious and in worldly dealings."¹²⁰ Imam specifically alludes to Nana's creation of the *yan-taru* movement to illustrate the texture of female education in Islam in Nigeria.¹²¹ Furthermore, as Beverly Mack observes:

Nana Asma'u's role as a scholar was multivalent: she was multilingual, an author of both oral and written works, a scholar known throughout West Africa and the Maghreb, and a teacher of women

and men, and of scholars and students, as well as a trainer of teachers. . . . In contemporary times, she is the model for women throughout the Maghreb who choose to study; they note that her life gives legitimacy to their pursuits.¹²²

More importantly, as Jones points out, Amina was not an exception, as she came to power in a long line of seventeen queens that ruled over the Hausa in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Mack adds that Asma'u was not the only one either; "several of Asma'u's sisters, equally well educated and erudite, remain unknown because their works are unpublished," adding that Asma'u's father, dan Fodio, "had been educated by his mother and grandmother."¹²³

For the African Muslim woman, her leaders lie in Amina and Nana. While the prophet Muhammad's wife Aisha may have stepped onto the battlefield, as Ahmed recounts her military exploits, the prophet's favorite wife was also an unmatched spiritual exemplar.¹²⁴ The interpretive stress, then, on spirituality, wisdom, and piety for the African Muslim woman resonates in Asma'u's works that immortalize women such as Asma'u's sister-in-law, Aisha, her half-sister Fatima, Zahratu, a notable student of Asma'u's, and others who exemplified Muhammad's *sunna* in their wise and pious lifestyles. Asma'u used her erudition and literary talent for no other purpose than to instill Islamic behavior. The goals of her influential works, such as *The Path of Truth*, *A Warning II*, *Lamentations for Aisha I and II*, are straightforward—advocate proper behavior in practical action (the pillars of Islam) and the intention behind the activity.¹²⁵ For instance, in *Lamentations for Aisha I and II*, Nana mourns the death of her sister-in-law, Aisha. She extols Aisha's piety and spiritual personality in the following verses: "Of the pious women humble to their Lord; of the women who have memorized the Qur'an by heart and who do extra in prayers, alms-giving, then recitation of the Qur'an."¹²⁶ And again, Asma'u notes Aisha's spiritual excellence: "I praise her for her worship, her modesty, religion, morals and glad kindness; for the way she said her *dhikr*, *wird* and prayer beads as well as her reading of the Qur'an."¹²⁷ As elegies on the exemplary lives of Muslim women, this edificatory literature reinforced Asma'u's goals of pursuing an Islamic lifestyle.¹²⁸

The core of Asma'u's goals abidingly center on piety and spiritual wisdom even in the *yan-taru* movement that she revived for Muslim women and children in the Sokoto Caliphate. In existence since the sixteenth century as a movement of moral reform, the *yan-taru* taught Muslim women the values of Islam to be imparted to their families as wives, teachers, and mothers to produce God-fearing citizens. But it was believed to be

systematized by Asma'u in the nineteenth century with the aim of making its citizens, particularly women, adopt behaviors that resonated with the mission of the Sokoto Caliphate. Meaning the “collective” or “those who congregate” in Hausa, the *yan-taru* was the backbone of women’s and children’s Islamic education in Nigeria and surrounding regions. As Beverly Mack and Jean Boyd explain, its ideological methodology rested on two principles, namely a woman’s obligation to promote the good of her community and the good of her own soul.¹²⁹ In other words, Asma’u was ensuring that women first, then their families, and, by extension, the entire caliphate under her brother Bello, would be enlightened about the ways of the Qur’an and the *sunna*. Mack and Boyd locate Asma’u’s investment in the Islamic education of women and children in the caliphate in her mobilization of a cadre of literate, itinerant teachers, known as *jajis* in Hausa, or leaders of a caravan.¹³⁰ Asma’u personally trained the *jajis*, providing them with useful lesson plans to spread her instructive poetic works among the masses by traveling to far corners of the caliphate, to even secluded women, with the primary purpose of imparting knowledge for pious behavior and rudimentary Islamic skills in the practicalities of daily life, to “reshape the common details of their life into Islamic form”—how to dress, how to pray, practical things.¹³¹

In this sense, Asma’u’s movement was political insofar as she was supported by the state of which her brother was the leader. As Mack illustrates the topography of the *yan-taru* movement, it becomes evident that the scope of Asma’u’s project parallels the mosque movement, contemporized in present-day Egypt:

Nana Asmau’s training of the *jajis* and the ‘*yan-taru* was community work whose primary tool was the spoken word . . . captured Hausa men and women were new in the Caliphate, and needed to know practical things: how to dress, how to pray, how to reshape the common details of their lives into Islamic form. Asma’u’s works not only informed women on these matters, but also reinforced Sufi characteristics and the principles of the Sunna by outlining in praise poem the spirituality and moral characteristics that made a person noteworthy.¹³²

Mahmood summarizes the transformation effected upon Egyptian society by the mosque movement in changes that can be indexed on the behavioral transformation of Muslims, including “changes in styles of dress and speech, standards regarding what is deemed proper entertainment for adults and children, patterns of financial and household

management,” by making “moral precepts, doctrinal principles, and acts of worship relevant to the organization of everyday life.”¹³³ Although not state-sponsored like the *yan-taru*, the mosque movement’s driving force, *da’wa* or socioreligious activism, has involved much of the same activities with the purpose of diffusing Islam in Egyptian society: “establishing neighborhood mosques, social welfare organizations, Islamic educational institutions, and printing presses as well as urging fellow Muslims toward greater religious responsibility, either through preaching or personal conversation.”¹³⁴ As do the *dā’iyat* in Egypt, the role of the itinerant teachers or *jajis* was to catechize Hausa women, facilitating their education with pedagogical devices, all rendered through personal conversation and visitations to their homes or at a neighborhood location.¹³⁵

And yet it is not the *yan-taru* movement, however, but Asma’u, the individual, whose impact is felt even to this day. As Mack and Boyd state, “in nearly every case, contemporary women cite Nana Asma’u as their exemplar in seeking knowledge as a necessary pursuit in their lives.”¹³⁶ Notwithstanding the common historical precedents of socioreligious activism and piety in the *yan-taru* in northern Nigeria, and the Islamic Revival that the contemporary mosque movement in Egypt derives from, the mosque movement continues its socioreligious activism to galvanize piety in the personal domain of women’s lives, and Asma’u’s message, more than the movement itself, has been incorporated in the private sphere within the private domain, gesturing to the texture of the reception, the presence of piety, and its percolation in everyday life. In northern Nigeria, therefore, African Muslim women have imbibed piety by settling it within the individual dimensions of their existence as opposed to feeling the need to engage in collectivized, socio-religiously activist forms, as seen in the mosque movement.¹³⁷

In its resonance today, two important aspects on African-Islamic feminism can be distilled from Amina’s and Nana’s political leadership. Despite such a clear political objective, and even under the aegis of the state, Nana’s and Amina’s leadership did not espouse goals for women’s political or public participation. The *yan-taru* aimed at the personal and private Islamic education of women—how to dress, pray, eat, and live in accordance with Islamic fiats on a daily basis. Such education was an end in itself and not a platform for public activity. The purpose of such leadership then—inculcating Islamic knowledge for Islamic behavior—is the goal of feminism that Hausa women aspire to even today. Together, Amina’s example as a historical exemplar in military, political, and administrative leadership, and as an unparalleled Muslim Hausa ruler, attesting to the Islamic heritage of Muslim women’s historically strong

social rights and status, and Nana's teachings pivoting on faith and right living, provide Hausa Muslim women with a positively emancipatory iconography of a Muslim woman's abilities.

Skillful Education, Personal and Economic Autonomies: Other Loci of Power and Rewards

The emphasis on Islamically correct personal living and faithfully deploying Islamic behavior—prayer, rituals, and habits such as dressing and eating—in one's private affairs assumes salience in Hausa women's long tradition of oral storytelling and their economic involvement through extra-market retail. Both of these examples summoned to validate women's personal and private expressions of feminism in Islam first and foremost point to women's prioritization of Islam—the primacy of religious observance (their limited physical movements, and the fulfillment of their religious, marital, and household duties) within expressions in economic and creative venues. Furthermore, both these activities—economic engagement and oral storytelling—have evolved from the forms of and times since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Oral storytelling in Hausa among women has evolved into women using their growing literacy to write their own poems and publicly perform them for economic gain. In modern times, this form has evolved into radio programs in Hausa society, and, as demonstrated in Beverly Mack's extensive profiles of several influential Hausa women poets, Hausa women have increasingly taken up poetry writing and radio broadcasting.¹³⁸ Likewise, non-secluded Hausa women have transformed their economic activity from small-scale house-trade to thriving businesses in food production and catering. Notwithstanding these social changes over the years, Hausa women still privilege the personal and private dimensions of their linguistic and economic talents, and continue to pursue these activities in private.¹³⁹ My interest, therefore, in the personal, private, and individual nature of such activities, including the personal and private origins that I briefly discuss below, determinedly pulls back from the public arena, into which Hausa women have of late extended their creative energies, and fixes on the private ways that women continue to pursue these engagements.

Physical seclusion is not Islamically mandated for Muslim women. The physical seclusion of married women during their childbearing years, as widely practiced in northern Nigerian societies, owes its observance to a number of historical, partly religious, and local customs and

factors.¹⁴⁰ Not all northern Nigerian Muslim women are secluded; they never were. Furthermore, the practice of seclusion varies between rural and urban areas, across socioeconomic classes, and even across Muslim women's ages.¹⁴¹ Women's restricted physical mobility, nonetheless, remains misinterpreted, pervasively received as a sign of women's social and economic subservience. Beverly Mack helpfully sums up this belief as a "poor reflection of the reality of women's lives in Northern Nigeria."¹⁴² She insightfully notes its practical use in that seclusion is most expected during a woman's childbearing years so she may focus on child-rearing, as her work at home is also commensurately labor-intensive (cooking, housekeeping, and child care) as that of a wage-earning woman outside the house:

The practical, idealistic aim of wife seclusion is to free a woman of childbearing age to focus on the family without obligating her to engage in wage-earning activity . . . it is a misperception to think that seclusion constitutes men's imprisonment and control of women by preventing them from acting in public.¹⁴³

Like seclusion, oral storytelling, too, has varied over time and an evolving social landscape in northern Nigeria.

In the same vein of re-examining received wisdom on Muslim women's leadership roles and goals, it must be noted that the widespread popularity of orature in Hausa literature does not stem from illiteracy of the Hausa population or imply it. Again, as Mack points out, measures of literacy in Nigeria are predicated on "Western educational programs without accounting for levels of Qur'anic education."¹⁴⁴ So, if by literacy one means knowledge of the English language, then most Hausa women may indeed be classified as "illiterate." But given the Islamic mandate to read the Qur'an and the profound relevance of Islam in Hausa women's lives, it can be stated with a large measure of confidence that a vast majority of Hausa women is literate in at least *ajami*, the Arabized script of Hausa, for the purposes of fulfilling their religious duties. To the Hausa, as Tom Verde puts it, *ajami* is like a "badge of identity," a badge of not only their Islamic but African-Islamic identity.¹⁴⁵ Moreover, as Mack notes, Hausa women also avail of adult education programs and even night classes to enhance their literacy in English, gesturing to the flexible, negotiable, and evolving nature of Hausa women's activities that are thought to be nonexistent.¹⁴⁶

Despite the myriad manifestations of Hausa literary genres, both written and oral, as Graham Furniss's breathtaking work on Hausa literature shows, the popularity of orature nonetheless shifts focus to the reasons,

nature, and settings of its use.¹⁴⁷ It is these aspects that are sensitive to women's personal, private, and individual creative engagements with Islam as they mirror this personal engagement in the literary texts of which I present readings in *Privately Empowered*. As it existed even before British colonialism in Nigeria among the rural Hausa, oral storytelling was a domain where a Muslim woman's skill in choosing, preparing, rehearsing, and presenting the stories required intelligence, creativity, and oral and linguistic facility. Sani Abba Aliyu's unique assessment of Hausa oral storytelling in rural parts of northern Nigeria pointedly reveals many crucial facts about African-Islamic feminism. First, as Aliyu clarifies, even in pre-colonial Hausaland, before the arrival of the British, women's seclusion fostered their expertise in the finer aspects of oral narration. It facilitated, in several ways, the honing of skills that allowed women to fulfill many other more important functions, namely educating their children, in addition to being influential repositories of the community's wisdom:

When the men embarked on post-harvest migrations, leaving the women and children behind, or set off on distant errands on behalf of traditional rulers, it was only logical that the stable, domesticated women should perfect their oral artistry in weaving entertaining episodes around serious moral lessons, fulfilling their function as the children's first socializers.¹⁴⁸

More importantly, the woman's multifaceted role of being the child's first socializer and tutor, avers Aliyu, "the closeness of Hausa women to children, principally as mothers and agents for the transmission of norms and values, strengthens their position as influential narrators."¹⁴⁹ The goal of such an undertaking, as Aliyu makes clear, is fulfilling the duties of motherhood—a personal, private, and individual objective. Owing then to her influential position as the storyteller and guardian of traditional wisdom, with the aim of fulfilling her maternal duties in her society as the menfolk are occupied outdoors in the fields, the Hausa woman incurs the enormous responsibility to tutor her progeny in the customs of their community. As a result, explains Aliyu, "the average Hausa woman is a more versatile and proficient deployer of linguistic resources than men in society" and takes it upon herself to continue the "aesthetic refinement of oral storytelling."¹⁵⁰ She must polish her skills in eloquence, narration, confidence, and imagination.

In this private universe of the household, then, for equally private goals such as motherhood, the Muslim woman relies on her personal and individual resources of oral skills, creative talents, her education in

traditional stories, and her judgement to transmit a trove of tales for her audience. She must patiently and resourcefully choose the stories, organize her narration, rehearse the tone, tenor, and tempo of her delivery, and perform the stories with confidence and skill to fulfill her maternal duties of entertainer and educator to her children and family. The African Muslim woman thus conjures a broad register of skills and talents—intellect, eloquence, creativity, and imagination in narrative techniques, pedagogy, and self-confidence—through personal, private, and individual preparation, and perseverance without external tutoring, styling, or guidance. Her stewardship of this art form, given its significance in the Hausa community, therefore is vital to the continuity of the Hausa language and its orature that for most critics remains hidden as it reveals no manifest value or use as externally visible, viewable, or public activities do. Most of all, and contrary to the belief espoused by African theorists that Islam promotes “sexist demands” to keep Muslim women hidden, unheard, and invisible symbolically and literally behind the veil, Aliyu instructively adds that “male members of society view storytelling by women as functional, facilitating the inculcation of socially desirable values such as hard work, honesty, thrift and wisdom . . . teaching them the richness of their language and culture.”¹⁵¹

And on the same lines of validating women’s personal and private engagements with Islam, I examine the robust presence of “extra-market retail” among northern Nigerian Muslim women, though the phenomenon is also prevalent among Muslim women in southern Nigeria and among Hausa women in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, such as Ghana and Niger. Since Polly Hill’s groundbreaking discovery, successive efforts on extra-market retail among Hausa women and among Muslim women, in general, even in other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, have observed the same.¹⁵² In her pioneering fieldwork on the “hidden” trade in Hausaland, in a small village on the Nigerian border with Niger, about twenty kilometers from Katsina, in Batagarawa, Polly Hill discovered the peculiar absence of a traditional marketplace in the village and found instead a highly developed form of “extra-market retail,” a parallel economy, operated by fully secluded “Muslim women” from the confines of their household compounds, successfully running a marketplace of “incomparably greater importance” than the ones established after several attempts in the village.¹⁵³ A traditional marketplace, claims Hill, would typically be located at the juncture of a group of ten small towns, or *gari* in Hausa, serving a population of about ten thousand people. Trade and retail in such a space would take place in food items, vegetables, and condiments, among other products such as food grains, cattle, and meat. In place of

the traditional market in Batagarawa, however, Hill found small vendors, mostly outside of homes in doorways or in the privacy of their husbands' compounds, where secluded women retailed in foodstuffs, vegetables, and small quantities of food grains. My interest in such a phenomenon lies not in the sophistication of this parallel economy, where, as Hill states, a woman's "economic autonomy is often sufficient to insulate her from her husband's poverty" and where "despite their virtual incarceration for the first thirty-five years of their married life, the women of the *gari* enjoy a considerable degree of economic independence."¹⁵⁴

I am more interested in closely examining the site that has allowed women to upstage the existence or presupposition of a traditional market, the heart of economic activity in West African villages and towns, namely the homestead, that is a personal, private, and individual place of dwelling that women use as their base to operate production, marketing, and retail of their products. It is also the personal, private, and individual dimensions of this space that prompt women to insist on anchoring their operations in it and shun trade in the larger marketplaces. The women traders in Batagarawa oppose the establishment of a public marketplace even though it may be more lucrative for them to trade in the same goods through emissaries, "runners," and couriers, mainly their male relatives or non-secluded women, in the larger market area, serving a wider population as is common practice in other Hausa societies where house-trade is prevalent.¹⁵⁵ This opposition to trade through emissaries that would undoubtedly enhance their profits indicates the women's insistence on internalizing and privatizing their economic functions where economic emancipation or even economic independence is secondary to maintaining the personal dimensions of house-trade. This is furthermore evidenced by the products they produce and sell. It becomes clear that the women traders retain the business within the purview of their personal expertise (for which they have received no formal training, mechanized assistance, or special knowledge), namely cooking to retail foodstuffs.¹⁵⁶ Hill takes up in more detail the main products of house-trading that the women themselves prepare—groundnut oil that they process at home, millet porridge, gruel (*fura*), cakes, snacks, vegetables they cultivate in the tracts of land adjoining their compounds, and small quantities of food grains that their husbands procure from distant markets. This implies that even the choice of products remains tethered to women's domestic functions within the household, that of cooking.

To be sure, the personal, private, and individual domain of the house (the site of fulfilling their religious roles—child care, Islamic duties, housekeeping, and cooking) empowers the women to engage in economic

activity (house-trade). The women's economic involvement is subordinate to the preeminence of Islam in their lives, for only after a house trader fulfills her religious obligations at home does she set about converting her house into a trading place. The scale of these women's economic activity attests no doubt to their economic ingenuity in that they have rendered the conventional marketplace rather insignificant in the Katsina Emirate, as a result of which, as Hill remarks, many small towns and villages in this emirate remain without public marketplaces. But the scale of the women's operations brings into focus the means by which they have inverted the external, public, viewable, and visible to the domains of the personal, private, and individual in their compounds. In the privacy and individuality of their households, the women who engage in house-trade manage, coordinate, and sustain separate individual trading units. They do not partner with other women, nor do they combine their products with one another. Each woman is the individual proprietor of the operations of the business she runs. They maintain the individuality of their businesses and therefore rely on their own individual skills of time management as they must also attend to equivalently labor-intensive household chores of food preparation for the family, child care, and housekeeping. In addition, the women traders must plan, resource, and budget for their retailing in foodstuffs before marketing their wares. They must, therefore, rely on themselves to be highly organized, meticulous, and shrewd in successfully sustaining their businesses.

So when Hill concludes that the marketplace is important but *house-trading* is far more important than the marketplace, she gestures to the personal and private means by which women reinscribe the public within the personal, private, and individual domain of their lives, where it is still more important to fulfill their religious duties of Islamic behavior, child-care, marital duties, and managing a household. But more importantly, as she concludes, the parallel economy in this tiny northern Nigerian village is not a special case. Or more significantly, as Hill ponders, along with Abner Cohen, who studies similar economic activities of Hausa women of Ibadan (in Yorubaland) in the south of the country, the "most significant paradox" of Hausa society, as Cohen calls it, is that women dominate the cooking industry and the retail business, displaying a high degree of specialization and economies of scale, not just in parts of northern Nigeria but also in the south, so "that they can engage in business and amass wealth for themselves when they are in the bondage of seclusion and wifhood."¹⁵⁷ The paradox for *Privately Empowered* lies not in correlating the restriction on physical mobility with successful economic activity. Rather, *Privately Empowered* is invested in the personal, private,

and individual ways that empower African Muslim women to partake of some of the same activities—economic engagement and education. As African Muslim women interact with Islam in the personal, private, and individual domain of the homestead, these three examples—the aims of political leadership for faith and right living, and economic and creative activities with restricted physical mobility—provide the clearest articulation of what the women themselves feel and think about Islam. Women’s spiritual habits, likewise—prayer, Islamic practice and rituals—expose most accurately their feelings and thoughts on Islam.

Reading through the African-Islamic Feminist Lens: Biliterate Conjugations of Histories, Themes, and Locations

As a blueprint for the future of African and Islamic feminisms, African-Islamic feminism employs biliteracy in northern Nigerian fiction to determinedly locate Islamic feminism outside the Middle East and Arab world and outside topoi pertinent to political, public, or legal engagements with Islam. Equally, African-Islamic feminism appropriates aspects of African feminist discourse—*Umoja*, African womanism, nego-feminism, stiwanism, and motherism—to enrich the African Muslim woman’s feminism as an African Muslim womanist, an African Muslim nego-feminist, an African Muslim stiwaniist, and an African Muslim motherist. Steady effectively detects that the core that animates African feminist research lies in “the fact that alternative systems exist which recognize other loci of power, authority, and rewards” and in a “‘cross-cultural’ focus for studying women that is inclusive in its methodology” to gesture to a humanistic vision of African feminism.¹⁵⁸ It follows then that African Muslim women’s worldview may lie in private leadership, emulating Nana Asma’u’s mandate for faith and right living. It may also lie in economic and educational autonomy in skills and sites not typically found in the marketplace or schools. By extension, it may be discerned in a private, personal, and individual engagement with Islamic rituals and habits such as prayer, virtuous behavior, and embracing Islam by professing monotheism, as a reading of Alkali’s, Ali’s, and Gimba’s heroines unravels. Recognizing that Muslim women’s loci of rewards may be different foregrounds the principled approach that the goal of African-Islamic feminism is not to accord Islam an indigenous status (as opposed to foreign) in Africa, as indigenusness does not assure critical immunity. Rather, it is to genuinely treat Islam as a cognate of African diversity to expose well-meshed, biliterate connections between various feminist orientations.

Middle Eastern and Arab-Islamic feminism must likewise inclusively transact in transnational connections and communicate translocal realities to embrace Muslim women's engagements with Islam outside regional boundaries. Middle Eastern and Arab-Islamic feminism must also privilege the spiritual functions of the Qur'an, in addition to its legal purposes, in the expression of feminism in a move to societies that are not Islamic nation-states, where women express feminism outside the aegis of the state and other publicly and politically organized activities. Discovering that African Muslim women's personal, private, and individual engagements with the same topoi have preoccupied Muslim women in the Middle East—feminist leadership and its aims, the encryption of active community participation in publicly viewable and visible activity—exposes a different set of means and goals in engaging with Islam. It furthermore summons the question on what Muslim women themselves regard as constitutive of the goals and themes of their interaction with Islam. Moreover, can these goals be universally inscribed in Muslim women's agendas without examining what Muslim women themselves think about Islam?

African-Islamic feminism transforms and sharpens our growing understanding of feminism in being not only representative but also constitutive of the different means by which African Muslim women express feminism and of the different goals they may attain, as a particular practice may have a different valence for them than for their counterparts in the "Muslim world" in the Middle East. While the interpretive stress on physical seclusion appears to have fettered women's publicly viewable participation in community affairs in the Middle East, it is empowering for northern Nigerian Muslim women who observe seclusion as a socio-religious custom. In this way, Alkali, Ali's, and Gimba's fiction are generative of new meanings for feminism in Islam as they reformulate our assumptions about the means and ends of Islamic feminism. To globally impact feminism, both African and Islamic feminists must imperatively enact thematic and regional biliteracy and inclusively harness the common foci of their preoccupations.¹⁵⁹ The rest of *Privately Empowered* maps African-Islamic feminism as a mutually beneficial conjugation of African and Islamic feminist discourses, as a repatriation of the African Muslim woman's feminism to African feminism, by probing the personal, private, and individual engagement and its goals with Islam through *ṣalāt*, *du'a*, *dhikr*, *akhlāq*, *shahādah*, and *ḥijāb* in northern Nigerian fiction.