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Privately Empowered

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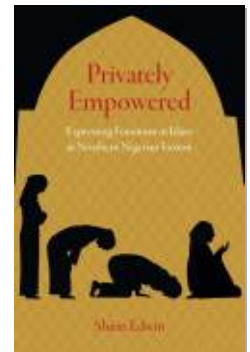
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EPILOGUE

Exposing Regional, Conceptual, and Discursive Veils through African-Islamic Feminism

This book has located Islamic feminism within the compass of personal, private, and individualized modes of engagement with Islam that draw their energy from rituals, habits, and beliefs neither collectively articulated or deliberated, nor politically oriented toward such goals as public reform and gender justice. This book's ambition is not to evacuate socio-economic or even political realities from women's lives; quite the contrary, it is to wonder if all women insist on, as Badran claims, "public identification of themselves as committed Muslims."¹ Focusing, therefore, on the Qur'an as more than a source of *fiqh* or *sharīa* or as an instrument of "sharia activism," *Privately Empowered* has revisited the cornerstone of Islamic scripture for its spiritual promulgations in women's lives. It has approached women as quotidian practitioners of Islam rather than as "gender activists," with a biliterate expectation to broaden both the regional and conceptual scopes of Islamic feminism and to reconfigure the vocabularies and goals of Islamic feminism that have rendered African-Islamic feminism the underprivileged child of feminist discourse.

Not only disproportionately focused on an extremely small region of the Muslim world, namely the Middle East and the surrounding regions, but also (perhaps because of it) conceptually limited to the imbrications of the nation-state and collective participation as the wellspring for its agenda, the profuse critical iterations on Islamic feminism have unstintingly valued women's public, group, and political enfranchisement, obscuring, as this book has shown throughout, modes of feminist expression that do not accrue to these goals. In an effort to conjugate the common points between African and Islamic feminists, this book has conversed with both African and Islamic feminist theories by underlining a deficient regional and ideological grammar that leadenly connects Muslim women's expression of feminism to the historical evolutions of the Islamic nation-state, collective public projects, and legal goals. When Mahmood adroitly clarifies that the participants of the mosque movement in Egypt do not "directly engage the state and its juridical discourses," the assumption, as she continues that "all contemporary social movements find their genesis in a politics of

identity,” lacks accountability to the realities of African Muslim women for whom modes of spiritual engagement for personal, private, and individual fulfillment may not fall within the purview of social movements in the first place. Mahmood continues a couple of lines later:

To the extent that all aspects of human life (whether they pertain to family, education, worship, welfare, commercial transactions, instances of birth and death, and so on) have been brought under the regulatory apparatuses of the nation-state, the piety movement’s efforts to remake any of these activities will necessarily have political consequences.²

It is, as Mahmood quotes Charles Hirschkind to elucidate the political nature of even piety projects, “subsumed within (and transformed by) the legal and administrative structures linked to the state,” and for success, therefore, the “traditional project of preserving those virtues will necessarily be political.”³ Admittedly, the piety movement has not “politicized” spirituality in quite the same way as state-sponsored programs, but by virtue of being a “project,” a “movement” that “must engage with the all-encompassing institutions and structures of modern governance whether it aspires to state power or not” for its efficacy, the purportedly tenuous connections even in such orientations that do not directly engage the state are precisely the vocabularies, as I have argued, that continue to implicate Islamism in discourses on Islamic feminism, complicit or athwart. For the women I have presented in Alkali’s, Ali’s, and Gimba’s fiction, instances of birth, family, education, and worship do not have political consequences. These instances remain enveloped in personal, private, and individual concerns and actions as does the spiritual that is consubstantial with such concerns and actions. Thus, when Rauf ostensibly favors women’s private roles in the family and skills in piety, management, and negotiation, her goal for political empowerment underlying her formulations repeats the reflexivity of political agendas of feminist movements. Indeed, even when dis severing the goals of women’s activities from state-sponsored organizations, typically and conventionally encoded in legislative reform, electoral participation, or state-building, the public tenor of piety in Islam with underlying concepts of *da’wa* vitiates the salience of the private modes of spiritual engagement for equally private goals such as the ones I have explored in Alkali’s, Ali’s, and Gimba’s fiction. Unmistakably, these private goals draw breath in the literary culture of *Soyayya* books where Hausa women spearhead writing on issues most relevant to them. In so doing, *Soyayya* authors reveal most faithfully the ambit of Islam

in women's private lives. More important, they reveal forms of feminist engagement in spiritual activity.

The cardinal points of Islamic feminism and gender questions will always be marked by politics, law, nation-states, and gender activism. So long as this nexus veils Islamic feminism, other modes of expression will remain woefully unexplored as other venues of Islamic engagement and practice will continue to be poorly theorized or simply ignored, especially in sites where Islam has not enjoyed a long history of political participation in governance and legal structures, in a continent of no less than five hundred million Muslims, but with only Mauritania as its solitary Islamic republic. Briefly then, cooke's recommendation of Islamic feminism as a "faith position" is most apt without, however, its extension as "sharia activism," or as a platform for gender rights and legal participation, for a personal, private, and individual faith position squarely invokes the specificity of Islam in women's lives that has often been, to evoke Kandiyoti, evacuated from formulations of feminism.⁴ Following the compass of women's personal, private, and individual faith positions then, I have explored the various spiritual coordinates of quotidian practice in northern Nigerian Muslim women's lives, plotted on personal, private, and individual lines of prayer—*ṣalāt*, *duʿa*, *dhikr*, Islamic faith or *shahādah*, virtuous behavior or *akhlāq*, and modesty in the *ḥijāb* or veil.

In arguing along with other theorists like Alidou, Loimeier, and Bangura, among others, that not only have African Muslims been absent for so long from Islamic discourse and their realities de-emphasized, but that critics have constantly discoursed on Islam in Africa with an attitudinal veil, to borrow Kassam's expression, I have sighted a discursive veil, an attitudinal cover, that must also be shaken to expose engagements veiled by the persistent view. Even as recently as 2009, Kanchana Ugbabe writes that Alkali's views on marriage are

cynical: wives are abused, silenced, deceived and treated as inconsequential. Men disrupt the quiet and constant flow of a woman's life with their oversized egos and their selfishness. Women are kept in subjection, often without education, on account of cultural practices and religious beliefs.⁵

Issuing from such critical comments as seen throughout this book—"somebody else's religion," as Amina Mama calls Islam in Africa; "the passion to outdo men," as Sule Egya describes the African Muslim woman's agenda along with her desire to "escape from her milieu" or to suffer the "culture of silence" that is Islam—as assessed by a multitude of

critics, this discursive veil is pinned on a dialectic that critically shuttles the Muslim woman between two neatly inflexible postures: subversion or unquestioning acceptance of Islam. The analytic lens used by a host of African theorists, when studying the African Muslim woman, is, therefore, programmed to capture this dialectic in African-Islamic feminist fiction. That the African Muslim woman also heals, repairs, and mends, that she also enacts *Umoja*, as African theorists have envisioned feminism, but also intuitively goes around (patriarchal and religious) landmines, in Nnaemeka's terms, as nego-feminists, African womanists, motherists, and stiwaniists do, that she possesses these mature, supple, and wise qualities and sensibilities as does her non-Muslim African sister, would mean turning to the African Muslim woman to listen for a biliterate *dhikr*, a remembrance, that echoes her consciousness of religion and not the oppression imputed to her. The fiction I have examined audibly plays such voices. In Alkali's *The Stillborn*, Li's older sister, Awa, critically evaluated as a victim of centuries of Islamic indoctrination, and, therefore, an example of subservience, in fact manifests courage, responsibility, and unwavering commitment to her dreams and decisions that need to be critically repatriated within both African and Islamic feminist discourses as African-Islamic feminism to emphasize African womanism, nego-feminism, and stiwaniism and a personal, private, and individual engagement with Islam. Posited as a facet of Islamic practice that has not been of policy interest to Islamic theorists, and consequently of little discursive value, the questions I have answered in this book, namely on the use of the voice of *dhikr*; on the details of women's prayer habits; on the insights into their habits of invoking God, or *dhikr*, when not plotted on the familiar calculus of publicly visible goals; and on their choice to become Muslim or not, can definitively nudge African and Islamic feminist theories out of their regional, conceptual, and ethnocentric inertia to mutually conjugate their orientations in African-Islamic feminism.

Within this spiritual universe of *dhikr* where the African Muslim woman may not necessarily view Islam as the source of her problems or legislative or political activity as solutions to them, the analyses in this book have dwelt on personal praxis that remain private in their goals. Together, the spiritual practices—*shahādah*; *ʿibādāt*, encompassing *ṣalāt*, *duʿā*, and *dhikr*; *akhlāq*; and *ḥijāb*—inscribe goals with consequences on private and personal lives. *ʿIbādāt* enfolds the entire range of acts of worship, ritual, or canonical prayer, such as the *ṣalāt*, and non-canonical, like the *duʿā* or supplication, the manner of existence as the very purpose of Muslim ontology is to worship God. Not far from this thought is *dhikr* that also foregrounds a constant remembrance, subordinating humans

to the divine. Along the same lines of worship are the necessary qualities or dispositions or *akhlāq* that shadow worship and are desirable for the exercise of piety in the entirety of one's personal, private, and individual life. These concepts, then, and their practice knit all manner of existence for a Muslim. The interconnectivity, and, more crucially, continuity of these themes in a Muslim's life threads the literary corpus I have examined, particularly in the way Li first acquires the disposition to accept Islam in her acknowledgment of Islamic monotheism, or the *shahādah*. This commitment is then continued in prayer or *ṣalāt*, *du'a*, and *dhikr* as evinced in Magira's, Farida's, and Zahrah's constant invocations of God. Undergirding the practice of ritual is the daily effort to acquire and manifest a disposition that coheres with an Islamic personality or *akhlāq* as evidenced in Nana's actions. The spiritual universe of these women steadily transacts in preoccupations that are not typically indexed in articulations of social and political processes as their acquisition and enactment are contained by the personal and private scope and consequences of their feelings and thoughts.

Very much to the point, therefore, is the thematic cornerstone of the analysis of these novels that connects the ways in which Muslim women in northern Nigeria enact these spiritual habits in ever-changing configurations of relationships. The theme of movement is consistent—deeply rooted in the geographical contextualization of the novels—it is embedded in the sociocultural milieu of the context of northern Nigeria. In concerning themselves with the world inside the energy of the family, as Li has to deal with her father and family; Nana connects with her grandfather; Magira, of course, commands an entire dynasty; Farida must constantly interact with her guardians and then her husband; and Zahrah networks with diverse people, friends, and family, these women engage Islam as limited to interpersonal interactions. Indeed, they anchor such interactions within marriage, family, and motherhood that are also central to the canons of African feminism as in *Umoja*, African womanism, and motherism. But these women also shift physically. Li moves back and forth from Hill Station to the city. Nana undertakes a journey of a thousand kilometers from her village Zuma to the district headquarters in Birnin Adama. Magira shifts from the rural Ramta to the urban Makulpo, her family in tow, and Zahrah shuttles between Rabbah, Min-sra, and surrounding towns. Lastly, but equally important, Farida will move from Kaduna to Sabon Birni, then even to London and back. In these complex navigations through physical and emotional migrations, the African Muslim woman disengages Islamic feminism from two levels of feminist discourse, namely the political and public representations of

women's activities and from all the motivations that prompt such participation, to sharply focus attention on private and personal spaces of engagement with Islam, through interpersonal relations or familial interactions, for instance. Li will learn by observing Awa. Nana learns from Baba Sani. Seytu is deeply cognizant of Magira's contributions. Zahrah's convictions are affirmed in a private and personal process through casual conversations and even internal musings and dreams with Miriam, Zubaydah, and Shareef. And, finally, Farida relies on herself. Specifically, such a private engagement can expose the variety of the kinds of Islamic feminisms that spatter the neat spaces and postures of subversion and unconditional acceptance of Islam onto which African Muslim women have been plotted—Li is not Muslim at first, she comes to the religion. But Nana readily manifests Islamic qualities in her interactions on her journey. If Magira strategizes feminism in her prayers to express it inside the familial fold, in her business and control of her family affairs, her granddaughter Seytu acknowledges her grandmother's role in her life and contribution to her success but does not explicitly practice Islam. Zahrah's and Farida's feminisms are overt allusions to Islam as they functionalize it for their personal success, but Awa in *The Stillborn*, Peni and Mero in *The Descendants*, and Laila in *The Virtuous Woman* add yet more dimensions to African-Islamic feminism.

Just as these women come to know things about themselves, Islamic feminism also needs a continuous revision that can expose biliterate avatars such as African-Islamic feminism that serve as a leaven for both African and Islamic feminisms. Continued preoccupation with Islamic feminism as a social activity and activism for gender justice is to foreclose those modes of engagement that prioritize a different matrix of goals. As we have been reminded since Edward Said's *Orientalism* that the accumulated force of discourse is immensely powerful and difficult to overcome, the unremitting persistence to see Islamic feminism, therefore, as little more than a fight for egalitarianism, in fact has unfortunately reduced it to a ledger for recording women's socialized, public, and organizational engagement with Islam. The future of Islamic feminism resides not in being continually moored to the same regions, processes, and goals, but in turning a corner to stumble upon, as in this case, that which Muslim women have been engendering for centuries in personal and private engagements with Islam. The confluence of African and Islamic feminist discourses, therefore, births African-Islamic feminism as a critical and discursive practice invested in personal, private, and individual expressions of feminism in regions outside those where feminism is frequently articulated as a coalition of religion and public politics.