Hidden in the Household: Gender and Class in the study of Islam in Africa
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I. Introduction

The History of Islam in Africa is a remarkable collection, many years in the making, which assembles voices of key scholars working in the area of Islam and history in Africa (Levtzion and Pouwels 2000). And thanks to the vision of its editors, it is even more. The introduction echoes the understanding Nehemia Levtzion developed over a long career of how and why Islam became rooted throughout the continent over many millennia. This lifetime of exploring different facets of Islam’s history in Africa clearly fashions the lens through which readers are asked to read Islam in Africa’s subsequent twenty-four chapters. It is a lens that, in turn, focuses attention on a combination of patterns of Islamic expansion and varieties of Islamic experience: it has a strong geographical character (patterns as they emerge in different regions of Africa) and an equally strong emphasis on process (experience as measured through conversion). Across time and space, readers encounter stories of how and why African merchants, politicians, diplomats, scholars and ‘holy men’ – Africa’s royal, upper and middle classes – became Muslim and in turn shaped African history. These are without exception stories of ‘progress’ in which the processes of Islamization move Braudelian-style – in simultaneous historical ‘moments’ moving at different speeds and different societal levels – towards fully Muslim societies. What this means in any given moment or place varies greatly; as the introduction states: “… the advance of Islam has profoundly influenced religious beliefs and practices of African societies, while local traditions have ‘Africanized’ Islam” (Preface; my emphasis). Nevertheless, Levtzion and Pouwels make it clear that ultimately, ‘progress’ is achieved when the traditional or the pre-Islamic can be overcome. ‘Africanized Islam’ -- in spite of the attention given to the dynamics of conversion -- remains a less-clearly articulated concept than ‘Islam in Africa’ (2-4). And ‘Islam in Africa’, Africanized or not, remains firmly within the domain of trade, politics and war (Preface).

To elaborate slightly: the model of ‘Islamization’ presented derives from Levtzion and Pouwels’ understanding of conversion. They argue that while merchants opened ‘routes’ (through the ‘gateways’ of north and east Africa, the title of the first section), they merely exposed Africans to Islam; “conversion to Islam was the work of men of religion, communicating primarily with local rulers. The latter were often the first recipients of Islamic influence…”, underscoring the importance of ‘states’ in the process. In turn, rulers and associated aristocracies took a middle position between the Muslims who “helped them” and “the rest” who remained attached to traditional beliefs (2). Out of this situation developed a ‘negotiated Islam’ where people either publicly proclaimed Islam and privately continued to ‘fear fetishes’ or sought a symbiotic relation between the traditional and the Muslim (3). A sort of structural parallelism prevailed: “Muslim clerics who rendered religious services to Islamized chiefs became integrated into the sociopolitical system of the state by playing roles similar to those of traditional priests…”, clerics were neutral like priests, mosques resembled shrines in function (3). Over time,
these clerics and saints (wali) taught rulers but even so, many remained “unable to relieve the monarchy of pre-Islamic heritage”; in many instances, those who became “too Muslim” were deposed or killed (4). The historical watershed occurred in the 17th and 18th centuries, when Islamic learning moved from the town (where rulers and learned teachers lived) to the countryside. It was ‘rural’ Islamic scholarship that gave rise to a new class of Muslims – those who took up jihad against those urban, literates who had incompletely embraced Islam (10, 11). “The challenge to the marginal role of Islam in African societies did not come from ‘ulama’ [learned men] who were spokesmen for the traders, nor from clerics who rendered religious services in the chiefly courts; it came mostly from the autonomous rural and pastoral enclaves” (11). The editors emphasize the role of emergent vernacular Islamic literature – in particular, poetry and oral renderings of Islamic thought – in popularizing Islam among the illiterate peasants and pastoralists of those enclaves (12). In these ways, changing realities of conversion shaped both the patterns and the progress of Islamization.

Historians of Africa will recognize in this approach a well-entrenched framework that gives organizational priority to region -- the traditional North, West, East and South Africa, and places thematic emphasis on power-related activities like state building, commerce, politics, religious hierarchies and war. Most will also note that this traditional approach is one that is both elitist and male oriented: because it concerns itself with activities that were largely (though not exclusively) the domain of men – and men primarily of middle and/or upper classes, it privileges an elitist, male world-view. Put another way, if it is assumed that the essentials of Islamization were processes and patterns of conversion that were in the hands of ‘learned religious men’, ‘successful merchants’ and ‘powerful chiefs’, then Islamization by definition becomes an understanding of what these men did and why and how they did it. In this case, the tendency to adopt this perspective is strengthened by the fact that Islam itself is usually understood as a patriarchal, patrilineal ideology. It seems legitimate to ask, then: to what extent can this model incorporate practices and experiences of conversion that are not about traditionally recognized power – either gender or class defined? Alternately, one might equally pose the question: how might such alternative practices and experiences reshape or challenge the existing model?

II. Gender, Class and “Islamization”

The editors give few indications as to how they might respond to the first question. In the introduction, apart from an indirect reference to “spouses and their relatives” converting in the context of East Central African trade (7), women literally enter the picture only during the last section addressing colonial rule. And even in this context, women are merely observed taking an active part in popular movements and preaching to other women, among a range of voluntary services. The most significant impact they are credited with having on the practice of Islam is creating what came to be known as ‘the women’s pilgrimage’ – the off-season journey to Mecca that was largely populated by women (15). As for non-elites, other than taking up the anonymous role of those who occupied the above-mentioned “rural and pastoral enclaves” (presumably the non-literate peasants and herders responding to the process of “popularization”), we see them referenced on occasion as slaves. In this model, slaves are either the cause of Islam’s lack of progress (only non-Muslims can be legitimately enslaved, therefore
territories regularly raided for slaves marked the frontiers of *Dar al-Islam* (5), or its embracers as an expression of resistance to Christian masters (this in what is presented as an unusual situation, addressed only in the chapter on South Africa) (7).

The geographically and chronologically organized core of the book (some fourteen chapters) does not provide that much more material with which to engage the question, but that which is offered up is very suggestive. For example, in the context of West Africa and the rise of 18th and 19th century *jihads*, David Robinson highlights the role of the use of vernacular languages in expanding the audience receptive to a revitalized Islam. He notes that in the Futa Jalon, such literature was primarily in Pulaar (not Arabic): “much of it was designed for recitation and the edification of the women, slaves and other less literate members of the population” (134). Similarly in Northern Nigeria (Sokoto), such literature was written in Fulbe and Hausa, again, intended for recitation to the “less literate – women, slaves, farmers, pastoralists”. Key texts were copied and circulated to other parts of the savanna becoming the “Sokoto model” of *jihad*. In both regions, and in spite of being “contained in a patriarchical framework”, free women could be teachers and pedagogues (134, 138-9). Probably the most famous of these who made “vital contributions” to vernacular literature was Nana Asma’u, daughter of *jihadist* Uthman dan Fodio: “encouraged by father, brother, and husband [she] developed organization and pedagogy to reach the women of the region …By her poetry in Fulfulde, Hausa and Arabic, and by her training of teachers, she probably accomplished more thorough going Islamization in the northwestern part of Hausaland than anyone else in the caliphate” (138, 9). According to Robinson, Nana Asma’u was promoting a particular form or ‘version’ of Islam over what was at the time regarded as ‘traditional’ (*borî*) belief. What is also striking here is that there was a collaborative effort to incorporate ‘women, slaves, pastoralists, farmers’ between Nana Asma’u and her male family; it was recognized that this audience needed to understand Islam not only in a local language because of their illiteracy but through a different genre – such as the oral recitation of poetry. Both practice and process were reshaped to respect different worldviews and to respond to different local belief systems, central of which in both the Futa Jalon and the broader savanna were those of women and slaves.9

A second set of material can be drawn from the East and East/Central African region. The ‘conversion model’ is presented as evolving in a different pattern in this region, as well as at a later date – effectively the 19th century. The “slow process of Islamization” moved beyond coastal regions only as Africans who had converted in the coastal urban environments returned home to the interior with the growth of the ivory and slave trade. This commerce, in turn, was buttressed by the arrival of new merchants and landowners who invested in Islam (mosques, schools), the rise of sufî brotherhoods and the development of the Omani ‘empire’ based on the prosperous island of Zanzibar. Levitzion and Pouwels note that even in this environment, “not many Africans accepted Islam … Those who converted were mostly members of the immediate entourage of the Arab and Swahili merchants: spouses and their relatives, porters and other employees of the merchants” (6,7; quotation, 7). Yet the emphasis here remains firmly on the traders as agents and trade as practice.

The reference given for this ‘slow process’ is David Sperlings’ fascinating chapter on the hinterland. A few examples will suffice to argue that his material is far more
revealing of both process and practice than the introduction suggests, and with some probing, far more provocative in terms of our understanding of ‘the model’. The above statement about the immediate entourage of merchants is made in the context of discussing the major trading centres of the interior (Tabora and Ujiji) and commenting upon the “surprising lack of Islamization” in the area; while difficult to define, Sperling points to “an apparent lack of interest among most Muslim traders in spreading their religion.”

He then goes on to note that Africans who adopted Islam were generally “wives [of Arabs and Swahili] and sometimes relations of their wives, retainers or porters, and slaves” (289).

Wives and slaves -- each category of converts plays a significant role in Sperlings’ account. In fact, numerous examples of Islamization being driven by Muslim merchants marrying local African (non-Muslim) women are provided, ranging from the coastal region of Mombassa to the deep interior. The process of ‘rural Islamization’ he dates largely to the latter 19th century and to the ‘remigration’ of urban converts, just as Levtzion and Pouwels outline. But the actual Islamization in each instance can be located in the heart of newly-formed households. In the case of the Segeju and Vumba Swahili, the latter settled near Segeju villages, took Segeju wives and the children of these marriages were brought up as Muslims; other Segeju (friends? relatives?) “must have been attracted…” as well. “Thus the Seguju came to be among the first indigenous African people of the coastal hinterland to adopt Islam on a large scale, and this was not so much because of trading contacts but as a result of close relations arising out of interspersed settlement and intermarriage” (282). A similar situation is described between the Swahili and Sigua of the Mrima Coast hinterland and between the Digo and the Tangana Swahili (south of Mombasa) (282).

A few interesting observations are relevant here. First, in the case of the Digo and Tangana, an early twentieth-century observer noted that, “Side by side with Mohamedon practices, they continue their tribal religious observances. Most of their wives and women folk are pagans and their husbands do not seem to consider it necessary for them to be anything else” (282). This led Sperling to conclude that, “They [Digo Muslims] seem to have had no difficulty leading their traditional way of life and responding to the demands of their new faith”; from the 1870s the number of Digo Muslims increased gradually but steadily – while continuing to live in their villages, “[they] would go to pray in neighbouring Tanzania mosques”. While the outside observer saw Islam literally in the persons of the men who would have been praying in the mosques and by default, ‘paganism’ in the ‘women folk’ who remained in the villages, Sperling eschews such simplification in acknowledging that there was a dynamic created in the early marriages that ‘gradually but steadily’ created Muslims of the Digo. Children were clearly being brought up Muslim (creating the generation of Digo Muslims, undoubtedly men, who went to pray in neighbouring mosques), as well as the next generation of Digo Muslim women; the observer, in attributing ‘paganism’ to the women overlooks his own comment that “they” continue their tribal religious observances, “side by side with Mohamedean practices”. Men and women were experiencing Islam within an environment that women ensured continued to protect their cultural ‘tradition’ (282).

There is another point of relevance here, raised by Edward Alpers in his related chapter: everywhere in East and East Central Africa this ‘culture’ was matrilineal. Alpers notes the same strategies as Sperling in terms of the role of intermarriage between Muslim merchants and ‘local’ women in the “initial expansion of Islam in Macuana...”
but concludes that “since Makua culture was strongly matrilineal, it is not at all clear that such marriages ought to be considered as part of a pattern of Islamic conversion” (306). In effect, he (like Sperling, above) then goes on to show very clearly why indeed they were central to this region’s ‘pattern of conversion’. He notes how Islamic and indigenous forms of belief were gradually being “mediated”, giving examples of law, initiation ceremonies and mourning (313). He also comments on Swahili scribes and traders as being important “not least for their knowledge of Islamic charms…”(308), again suggesting a resonance with ‘traditional’ beliefs that facilitated the mediation he identifies. As Sperling’s evidence suggests, the arena in which such mediation occurred was the household and the ‘traditional’ village – the reproductive sites of matrilineal society.

This raises yet a third point – where, exactly, Islamic teaching, learning and praying took place. As Sperling notes, outsiders looked for signifiers of Islam such as mosques and Quranic schools, and tended to conclude that people were not Muslims in the absence of these institutions (275,6; 289). While to some extent accepting this association in the early parts of the chapter, he cautions against the weakness of such sources by referencing the fact that such practices were undoubtedly going on unobserved in the privacy of homes (providing the example of Zanzibaris) (289). Alpers is even more explicit. He accepts that “Islam was spreading peacefully by Muslim traders” but specifies that the local holy men (walimu) and shurfa -- “with their religio-magical knowledge”, as well as “innumerable mafundi (masters)” were teaching village children “in any hut, on a veranda or under the shade of a tree as school” (309), largely out of sight or recognition of European visitors. ‘Huts’ and ‘verandas’ again situate the locus of process and practice back in the household. Sperling concludes that “because of the limitation of our sources and consequent lack of knowledge, the history of Islam necessarily lies hidden behind the secular and commercial activities whose details are so much better known” (289). That said, looking more closely at how matrilineal societies and the women who were powerful in them actually ‘mediated’ between Islam and traditional culture just might reveal more of what ‘lies hidden’ than we have recognized to date.

Sperling’s observations about Muslim converts also included attention to ‘non-elites’ – specifically to slaves. Indeed, his chapter deals more extensively with them than any other, but just as sources for ‘hidden teaching and learning’ pose a problem for historians, he notes that “the practice of Islam by slaves is not well documented” either. “Illiteracy was high, opportunities for learning few, and knowledge of the faith rudimentary. Slave villages had no Quran schools, and slaves and the children of slaves had little chance to learn about their faith. Slaves who lived in town had better access to education and sometimes studied to quite high standards….. But even slaves without a solid grounding in Islamic doctrine acquired a veneer of Muslim attitudes and practice…. [According to a European observer,] ‘[they] sometimes learn by rote sufficient of the Koran, though in an unknown tongue to them, to take part with their betters in the religious exercises of the mosque’ (280).”

One cannot help but be struck by the fact that these measures of ‘being Muslim’ echo some of the issues Sperling addresses elsewhere as being perhaps over-emphasized (eg. the presence of mosques and schools). They also resonate with Robinson’s evidence
discussed above regarding those who learned without Arabic literacy and the role such people played in the process of Islamization in West Africa. And finally, one might be tempted to comment that the description of slaves learning the Quran ‘by rote, in an unknown tongue [Arabic]’ correlates well with the description of any non-Arabic speaking talibe (students) – slave or free -- learning to be Muslims in a Quranic school or mosque!

In spite of the doubts his initial discussion of slaves and conversion might raise about this sector of society being significant to the ‘model’, Sperling’s actual evidence argues strongly to the contrary. For example, when he recounts that slaves were among the ‘entourage of Swahili and Arabs’ who converted in Tabora-Ujiji region, he notes these “Islamized Manyema slaves” were sufficiently large in number that “the town [was] as much like a plantation as [a] trading settlement” (288). Alpers adds to this impression. He notes that in the mid-18th century the Portuguese restricted Muslims in Mozambique acquiring new slaves because “Muslim owners indoctrinated the slaves with ‘their dammed Mohamedan faith’” (305). A century later, no attempts had been made to convert free Makonde at Cape Delgado, but Makonde slaves on the coast had become Muslims (307). He also notes two significant institutional developments deriving from conversion practices that built on the region’s tradition of slavery. While noting the ‘challenges’ that Islam posed for matrilineal kinship and inheritance practices in East Central Africa, he also recounted one ‘mediation’ that permitted the Yao to benefit from both the new and the old: chiefs quickly discovered how to exploit Islamic “patrilateral means” of inheritance to attach slave women and children to their own matrilineages (313). Secondly, north of Quelimane, schools were established that recruited students from the coast: “When a child enters that school, the first condition that is imposed on him is to embrace the religion of Mohamad, then the father of the child accepts the obligation to furnish a domestic servant to the Arabs as a slave when the child has completed his studies – normally three years… On completion of his studies the disciple takes the name of Malimu and is a doctor. Upon fulfillment of payment by his father, he then returns to his kin and his people and exercises his art among them…”(308; emphasis in the original). Alpers comments that this is “solid evidence” of a missionary strategy for Islam; he might also have noted that it was one firmly rooted in East African slavery and ultimately would have had the impact of linking coastal and hinterland Islam through the expansion of that institution, as well as through the concomitant expansion of Muslim education (308,9). 22

A final point, significant in its comparison with the West African situation described by Robinson: both women and slaves could be teachers and walimu. Sperling identifies one of the last liwali of Mombasa as having been a slave (280), and Alpers describes the Shaykh who introduced the Qadiriyya brotherhood to Malawi in 1929 as “the most important woman in Malawi Islamic history.” 24 Having studied and received her credentials in Zanzibar, “her leadership and teaching brought many women into an active role in the revitalized umma [Muslim religious community] through the use of tariqua [brotherhood] banners, dhiker [trance inducing singing] and occasions for collective religious celebration” (312,3). While we unfortunately are told nothing about how being of slave background might have shaped the Shaykh’s experience or his influence in the ‘Islamization’ of Mombasa, clearly the Malawian Shaykh had, like Nana Asma’u, responded as a woman to the needs of potential female converts. Where the latter
had attempted, with the ‘Sokoto model’, to use vernacular language and local forms of
poetry to compete with traditional belief practices like bori, the former incorporated such
practices as dhiker (religious recitations of the names of ‘God’ that lead to a trance-like
condition; tied to mysticism not orthodox practices) into an Islam women would be
attracted to (one with collective ceremonies, dancing not unlike bori custom, and symbols
like banners). What is significant about these two cases is the fact that each Shaykh – one
a slave, one a woman – was an integral part of the larger process of Islamization taking
place in their respective regions. They, their practices, the experiences of those who
followed them, have to be incorporated into the ‘model’ we use. Either that -- or the
model has to be reshaped such that they can be fully embraced.

Such a path is more easily identified than followed, it would appear, given the
strength of current gender and class readings of the evidence. In the final section of the
book (disappointingly entitled ‘General Themes’), there is no chapter exploring the
‘theme’ of class -- or more specifically slaves -- and Islam. There is, however, a brief
but highly impressive contribution dealing with ‘Muslim women’ by Roberta Ann Dunbar
(373-96). In light of the discussion above, I would argue that it constitutes one of the most
important points of departure in Islam in Africa. In terms of content, it fleshes out much
of the material I have teased from Robinson, Sperling and Alpers above; essentially it
adds many more women and their activities to the Levzion-Pouwels ‘model’. But it
stands out precisely because it argues that simply adding more women to the equation is
not enough. Dunbar concludes that:

“… The relationship between religion and other aspects of their life [Muslim women in
sub-Saharan Africa] is complex. It is shaped by contextual elements of ideology, social
structure and political economy, on the one hand and by women’s strategies on the other.
…Differences of demography, underlying social structures, the age of Islam and colonial
history account for regional differences in women’s experience of Islam to a greater
degree than particular features of Muslim ideology. That does not mean, however, that
ideology lacks importance… This is particularly visible in the domain of law and the
state…. Family law often lies at the frontier of … debates [between Islamic and secular
law/authority] because it touches people close to home. The status of women more than
that of men is linked to family law because of their centrality to the biological and cultural
reproduction of the system. …

… While the processes of these developments require further study, these features
characterize Islam and Muslim women. If the exercise of condensing such rich and varied
experience into so few pages has any merit, it is to broaden our conceptualization of Islam
as well as to embrace our understanding of the condition of Muslim women.” (412,3;
emphasis in original)

We must ‘use Muslim women’s lived experiences of Islam to influence our
conceptualization of Islam’ – this is essentially the challenge Dunbar issues to readers and
to the ‘model’ the editors currently offer up. In the remainder of this paper, I would like to
engage with that challenge, expanding it to embrace both women and slaves along the
lines suggested to us by Robinson’s, Sperling’s and Alpers’ chapters. I have chosen to
draw on the experiences of three Muslim women living, respectively, in North, West and
East Africa during the 20th century; they represent, between them, lives of both freedom
and slavery. The stories are not new – indeed Baba, Bi Kaje and Fatma are probably
familiar to most readers interested in Muslim African women and/or slaves. However, their lived experiences as recounted in the published versions of their lives have yet to be interrogated in terms of what it meant to be Muslim from their gender and class perspectives. And in turn, how these perspectives might help us reshape our own with respect to understanding ‘lived Islam’. The material teased out of *Islam in Africa* (above) drew primarily on the late 18th and 19th centuries; the lives of Baba, Bi Kaje and Fatma move us into the colonial era and beyond – an evolution of the processes and practices discussed above. These explorations are preliminary and tentative but hopefully they will succeed in ‘engaging with the legacy’ of Nehemia Levtzion in a way that will stimulate further discussion and further debate.

**III. Lives of Women, Lives of Slaves: ‘lived experiences of Islam’**

**A. “Baba of Karo” (1877-1951, ‘Woman of the Muslim Hausa’, Northern Nigeria)**

To understand Islam as Baba appears to have lived it is to understand her experience as wife, co-wife, mother and slave owner on a daily basis. Islam seems to have impinged upon her reality primarily in terms of prayer – not because she prayed (she actually never mentions herself or other women praying), but because prayers ordered daily routine and work. Her account of her own life, ceremonies and rituals, her husband and/or the household slaves, is repeatedly ordered with reference to prayers: what is done before them, between them, after them; how women’s and slaves’ labour was organized in terms of different prayers; how children’s studying of the Quran was similarly scheduled (120, 131-4). When she was married to an Islamic teacher (‘alim’ or *malam* in Hausaland), Islam also marked the seasons. After the harvest was in, she traveled with her husband and a group of young students (*talibe*) for several months, staying in different towns while he both taught and learned. She did little or no work during this time, visiting with the women in the families with whom they stayed, living largely on the alms given to her husband (131-4). Other than this, she was secluded during her adult life and her concerns were largely those of food (and organizing the labour to make sure it was prepared) and rituals like marriage, divorce and childbirth. In her world, the most important aspect governed by Islam seems to have been *iddah* – the period of time a woman had to remain celibate and secluded after divorcing and before remarrying. This Islamic requirement (that was meant to ensure the divorcee was not pregnant) played a huge role in Baba’s life because she spent so much time involved in facilitating marriages and divorces; in a society where multiple marriages in one’s lifetime was the norm, it clearly was an important part of all women’s lives, determining where and how they would live for much of them (25, 48, 111, 130, 152-3, 167, 171, 179, 259-ft.3, 270-ft.21). Islamic judges (*qadis*) also intruded upon her reality primarily in terms of the decisions they made regarding the divorces of Baba’s friends and relations – if these respected legal voices had another role in society, one would never know it from Baba’s account (eg.107-8,165, 170-182 *passim*)! It is interesting, however, that while Baba mentioned covering her face and head while traveling (so that she could peek out but no one could see her), it was only because it was so rare that she spoke of it -- when secluded, this was not an issue (132). Nor did she seem to link being veiled or secluded to her religion. In fact, she noted that some men secluded their wives and others did not (within the same neighbourhood). She seemed to associate seclusion more with being urban than anything else, noting that ‘in Kano’ men secluded their wives with nice food
and lovely clothes but did not permit visits outside even with their kinfolk (a particularly ‘bad’ thing in her view, not true of seclusion in her area) (80). And in recounting that one of her husbands had paid boys to fetch firewood and water for her and her co-wife until, when he fell ill they were no longer confined to the compound and went out to fetch wood and water themselves, she suggested indirectly that seclusion was also an issue of status and labour availability (210,11). 33

Consciousness of ‘being Muslim’ was most prevalent when she spoke about slaves. On one occasion she commented to her interviewer, Mary Smith, that if a slave had four wives, he was probably Muslim; she mentioned that masters freed slaves in order to be rewarded: “It is like giving alms”, she said. “But if masters of slaves do not attend to religion, they did not do it [manumit] at all” (40). Slaves were inherited like all other property – her story is peppered with mentions of how a man would inherit two slaves, a woman one. She pointed out to Smith that the important process of dividing up slaves was according to Islamic law but slaves could not, themselves, inherit (39-40, 75, 119). This aspect of ‘being Muslim’ was central to her reality and to women in general, because of the important role that slaves played in their lives. Baba emphasized in particular how children born to family slaves were ‘freed’ after their Islamic naming ceremony and considered ‘kin’. By this she did not mean ‘free’ but rather ‘special’ with rights that purchased slaves did not enjoy. “We took part in one another’s ceremonies, there was ‘Kinship’ (40)… If we had a ceremony, they all brought things to give us; if they had one we all took things to them…(42). 34 She did speak of slaves who were fully freed, for example the one she had been given. The process of ‘adoption’ was an Islamic one with malams and sacrifices and prayers involved. The slave was given a new name (a ‘free Muslim’ name – in this case ‘Allah the Remedy’ became ‘Usuman’) and became his former master’s son. He, in turn, gave his new ‘son’ to Baba to be her child (she was infertile), “just as if I had born him” (122). 35 Issues of birth and children were intricately linked to Allah and his name was invoked on many occasions to assure conception and successful deliverance of children (eg. 124, 142, 145). Again, Baba’s personal situation as an infertile woman underscores even more strongly in what ways Islam was central to life: it brought children or created them from slaves. Children of slaves married to each other were considered Muslim, regardless of the faith of their parents, and were given a name at the seventh-day naming ceremony (40, 257-Ft.6). Frequently slaves had what Baba called ‘double names’ – most seem to have in some fashion invoked ‘Allah’ or Islam: “Gift of Allah”, ‘Wealth belongs to Allah’, ‘May Allah prolong our father’s life’ or, as in Usuman’s case “Allah the Remedy” (50). 36 It was their master’s religious duty to see that they were brought up Muslim (257-Ft.6). 37

There are three particularly interesting elements in Baba’s life history that reflect upon more orthodox views of ‘women and Islam’. First, there is the degree to which the presence of the British seems to have had no impact on how Baba lived or experienced Islam. Even in connection with slavery, she argues that most slaves (and certainly most of their slaves) ‘continued to live as before’ (67, 128); 38 they in turn, continued to treat their slaves as before. Nothing in her account suggests that the rituals involved in the childbirth, marriage or freeing of slaves changed – even when slaves were in principle ‘freed’ in law. She gave no indication of being aware that the British in anyway interfered with Islamic law or its practice by qadis. Other than providing peace so that she and her husband could travel on their annual teaching circuit, and putting an end to kidnappings in
which anyone could be taken for purposes of being ransomed back, from her perspective, the British had no impact whatsoever on life in Northern Nigeria.  

Second is the degree to which Islam did not provide a sense of common identity with the other Muslim group in the area, the Fulani, even in the context of British (Christian) colonial Nigeria. She very strongly and clearly differentiated herself, her family and her ‘people’ from the ‘cattle Fulani’. Indeed, from her account it would be difficult to know that they were Muslim, let alone the ‘orthodox’ group who had carried out the jihad of Shaykh Uthman dan Fodio in the early nineteenth century. She portrayed them, literally, as ‘having no humanity’ because they did not pass children around the kin-group in forms of pseudo-adoption as did the Hausa. Fulani ‘have no compassion’; they have ‘no human feelings’, they ‘are not good people. They care only for themselves and their own children. According to Baba, only when they married Hausa women did they begin to adopt and ‘become better people’ (127,8). The only ‘interaction’ she recognized was the selling of grain to them as they passed during the season in which they pastured cattle in the region (119). Intermarriage, while it did occur, was rare and frowned upon (146).

And lastly, there was the integration of bori (spirit possession) and ‘charms’ into her experience of Islam. While she noted that the men did not like to have bori practiced in their hamlet (43) and that chiefs publicly objected to it, she just as often talked about the presence of prostitutes known to be involved in bori coming to the compounds (43, 63). A relative of hers was even welcomed back as a wife after spending years in the city in a ‘bori brothel’ (135). She also recounted how bori spirits (one, somewhat surprisingly, a Muslim named Malam al-haji) were involved in the creation of their new village and how expert bori dancers had been called upon by the Chief to help generate an active market (219-21). “[The Chief] likes bori but only in private, because he is afraid….All of the rulers like the bori – if they didn’t, would their work be any good? Of course they all agree with them…” (222). She went on to explain at some length how bori and malams co-existed, in one instance tying the concept to seclusion. “Of course they [chiefs] all agree with them [bori spirits]. So do the malams, secretly. The malams call on the bori in private, in the darkness at night. Everyone wants spirits, kings and noblemen want them, malams and wives shut away in compounds – it is with them that we work in this world, without them would our labour be of any use? The work of the malams is one thing, the work of bori experts is another, each has his own kind of work and they must not be mixed up…” (222).

To some extent this could be viewed as consistent with the orthodox view of ‘bori’ existing as a ‘remnant’ of earlier beliefs -- as contrasted with the reformed Islam Nana Asma’u attempted to teach for example, or as referenced by European observers talking of ‘pagan’ women folk in East Central Africa. But there is a sense here that this is really a shared Islamic reality in which everyone accepted the broad framework and participated at different times in life and in different ways, in its articulation – more along the lines of my interpretation of Sperling’s evidence (above), of living Islam within a ‘traditional’ cultural environment in which women were key ‘mediators’. And in this case, ironically, the ostensibly Islamic practice of seclusion, according to Baba, promoted the clearly non-Islamic invoking of bori. This interpretation tends to be reinforced by Baba’s casual mentioning of ‘charms’ that were used to bring run-away women home (including the above-mentioned relative who had lived in a bori brothel). These were
drawn up by *malam* (in this case, her father and on another occasion, one of her husbands who was also a *malam*) (135-7). There is no question that this particular magic united the sexes and was the base of a particular power men exercised over women, a power greater than any given in law. And it would seem that at least in Baba’s world, it was resorted to frequently. Baba attributed to this power the fact that her relative stayed in seclusion for fifteen years with her father even after she had been on her own for so long ‘in town’.

Another version of this kind of ‘sharing’ of so-called magic concerned the important issue of conception. Baba talked about various ways to prevent pregnancy (including wearing a kola nut around one’s waist (148)); most interesting was ‘writing medicine’ – when a *malam* wrote out a text from the Quran on a slate, washed off the ink and gave it to the woman to drink. Baba implied that only greedy *malams* did this but she also gave the impression that like the use of ‘charms’, this was not uncommon. It was also used to encourage conception. Baba knew this first hand because, in her childless condition, she had tried it. She had also tried drinking *bori* medicine; neither delivered the desired result. She subsumed both failures, equally, to the will of Allah: “you can only have that which Allah gives you – isn’t that so? That’s your destiny” (179). For Baba, this may have been the most important of all internalization of Islam, given the absolute centrality of reproduction to the identity of a Hausa woman – and, as Dunbar reminded us (above), of that biological reproduction to the cultural continuity of society. It also exemplified that sense of a shared set of beliefs between men and women, between *bori* and *mallam* medicine, that marked ‘lived’ Islam⁴¹.

One last observation concerns what seems to be an unusual (if not unique) custom: the marriage of alms. Baba mentions this peculiar marriage in which a woman was given as alms to a *malam* without the usual bride-price payment by the groom’s kin (99,100). On one occasion, her family participated in a marriage ceremony in the morning (wherein the woman was ‘married’ to a representative of the Prophet) only to find out in the evening that the ‘bride’ was being given to them (and that was the way she expressed it -- to ‘them’, the family, not just to her husband) (129). On another occasion, a relative of Baba’s had run away from a marriage of alms and this was seen as a very serious breach of community that reflected badly on the family (151,2). In terms of what it meant to Baba to be Muslim, we see it articulated on every page as she emphasized the centrality of ‘family’ to life and her role in that family. But in her last thoughts recorded with Smith, she spoke of marrying off her adopted daughter. “I should prefer to give her as alms” she said, “I haven’t many children so I should like to give her to a good *malam*, a student but a young man, because maidens don’t like old men; then we should give her as alms. I should be happy… [and] if it is a marriage of alms, our kinsfolk will all help me.” In this wish, we see what being a good Muslim woman meant to Baba, in the context of being Hausa, in the 1940s: Islam as it was being lived and experienced aided women like Baba (as well as those in families poorer than hers) and put issues of family and reproduction at the forefront.

B. “Bi Kaje” (1890-1981/2, Swahili Woman of Mombasa, Kenya)

The account of Bi Kaje’s life in Mombasa is considerably shorter and less revealing than that of Baba’s (Mizra & Strobel, 1-65); however, there are some interesting parallels. She too was Muslim, freeborn and conscious of her ‘superior’ identity, culturally speaking. Whereas Baba expressed that identity in the context of neighbouring
Fulani Muslims, Bi Kaje did so in terms of the origins of Arab settlement on the coast. She claimed descent from the original ‘twelve tribes’ who were responsible for integrating strangers to the land; interestingly she said they had not initially intermarried with ‘foreign Arabs’: “This is not their place. When the Arab came in the past and wanted a wife, he couldn’t marry someone’s daughter from here. If he came, he would be told ‘Who is this person?’ We didn’t want intermarriage with those Arabs. Perhaps he was a slave back home.” (28) However they did marry shurfa, those who claimed direct descent from the prophet. “… those masharifu mix with people from here. We accept them. We can’t refuse the masharifu” (28). With this statement, she was both establishing the key role of women as the agents of coastal integration and linking this process with a ‘pure’ Islam. This was also meant as a repudiation of the recently-arrived Omani Arabs who she considered to be as much outsiders as the earlier strangers of whom she spoke. She insists they did not automatically receive respect (18, 19). Her account of origin also placed marriage at the centre of ‘being a good Muslim’. This association was made explicit in Bi Kaje’s explanation of the intricate kinship relations that defined her life. Moreover, just as Baba’s account illustrated how central maternal relations remained in the practice of marriage, childbirth and divorce, Bi Kaje’s led Strobel to comment on the same phenomenon “despite [the] strong patrilineal bias[es] of Islam” (18). The cultural matrilineality we observed in earlier accounts of this region (and discussed above), seem to have continued in the twentieth century to negotiate successfully the patrilineal world of Islam.

It is also notable that much of Bi Kaje’s identity both as a Muslim and as a woman was tied to slaves and slavery (30-40). She spoke extensively of the slaves in her family, of how they were divided between sons and daughters (although her divisions did not so neatly reflect Islamic inheritance practices as had Baba’s), and of the distinctive status of ‘slaves of the household’ – those born to the family or of ‘mixed’ slave-free marriages rather than those purchased in the market. And she used similar terminology: where Baba spoke of children born of household slaves as being ‘freed’ to the family and as being ‘kin’, Bi Kaje declared directly that they were not slaves. They were mzalia.

“Among us, if a person is an mzalia once or twice [that is, in terms of generations] you treat them like your own child, if you like. … they say: two times an mzalia and their father is a freeborn man. But they keep the slave name because the grandmother was purchased [she is speaking of a particular slave history here]. We say you let them free. You write, “This person is free. He is neither my slave nor anyone else’s. I will not make him serve.” Now you have set him or her free; he or she is a freed slave, an mzalia of the lineage, and is not a person to be ordered about… You seclude her [if a female] like your own child (33).”

While she is not as explicit as Baba in linking this lineage extension to religious conversion, it is understood here in the reference to seclusion. Indeed, she gave the impression that conversion was the definition of ‘freedom’ and that with respect to female slaves, seclusion was the mark of their ‘freed’ status (33). In another section of her account, she addresses ‘becoming Muslim’ more directly.

“A person says, ‘I want to become a Muslim,’ along with his wife. He will convert, he will become a Muslim, he will be taken to the mosque, he prays, he fasts during Ramadan. Now, if he has a child, that child isn’t anyone’s slave. The father isn’t a slave, he has converted. …A person who leaves his religion and follows ours has surpassed us.
In praying, in fasting, he has surpassed those of us who were born into the hand of Islam (29).”

In this account, conversion accomplishes the equivalent of being ‘born into the household’ – it is a direct way to alter both one’s own status and that of one’s children. And again while less explicit than Baba’s statements about masters’ duties regarding the Islamic education of their slaves and slaves’ children, Bi Kaje’s reference to ‘his being taken to the mosque’ implied that this would be undertaken by the master or someone appropriate in the family.

Bi Kaje spoke of a very special intersection between being female and being slave in a Muslim household: the concubine. Concubines were not unique to Muslim societies but Islamic law regulated the institution. Only slaves could be taken as concubines, sexual relations with a free woman required marriage. And children born to a master by a concubine had to be recognized as free. Generally speaking, the concubine too was freed; in any case, she could not be sold. Concubinage provided social mobility for female slaves and even potential freedom if masters respected the law. In Bi Kaje’s experience ‘cultural custom’ also played a role. She recounted how the woman who had raised her father gave him a farm and two slaves, one of which – Faida – he took as a concubine:

“He secluded her; she did not have to go out. …She had a child, but it died. So, she lived with my father and when the child died, Faida had no work. My father didn’t live with her anymore. By our custom, if you make a person a concubine and then want to let her go, you should marry her off. You look for another husband and marry her off. If she is not married because you, her master, didn’t find a husband for her, if she stays unmarried and then gets another man, if she gets pregnant and delivers a child, it must be yours. My father said, “I made her a concubine, she had a child. When she delivered, the child died.” My father didn’t want her again. She built a house for herself and lived there…. Then my father found a person named Msengesi, a slave of people from Zanzibar. He returned and married Faida. They stayed here in town. He didn’t build a house; they rented other people’s houses and lived in them. She had no children (32).”

Because Faida’s child died, her contribution to Bi Kaje’s family was largely that of any other female slave. Had the child lived, she would have both biologically and culturally contributed to the family lineage. But that did not negate her status -- umm al-walid – mother of the child; she could not be sold. Being Muslim and being a concubine bought her a life she would otherwise have been unable to access; her reality also became a part of Bi Kaje’s experience and family life.

Bi Kaje, like Baba, emphasized the ongoing relations one expected between former female slaves and the household. For example, Faida, although living in her own house was expected to assist at family ceremonies: “If there was something happening at the main house, naturally she would come. If there was a wedding, she would come. When it was over she would return home. If there was a funeral, she would come and sit through the funeral with everyone else. When it was over, everyone would go home”(32). Then there was her aunt’s cook who although freed, continued to live in the same house as her former mistress and attend to her needs until she died. After this, the freed slave lived out her days in a house with Faida, reflecting the way in which the concept of an
‘extended family’ in this case had been internalized not just by means of master-slave relations but laterally, through the ‘slave-slave’ kinship that ‘family’ provided (32-5).

Echoing Baba, she linked freeing slaves inextricably to Islam. She recounted the story of a woman who had been freed by the British rather than her mistress – a secular, rather than a religious manumission. The woman then went to market and sold palm wine; when told that this was contrary to Islam, she stopped. In the end, she sold all she had accumulated to build a mosque. Unfortunately, she did not have enough to complete the building but later it was finished by others and named after her. The inference here is that in spite of the slave’s considerable personal commitment to Islam, being ‘on her own’, away from her Muslim family, she simply did not know enough. And most importantly, because she had not been properly emancipated, she could not succeed ‘properly’ as a Muslim woman (37,8).

Even Bi Kaje’s account of seclusion involved slaves: she recounted that the contemporary ‘buibui’ (outer gown worn by women) is a recent phenomena and that when she was a child and young woman, women went out together with a tarpaulin-like cover that slaves carried. They walked, literally, in a sort of moving room that took their secluded part of the house into the street. Then a version of it that covered a single person, the buibui was developed; this required neither company nor slaves (46) – presumably, a reference to the ending of slavery under British colonial rule and a subsequent shortage of personal servants. She also noted the issue of labour, as had Baba, when recounting differences between urban and rural practices. She noted that for those living on farms where water was some distance away, married women who did not have anyone to fetch it for them, would go out themselves – covered, of course (47). On the other hand, she seems to have articulated a stronger association between seclusion and Islam than did Baba -- and ultimately, between seclusion and prestige. For her, having been very strictly secluded was clearly a status symbol and her only regret seemed to be that women in contemporary Mombassa are at a disadvantage when they suddenly find they have to use the shops and they are uneducated in that respect. But she did not seem to regret her own situation (46-9).

One other point of interest with respect to the issue of ‘lived Islam’ was Bi Kaje’s extensive account of New Year’s Day rituals. They involved sacrifices on the ocean shore in order to assure prosperity to the community. The ritual involved walking a cow around town while reciting prayers from the Quran, then sacrificing the cow on the beach where meat would be distributed and eaten. It was important that the meat did not come back into the city. Bi Kaje feared that ‘now’ that people take meat back home, this was going to bring an epidemic on the town: what was not eaten was supposed to be disposed of into the water to eliminate ritual pollution and sickness (45,6). This is a striking example of a shared ‘un-orthodox’ Muslim ceremony that united both men and women, cultural tradition and Islam, but that was also distinctly urban.

Bi Kaje and Baba clearly experienced similar satisfaction in their role as marriage facilitators and the former’s stories of marriages and the role of the local shaykh in overseeing divorce are comparable to Baba’s (50-5). So too are accounts of the rituals involved in childbirth and in ‘adoption’ – the sharing of children among kin-folk (57,8). However, formal Quranic education appears to have been more important to Bi Kaje than Baba. While Baba noted that sometimes girls were educated at Quranic schools, she also said that sometimes even boys were not; it was not a central issue for her, perhaps
because in the end, she came to live for many years with a *malam* and associated Islamic learning with the ‘informal’ (largely hidden) seasonal and household instruction her husband provided. Bi Kaje clearly valued education but in a different way. She noted that girls were taught at home by other women -- another example of ‘private Islam’ -- but saw the denial of ‘school’ as an attempt to keep her from writing to men (43) -- an interesting link between gender relations and Islamic education!

C. “Fatma Barka” (1900/10-1994, Malian Slave, Goulimine, Southern Morocco)

Finally, let us turn to the story of Fatma. Why I want to draw upon an analysis that has been extensively developed elsewhere (McDougall, 1998) is to explore the class aspect of this topic of women’s lived experiences of Islam. Fatma was a slave for a large part of her life, then she was a ‘freed slave’ until her death. Both Baba and Bi Kaje spoke extensively of slaves and of how they were governed by the same Islamic rules as free people; nevertheless, they noted a range of ‘exceptions’ that continued to affirm slave status. Fatma allows us to see these similarities and differences from the slave’s point of view. Explicit references to religion in Fatma’s story are rare. Other than making a reference to ‘her’ Shaykh on one occasion in her account and her decision not to look a picture of herself she had given me permission to take because ‘it was against her religion’, Fatma’s faith was not evident in her interviews.51 And yet the fact that she was a female Muslim slave in a Muslim society shaped so much of her life. Probably the most significant way was also the least visible in her story -- namely the fact that she was at some time a concubine to her master. This I learned only after her death but it helped put several pieces of her story into context. First, she told of having arrived from Mali with her master’s family in Goulimine – in fact she repeated this story of crossing the Sahara in a camel caravan from Timbuktu on two occasions, almost as a kind of performance. On each occasion, at one point or another, she repeated that she was not Mohamed Barka’s daughter, that he had bought her in Mali and that she was his ‘servant’ (296). Initially I missed the significance of this – only when put together with the information about her relationship with her master did this make sense. It was important that her slave status was publicly recognized because only as a slave could she legitimately have been, within Islamic law, a concubine. And this was important to her – she considered herself a good Muslim (300).

Looking closely at Fatma’s account, in which so much of her total identity was developed in terms of her relationship to her ‘family’ – that is, the extended family of her master Mohamed Barka --we can see several instances where her presentation of her master as a ‘good Muslim’ was also about herself. In recounting their arrival in Goulimine, she reiterated that Barka’s wealth came as a reward for his faith, not as a consequence of a materialistic marriage (296,7). She also noted that he had freed a household slave, Messoud, in recognition for an act of bravery; this was an especially highly-regarded pious act for a Muslim to undertake (300,1). Perhaps the instance that resonates most with Baba’s and Bi Kaje’s accounts has to do with inheritance. Upon his deathbed, Barka had instructed his children not to treat ‘Faytma’ (his name for her) as inheritable property. As a slave, she was legally exactly that, property, but as it happens she had not had a child with him. He had gone on to articulate this unusual request -- in effect, a request to free her-- in Islamic terms: he had said “*she is your Mother*”. Again, this phrase makes no sense on its own but taken in the context of religion, it acquires
significance (288, 301). In the metaphors Fatma used to present her former master to us, she was adopting important symbols of who she was as well. She was revealing to us -- albeit obliquely -- something of the Muslim slave culture, which had been a part of her reality over time and by which she defined her own religiosity.

In closing this discussion of Fatma, it is worth noting that in her descriptions of her relations with the Barka family – her continuing participation as cook for family celebrations, her assistance when family members were ill, and the family’s involvement (including assistance by Messoud) in the marriage of her son (289, 301,2) – she echoes almost eerily both Baba’s and Bi Kaje’s descriptions of the slave women in their families. In addition to the repeated emphasis on ‘kin’ underlying her discourse, the centrality of food and food preparation to defining these relations is striking. Where Baba frequently referenced ‘gifts’ of food moving between the free and slave communities to characterize relations between what were essentially fictive kin, both Bi Kaje and Fatma tied female slaves to masters and mistresses through the process of cooking. For the former, family pride was expressed in the *mzalia* extensions to the lineage; for the latter similar pride was derived from being incorporated in such an extended family. Fatma articulated both the pride and the status in her testimony that: “I am the mother of a very large tribe.”

While one might argue that this was simply a function of slave society, I am inclined to interpret this more in terms of the specific set of relationships Muslims incorporate into the concept of ‘family.’

The year before she died, she applied for and received her first *carte d’identité*. It stated that she was born in Goulimine. Clearly, this was not a biological birth but a familial one: in Goulimine she became ‘Faytma’, concubine of Barka. And over the years, as members of Barka’s ‘biological’ family died, she became the embodiment of Barka’s memory and it, in turn, enshrined her own identity. So, this was the name she chose for her *carte* ‘Fayma Barka’ (305). In contrast to the unfortunate freed slave in Bi Kaje’s story, Fatma was ‘properly’ emancipated (freed some years after Barka’s death by his son), and lived a ‘proper’ life as a good Muslim; in so doing, she took her place in the Barka lineage and flourished in the reflection of her ‘good Muslim master’ of so many years ago.

**IV. Conclusion**

In *Islam in Africa* Levitzion and Pouwels set out to establish a ‘continent wide’ approach, a model to understanding the process and progress of Islamization in Africa. As developed in the Introduction, it was an approach that by and large attributed agency to free, middle-and-upper-class men and measured progress by their activities. Yet, there were hints of the voices of others – women, for example, and slaves. And when we pursued these voices in some of subsequent chapters, they became sufficiently loud as to suggest there might be some dynamics at play not yet ‘accounted for’ in the model. Robinson expanded upon the editors’ attention to the role of vernacular language in the process of conversion and the emergence of ‘rural Islam’ by drawing our attention to the fact that many (if not most) of these converts were women and slaves, and that women were often the teachers and mediators between literate written (Arabic) Islam and illiterate oral vernacular Islam. Sperling and Alpers located women and slaves among the main converts in hinterland and interior East Central Africa; they clearly identified marriage as a key ‘process’ in conversion, and located Islamic teaching and learning among women, children and slaves in the household and village. They also spoke directly
to the issue of the co-existence of so-called ‘traditional’ and ‘Islamic’ beliefs within those households and villages – implying that ‘mediation’ and ‘negotiation’ underlay this co-existence but stopping short of suggesting that women within the household were the primary agents undertaking it. Finally, from the only thematic chapter to focus on women, we drew on Dunbar’s conclusion (buttressed by reference to Wright’s trailblazing 1970s work) that we need to understand women’s experiences of ‘being Muslim’ not only to learn more about women per se – but to learn more about Islam.

The stories of Baba, Bi Kaje and Fatma took us into their households and allowed us to see how lived experiences of being female or being slave (or being both) may have shaped being Muslim. These stories are twentieth century ones, but in their detail and their voices, they resonate with the glimpses our historical sources left of earlier times. For them, being Muslim was experienced in many ways but almost all were located within the household. Many were very personal, if not intimate in nature: prayer shaped life and work on a daily basis; Allah was invoked in names, in songs, in ceremonies concerned with the essentials of life and death; Islam and Islamic practices were central to the identity of slaves born to the household and especially to female slaves taken as concubines; malams and qadis were called upon to shape marital relations – either by the power of law or ‘charms’. Seclusion emerged as a more complex factor, being on the one hand (somewhat ironically), a ‘public’ marker of being Muslim but on the other, a combined reflection of class and location (rural-urban). The reason for secluding was clearly rooted in religious beliefs, the ability to do so limited by other factors. Bi Kaje’s account suggested one more nuance – seclusion as distinguishing between slave and mzalia. Even veiling (‘seclusion in public’ as the story of the buibui illustrates so well) was imbued with Muslim modesty, cultural custom and frequently, class sensitivity. Finally, these stories echoed each other in emphasizing the shared sense of ‘kinship’ that Islam facilitated between free, freed and slave household members – Baba and Bi Kaje used Islamic ritual and ceremony to ‘extend’ their families, Fatma used her position in such a family to acquire an identity as a proper Muslim woman.

In what ways, however, do these ‘lived experiences’ speak back to Levtzion and Pouwel’s approach to ‘Islamization’ and to Dunbar’s plea that we allow women’s experiences help us to re-conceptualize Islam in Africa? First, I would argue, they help us move beyond the dichotomy of ‘traditional/pre-Islamic versus modern/Islamic’ that underpins notions of ‘rural and urban’ and ‘public and private’ Islam, and more towards the ‘complementarity’ and ‘permeability’ emphasized in work on identity (Askew, 73). And contrary to what arguing for a ‘women’s perspective’ might suggest, these stories also challenge in subtle ways the assumption that in Muslim African societies women’s and men’s worlds were completely separate. Certainly age and class cross-cut such divisions but Baba in particular gave the impression that those worlds intersected more often than one might expect. Looking at life from within the household we can see both custom and culture providing an architecture for ‘being Muslim’ that is quite distinct from that which governs life at the mosque or the Quranic school. Unlike the latter, which tended to be the domain of men, the household embraced both men and women, albeit in clearly defined roles. Studies that have attempted to explain this complexity in terms of men’s and women’s Islam, or as in the East African context as ‘African women, Islamic men’ have not moved much beyond the early-twentieth century observer we met above who saw Muslim men going to prayer and so-called pagan women staying home.
Moreover, they miss three dynamics that are central to the practice and experience of Islam that are only evident within the household: marriage, childrearing and ‘family’ slavery. As we saw in more general terms in Sperling and Alpers’ chapters, marriage was a key factor to converting women of non-Muslim backgrounds but simultaneously, those marriages were also uniting different cultural traditions and in East Central Africa (as well as early on in much of Sahelian and Saharan West Africa (McDougall 2004)), uniting matrilineal with patrilineal custom. Within these marriages -- Muslim by law and religion, culturally tied to women’s locality and ethnic identity -- children, boys and girls, were raised Muslim. Women usually taught young children, then boys turned to clerics and schools (where they existed) while girls continued to be educated in the household. Bi Kaje’s story as a Swahili woman is a wonderful illustration of all of these issues.

Lastly, there were the household slaves who, through Islamic practices like concubinage and naming practices, became ‘kin’ to the lineage. Bi Kaje’s story emphasizes a fairly well-defined family that had been formed by incorporating concubines, adoptees and mzalia -- surprisingly similar to the one Fatma lived in so very far away in Morocco. Baba seemed to extend the concept of ‘household’ even further to include whole slave villages descended from the Hausa equivalent of mzalia; nevertheless they were ‘personalized’ through her immediate family’s on-going involvement in arranging marriages and adopting children. This kind of slavery, often called ‘Islamic slavery’ in the literature, is usually studied in isolation from Islam – that is, these stories, these slave narratives, are well known in discussions of the history of slavery. But, as is evidenced in the Levtzion and Pouwels volume, they are not seen as part of the history of Islam. Alpers asked if marriage in matrilineal societies ‘ought to be considered as part of a pattern of Islamic conversion’. I argued in the affirmative above; here, I would suggest in addition that perhaps why the process was so successful over the long term was because of the way in which Muslim slaves (converts, adoptees, concubines or mzalia) became incorporated into the larger lineages. Not only were they and their progeny extending the family – including its labour and reproductive resources -- they were extending and shaping the practice of Islam in ways special to their slave and gender status.

The household, if understood in this dynamic multi-status, multi-generational, multi-cultural, ‘gendered’ way, can provide a conceptual framework for understanding the practices, processes and patterns of ‘Islamization’ as they were experienced by others than the traders, clerics and chiefs. Or, one might also argue that these leading figures of society also ‘lived Islam’ next to their mothers, wives, sisters and slaves and were themselves, at least at times, part of this household ‘world of Islam’. Without denying the importance of recognizing the agents and activities privileged in most studies of the history of Islam in Africa – the Levtzion and Pouwels volume included and now certainly considered the ‘seminal’ work on the subject, this preliminary exploration of ‘others’ usually seen as marginal to the process of Islamization, notably women and slaves, is intended to expand the parameters of that process. It argues that women and slaves were not only ‘recipients’ of Islam but agents of conversion as the religion rooted itself in Africa. In their households, they shaped how Islam was lived by all around them. And instead of only looking at the history of more public activities, if we address attention to the household and its changing nature over time, perhaps we will see a different face of Islam and Islamization emerging.
Notes

1 It reflects his earliest publications on Islam in West Africa’s Volta Region (1968), through his penning of the seminal Ancient Ghana and Mali (1973; reprint 1980) in which he explored state growth, through his co-editorship of the invaluable Corpus (1981; reprint 2000) that made selected, excerpted Arabic texts available to non-Arabophones, to his numerous conference-based edited works on a range of specific issues including ‘rural and urban Islam’ (1986) and ‘Renewal and Reform’ (1987). [For full references to these works, see Levtzion’s CV republished in this volume].

2 Introduction title: “Patterns of Islamization and Varieties of Religious Experience Among Muslims of Africa” (1-20).

3 Topics of ‘Progress’ and ‘conversion’ in context of ‘North and West Africa’, then ‘Horn and Sub-Saharan Africa’ are central to Introduction (especially 2-8); chapters following are organized according to geographical region (with the exception of ‘Themes’, grouped together at the end.).

4 Or put another way, had continued to embrace an “accommodation of Islam with traditional religions”. The Fulani jihad of Uthman dan Fodio in Northern Nigeria was justified in these terms (10); the continued persistence of “pre-Islamic elements” in Bornu also legitimized extending the jihad against this ostensibly Muslim neighbour (5).

5 See chapters on East and Central Africa (David Sperling , Edward Alpers) in which matrilineal societies are addressed. For Alpers, Islam’s patrilineality is so central that he questions whether marriages to women of matrilineal societies “ought [even] to be considered as part of a pattern of Islamic conversion” (306), a point to which I will return, below. Kelly Askew (1999) notes that the association of Islam with patriarchy and ‘male domination of women’ has distorted the writing of Swahili Coast history (67-70).

6 This characterization underscores the dichotomy between the ‘rural, Arabic illiterate countryside’ and the ‘urban, commercial, educated’ communities (7).

7 Or to say it another way, had continued to embrace an “accommodation of Islam with traditional religions”. The Fulani jihad of Uthman dan Fodio in Northern Nigeria was justified in these terms (10); the continued persistence of “pre-Islamic elements” in Bornu also legitimized extending the jihad against this ostensibly Muslim neighbour (5).

8 Roberta Ann Dunbar contributed “Sufism and Muslim Women in Africa: An Opportunity to Shape the Public Sphere?” to the original ASA memorial panels, in which Nana Asma’u’s contributions were highlighted; regrettably, family circumstances prevented Dunbar from preparing that paper for publication in this volume.

9 Robinson cites additional information on Futa Jalon literature (Ft.21, p.145). This realization is not in itself so revolutionary (eg. Jean Boyd’s The Caliph’s Siste, 1989). What is noteworthy is that this analysis has not in any significant way influenced the ‘vision’ presented to readers in the introduction.

10 This observation is repeated later in the article (290,1).

11 A not insignificant change in Levtzion and Pouwels rendering of this statement substituted ‘other employees of the merchants’ for ‘slaves’ (compare 7 and 289).

12 Segeju are linguistically Mijikenda but considered culturally distinct (Eastmann 1988, 7; on the Mijikenda in general, see Willis 1993).

13 The Digo were also Mijikenda, one of the original ‘nine groups’ (Askew 71).

14 These observations invoke a larger discussion about women, gender, culture and religion given definition by Carl Eastmann (1988). She addressed Strobel’s earlier argument (1983) that women (mostly of slave origin) tended to assimilate into coastal Swahili culture, including Islam, and that thereafter, their children were similarly acculturated. Eastmann argued that the opposite was equally as likely, that what developed were gender-specific cultural and religious ‘worlds’. With reference to the Digo, the female slaves, noted as being particularly numerous among Digo (Mijikenda) in the 19th century (for example) maintained their culture and, in keeping with comments by contemporary observers, their religion. She goes on to hypothesize that this ‘gender defined world’ was a dichotomous one in which Muslim men raised Muslim boy children in an Islamized Swahili culture, while ‘African’ (non-Muslim) women raised African girl children in a non-Muslim African culture. Sperling’s comments (above) raise questions about this interpretation. Patricia Romero’s life history of Mama Khadija (1988, drawn on for purposes of comparison in the ‘life histories’ section below) also support an ‘accommodation’ model, commenting that among Lamu household slaves, practice was to follow the example of the master’s family. Yet Khadija did maintain ‘traditional African’ culture as a healer and mid-wife, and attempted (in a rare situation) to bring the Swahili ‘aristocracy’ into that African world (154-60). The direct challenge is Kelly Askew’s work on
music and dance. She questions this historically-gendered analyses (1999) and attributes the widespread acceptance of gender dualism to the equally widespread assumption that Muslim-rooted patriarchy and patrilineality had shaped culture. “Because a vaguely conceived Islam is the perceived cause for gender segregation, and because the coast has been predominantly Islamic for more than seven centuries”, she states, “the conclusion that pervades Swahili studies is that gender segregation has been around a very long time (91)”. She argues that the ‘duality’ of contemporary Swahili society is recent.

Both she and Eastmann take ‘Islam’ as a given, Askew’s nod to a “vaguely conceived” ideology notwithstanding. It is worth noting that Strobel’s argument is not as clear-cut as Eastmann suggested. Strobel allowed that household domestics might have adopted freeborn culture in order to signify a ‘class’ difference between themselves and slaves more removed from the house who retained a more traditional, ‘africanized’ lifestyle. This was not an ‘either-or’ situation. Most recently linguist Katrin Bromber’s preliminary work with terminology used for female slaves underscores a lack of dichotomy between expected categories like ‘noble/slave’, ‘master/slave’, ‘mistress/female slave’ that she attributes to the transitional situation in which household slaves found themselves as they sought to disassociate with ‘uncivilized’ traditions and adopt ‘civilized’ Swahili culture. The ‘dichotomy’ was expressed in cultural, not gender or class terms (115,6).

The question of how patrilineal or matrilineal the ‘Swahili’ were remains debated and debatable (eg. Askew 86-88).

To judge one’s innocence in the Mozambique hinterland, one was to eat an uncooked ball of rice in which was written a phrase from the Qur’an – without vomiting (307)!

Sperling recounts the story of slave-trader Tippu Tib: he was able to pass himself off as the son of a ‘long lost’ daughter of an important chief; drawing on the matrilineal inheritance practices of that society, he laid claim to all the ivory that would normally have been brought to the chief (290). Elsewhere, I have draw attention to the role of matrilineality in shaping how Islam came to be both embraced and practiced during an era even earlier than the one this evidence references (McDougall 2004).

In particular in his discussion of the Islamic conversion of slaves (279-81).

Another reference to this ‘hidden’ education: Romero’s Khadija. As a freed-slave child, she learned the Qur’an from visitors to the house and most particularly, her sister (144).

I include here the Swahili who appear, at least in earlier centuries, to have been largely matrilineal (McDougall 200; Askew 1997).

In the context of Tippu Tib: “some Manyema made their way to Tabora and Ujiji – more often than not as slaves, and became Muslim” (290).

Children learned to read and write in Arabic, as well as “a little medicine” (309).

Shaykh Mbarak bin Ali al-Hinawi.

Shaykh Mtemwe bint Ali bin Yusuf.

There are eight contributions, covering such ‘themes’ as art, literature, music, education and law (curiously, Sufism is also relegated to this section). They constitute one third of the book but are under reflected in the Introduction.

This is surprising given the ‘growth’ in studies of this particular intersection by the mid 1980s and into the 1990s. Fred Cooper’s Plantation Slavery on the East African Coast delineated a framework for studying ‘slaves and Islam’ in 1977, followed by his “Islam and Cultural Hegemony: the ideology of Islamic slave owners on the East African Coast” (Paul E Lovejoy’s influential The Ideology of Slavery, 1981). Lovejoy’s work on slavery in the Sokoto Caliphate (especially attention to Islamic concubinage and slavery, 1988, 1996) focused attention on this area of study. Joseph Miller’s ‘world bibliography’ of slavery carved a niche for ‘Muslim slavery’ in 1985, updated in 1993; (see especially ‘Muslim Slavery and Slaving’ in Elizabeth Savage, 1992). John R Willis’ two-volume collection Slaves and Slavery in Muslim Africa also appeared in 1985. By the mid-1990s, studies of Islam, slaves and slavery were central to the field of Islam in Africa.

Vidrovitch’s overview of ‘women, marriage and slavery’ and Bi Kaji’s life history is drawn upon by Bromber to flesh-out literary terminology with life experience (both 2007).

This approach echoes Marcia Wright’s innovative work in the 1970s, in which she sought to understand slavery through the experiences of the most vulnerable – the women. In the 1993 collection that brought together much of that work, Strategies of slaves and women, a 1975 essay is reprinted that argues for an erasure of the ‘boundaries’ historians usually impose between slave and free. It draws attention to the importance of gender in determining the strategies open to slaves in making their own world. Manipulation of, and insertion into, kinship networks and idioms feature centrally in her analysis. (For an excellent review of this work and its significance, see Glassman, 1995.)

The exception to this was when she discussed a widow mourning for her late husband – during the 130 days of morning, “you say your prayers and pray for your husband” (211,12).

Romero (1988) comments on the significance of daily prayers in Mama Khadija’s life in relation to the work involved in fetching water for ablutions (146).

This mirrors the required time female slaves remained with their seller before being turned over to a new owner, and for the same reason – to be certain there was no pregnancy in play that could affect the divorce/marriage/sale. Islamic practice shaped by gender in this instance cross-cuts class.

The only other time she mentioned covering the head was in speaking of coming into a household as a new wife. In her second marriage she remained with her head covered for six days – after that, she became a ‘daughter of the house’ and uncovered. A first wife remained covered for seven months because she must become “accustomed to the house”. Head covering was no longer so much a religious as a cultural practice, embedded in customs that were about family, not Islam or gender per se (she did not, for example ‘uncover’ in the presence of other women in the household until she had become its ‘daughter’).

She also mentioned that she and other women had fetched water when the whole village had been moved and water was scarce (188). Her Mother had been a ‘secluded wife’ and, as a child, she had gone to market to trade on her mother’s behalf; that she particularized this information suggests that being secluded (aurem kulle in Hausa) was by no means the norm (55, 259 ft.8)

One would call the first part of the name (eg “Gift…” or “Wealth belongs …”) and the slave answered accordingly “… of Allah” or “… to Allah”.

In her family, when slave boys were seven years old they were taught prayers and sent to Quranic school; sometimes girls went too (43).

Her interpretation of the ending of slavery is revealing. After the British said no master was allowed to call a slave ‘slave’, ‘those who were younger than you became younger brothers, those older became older brothers’. From her perspective, this was an extension of existing custom with respect to the children of house slaves. And according to her, only ‘some slaves’ who had been bought in the market fled; the rest remained in the family (67). Her perspective on the British seems to have been shaped by local malams (learned men) who had said that the Europeans would “stop wars, they would repair the world, they would stop oppression and lawlessness, we should live at peace with them”.

“Before the world was settled, there was no traveling about”, Baba’s reference to the arrival of the British (132). Smith notes that she talked of a time when ‘everyone became free’; as no such law had been passed at the time (c. 1910-11), Smith queries Baba’s meaning. It is likely that the reference to ‘free’ here was the same as above – that is, that slaves were no longer purchased in the market, therefore all slaves became the equals of ‘family-born’ slaves.

One is reminded of Khadija, a mid-wife who also ‘dealt with problems of the spirit world’ for both her own former slave community and her former master’s family (Romero 152). On bori among the Hausa, see the work of Susan O’Brien (eg. 1999, 2001).

It is clear from Baba that most bori adepts were women but yet there were two male dancers in her own family one of whom was her father’s younger brother (and her father was a malam) (63). With respect to malams, she also noted that women went to them to get ‘medicine’ to drive co-wives mad (156). It may be that ‘malams and bori had their own work’ but in terms of women’s domain, it would seem their ‘efforts’
were often aimed towards the same or very similar goals. For an inside view of how Islam and ‘sorcery’
(including spirit possession) can co-exist – indeed, feed each other, see Lambeck, 1993.

42 “[Bi Kaje’s attitude] corrects a view commonly held in the literature of the coast, which was written
during the colonial period and inherited the colonialists’ view of the Omani aristocrats as superior to
Africans. This Arab ascendance in the historiography reflected the rise of the Omani sultanate in Zanzibar
in the nineteenth century, but has been misread backwards into earlier periods” (Mirza and Strobel 19).
[Another example of the ‘error of reading knowledge of the past into the present’ (Askew 69.) Elsewhere I
have observed in similar fashion how the process of Islamization itself ‘coloured’ the very evidence we are
trying to read both in the context of West and East Africa (McDougall 2004). Louise Rolingher adds that
we may also be seeing the view from Mombasa as opposed to that of Zanzibar. “Lamuan (Waamu) and
Mombasan (Watu wa Mvita) Swahili Muslims think/thought of themselves as having a more direct and
“purer” link to Islam than the Omani upstarts (Personal Communication, 2007). For her larger exploration
of gender, Islam and Swahili Identity, see her forthcoming PhD thesis “Edible Identities: Food, Cultural
Mixing and the Making of East African Identities in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries” University of
Alberta, 2008.

43 Strobel comments upon the ‘language’ of kinship that fails to easily differentiate between relationships
and makes explanations confusing when translated (18); Smith also commented upon this issue with
respect to Baba and noted that Baba would only use names when it was clear that Smith was confused!
44 Curiously, Bromber does not mention the term *msalia* either in her discussion of *suria* (concubine) or
*hadimu*, freed slave. Deutsch, on the other hand, devotes a paragraph to their status (132).
45 Or, as we will see below in the case of Faida, of a special status that incorporated elements of both
freedom and slavery. While Faida was ‘free’ to live independently when no longer wanted by her master,
and was given the means to build her own house, had she subsequently had a child, it would have belonged
to Bi Kaje’s father who was still legally her master. That she remained his property was underscored by the
fact that he eventually ‘married her off’ (as was his customary obligation); at that point it would seem she
lost the right to the house she had built (property of a slave is the property of his/her master) and spent the
rest of her life living in rented accommodation. However, at least from what we know from Bi Kaje’s
account, even though not formally manumitted, she was not included as inheritable property on the death of
Bi Kaje’s father (33). [More on Faida in the discussion of concubines, below]
46 *Suria* (pl. *Masuria*). See Bromber (116,7; 120,1). She raises questions about the Islamic practice around
*suria*, suggesting it may have been ‘different’ among the Swahili but has no evidence to that effect. (She
links the Ibadite legal system with Zanzibar, implying *masuria* may have been treated differently there; the
Ibadhi influence was introduced in the nineteenth century with the establishment of Sultan Said Sayid’s rule.
It was therefore chronological and class ‘specific’, not geographical – and Ibadis spread well into the
interior during the course of the century). Also see Deutsch (134).
47 The following quotation from Mwinyi Bakari (Van Allen translation, 1981) does raise a question with
respect to Swahili society: “If a freeman marries a slave woman, their child is a slave; but if a free woman
marries a slave man, their child is not a slave, because free birth is matrilineal” (175). According to Islamic
law, a freeman can take a slave woman as concubine but not as ‘wife’ – if married, she must be freed, so it
is difficult to understand exactly what is meant here. Elsewhere, it was rare for a free woman to marry a
slave man but the same distinction pertained – marriage could only take place with a slave partner if the
other was also slave or ex-slave. ‘Ex slave’ is officially ‘free’ but not necessarily regarded as such socially;
perhaps this was the ‘freeman’ Bakari referred to, in which case it is true the child would be ‘slave’ because
the mother still belonged to her master. As for the ‘ex-slave women’ marrying with a slave man and the
reference to matrilineality – it may indeed have been a reflection of a matrilineal society (as Askew infers,
88). Or, it may possibly reflect the ‘norm’ of a child of a slave relationship tracing ‘possession’ back
through the female to the master as articulated in the transitional societal moment Bakari was observing.
The differences between slave, freed slave and ‘free’ appear to have been negotiable to some extent. See
Strobel’s discussion (1983, 119-21); she notes that while a slave woman may not marry her master without
being freed, she can marry another man while still a slave. There is still some ambiguity as to whether this
was true of any free man or only ‘freed men’. Bromber’s discussion of this issue (120,1) confuses several
of these points. She notes the Islamic injunction against marriage between partners of unequal social status,
then suggests it is ignored in cases where a free person was not yet married (and was thus eligible to have
extramarital relations) : free males married female slaves “whom they had to free before marriage” [my
emphasized. Married men were entitled to sexual relations with as many concubines (who, in turn must be slaves) as they wished; the point of freeing them before marriage was just that – no law was ignored, marriage took place between a free man and a ‘freed’ woman. The real question here is the one raised above – the ambiguity between free and freed.

48 If not immediately, then on the death of her master.

49 Bromberg notes that she initially doubted the claims that masuria enjoyed a special ‘higher’ status “as respected figures within the household who upon the birth of a child advanced to highly regarded members of the community”. However, she is now convinced as “the respected status of many of these women has … been confirmed by numerous interviews” (120). [Interviews in Bagamoyo, 2000, 17 in total(114)]

50 Strobel confirms this memory: the tent-like covering carried by slaves was called the ramba or shira (in Swahili). In 1910 it gave way the wearing of the buibui; Strobel also surmises that this was related to the abolition of slavery (1983, 122).

51 The details of how, when and where the interviews took place can be found in McDougall 1998, 305,6, fts. 2,3) She once mentioned Allah in the context of: ‘If you lower your head to God [Allah], he will give you everything you wish’ (298).

52 Fatma’s experiences resonate with Strobel’s observations and analyses of female slaves involved in reproductive labour (broadly defined to include more than biological reproduction) in a Mombassan urban household (1983 – interviews conducted 1992-3, 1975).

53 This in turn derives from the role kinship played in the initial articulation of Islam, as first argued by Fred Cooper in the context of East African Muslim society. He argued that laws and customs were less about Islam per se than about the concept of kinship rooted in Islam (1977 25, 6). In this respect so-called ‘Islamic Slavery’ was no different from lineage-based slavery. Herein lies the intersection with Wright’s analysis (1993 21-45), which also derives from East African narratives. Her accounts deal with slaves who interacted with the newly-established Christian mission communities, rather than the coastal Muslim Swahili ones, for the most part. All retained roots of some depth in ‘non-Christian, African’ society as well. Wright emphasized how these enslaved women drew on kinship idioms to be wives, mothers, sisters and daughters, as well as ‘slaves’. Kinship was not ‘fictive’ in the anthropological sense, but it had specific meanings within each of these different societies. I suspect Wright would privilege class and gender over religious ideology with respect to the operating of kinship as an integrative and protective mechanism. However, similarities seen across three very different cultural and geographical regions (including colonial identity – Fatma’s Morocco being French, Baba’s northern Nigeria and Bi Kaje’s Kenya British) that shared belief in Islam, suggest that some ‘dialogue’ between the perspectives would yield useful results and that Cooper’s observations about Islam and kinship must remain central to any such discussion.

54 Fatma had not been secluded but like many Saharan women in southern Morocco, she wore melhafa – a sari-type veil that totally covers the hair and can be drawn over the face to leave only eyes visible.

55 This ‘discussion’ deserves more attention. IM Lewis takes on the issue critiquing, among others, Ernest Gellner, J Spencer Tringham and H J Fisher; he reiterates the role played by the dichotomy historians set up between the literate, well-informed ulamma of the towns and their illiterate (or semi-literate) country cousins. He argues that “what in a particular cultural context is regularly categorized as ‘pre-Islamic survival’ is in many cases nothing of the sort”. While I remain uncomfortable with his notion of a ‘spectrum’ with orthodox, fundamentalist Islam at one end and “magical maraboutism” at the other, I agree with his point that these cannot be unambiguously be identified with the dichotomies between town and tribe, male and female (140-2; 152-4). Askew’s work engaged with frequently (above) argues similarly, as we have seen, particularly with respect to the ‘dominance’ of gendered worlds and patriarchy (1-4).

However, Eastman’s challenge remains. While arguing for a ‘process’ almost identical to the one I will return to below, she concludes that: “Islam leaves girls and women at home, together, and in seclusion. African practices remain in a position to be maintained, transmitted, transformed and reaffirmed (as dynamic cultural processes) from generation to generation. Boys, in contrast are socialized by their fathers into an Islamic lifestyle and remain relatively isolated from the African cultural influences at play in woemn’s’ groups. Even in marriage, where the dual sub-cultures meet and where it has been thought that Swahili women act in accord with a code of behaviour that is expressive of Islam, Muslim/Arab influences may be more illusory than factual.” (3, my emphasis). In effect, this chapter revisits precisely this point.

56 Eastman contrasts ‘Arab men’ with ‘African women’. But in East/East Central Africa, most Muslim men taking non-Muslim wives were either Swahili (of coastal, not Arab culture per se) or other African converts to Islam (often businessmen). The notion of pure ‘Arab’ as distinct from pure ‘African’ is neither consistent
with the evidence we have from Sperling and Alpers, nor resonant with recent studies on Swahili identity (eg Askew).

57 This recollects Sperling’s description of ‘Islamization’ among the slaves of the Tabori-Ujiji region.
58 For a detailed discussion of ‘productive and reproductive slave labour’ in a Swahili household, see Strobel 1983, especially pages 116-23.
59 As Sperling said, the ‘secular and commercial’; I would add the political. It is striking that once women appeared in the political arena, as occurred frequently during the colonial era, they became part of the discussion of ‘Islamization’ (Levtzion & Pouwels 15). Even Dunbar’s chapter focuses principally on contemporary political activities and speaks of women ‘using’ Islam to gain rights and protect against social/governmental oppression. However, our view of these activities might change if we were able to situate ‘Islamization’ in a context that placed the household at the base (if not the centre) of the analysis. Perhaps women were/are simultaneously engaging with Islam and shaping its practices in different domains of their lives, in the context of different familial and social relations. [eg. food -- obtaining it, preparing it, exchanging it, eating it. The rules and rituals surrounding ‘food’ are rooted both in religion and in the household, as each of the ‘stories’ above reveal; yet I am unaware of studies to date that have attempted to explore Muslim identity or experience through food. Rolingher’s thesis, Edible Identities should go some significant way towards responding to this oversight.

Rolingher’s thesis, Edible Identities should go some significant way towards responding to this oversight.