In *Arts of Being Yorùbá*, Adélekè Adéékó asks a deceptively simple question: What does it take to be Yorùbá (p. xiii)? To find the answer, he examines what he calls ‘cultural being as art’ (xv), practices old and new, from those often framed as timeless, on through literature, and then to recent phenomena that some might argue are not Yorùbá at all. Adéékó delivers a bold new take on each of these practices, showing how the older forms are far from unchanging, while the newer ones rely on the logics of those that preceded them. Ultimately, all of these are ‘being-Yorùbá practices’ (xiv) because they help self-identified Yorùbá people respond to contemporary circumstances in ways that signal their Yorùbá-ness to themselves and others.

In Chapters 1 and 2, Adéékó rejects the idea that Ifá divination and Yorùbá proverbs are simply fixed forms rooted in ancient cultural wisdom. A diviner casting palm nuts or a chain, and a Yorùbá person quoting a proverb convey much more than storied knowledge; the meaning of a diviner’s reading or an age-worn proverb relies just as much on the contemporary situation onto which it is brought to bear. The meaning of these bits of wisdom must be interpreted in relation to inscriptions from the past, not simply at face value, but within the context of each usage that grants it meaning for people in the present.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, Adéékó examines the novels of D.O. Fágúnwà, written during Nigeria’s colonial period, and the plays of Akínwùmí Ìsòlá, written shortly after Nigeria’s independence. Rather than seeing these works as evidence of some move from preliteracy and tradition to literacy and modernity, Adéékó argues that they show a continuity with older Yorùbá logics despite their shift to new media. In Fágúnwà’s novels, Adéékó finds evidence of the volatile conditions in which they were written, with both the frame story of a hunter–adventurer relating his exploits to a scribe and the treatment of female characters betraying the shifting roles of these groups in contributing to concepts of being Yorùbá under colonial rule. Likewise, in Ìsòlá’s play about the fate of a powerful woman known as Ìyálóde Efùnṣẹtàn Aniwúrà, Adéékó shows how her downfall owes little to her being ‘unwomanly’ – a misreading created by English translations and their imposition of foreign ideas of gender – despite the allegations of her male enemies.

Adéékó concludes by arguing that the relative newness of two emergent arts makes them no less Yorùbá, thanks to the cultural logics that guide them (Chapter 6 and Conclusion). In Nigerian praise magazines and at book-launch ceremonies, the author sees new iterations of Yorùbá panegyric praise poetry via celebrations of ‘eminence’ in ways that make the eminence accessible to others. In *Ovation* magazine, glossy photographs of successful and up-and-coming Nigerians translate praise poetry into images, while book launches borrow the structure of Yorùbá baby-naming and -outing ceremonies to commemorate new publications rather than infants, and to praise authors rather than their works.
Arts of Being Yorùbá is a needed contribution to Yorùbá studies and a welcome rejoinder to a more culturally essentialist understanding of what it means to be – or not be – Yorùbá. Adéékó’s concept of ‘cultural being’ as art – practices that rely on borrowing and mixing as much as on speaking a particular language, living in a certain territory, or preserving a primordial past (xiv–xv) – would benefit any study of how collective identities are manifested and understood, whether in Africa or elsewhere. If the book has one major shortcoming, it is its almost exclusive focus on middle-class Nigerians, mostly ignoring Yorùbá with fewer means, as well as Yorùbá from other parts of West Africa and the Americas, whose different experiences of class, slavery and colonialism give them, perhaps, different answers to the question of what it means to be Yorùbá. But Adéékó’s focus is probably intentional; he wants to dispute the idea that middle-class Nigerians are somehow less Yorùbá for writing novels or for giving their children Christianised names (xxiii–xxiv). As he shows, these things can be perfectly Yorùbá, too.

BRIAN C. SMITHSON
Duke University

Privately Empowered: Expressing Feminism in Islam in Northern Nigerian Fiction by SHIRIN EDWIN.
doi:10.1017/S0022278X18000368

Prof. Shirin Edwin of New York University Shanghai is a literary scholar known for analysing Francophone and Anglophone West African fiction about African Muslim women. Edwin argues against the demonisation of Islamic beliefs and practices in Africa, in particular the widespread tendency to see Islam as a foreign oppressor of African Muslim women. The problem, Edwin writes, is that scholars misrepresent Islam in Africa as foreign and monolithic, when it is local and complex, and misrepresent African Muslim women as weak and oppressed, when they use Islam to live meaningful lives of their own choosing. Scholars should see that Islam does not marginalise women in Africa, she insists, and would if they attended to how African Muslim women’s private practice of Islam nourishes them, rather than attending only to radical activism. If scholars view feminism as only marching in the streets, joining activist women’s groups, running for office, and struggling for legal reform, then they miss how Muslim women’s private lives, and their personal daily rituals such as prayer, can also be expressions of feminism. Edwin claims that Islam is a willed praxis of emotion, not merely an unwilled praxis of legalism. With a focus on women’s private praxis not public activism, Edwin is an important part of a larger research current, launched by scholars like Saba Mahmood, which asserts that western theories of agency are too limited to account for the freedom of Islamic women who see submission and surrender as life goals.

In Privately Empowered, Edwin analyses the Anglophone novels of three under-studied northern Nigerian authors: Ms Zaynab Alkali (The Stillborn [which analysis takes up Edwin’s Chapter 2], The Virtuous Woman [Chapter 3], The Descendants [Chapter 4]), Mr Abubakar Gimba (Golden Apples [Chapter 5])

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. IP address: 54.70.40.11, on 21 Dec 2018 at 18:57:08, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X18000241