or Islamic empire, was built on the existing political and socio-economic structures already in place. However, it also brought new legal and political institutions in the form of a federation between a Caliphate based in Sokoto, Fodio's hometown, and new emirates to transform the old Hausa political and social structures. Since the establishment of this Hausa-Fulani Muslim political system in the nineteenth century, northern Nigerian has become the largest and most influential Islamic tradition in sub-Saharan Africa.

Recent troubles in northern Nigeria caused by Islamic fundamentalists have led many to question the role of this critical region in Africa's most populous nation. One subject in particular that generates controversy is women's rights under Islamic law. e expansion of *Shari'a* law in twelve states in Northern Nigeria between 1999 and 2001 sent a wave of anxiety through human rights activists worldwide, and stoked inter-religious con icts in the region. Critics argue that women are the most negatively a ected by expanded Islamic laws, restricted by patriarchal values and given unequal rights and representation within the legal system. While analysts have explored various aspects of this on-going crisis, they have generally ignored the critical role of Northern Nigerian Muslim women's organizations challenge the negative impact of expand *Shari'a* on the condition of women and girls in northern Nigeria. In this paper, we will analyze the critical role that Muslim women's organizations play in the country's current *Shari'a* crisis of Nigeria's current democratic system.

Islamic, northern Nigerian feminism that we see at work today tackling the impacts of *Shari'a* law in the twelve states that employ it is not an entirely new creation. Women's rights movements in Hausa-speaking Nigeria have been present before the establishment of the Caliphate. This rich history gives Muslim women from the North a voice that is distinct from Western feminist movements and sometimes contrary to them. However, the struggle to combine their numerous identities—female, Muslim, Hausa-Fulani, and Nigerian—within the constraints of a deeply patriarchal society has led to splintering in the movement.

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in age than northern Nigerian Muslim women traditionally do. The position of women in these traditional societies seems to have been dictated by material necessity, rather than religious doctrines.

e growth of Islam in Hausaland brought with it new beliefs about gender roles, dictated by the words of the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad. is process started well before the Fulani Jihad, as traders and travelers brought teachings from the Arab world to western Africa; it was not until the establishment of the Caliphate that religion truly took hold in the area. e high rate of conversion can be attributed, in part, to economic and political opportunism—being a Muslim citizen of the Caliphate came with status and capital. Islamic teachings were disseminated in multiple languages, including Fulfulde, Hausa and Arabic, and emphasized the universal applicability of the religion to the everyday challenges of Hausa commoners, the talakawa.

In declaring the Fulani war in 1804, Usman dan Fodio and his followers called for the purification of Islam against the syncretism that was widespread in Hausa society and preached against the abuse of power in the courts of Hausa rulers. In keeping with well-established traditions of the Muslim world, Fodio's numerous writings and teachings, included women. This was also reflected in the works of Fodio's most trusted followers notably his brother Abudulahi, his son, Mohammed Bello (who consolidated the Caliphate), and his daughter, Nana Asma'u.

Nana Asma'u was well known as an influential Islamic scholar. During the jihad she was a teacher to both men and women and wrote numerous poems and didactic works in Fulfulde, Hausa, Tamachek, and Arabic. Although Nana Asma'u was privileged, in part by her lineage, she also acted as a role-model and encouraged other women in the Caliphate to pursue education and influence in local communities. This fact is captured in Nana Asma'u's own elegies, many of which pay tribute to the numerous women who positively influenced their society. Despite entrenched patriarchy since the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate, the works of women, such as Nana Asma'u, have inspired many Muslim women to challenge the marginalization and oppression of women and girls in Northern Nigerian Muslim society. This legacy no doubt inspired the

the position of women in

leaders of the Muslim women's organizations that challenged expanded *Shari'a* in the twelve northern Nigerian states.

However, the consequence of British colonialism and its policy of indirect rule from late 1800s–1900s institutionalized religious practices and strengthened Islam in northern Nigeria. The federal structure consolidated the rule and power of Muslim Emirs, and missionaries were barred from accessing Muslim areas. The added threat of western Christian culture led to an increase in religiosity as a means of resistance. Changes in the economy, such as increased focus on cotton and groundnuts are also partly responsible for

the notable escalation in the practice of wife seclusion, known as purdah, as women could work from home grinding nuts or weaving. The spread of capitalism in northern Nigeria may also have led to more exploitation of women, who had become dependent on their male heads of households.

The progression from traditional Hausa society, the rule of the Caliphate, to colonialism and post-colonialism, sheds some light on how certain customs and the treatment of women has evolved in Northern Nigeria. However, looking at this history as a steady progression between distinct stages obscures the fact that past practices continue to have a powerful influence on the present. The size of the Caliphate made it difficult for its rulers to fully establish a purely orthodox form of Islam, partly because of the ease with which these beliefs could be combined

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cases, and did not restrict their authority over criminal cases. Moreover, with apparent popular support, the twelve northern state governors contend that their *Shari'a* law policy reflects the spirit of Nigeria's nascent democratic transition.

Besides political context, the role of clerical authority is notable as well. The interpretation and implementation of *Shari'a* law is currently in the hands of a few male scholars and social leaders, as well as judges and lawyers who may not be completely familiar with the complex rules and procedures. The guidelines put forward in the Quran and Sunnah are not enough in themselves to act as a fully functioning legal system. Ayesha Imam, who gave an address at the Wilson Center in September 2003, explains that *Shari'a* law is "not divine, but merely religious," meaning that a large amount of interpretation, and therefore contextualization, is needed to create a workable system. Different schools of Islamic thought do interpret the scripture in a variety of ways, and this can have a considerable effect on its implications for women.

Reinterpretation has actually been utilized by Muslim women's rights activists to fight against some of the perceived injustices that have been inflicted on Muslim women, particularly those from low income, uneducated backgrounds. This method of activism can be seen clearly in the cases of Safiyatu Husseini of Sokoto and Amina Lawal of Katsina, both of whom were convicted of adultery (a case of zina—one of the most serious under Islamic law) and sentenced to death by stoning during the *Shari'a* crisis from 1999–2003. In both of these cases, Muslim women activists backed by activists of all faiths, both nationally and internationally,

the unconventional strategies adopted by the leaders of these Muslim women rights groups' have surprised nigerian liberals, feminists and islamists.

used arguments based on *Shari'a* procedure to appeal the sentences.

The unconventional strategies adopted by the leaders of these Muslim women rights groups' have surprised Nigerian liberals, feminists and Islamists alike. While the women's groups remain committed to using the Nigerian Constitution with its strong common law roots and ratification of universal human rights conventions, they have embraced *Shari'a* law as an essential part of Muslim culture, adopting sophisticated interpretations of complicated religious texts from which *Shari'a* is derived to successfully defend their clients. In their political and legal activities, these activists consciously draw from a tradition of Hausa and Fulani women that has been inspired by progressive Northern Muslim movements, such as Northern Elements People's Union and the People's Redemption Party, that consistently advocated for universal free primary education and the provision of essential social services for the masses of poor people in emirate society, including girls and women.

The use of Islamic arguments shows Nigeria and the world how women can advance their cause within an Islamic society. Furthermore, it gives these women a localized legitimacy they

would have lacked if they had armed themselves solely with secular Western feminist and liberal criticisms. Yet lingering fears of colonial impositions on northern Nigerian culture as well as a predominantly conservative outlook have made it difficult for activists to integrate their religious, cultural and political identities.

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