

## **WOMEN IN THE PROMOTION OF CULTURAL SECURITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA**

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper examines the role of women in protecting and preserving the cultural heritage of the African continent which is an important ingredient for the nation's development. It traces the indispensable role of the women to the creation of mankind at the Garden of Eden. However, despite the much desired role and contribution of the women to the development of the African nation, the imposition of colonialism in Africa laid the groundwork for the marginalization of the women folk, which eventually created gender inequality that weakened the contribution of the women. Nevertheless, African women have not given up the struggle. Women continue to play a leading role in preserving the farming tradition which is the main occupation in Africa by means of women organizations such as "Women in Agriculture in Nigeria" and "Women farmers Advancement Network". Notwithstanding there are still a number of barriers against women effective participation in economic development activities which the study has identified to include; systemic gender biases in form of customs and beliefs; domestic workloads that impose severe time burden on women; limited access to credit, education and medical care. The expose of these barriers reveals the need for greater sensitization of the cultural and social barriers to encourage increased women participation in the economic activities in Africa.*

**KEYWORDS:** Women, Cultural security, Development, Africa

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The significant position of women in our society was highlighted by Staudt (1987) that "from ancient time women have borne men, without women men are nowhere....you know too well that We the women, shoulder the greater part of the Problems in the community." Cultural

security is a commitment to service provision that does not compromise the legitimate cultural rights, views, values and expressions of African women. Women are the custodian of culture. Since pre-colonial and pre-capitalist Africa, women were often full participants in the economy beyond the household and played significant role in the political decision-making process. Although the position of women differed depending upon the exact nature of diverse traditional political system. The contribution of African woman in general was so significant to be ignored. However, over the years the situation has changed.

African societies were in the past characterized by loose (if any) boundaries between public and private as the “modern” world now knows them. The domestic sphere covered more than single conjugal units and incorporated multigenerational compounds and lineages. Besides being active in household, food collection/ production, crafts, and trade, women publicly participated in the political collectivity of pre-state and non-Islamic societies. Women used their work and reproductive capabilities to create public valuation of woman. As an Asante proverb goes; “it is a woman who gave birth to chief.” (Staudt, 1987) Women many obligations gave them certain autonomy, a pattern which lingers totally with large numbers of female-headed households (Ibid). Presently, African women are seen as dependent and subservient in every aspect of their existence, in secondary or insignificant economic roles, without political clout, in every way dominated by men and described by Staudt (1987) as “uncultured condition.”

### **Africa: the Study Location**

Africa(See Fig. 1) is considered by most paleoanthropologists to be the oldest inhabited territory on Earth, with the human species originating from the continent. During the middle of the 20th century, anthropologists discovered many fossils and evidence of human occupation perhaps as early as 7 million years ago. Throughout humanity's prehistory, Africa (like all other continents) had no nation states, and was instead inhabited by groups of hunter-gatherers such as the Khoi and San. In the late 19th century, the European imperial powers engaged in a major territorial scramble and occupied most of the continent, creating many colonial territories, and leaving only two fully independent states: Ethiopia (known to Europeans as "Abyssinia"), and Liberia. Egypt and Sudan were never formally incorporated into any European colonial empire; however, after the British occupation of 1882, Egypt was effectively under British administration until 1922. Today, Africa contains 54 sovereign countries, most of which have borders that were drawn during the era of European colonialism. Since colonialism, African states have frequently been hampered by instability, corruption, violence, and authoritarianism. The vast majority of African states are republics that operate under some form of the presidential system of rule. However, few of them have been able to sustain democratic governments on a permanent basis, and many have instead cycled through a series of coups, producing military dictatorships (Richard, 1985).

In the 21st century, however, the number of armed conflicts in Africa has steadily declined. For instance, the civil war in Angola came to an end in 2002 after nearly 30 years. This has coincided with many countries abandoning communist style command economies and opening up for market reforms. The improved stability and economic reforms have led to a great increase in foreign investment into many African nations, mainly from China, which has spurred quick economic growth in many countries, seemingly ending decades of stagnation and decline. Several African economies are among the world's fastest growing as of 2011. A significant part of this growth can also be attributed to the facilitated diffusion of information technologies and

specifically the mobile telephone. Africa's population has rapidly increased over the last 40 years, and consequently, it is relatively young. In some African states, half or more of the population is under 25 years of age. The total number of people in Africa grew from 221 million in 1950 to 1 billion in 2009 (Africa, 2013).

### The Role of Women in the Promotion of Cultural Security and Development in Pre-State/Africa.

Pre-state African societies had no public-private dichotomy which corresponded to gender. Since the domestic or private sphere was an integral part of the public spheres power, authority, and influence within the domestic sphere was power, authority and influence at certain levels within the public sphere. Economic activities were as much a part of domestic as occupational roles. Women's political functions in pre-state and community politics were rich in variety and broadly representative of all sub-Saharan Africa.

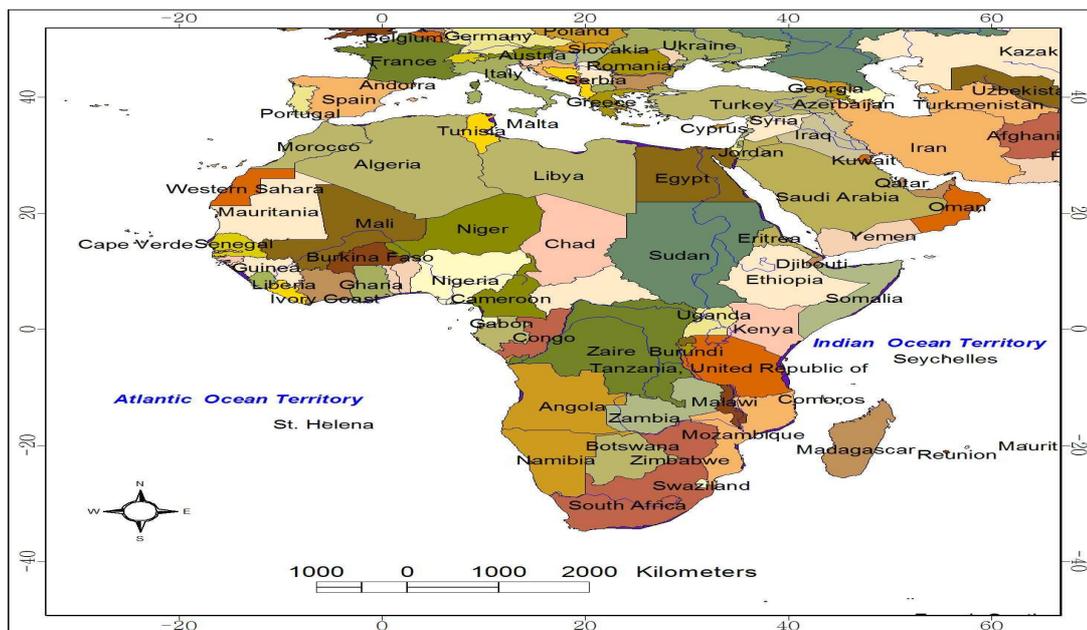


Fig. 1: The African Continent

In Southeastern Nigeria, women's authority structures paralleled men's to function as women's court, market authorities, and overseers of village welfare. Women managed their own affairs in kinship institutions, age grades, secret and title societies. In markets, women fixed prices, settled quarrels among traders, and imposed fines to enforce their will. Ibo villages had women's councils at various territorial levels. Among the Mende in Sierra-Leone, women's secret societies, called Bundu, protected women's right and served as political support bases and training grounds for women chiefs, such as for Madam Yoko of the Kpa Mende Confederacy. In

Cameroon, Bamileke female farmers belonged to the Mensu, a woman society composed of the best cultivators. The Mandjon was a group of important women who administered village work done by women such as clearing paths. Among the Kikuyu in Kenya, women's age segmented organizations matched those of men's and performed a wide variety of functions, including judgement, mutual aid, initiation into womanhood, cooperative farm labour, religious ceremonies and disciplinary action among women (Staudt, 1987). The above represents cultural-preserve of African women which in turn enhanced development in Africa.

### **The Role of Women during Colonial State**

Following the imposition of colonialism in Africa, groundwork was laid to conceive of work value and reward in ways already present in the highly differentiated and set segregated industrializing world. Administrators selected for the colonial service men while women preserved the home refuse for men. This insulated women from the presence of public life. A general obliviousness to women's indigenous political authority eliminated women's political agenda and women as political actors. So with the moral and legal foundation of male authority established, women were defined out of policy and political reality. State formation had high costs, among which was included women's loss of rights in non state spheres. Former female managed political responsibilities (such as judicial functions) were removed from their hands to be replaced with the now male-controlled administration, male-run Native courts, or the private market, in which women participated but in an increasingly marginal ways. The point is that the colonial state laid the foundation for societies to conform to cultural notions of appropriate gender relations in industrializing class society, in which women enable and stimulate male work force productivity through home labour in food production, water and food collection and consumer demand as well as serve as a low-skill reserve labour force. In this conception, women are also politically conservative and this help maintain a given political order (Kruks, 1987). Despite gender discrimination during this epoch, cultural pressures of women were still obvious. Women were responsible for the production of sustainable food items though in a subsistence level. They also engaged in other forms of production such as pottery, weaving, fish drying, cassava production, fisheries, and sheep rearing among others (Enobong and Ibok, 2011).

### **The Role of Women and Cultural Security and Development in the Contemporary Africa**

Among cultural preserves of African women be it art, domestic work etc, farming cum agriculture stand out which they have jealousy guarded right from pre-state era. Ironically, women are known to be more involved in agricultural activities than men in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) countries, Nigeria inclusive. The involvement of women in agriculture in Nigeria has attracted greater attention in recent years. Reasons for their involvement are as many as are diverse. In some sections of Nigeria, women have virtually taken over the production and processing of arable crops, being responsible for as much as 80% of the staple food items. Estimate of women's contribution to the production of food crops range from 30% in the Sudan to 80% in the Congo; contributing substantially to national agricultural production and food security, while being primarily responsible for the food crops (Afolabi, 2008). Bryson (1981), assessed the overall importance of women in agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa using available data on the predominance of female labour in crop production. The researcher observed that more women than men did agricultural work on the family lands and that women work more hours than the men. Also, it has been noticed that female labour in production tends to be less

important in societies where intensive agricultural systems are more dominant than the extensive systems.

Notably, beyond politics, the broad domains involving women of various classes are agriculture, urban workplace, the law and education. Women contribute tremendously to agricultural output, women constitute 60% of the communal farmers but unfortunately, they hardly benefit from agricultural incentives and innovation because of economic suppression and social and traditional practices. The marketing of the farm produce has been thrown in the hands of businessmen, whose sole objective is profit maximization, resulting in food security which Africa highly prize or treated.

Gender discrimination, rather than ignorance, is the reason for lack of women participation in agricultural programmes and projects. In subsistence agriculture, food production is mainly done by women, with little from men. In Kenya for example work done by women farmers far outweighs that of men. Also, in Ghana, small holdings kept by women provide about 80% of the total food production in the country. In Tanzania, 87% of the women who live in rural areas play similar roles. While Zambian women contribute up to 80% of their labour for household crops (Yemisi and Muhtar 2009, Boserup 1970 and Pala, 1976).

African women now are not only being involved in farming (cultural heritage) but also in employment as civil servant, and in industry. They have also been involved in small-scale entrepreneurships. No doubt, these sectors have been severely affected by the introduction of trade liberalization. Women on this continent contribute the most critical factor in agricultural products and agriculture (Fridah, 1988).

### **The Role of Women Organization in Strengthening Cultural Heritage**

It is a well known fact that in Africa many factors work against women in their participation in economic development. Some of which are socio-cultural and economic in nature. The task of surmounting such obstacles can be very daunting, even though women have largely succeeded in overcoming some of them. Kudos goes to the actions and persistence of women's group and community-based organization and the civil society organization fighting their cause.

Drawing from Nigerian experience, the Nigerian women like their counterpart elsewhere have proved to be more than a mere "*bench-warming*" spectator, even in the midst of the male-dominated professional congregation. If given the opportunity women can effectively participate in policy-making and governance especially as it affects their cultural heritage. That notwithstanding, the steady advancement of women in contributing to the nation's economic development and their progressive prominence in the national scheme of affairs have, to a large extent impacted on the Federal government and government has responded positively in diverse ways. One of such response is the establishment of programme called "*Women in –Agriculture in Nigeria*" (WIA).

This programme WIA came about in 1988 when it became clear that in spite of a decade of World Bank assistance in building up Nigerian's agricultural extension service, women farmers were still receiving minimal assistance and information from extension agents (World Bank, 2003). This programme was therefore created to integrate women into development process with specific reference to agriculture. A serious lapse in the country's agricultural extension system

had hitherto been discriminating against women farmers. The WAI programme, therefore sought to improve agricultural extension services for women which entails the retraining of existing home economics agents in agriculture and extension methodologies, with emphasis on women's activities (Maigida, 1992, Yemi and Aishia, 2009).

Aside from government efforts to bridge the gap between men and women farmers, various women groups and organizations have emerged. One of such group is the "**Women Farmers Advancement Network**" (WOFAN), a private initiative founded in the early 1990 in Nigeria. WOFAN works with 250 women's groups in five different States in Northern Nigeria in an effort to mobilize and train rural women in the management of information and communication. The network also organizes a weekly radio broadcast that features the efforts of rural women (WOFAN, 2003).

In Sudan, the number of national NGOs working in the area of agriculture have increased with many projects targeting women in the area of livestock and dairy. In Tanzania, NGOs have become a dynamic arena for women empowerment and support to rural women in agriculture. In Nairobi, there are a few women's groups and NGOs which work to enhance women's role in agriculture and food production and advocate on behalf of women farmers (Franklin, 2007)

Despite the laudable efforts of the women organizations, groups and NGOs to close the gap between men and women farmers, a number of barriers to women participation in agricultural activities have been identified. Among these are; systemic gender biases which may take the form of customs, beliefs and attitudes that confine women mostly to the domestic sphere; women's economic and domestic workloads that impose severe time burdens on them; laws and customs that impede women's access to credit, production inputs, employment, education or medical care. The expose of these barriers reveals the need for increased sensitivity on the social and cultural barriers that inhibit women's participation in economic activities in Africa.

This paper therefore has revealed why African women should be appreciated and treasured. They have excelled and have contributed immensely to National development, preserving the African farming culture and trading especially in the bulking, transportation, exchange and distribution of food stuff. Daily and periodic markets are held monthly in African lands, where food stuff from farm is brought by rural women and sold to urban consumers. So regular and efficient has this process been that most urban consumers are not even aware of how foodstuff ends up in their kitchens.

## **CONCLUSION**

Women embark on agricultural activities for variety of reasons. Women have the personal interest, they earn financial resources and it is the family tradition. Temporary or permanent migration of significant number of men has caused shortage of labour in rural areas; as a result women are left behind to do much of the farm work as paid or unpaid labour. By this they help to preserve or secure the cultural tradition of farming or agriculture which has been the foremost human occupation. When God created Adam and Eve, their main occupation was farming or agriculture, and in Africa, the production of food at least for household consumption are exclusively women responsibility, a culture which has continued till today despite all odds and hurdles by male chauvinism associated with African societies.

We can therefore conclude that the survival and sustenance of agriculture in Africa rest squarely on the rural women. Women therefore, should be given due recognition as far as decision-making process in agriculture is concerned knowing that without their effort to preserve the culture of agriculture which is the main stay of African economy farming tradition could have been extinct.

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