

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

AFRICAN WOMEN

Tanure Ojaide, PhD

AFRICAN WOMEN are primary custodians of African culture; hence this week's study is devoted to African women today. Women raise children with the help of men but they play a predominant role in their upbringing.

RURAL AGRICULTURE is still overwhelmingly done by women about 80% are farmers compared to 65% of men rural farmers. Women who are divorced, widowed, or still married to men with low incomes still have to cultivate crops for subsistence of their families and for sale to make income to provide other amenities for the family. The women farmers have to work against the odds of land tenure and customs that put lands under the control of men. Women members have to borrow money from rotating credit unions called *esusu* in West Africa to have capital to finance their farming. There are few female agricultural extension workers across the continent but efforts are being made to train women.

WOMEN TRADERS AND ENTREPRENEURS have an important role in the economic sphere in their families, communities, and nations. In Ghana and Nigeria, for instance, women traders are famous for their textile business, buying wholesale and retailing their fabrics. Yoruba and Ashanti women are known for their trading acumen.

MODERNITY AND SCHOOLING have raised the status of women in African culture socially, economically, and politically. Educated women now abound in most professions, including bankers and professors. This means they earn as much as their male counterparts and they are at the top tier of good wage earners in their societies. Education and good jobs also free the women from many of the abuses of patriarchal societies in which men decide for the family. In many parts of Africa, female students are as many if not more than male students.

MANY CULTURAL PRACTICES are changing with the education of women and the general enlightenment of the populace. An example is female circumcision, which has declined considerably owing to works of NGOs and the education of women.

AFRICAN WOMEN TODAY are like women anywhere else in the world. They have changed and yet maintain their African identity. An African woman banker or professor could have the same ideas and values as women from other cultures; however, she is still likely to braid her hair African-style, wear African dresses, and still have respect for the culture knowing the roles for men and women are shared equally and not weighed against any gender.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the problems that rural women face in agriculture?
2. How are educated African women coping with their state as women today?
3. What have African women gained from modernity?

Readings

Mario Azevedo, ed. *Africana Studies: A Survey of Africa and the African Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2005).

Phyllis M. Martin and Patrick O'Meara, eds. *Africa*. Third Edition. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1995.

David Sweetman. *Women Leaders in African History*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1984.