

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Nigeria's Modern Women

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Dear Mr. Nolte:

Many surveys and countless studies have been carried out to determine some facts about African students studying abroad. A compilation of some of these studies reveals the average African student as a single male, 26 years old, in his third year of undergraduate school, majoring in one of the social sciences. His difficulties include adjustment to food and language peculiarities, inadequate financial support, dissatisfaction with his social life and a degree of color prejudice. Some of his satisfactions are meeting new people, seeing different countries, having access to other forms of art and culture and noting the increased awareness and interest of foreigners in his country and continent.

Few of these studies have mentioned women. I talked with several, while in London, to get some idea whether their experience parallels that of men. I found that they have similar annoyances with housing difficulties, and often have more tension in their social lives because many men abroad, not always of their social class, approach women with less reservation. They suffer the sometimes embarrassing curiosity of foreigners about such things as cannibalism, polygamy and slavery in Africa. They enjoy many of the same pleasures of their male counterparts; good theater, making friends without the encumbrances of traditional limitations, and the free-swinging, exciting lives that students live.

One thing, however, was different. There seemed to be greater concern on their part for the roles they would play on returning home. They anticipated problems in finding employment in their fields, traditional prejudice against women who seek satisfaction outside the home, opposition to programs and policies they felt incumbent upon their integrity to pursue. Some saw finding a husband, who has similar experiences and attitudes as their own a problem. The anxiety of some of the male students was in regard to their ability to gain personal and private success. The misgivings of the women students concerned opportunities for employment and how their new ideas and demands would be received by families and communities.

When I arrived in Nigeria, I met many women whose backgrounds were similar to those of the students. They felt the women students were unduly concerned. After all, they had studied abroad, returned to Africa and re-established themselves in their communities with relatively few difficulties. They said these present students would, by virtue of their advantages (travel, education and sophistication) enter their world, a world where freedom and opportunity abound.

They said there have always been unique opportunities for some Nigerian women. Their basis and influence have been determined, in large measure, by the area and culture in which they live; and prestige positions accorded them for individual merit. In both northern and southern Nigeria women have been important as individuals. They have been title holders (chiefs), had wealth (traders), had skills (artisans), or had specialized knowledge (medicine women or diviners). They have been respected and sometimes revered by the masses but their positions were seldom immutable or preconditioned by status.

Historically, northern Nigeria, desert and Moslem country secluded from external influence by geography and religion, has tended to move at its own pace, having limited horizons in respect to women. The women of the Northern Region still do not have the franchise as do their southern sisters. With increased mobility, receptivity to western aid and education on the part of the government, and the impinging of Christian religions and ideas on the culture, progress is being made in enlightenment and increased opportunity for women.

I found that southern Nigerian women have traditionally had important roles in tribal life as well as authority and jurisdiction in certain areas of family life. They have had rights and safeguards in addition to duties, not as much as may have been desired but more than women in many other parts of Africa. Trader women, many of them illiterate, have been known for their energy, business judgement and wealth. That women are responsible for sixty-six percent of Nigeria's economic turn-over is ample evidence of their role as traders. Many a female chief has organized and set up social or health facilities such as one of those in which I work, Egbe Obinrin Ibile Ibadan Welfare Clinic, which serves a slum community and to which mothers come with their children for preventive health services and nutritional advice.

Southern Nigeria, because of its proximity to the shipping routes, has long felt the affects of Christianity and education. When education was first made available to African women, no distinction was made between tribe or class, except that undoubtedly the daughters of chiefs and wealthy traders were some of the first introduced to it. Numbers grew. Some returned to tribal concerns after having been locally educated, some pursued economic interests and some presided socially and charitably. With the growth of secondary schools and the possibility of study abroad, vision expanded and girls were as eager as boys to train for posts and careers. They were trained in the traditionally western women's fields: teaching, nursing, social welfare. From the history of some of these professions in Nigeria, women very early developed an awareness of social responsibility beyond the customary obligation to their husband's or their own relatives. Their attitudes and ideas on marriage and family life were not untouched by their new experiences.

With the increased aspirations of women came the curious contradiction in male attitudes, frequently of well educated males. Some women were fortunate enough to find husbands who had shared the same experiences and who wanted wives with whom they could discuss affairs, receive guests,

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foreign and local, and manage the family. Other women adapted themselves to husbands who wanted numerous children, a good cook and someone who would not disagree or look down on them.

The older elite still exist in both northern and southern Nigeria. They have social and community positions to maintain, certain modes of living, and wealth to distinguish them as important individuals. A group elite seems to be forming now, whose ~~status and influence~~ are not so much determined by special class or tribal ties as by education; and their influence extends beyond tribal and regional boundaries. Education, which seems to confer the greatest distinction and potential value on Nigerian women today, makes it possible for those without traditional aids to participate in, contribute to and influence contemporary culture and society.

Many of those I have met tend to be wives rather than career women in the professional sense, although there is a sizable group of working women. At times it would appear that their activities are, in the main, social. They preside over swank cocktail and dinner parties, have large, well-appointed, fully staffed homes, are chauffeured in their private cars and are often pictured on the social pages of local newspapers, appearing chic whether in Nigerian or western clothing. They see one another socially, sponsor cultural shows and fund raising affairs, appear at film festivals, are members of international organizations and travel widely.

On the other hand they are concerned with draught, blight, birth, death and marriage as well as the efficient operation of volunteer welfare organizations and welfare clinics. They worry about the health and nutritional standards of the people, decry the open gutters in the cities with their stagnant, bacteria- and malaria-breeding water and dislike the public dwellings without light, water or sanitary facilities. They are conversant with the health-work-output cycle and teach in the welfare clinics against poor nutritional practices which sap energy and resistance, making the individual an inefficient producer, whose reduced output and low gains perpetuate malnutrition. This group does verbal battle for medical and social prophylaxis and improved agricultural and livestock techniques. They are conscious of the fact that political advancement must be accompanied by social advancement in the "bush" as well as in urban areas.

These women are cognizant of problems arising, during this transitional period, out of interaction between traditional modes of living and the demands of modern urban life. Trying to come to grips with the schism created by the replacement of the extended family by the nuclear family is one they share with women the world over. They encourage and sponsor such things as day nurseries and adult education classes, through which information and ideas can be exchanged on homemaking, family care and public services and responsibilities, which they hope will enable more women, not only to feel secure without the traditional kinds of help formerly available, but also to play a more active role in the development of their country.

One special problem with which they are trying to deal is that of living in a society which accepts polygamy and regards monogamy as

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fashionable but impractical. Polygamy, as a topic of social conversation in a mixed group, has only recently become acceptable. It has been said that most monogamous men have extra-marital relationships of a semi-permanent nature. This amounts to accepting different standards of morality for men and gives women little security in marriage. Even today women are responsible financially for the upbringing and education of their children. Much is being done directly by example and indirectly by spreading their influence to alter this situation.

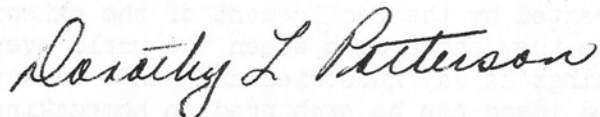
This group, many of them moulded by western influences, are cultural conservationists. They articulate their concern for education being offered entirely in English and some have removed their children from expatriate to indigenous schools where they can learn Nigerian languages as well as English. Nigeria's women, some from other African countries and European countries, having met and married Nigerian men while abroad, all seem to promote that which is primal in Nigerian culture and reach to understand each other across the gap of sometimes conflicting tastes and conventions.

It is not unusual for students away from home, uncertain of their futures and uncertain of their part in their country's future, to anticipate and possibly magnify their problems. They do have cause for concern but probably not as much as they think. They would do well to follow the precedent being set by the established women. It will undoubtedly be years before large numbers accept the standards of this group as their own or even as something to strive toward, but today many recognize this pattern as the one of the important women in the country and as the pattern educated women aspire to.

Some criticism has been made by the students of the lives of prominent women as mimicking their former colonial masters. In years to come this charge will be invalidated as their ways are understood as the universal pattern of elites.

Nigeria's women have approached the change in the traditional role of women in Africa in a practical way. The students abroad could have no better mentors because they seem to be achieving a happy blend of western materialism and idealism with African realism.

Sincerely,



Dorothy L. Patterson

Received in New York March 25, 1963.