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**HANS WOLFF
MEMORIAL LECTURE**

*“Women’s Farming and
Present Ethnography:
Thoughts on a Nigerian Re-Study”*

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NINETEENTH ANNUAL HANS WOLFF LECTURE

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WOMEN'S FARMING AND PRESENT ETHNOGRAPHY
THOUGHTS ON A NIGERIAN RESTUDY

It is an honor to be here delivering this lecture instituted in memory of Hans Wolff, especially since his own interests in Africa were initially inspired, as were my own, by Nigeria in general and Yoruba society and culture in particular.

There are two threads I want to weave together in this lecture: my empirical work over the past ten years or so on women's farming, and conceptual questions about the time frames of enquiry that this work has encouraged me to address, and which engage with anthropology more broadly.

In her famous publication in 1970, Ester Boserup put African women's enormous contributions to the agricultural economy back on the intellectual map. Almost twenty years later, cross-cultural studies have confirmed that female farming is a widespread and persistent characteristic of the continent's production repertoire. In short, it is seen as customary, even - as the founding father of all subsequent work on African divisions of labor, Baumann (1928), suggested - primordial. Summarizing his life's work in African anthropology, Meyer Fortes claimed that the guiding issue was "the phenomenon of custom" (1987:175). One answer he gave, and the answer I studied as an undergraduate and graduate student, was the regulation of conduct by norms, ultimately by "consensus, collective authorization and compulsion" (ibid:177) but "kept going by the vigilance of conscience" (ibid: 217). A generation later, under the closer examination of practise theory of various sorts and the more distant scanning of historical work - again, of theoretically varying sorts - one foregrounds turbulence rather than fixity, contingency rather than sui generis principles in operation, struggle rather than compulsion and multivocality rather than consensus.

The first part of my lecture reviews the application of the very close and very distant views of recent anthropological and feminist-inspired theory to the "custom" of female farming. From that exploration, another challenge developed. In the study of the turbulence and contingency of changing custom no topic is less initially appealing than one - such as

female farming - which not only seems to change very little, but whose shifts leave very little trace, so quickly do they seem to be assimilated by actor and observer alike to the "customary division of labor". Simply not available are sources such as the innovations in poetry and prayer, symbol and society of the indigenous religious movements whose study so decisively changed the discipline's perspective on custom. Nor are there clear confrontational moments, crises of concept and action, of the sort analyzed by Sahlins in his own historical work on transformation. One is inevitably - that is, not necessarily from theoretical conviction - working with commonplace changes, vibrations, shifts in frequency and intensity, additions and subtractions from repertoires, which nevertheless one believes in principle may build up to critical points, cross thresholds, contribute to major configurational change.

Since I had no dramatic events to be guided by, and little of the rich documentary resources that Europeanist scholars can find to fill out an interpretation of "everyday life" in the past, a way became necessary of self-consciously experimenting with the differing visions provided by varying the concept of time, analogous to the experimentation with periodization in feminist history: shifting frames, changing perspectives, splicing frames and perspectives together, and drawing on already existing but underused concepts in a process that is far from complete, or even perhaps entirely coherent at this moment.

I will be prevailing, therefore, on the expertise for which this African Studies Program is so well known. This lecture resembles a certain style of folktale, in that it has a somewhat arbitrary beginning at the moment when I started to work on the division of labor, an arbitrary end with my present, still incomplete, analysis of my fieldwork in Nigeria, and only a provisional moral. But this narrative format is perhaps appropriate not only for this audience but for the subject matter, concerned as it is with the questionable nature of beginnings and ends.

So, the beginning: I have been very fortunate in my studies of the gender division of labor in African agriculture, to be challenged by the striking differences between the two societies in which I have carried out field research during the past twenty years. Having worked first in a Yoruba community in Western Nigeria in 1968-9 I immediately had the parallels and contrasts in mind when I started to work on women's farming in the

Beti area of Southern Cameroon in the mid 1970s. While the two peoples share certain attributes of agro-ecology and economic history - a savanna/forest border environment, proximity to rapidly growing cities, cocoa as the major export crop - they seem to exemplify quite different gender divisions of labor. For a very long time, Beti women have carried out most of the tasks of food cultivation. Yoruba women's farming on their own account, by contrast, was very much a minority enterprise when I worked in South-Western Nigeria in 1968-9. The vast majority of women fit the famous Yoruba pattern of female enterprise in processing and trade, while men were responsible for farming and the staples of the diet. To use Boserup's phraseology (1970), the Yoruba system was a male farming system and the Beti a female farming system. Classic social anthropology would also have placed the two systems in different categories: the Beti a segmentary society, the Yoruba with centralized administration of large urban settlements.

My first historical work on the division of labor was a comparison of the two systems under the common influence of the cocoa economy of the colonial period (1980; see Figure 1). That analysis was based on the typological distinction between the two, and the conclusion tended to reaffirm it. In both cases the gender division of tasks with respect to food cultivation had been very largely preserved over the expansion of cocoa production during the colonial period. Yoruba men continued to farm, while women stepped up their activities in distribution. Beti men added cocoa farming to their older forest activities, leaving women with food cultivation. In both cases, the broad framework of the old task-specific division of labor of male and female farming was recognisable in the colonial and post-colonial economies. Theoretically-inclined comparativists such as I was in that article could argue that both mainstream socio-cultural and Marxist interpretations of social change could be supported by this finding: locally specific values and relationships, whether thought of as the *cultural* definition of male and female tasks or as the male-female differential in *economic* returns to labor, seemed to persist tenaciously over the hundred years of dramatic political and economic transformation. The colonial and commodity economies took the local systems as they found them; the local systems assimilated novelty to their own norms of thought and activity.

While this was a neat and persuasive conclusion I was never entirely happy with it because the key analytical parameters had been left rather vague. The conclusions of that paper were stated negatively - that the cocoa and commodity economies had not homogenized the two systems. But the positive implication was there that custom had persisted, and although I did explore some of the possible dynamics, without a more critical examination of "persistence" one could not go much further. The conclusion remained impressionistic, a quality somewhat masked by the quantitative nature of some of the data. But in the end, one looked at those bargrams of time spent in food and cocoa cultivation and said intuitively "Yes. They're still different, and perhaps as different from each other in 1980 as in 1880".

I was bothered, not that this logic of inference was necessarily wrong, but that it was unexamined. If persistence is a key characteristic then its qualities need to be specified, including its dynamics, that is, ways of differentiating between stagnation and tradition, between reasonable caution in the face of economic and political volatility and the outright rejection of innovation, between inability to articulate a collective vision for change and powerlessness to implement one. We were ourselves living out - in the late 1970s and early 1980s after a pioneering period in feminist anthropology and feminist consciousness - the on-going implications of what we had thought were unambiguous innovations in our own divisions of labor. By that time neither the modes of persistence and change in life, nor their categorization in thought, seemed as transparently understandable as initially predicted.

In scanning the horizon for landmarks and beacons for exploring this territory, the situation in Africa itself has loomed large. When one is there, the changes and persistences seem far more diverse and surprising than the models can cope with, a fact that lies behind - I believe - at least some of the difficulties of African scholars with work coming out of Western social science traditions. An interchange witnessed at a session of the African Studies Association meetings several years ago has been a graphic reminder to me; to a perfectly reasoned comparative and typological discussion of Yoruba's women's economic freedom, a female Yoruba participant responded with profound exasperation. "we are *not liberated!*".

Different vantage points, different views. But there are also formal analytical differences between the two vantage points, stemming from assumptions about the nature of time. The first is reflecting in a comparative and static mode on the nature of cultural assumptions and social structures; the second, in an experiential mode whose temporal reach is back into her immediate past and forward into her potential future. The first is a framed definition of time, and second is a centered definition. The first takes a boundary – a persistent Yoruba culture – and then explores the canvas within it ; the second starts with a focal point and works outwards with no initial concern with the positioning of the frame which may, in the end, be quite arbitrary.

This contrast between framed and centered assumptions about relevant time makes them seem opposed and perhaps mutually exclusive. What I was hoping, however, was to see them as part of a repertoire of time concepts that might be built up, and then combined in ways that highlighted key processes. C. Wright Mills (1959) wrote that the intellectual journey of social science was incomplete until biography and history had been illuminatingly intersected. Biography and history are only two temporal concepts. Clearly, coming from anthropology with its long tradition of work on indigenous and analytical temporalities including developmental cycles (Goody 1958) and structural duration (Gluckman 1958), there were more.

The first and most obvious experiment to do with my own empirical problem of the dynamics of the division of labor was to move the time frame around, to shift the classic precolonial, colonial, postcolonial three-act play out of the center and try to incorporate pre-colonial change (Guyer 1984). Prevailing approaches to pre-colonial change in agricultural production and the division of labor came from evolutionary theory, understandably since the data are thin. Boserup incorporated Baumann's assumptions. The female farming he saw at the end of the nineteenth century in the forest regions of Central Africa preceded – as he saw it – the male farming of the savanna, as extensive agricultural techniques precede intensive techniques, and as segmentary societies precede centralization. Female farming was individuated and technically simple; male farming was collective and complex. Female farming was primitive; male farming more advanced.

Moving away these assumptions for the moment allowed another regularity to come to the fore. Looking again at the ethnographic data on African farming around the turn of the century, when it was first described in some detail, it seemed that the syndrome defined as "female farming" was particularly characteristic of maize and cassava production and hardly at all of yam, sorghum, millet and rice. All of the latter crops were grown in complex group and individual, male and female, interdigitated task sequences, and sacralised in a manner that made production seem like a ritual, a choreographed movement, at some stages literally set to music. In fact, the anthropology of performance was an inspiration to understanding the economies of these staple crops. Audrey Richards captured both the social and aesthetic nature of the contrast with maize and cassava, whose cultivation - she wrote - was not only individual but "considered hard and unromantic work, quite unlike millet cultivation" (1939:304).

The contrast is not between roots and cereals but between two different categories of crop corresponding exactly to the New World staples introduced from the last years of the fifteenth century on the one hand and the indigenous African staples on the other. One could argue further then, that African farming had not started out female and individual; it had shifted in that direction at a certain period in the past. To see this one had to remove the temporal frame defined by evolutionary and social structural theory, and reposition it around a central focus, in this case the introduction of the New World staples into production repertoires.

Positioning the frame in an exploratory and experimental way to throw a focal historical process into relief gives a toe-hold into the problem of persistence by highlighting shifts that have taken place, however slowly and however little trace they have left in written sources. Perceptions, questions and methods are reoriented away from the evolutionary issue of why men farm at all, to social historical questions relating to the on-going process of getting into and out of farming, adding and subtracting different tasks, under different conditions, by both sexes. And to address this kind of question, a simple task-based description - men do this and women do that - must be inadequate because it fails to capture the performative sequencing of activities, the cultural ecology of crop-type

and field system, and the cultural-political links between work and claim on the product.

In a more recent paper (1988) I suggested that analyzing the rhythmic structures enacted in production - rather than the more classic description of tasks - might be a micro-level method of seeing the "practise", the turbulence of the customary division of labor revealed in the macro, multi-century, continent-wide vision. With a set of temporal frames provided by the nested calendrics of a particular system, one could center and recenter on what I thought of as "the beat", the moments of maximum social and cultural emphasis and possibly of contention as the rhythm of work picked up or syncopated in new ways over time with the addition of new crops, new techniques and new processes.

While I have felt somewhat satisfied - so far - that the distant vision of history and the close vision of practise have the same logical properties with respect to framing and centering, a further problem nags: their magnifications are dizzyingly far apart. One is too close, for the analyst and perhaps the actor as well, to discriminate the historically significant - the transformative - from just movement. The other is too far away to see the forays, experiments and struggles through which a particular path - recognisable to the analyst and plausible to the actor - gets taken. Other magnifications of vision were needed, intermediate temporal frames, to discriminate significant shifts of configuration from, on the one hand, structural or revolutionary change and, on the other, just "practise". This is a critical analytical issue, the problem of being able to scale up and down within a single theoretical framework, rather than having to shift assumptions at different levels of analysis. But differentiating degrees and kinds of significance is also a cultural and experiential issue. Understanding the step-by-step cumulative and configurational nature of change is not just an ivory tower challenge; people face it by exercising resources, applying discrimination and establishing interpretations to draw on the past and take hold of the future.

Having thought about the scale and significance issue for some time, I returned to Nigeria to plan a new field research project in the community where I worked in 1968-9, explicitly experimenting with an intermediate time frame, namely the past twenty years. Twenty years falls neatly into

no common anthropological time frame, not even a generation, except perhaps a female generation. It is not long enough to support an argument about major structural change, much too long for the ethnographic present, and it lends itself temptingly to the application of a kind of interpretation to which most anthropologists are - I think - allergic, namely the tracing of linear trends. This era had nevertheless been undeniably significant in Nigerian political, economic and cultural history. It begins during the civil war (the Biafran War), goes through the oil boom of the 1970s, the return to civilian rule in 1979, another military period from 1984 projected to last until 1992, and the jolting economic conditions of devaluation and structural adjustment. My own two pieces of "ethnographic present" field research had been done in moments of crisis, not stasis, the civil war and the structural adjustment period.

I have mentioned my good fortune. While men's farming in this community had undergone a certain expansion and technical modification over those twenty years, I found that the female processors and traders had effected more striking change by going into farming on their own account in unprecedented numbers. The male farming/female trade picture no longer held. Both men and women were crossing with some alacrity the categories of occupation I had implied - and mistrusted - as stable in my earlier paper, and the whole development seemed to be going in the opposite direction to the "evolutionary" path from female to male farming. The arguments briefly summarised above certainly left space for this kind of turn of events, but witnessing a real example offered possibilities that I have not yet fully explored to try out framing and centering concepts, and to locate persistence and transformation, over a period of rapid change.

The lecture's title: "present ethnography" is used to express the difference between this and description in an ethnographic present or long historical mode. It refers to an ethnography of the moment in all its particularity and incoherence, set in as many types of time frame as seem necessary to gain a sense of the direction of social and cultural dynamics, as seen from within as well as without, a changing configuration comprised of cumulative experience and the larger forces which shape it. One is asking - in this case of the gender division of labor - where did it come from and where does it seem to be going?: to its direct and indirect participants, categories which include "us" as well as "them". Having set

out the intellectual run-up, the remainder of this lecture is a quite prosaic first approach to the situation.

Yoruba Women's farming

Let me just locate the community. I worked in 1968 in a small town of about 6,000 inhabitants. While small by Yoruba standards, it is fully constituted, with a beaded-crown *oba* ("king"), a full hierarchy of chiefs, residential quarters, cults and occupational organisations. It was settled in the mid nineteenth century by refugees fleeing from the fall of Old Oyo, and throughout quite turbulent political history had fallen under the regional domination of Ibadan. Land is owned by compounds, residential and administrative units that are ideologically defined as patrilineal, but historically quite mixed in ways that are punctiliously preserved for customary legal purposes. As John Peel (1983) has put it, the past is in the Yoruba present in clearly and fully articulated ways. History and precedent are passionately explored and invoked.

This community lies outside the famous cocoa belt, in derived guinea savanna land. For at least a hundred years, the area has supplied savanna products to Ibadan, including food crops such as egusi-melon, yams and dried cassava that are produced less easily in the forest zone. It is an area of fairly low population density (about 50 per sq. km for the District as a whole, but as low as 14 in some farm areas), one in which the land frontier has not yet been reached, at least, not in the technical sense of carrying capacity, although land can be a cause of dispute.

So women's farming: First, obviously, one frames: 1968 and 1988, women's farm activities then and now, similarities and differences. **While in 1968** decision-making and control of farm income was predominantly in the hands of men, all women did carry out agricultural work. Teams of women hired themselves out for harvest work for which they were paid, even by their husbands or close kin. Wives helped to dry soaked cassava. Some women worked as day laborers picking tobacco. All women head-loaded crops from farm to village and from village to wholesale market; husbands expected this service and generally did not pay for it. In fact, the entire commercial side of agriculture was deeply dependent on women's portage because of the limited road network. In brief, a large proportion of women had regular duties related to agriculture. It was a version of the

classic interdigitated task structure, but with an unusually heavy emphasis towards women's specialisation in ancillary processing and trading tasks in a farming economy that became partially commercialised a very long time ago, certainly well before the colonial era and probably before extensive cassava and maize cultivation. This had been a yam and egusi-melon system.

Own-account farming, however, was quite rare amongst women in 1968, although not unknown. Of the sixty farms I visited (66 farmers), two belonged to women: middle-aged sisters, living on their father's land, and farming in ways that differed in only a couple of major ways from the men of the same village: their farms were slightly smaller, and they never grew yams in more than a few heaps. Another woman had an onion garden in wetlands in the dry season. They hoed, planted, harvested and generally carried out most of the tasks done by men. Land clearing could be done by hired labor, which both men and women employed.

There was no cultural injunction or moral objection to women farming on their own account. It was more a question of whether bending over in the sun all day was desirable for a woman in the child-bearing and nursing years. Farming is said to be aesthetically problematic. People age quickly and become thin working at farm. Their skin becomes dry and dark rather than shiny and supple. In pragmatic terms, since women's labor was a substantial and important contribution to men's farming any conflict of seasonal peaks on one's own and men's farms might lead to awkward bottlenecks if women were farming on any scale. So farming for women was inadvisable and awkwardly timed rather than frowned on; any woman to whom the conditions did not apply could easily become a farmer. The two women farmers I knew then were probably past childbearing, were marginally married, living on their father's land rather than their husbands' land, providing food for their children as well as a cash income. They were entering the stage of life where the gender constructions around sexuality and reproduction lose some relevance and they were choosing to veer closer to a male pattern of life.

Here one should extend the time frame and add that gender in Yoruba culture and history is more a secondary than a primary characteristic. A person is a person first, a member of a kinship-political unit and thereby a woman is eligible in principle for many activities normally considered

male. In the history of this community, for example, there were not enough drummers in the early years after settlement and so women from a drumming compound practised their family craft. Such a conception allows for what we might perhaps term situational flexibility in the gender division of labor as well as giving women ritual and socio-political obligations.

Because of these aspirations and obligations, all Yoruba women, like men, need money. Owo, money, omo children, ati alaafia and wellbeing, are the basic components of the good life for everyone. A woman has her own obligations, both to her natal kin group and her children, that cannot be met without cash. Evidence for women's demand for independent cash income goes back well into the early years of the nineteenth century. All able-bodied women have an occupation, usually more than one over a lifetime and generally, in a farming community, different ones for different seasons. In 1968 women occupations were mainly concentrated in trade, primary processing, cooked food preparation and harvest work.

In 1988 agbe, farmer, is an occupational title claimed by women. In a sample of 222 women of all ages, over two thirds (69%) said that they have farms of their own. Extrapolating from my studies of men's and women's farms, perhaps 20% of the total arable acreage is now farmed by women, a growth that has developed at the same time as men's farms have also grown in size. Taking 1968 as an arbitrary but useful baseline, I would estimate that - without accounting for demographic and occupational shifts for the moment - the small farm sector in this town and its environs has increased its acreage by about 50% over twenty years, over half of that increase due to the entry of women into farming, and the rest to the expansion of the farms of men already farming and having started farming since 1968. So this shift of women into farming is not a reallocation of tasks and responsibilities between the sexes, but part of a quite major expansion in farming in general.

Seeing both the figures on change and the apparent ease of the transition - which is now taken largely for granted - I mistrusted my earlier inference that women were rare farmers in the past. In fact, my survey in 1988 confirmed that women's farming had been a minority affair of somewhat older women. Nine per cent of the 222 women interviewed had been farming for 20 years or longer, and the youngest age at which

they had started farming was 26, an age at which a woman would have been ten years into her marital career. While these numbers impressed me that the stereotype of "male farming" had been substantially correct in the 1960s, they also highlighted the already-existing cultural and economic viability of women's own account farming which only the magnetism of the central tendencies - cultural and statistical - implicit in the concept of custom had relegated to so minor a place in the ethnography of the time. The existence of women's farming way back makes sense of the apparent lack of contention about their entry in much larger numbers during the past twenty years. Women's farming fit into a conceptual and pragmatic niche already created.

But the change is not simply quantitative growth. When one moves back and forth from the frame to various foci within it, some striking qualitative shifts emerge which suggest neither an absolute departure from custom, nor a simple continuation and expansion of an old customary sub-theme, but something else: an elaboration and a creation of a new configuration.

The key concept for this analysis is the temporally centered conception of the cohort, that is, a category of people engaging in a particular activity for the first time at a particular moment and therefore under particular historical conditions. Although it is a well-known concept in demographic and social research its use in anthropology has been limited, and its enormous utility as one method of understanding collective, rather than individual biographical, historical experience presented itself to me initially through the data rather than through theory.

Let me present that data. Working with both my survey of 222 women, and a more intensive study of 41 women farmers (40 farms), I initially thought in the anthropological terms of generation, that women of different ages and life stages would have characteristic farming patterns. This approach was quite revealing for the male farmers for whom farming had been their main life's work. The key variables are farm size, the proportion of land initially cleared by tractor, and the proportion of the land in cassava cultivation. Each of these variables contrasted male and female patterns of farming: men's farms were bigger, used commercialized inputs differently, and were more diversified in cropping pattern. Cassava,

of course, has tended to be a more female crop in Africa as a whole as I suggested earlier with respect to the long history of female farming.

Figures 2 and 3 summarise the results of an age-generation approach to women's farming, drawing on my sample of 41 farmers (40 farms). First farm size and proportions cleared by tractor (Figure 2): the variation in farm size by age/generation is quite narrow and rather surprising; the largest category is only 18% larger than the smallest, and there is no peak in the middle years as one might expect. Tractor use perhaps fits with expectations, that the younger generation might be more likely to use newer inputs.

Now cropping patterns (Figure 3): again there is a substantial similarity in the proportion of land devoted to different crops. Women are particularly focussed on cassava production, with a ten-percentage point variation from lowest to highest.

These are puzzling results because they really don't show any major variations amongst women, which ought surely to exist since they range in age from under twenty to over seventy, with all the variation in life condition that that entails.

Trying another tack I went back to the year of entry into farming. And here a certain pattern appeared that corresponded roughly with regional economic conditions. Taking the sample of 153 women now farming (out of the 222 in the sample), the following distribution emerges, which I felt justified in dividing into three steps (Figure 4). The large peak at 1969 represents the fact that I have grouped all those farming longer than twenty years. Between 1969 and about 1976 the entry of women into own-account farming was probably well below one per cent a year, a rate that would maintain a steady participation level of about 10 per cent. Around 1976 the rate of entry picks up to about 3 or 4 per cent per year, and plateaus at that level until around 1984, when it leaps upward to between 10 and 12 per cent per year for three years.

Now these phases of Nigerian history have some quite different characteristics. The period before 1976 sees the end of the Civil War (the Biafran War), the gradual revival of urban demand, some transport improvement and so on. During this period the older pattern prevailed. a few women went into farming each year but largely for idiosyncratic reasons.

By 1976 the conditions of the oil boom had really taken over: demand was high, transport was enormously improved, the occupational structure diversified, urban consumption patterns shifted and many commentators argue that the population grew dramatically.

1984 marks the beginning of the current economic crisis during which urban demand has stayed high, positive prices for farmers have been offset by dramatic increases in all consumer prices and the restoration of payment for services such as schooling and medical care.

Women's farming expanded during *both* these latter two phases, under widely varying conditions, suggesting that farming became an answer to several agendas, not a single response to a single condition. By looking at each *cohort* one might be able to link these conditions with women's changing constructions of a workable productive life.

Going back to farm sizes and my three variables analyzed by cohort, a variation in pattern of farming jumped out. Farm size (Figure 5) varies by cohort by a factor of 2.6; the women who started farming before 1976 have farms 260% of the size of those starting in the most recent phase, with those in the 1976-83 phase falling in between. That first cohort is closer to the male farm size than the others, 81% of the mean for the male sample

Labor mobilization in clearing for all the women's farms differs from the men, in that women hardly ever do their own clearing (note the dotted section of the male column). Otherwise, what one sees for the women is an increasing use of tractor hire, but a more striking increasing proportional use of hired labor which requires somewhat more bargaining skill.

If we look at farming style (Figure 6) complementary variations emerge. Cassava cultivation varies from 54% of total area for the earlier cohort through 61% for the middle cohort, to 79% of the most recent cohort. Diversification increases directly with the time spent at farming, inversely with the recency of the era - and conditions - of entry.

This variation amongst cohorts makes sense, the aspects fit together; economic conditions, farm sizes, and crop diversity produce the same pattern. The three short time frames have their own characteristics.

The next element to explore is the experiential one using person-centered time, consisting of each cohort of women's own explanations, constructions, ambitions and changing patterns of activity. With the

former analysis done, I looked at my interviews in cohorts rather than taking the whole female category or dividing it up by generation.

Again I found patterns. In the more intensive study of 41 women and their farms I had asked about former and present occupations, life situation and the reasons for taking up farming. Before going into farming, those in the oldest cohort, with one exception, had been either traders or doing no other occupation. Their reasons often included the need to bring up children alone: to provide food and an income but without doing the amount of travelling required by trade. Their situation reflects my more general sense that the minority of women who took to farming in the past were embarked into middle-age, marginally married, and needing to support dependents in food as well as purchased items.

The middle cohort was markedly different. Most had been very active in some kind of fairly substantial business such as trading food crops to urban centers. The comparative profitability of their current occupations had suddenly been affected after 1976 by the intersection of personal difficulties with the intensification of urban demand and the extension of the road network that made trade and processing much more competitive. Those who had been in trade found it difficult to replenish capital at a certain point, and those buying cassava to process for sale had found their supplies drying up as male farmers either did it themselves or turned to larger-scale bulk selling to transporters with pick-up trucks and lorries. Own-account farming became a potentially profitable enterprise that - unlike trade - one could enter without much capital, that could be kept to a low labor input if cassava were the main crop thus allowing continued work at other things, that might bring good returns if prices lurched upwards, and in any case provided food for a growing family population.

The most recent cohort, by contrast, had been predominantly in the cooked food, small-scale processing sector working the local market; only two had been in some sort of fairly substantial trade. This cohort included more of the quite old and very young, trying out farming as a small scale experiment. Only in this cohort did anyone give as a reason for farming that they were emulating others. Their small farm size and predominance in cassava suggests a limited and focussed orientation and perhaps limited farming skill.

One sees, then, two things: that farming by women becomes increasingly plausible as it comes to answer an increasing variety of female agendas, and that those agendas are still amenable to differentiation from one another. For the older cohort it was an avocation and a solution to unstable support from men; for the middle cohort, it was a way of sourcing one's own needs for trade and processing under conditions of expanding competition in trade and transport; and the last cohort, working in the context of the increased cost of living and the past modicum of female success in farming, brings all these reasons forward to "try it out". None of these conditions has disappeared. Each new stage adds a further element to the configuration, making farming an attractive, possibly increasingly necessary, proposition for further elements in the female population as the regional division of labor, male and female, shifts.

One can now begin to pose questions about the social and cultural implications, the emerging images and dilemmas for the immediate future of Yoruba women farmers. The fact that there is a powerful motivation and a collectively constructed configuration around it, does not mean that conditions and institutions will support its optimal development or growth. If the newest cohort gradually expands and diversifies to resemble the older one, pressure will be placed on land tenure; "present ethnography" therefore needs to focus on key cases involving a wife's long term access to good land in a system where plots have to be put into bush fallow. If prices remain as volatile as they have been in past years, women's farming will be much more vulnerable than men's because of the disproportionate dependence on hired labor for clearing and heaping; ethnography needs to focus on the dynamics of failure and insolvency. If the middle, more ambitious, farming cohort makes money, they might try to go back into trade; ethnography would look at investment and the juggling of several occupations and income sources. If farming remains possible but not profitable the key issue to explore is whether women give up farming and take on an expanded role in - for example - agricultural wage labor or perhaps increasingly take over the formerly male activity of family provisioning, resulting in a fundamental shift in family responsibilities. Women's conceptions of those responsibilities will figure prominently in the solution. However infrequent at present, cases

illustrating people's emerging thoughts and actions on these points can indicate the geography of their immediate future.

People themselves do not usually try to predict the future in comprehensive terms, but a "present ethnography" needs to include - in a manner different from the distant vantage point of history and the close analytical perspective of practise - the ways in which the various paths forward are prefigured.

Some concluding remarks

At present the patterns of farming in Africa - and in particular in Nigeria - are quite volatile. The volatility of the end of the twentieth century is as much a challenge to anthropology as the evolutionary trends, the timeless structures and the long term transformations in which we have specialised. An anthropology adequate to understanding the motifs of late twentieth century African dynamics needs to be experimental with time, self-consciously varying the length of time-frame, trying out framing versus centering conceptions of time, and exploiting already existing concepts such as the cohort which can bring history and biography, culture and situation together.

Looked at in this way, the surge of women into farming in this small Yoruba community is not a paradox of evolutionary change - evolution going backwards as it were - , nor a transformation of the culturally defined division of labor, nor unambiguously a linear trend (a rise or decline) in female status. We can draw on those models experimentally rather than applying them with *a priori* conviction, because turning too quickly to a familiar time frame with its implicit judgments about significance, shortcuts the process of understanding people's construction of plausible ways of living in the present and of envisaging possible futures.

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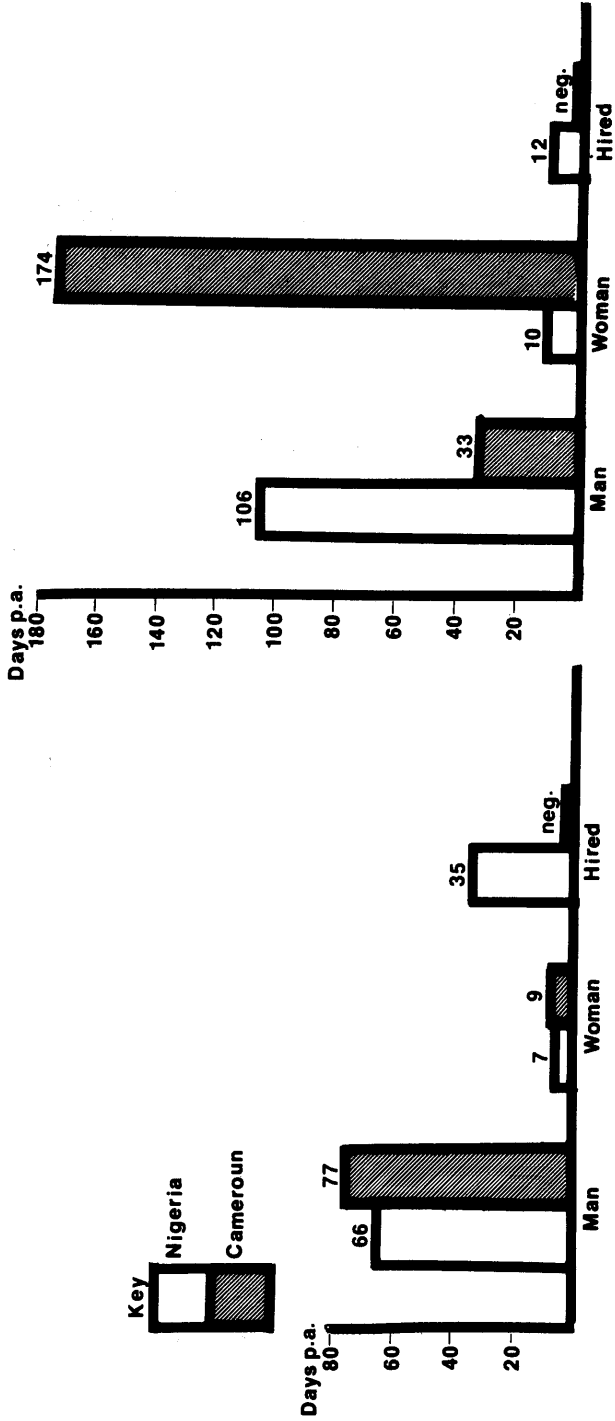
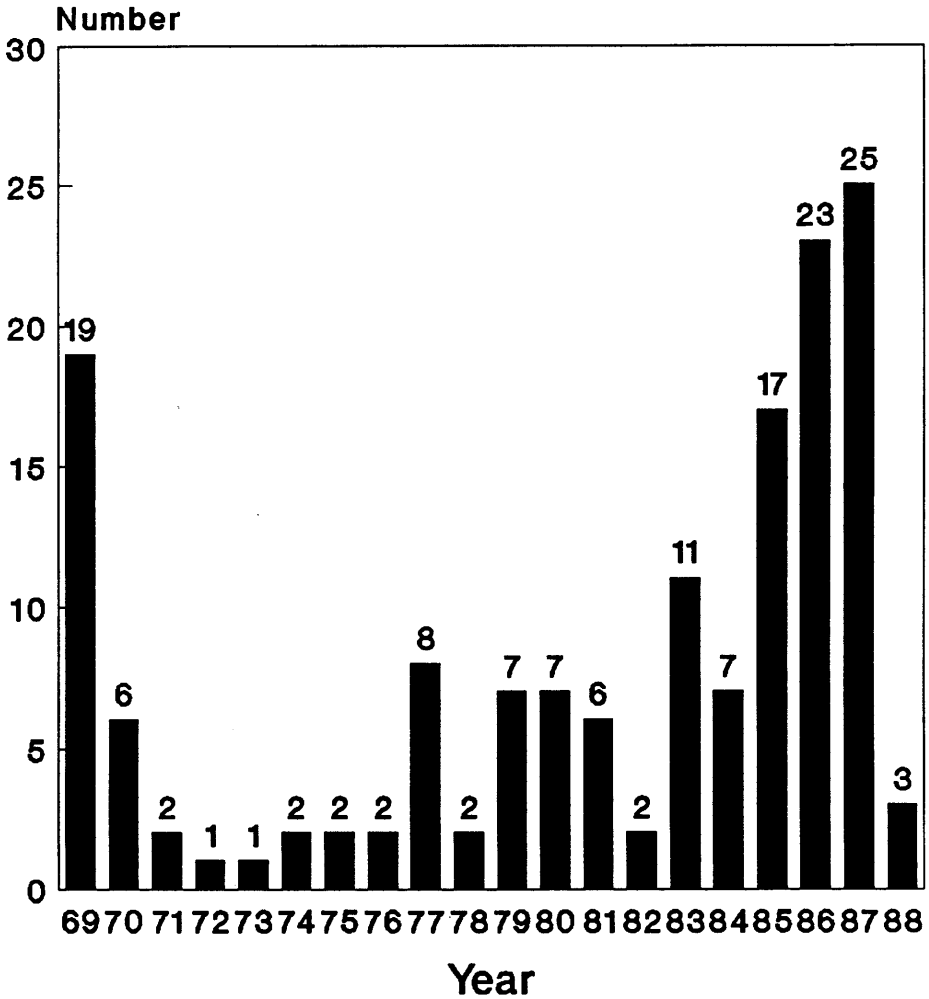


Figure 1

Figure 2

Women now Farming by Year Started 4 Compounds, Idere, 1988 (N=153)



First column Includes 1969 and before

Total sample: 222 women, being the resident female population of four Idere compounds on a festival weekend, one compound from each town quarter ("adugbo").

Figure 3

Labor Sources for Farm Clearing by Age of Women Farmers Idere, Nigeria, February 1988

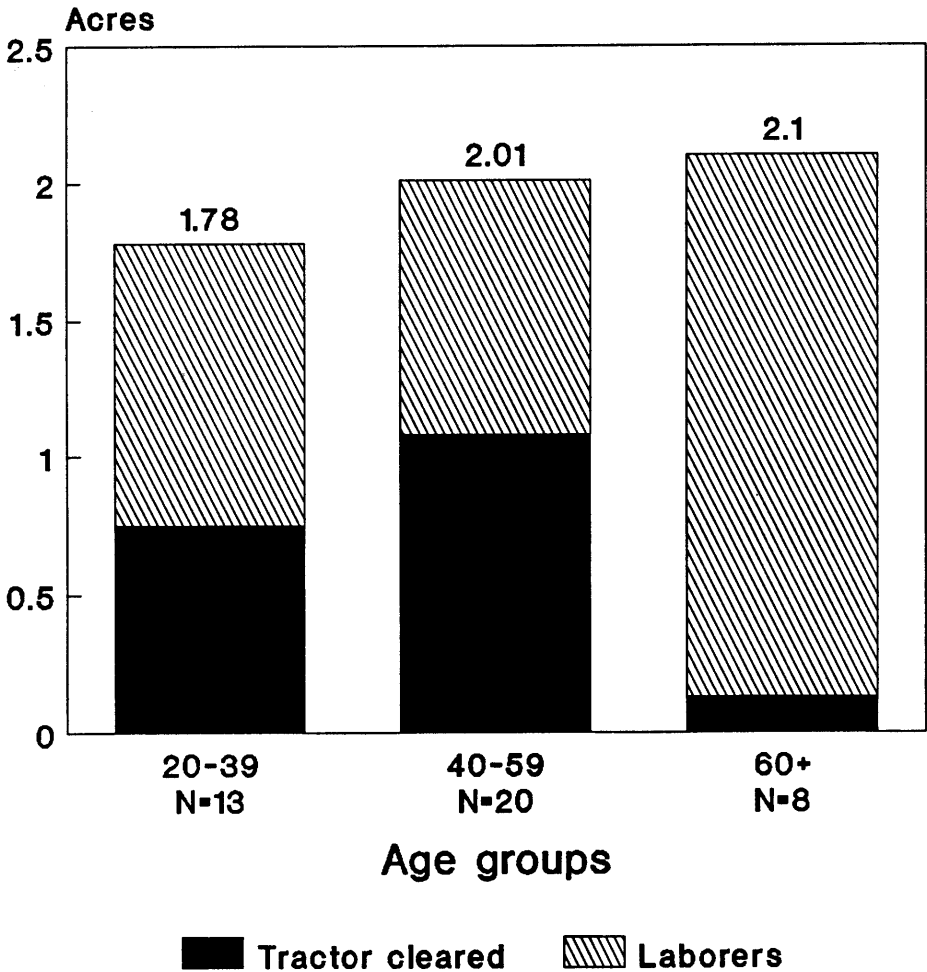


Figure 4

Proportion of Farm in Cassava by Age of Women Farmers Idere, Nigeria, February 1988

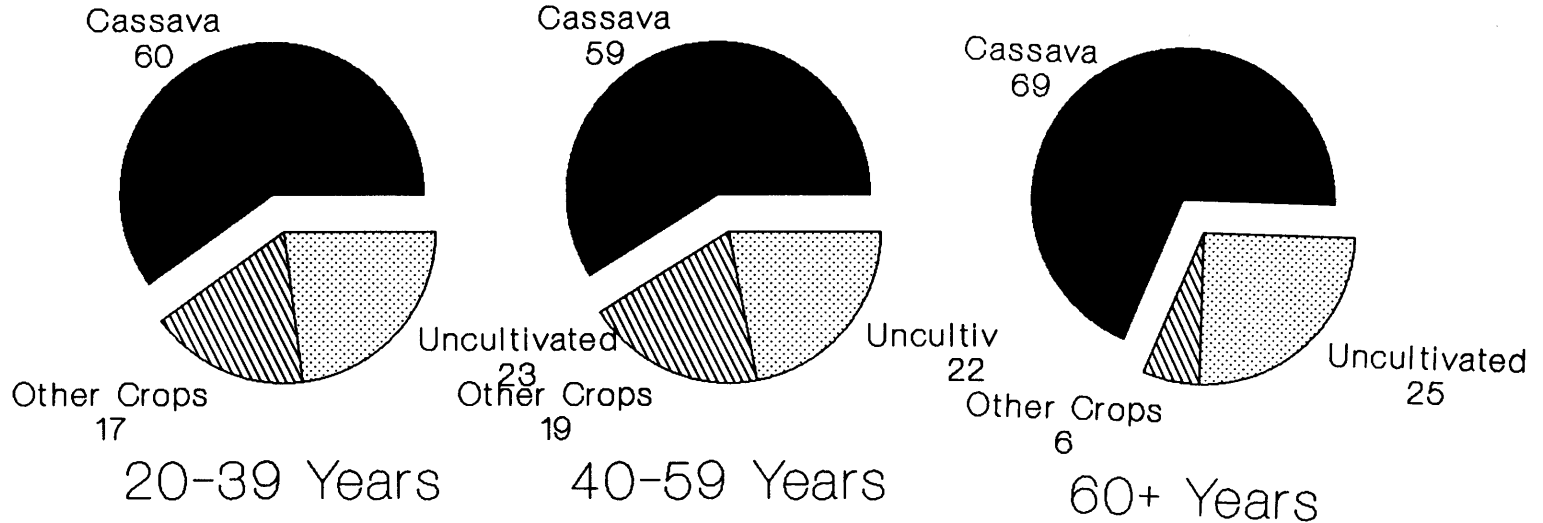
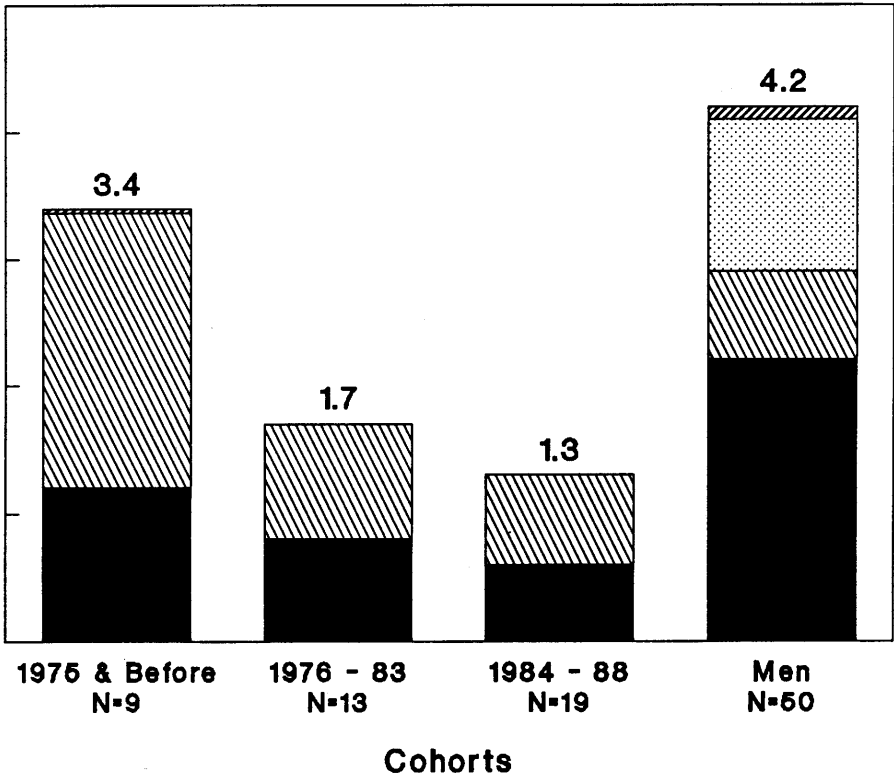


Figure 5

Labor sources for Farm Clearing Cohorts of Women and All Men Idere, Nigeria, February 1988

Acres



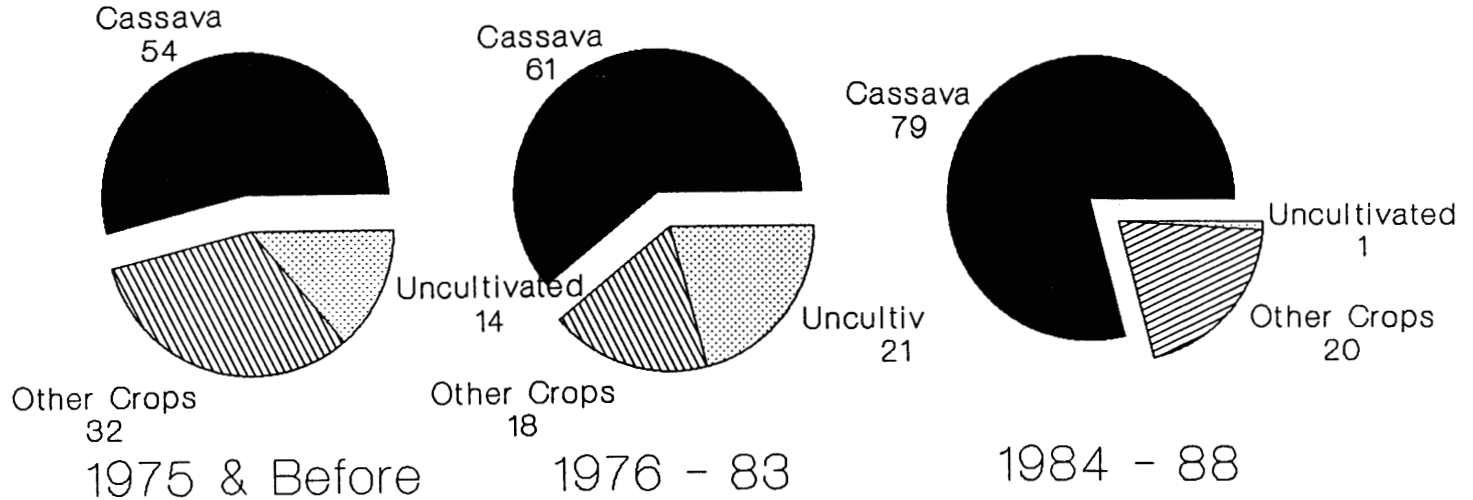
■ Tractor Cleared ▨ Laborers
▤ Own Labor ▩ Other

Farm size for small scale male farmers
Mean: 4.3 acres
Median: 3.4 acres
C.V.: 65%

Farm size for female farmers
Mean: 1.9 acres
Median: 1.5 acres
C.V.: 86%

Figure 6

Proportion of Farm in Cassava
Cohorts of Women Farmers
Idere, Nigeria, 1988



HANS WOLFF MEMORIAL LECTURESHIP

Hans Wolff was born on April 6, 1920 in Mainz, Germany. He immigrated to the United States in 1937, attended Queens College, New York from 1939-1941 and then transferred to Indiana University. From 1942-1946 he served with the Military Intelligence Corps. After the war he returned to Indiana and in 1946 the B.A. magna cum laude in Linguistics, he was awarded the M.A. in Linguistics in 1947 and in 1949 a double doctorate in Anthropology and Linguistics. In 1949 he was appointed to the faculty of the University of Puerto Rico where he taught for eleven years. His early work was in Amerindian languages, especially in Siouan studies, and in the teaching of English as a second language. While still at the University of Puerto Rico, he was invited in 1953 to visit Nigeria, and from that time his interest in Africa and African languages grew. He published widely on the languages and language problems of Nigeria, and became one of the leading authorities on Yoruba. He helped to found and to edit the Journal of African Languages, assisted in the early development of the West African Language Conference, and for several years served as Chairman of the African Linguistics Committee of the African Studies Association. At the time of his death in September 1967, he was Professor of Linguistics at Northwestern University.

The Hans Wolff Memorial Lectures were established at Indiana University to honor his considerable contribution to African Studies.

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