

# University Report

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COSMO PIETERSE:

This week a fuller report from the University of Nairobi on the role of women in rural politics. But first to Kano, in Northern Nigeria for a brief report on historical research on the old Empires and Kingdoms of West Africa. In Kano, Mr. John Lavers, lecturer in African History at the Adbullahi Bayero College which is part of the Ahmadu Bello University. Mr. Lavers first came to Nigeria in 1965. His field was anthropology. From a study of one area in anthropology, Mr. Lavers's interests took in more and more historical material. But now he has forsaken straight anthropology for history, and his department's present teaching and research include the history of the States of the Chad Basin. This history covers the Sudan and Chad and includes states like Old Bornu which covered parts of modern Cameroun, Nigeria, Libya and Nigeri. So Robin Story asked Mr. Lavers what were the sources of historical material for this large area.

MR. LAVERS:

Oral traditions and written materials. I have done some work in Bornu. I have been helping with one of the UNESCO projects. The long term aim is to produce a UNESCO history of Africa, and to this end certain areas have been laid down as key importance. Hausaland, the history of the Fulari peoples, the Mende-speaking peoples Swahili, etc., and of course the one that I'm interested in the history of the Kar peoples. I have been organizing a group of students, they go into the field

MR. LAVERS:  
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in vacation time with tape recorders, they receive some basic training. These are usually students who speak local languages or dialects of Kanuri which vary greatly, and they go out and collect genealogies, village histories, songs relating to past events, etc. Then I myself have been working in the archives in Europe, Paris and London in particular. But am hoping if I can't go myself to get someone to work in the archives in Istanbul because we have letters from the Sultans of Turkey to rulers of Bornu in the 16th century.

Vatican archives have produced a lot of material. There was a Prefect of Bornu who died in Northern Nigeria in 1710 I think it was. The contacts between Bornu and Morocco, we have surviving letters from Morocco; again mainly 16th century. So you see there is a surprising amount of material in the archives in Europe which people have not come across so far.

ROBIN STORY:

Yes, you have surprised me with those references. Now, when you've compiled all this material what do you hope to do with it?

MR. LAVERS:

Well most copies will be handed over to UNESCO to do with as they wish. I imagine that a team of historians will be put to work on it, I hope that I will be one of them. But one of the aspects of Bornu history that interest me is the Bornu Caliphate. That is the period from about 1500 to the time of the Fulani Jihad in the beginning of the 19th century. But also the story of a man called Radeh who came across from the Nile Valley, he was a Mahdist leader; he was a follower of the Sudanese Mahdi, and he came across and conquered Bornu in 1893 and was killed by the French in 1900. And he

MR. LAVERS:  
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is often dismissed as being a brutal conquerer, but he seems to be a very fine soldier and a particularly fine administrator, a gifted administrator. I am hoping to gather enough material, and I hope to produce a book in my Sabbatical year in 1973.

COSMO PIETERSE:

Mr. John Lavers, lecturer in African History at the Abdullahi Bayero College, Kano, on research into old West African empires. Fascinating stuff! And so onto research into relatively recent history and sociology: What role did women play in rural politics in Kenya in the 1940's and 1950's. What role do they continue to play there through the 1960's and into the 70's? This was what Ahmed Salim started discussing with Dr. Gideon Cyrus Mutiso last week.

There is little or no need to talk at length about the re-examination of the male/female relationship in the world at large. Europe - especially the United Kingdom and America - especially the United States of America, are rife with, or ripe for women's liberation, for female emancipation, rights for wives. And the fight continues to gather momentum.

Now in some areas this kind of redress of the place, role and rights of women has taken place more or less as a social evolutionary process. In the absence of husbands, or of most men, it has been found, especially in rural areas, that elderly women have taken on community leadership. Dr. Mutiso's research covered precisely this field: the literacy of the women in the leadership of rural organizations, the role of women generally in rural politics, the impact of rural organizations.

Our Ahmed Salim asked Dr. Mutiso whether there was a side and deep conflict between urban and rural areas:

COSMO PIETERSE:  
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was there competition in political pull and political organization between city and town on the one hand, and village and farm on the other.

DR. MUTISO:

No, I don't think the rural organizations see the conflict. Most of the time when you are interviewing the leaders, they always manage to complain about the urban based organizations just coming around to see them when they need something. In other words, when it is a period of elections, or a period for a campaign for leadership of the national women's organization, maybe they'll go around campaigning the local areas, most of the national organizations are utterly irrelevant, and are so in the eyes of the organizers of the rural women. And as a result they have a kind of an independence which is based on the district they are organized in or whether they are organized in terms of locations, and they relate to the local situation much more than any of the outside institutions tend to relate to them. What I mean when I say they are the only effective institutions in the rural area, so effective actually that if you look at the self-help projects which have been going on in Kenya and have been sort of accepted as the major avenue for rural development, since the Government can't finance all rural development. One finds that these are the women who contribute towards public Harambee projects, they contribute almost 60-80%, depending on what district you are in.

ROBIN STORY:

Through these organizations?

DR. MUTISO:

Through these organizations. They organize the raising of the money, they isolate the project, they decide what projects, and indeed a lot of time they are very much

DR. MUTISO:

involved in competing with the other institutions of the wider society in terms of where these projects are going to be and this is the process of politics you know. Indeed, one of the ironies of the independence of the rural organizations, be they women or otherwise, is that indeed the politicians, and the administrators, have found out that if you want to be effective in your own area, you have to make peace with them, more than you have to make peace even with the political party. So as far as I am concerned these are the critical institutions in the rural areas.

AHMED SALIM:

In other words, if elections are about to take place, you are saying that they local politicians from the town have to go back to something like these organizations in order to gain support - and get people to canvass for them.

DR. MUTISO:

Precisely. Now let me explain this, if you look at the older material in rural politics in Africa, in general. They have always argued that the local politician organizes a machine and its through that machine that he links up with a national political party. My own argument is that actually the local politician is in a very precarious position, because he doesn't actually control any of these organizations. There are situations where some women's organizations have started by a politician because he wanted to use them for electioneering purposes. But in exactly two years they changed directions - under their own local leadership, and indeed that politician has to go and petition them. These are the power-holders so to speak, because every politician who wants to get elected has to come and show to them what is going to benefit them for him to get elected. As a result you find a very peculiar situation in which most of the political scientists who have been working in the rural areas haven't talked

DR. MUTISO:  
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about. This is the idea that in the rural areas probably new coalitions are created everytime there is a major campaign or a major policy issue, and you can see this out of the way the politicians proposition the independent based rural organizations.

AHMEND SALIM:

Now obviously the women have also influence over the men in their areas not just of the women?

DR. MUTISO:

They do, a formal machine of the organization is controlled strictly by women, there are no men anywhere. But in terms of their raising funds for say Harambee projects they always go around raising money from every family, and lets not make a mistake about it, a lot of times they coerce people who don't want to support a particular project to, indeed, do it. But I suppose the whole process of development has got an element of coercion in it, in terms of disturbing peoples way of living so I can in a way live with that. Indeed it is not a significant aspect of the organizations, I only pointed it because this is the way they get the men to help them in the project they want.

AHMED SALIM:

They have a stick to beat the men with?

DR. MUTISO:

They do. They do have a stick of some kind and I suppose it is basically social functions. You know in our societies that they whole idea of mens status vis a vis women sometimes can be used very effectively in a public place to make you acquiesce to something you wouldn't ordinarily acquiesce to, and this is really the technique. It is used very effectively in mass meetings, you watch it in public meetings like I have in the last six months and you see it constantly,

DR. MUTISO:  
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whereby the women get up and say "You men, we have contributed 500 shillings, how are you going to be beaten by women" and some men then collaborate in the activity and it raises a lot of money, it is a very effective technique given the social psychological framework of most of the men.

MOSMO PIETERSE:

In the absence of husbands or most men, it has been found, especially in rural areas, that elderly women have taken on community leadership. But age can't be the only factor in choosing leaders, so Ahmed Salim asked Dr. Mutiso how he'd describe the people who are the leaders of these rural organizations.

DR. MUTISO:

Most of the women were not very high status people in the rural areas during the period of the 50's. You know if you are talking about social stratification in the rural areas in the 50's and 40's in Kenya anyway, it is merely the people who are allied with the missionary centres. Because they are allied with the missionary centre they get educated. Because they get educated they get the preferred jobs, i.e. teachers, nurses - women basically became nurses and teachers. These women didn't make these jobs so they were the low status groups in society and probably the last few years of the colonial period there was a lot of what has been called communal labour in most of Kenya - for people who were doing general public labour. But to the extent that most of the men were in regular jobs, women were recruited to do this for the family because this was allocated in terms of family. And I would argue here that this kind of status issue where these are low status people going in to public life i.e. organizing an organization which concerns itself with public life are given much greater status. Clearly this is in keeping of the logic of the nationalist movement whereby when people joined the movement and were active, they could be seen there in the

DR. MUTISO:  
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mass rallies etc., and so acquired a lot of status. Indeed I argue that the same kind of logic continues, and these women are essentially going into public life as a way of solidifying their own status within the rural society.

COSMO PIETERSE:

Now, to what extent is this rural Kenyan leadership by, or primence of women in society - in politics particularly - a very special feature of East Africa, even of Kenya? Wasn't it caused by peculiar circumstances, such as the absence of husbands, and men generally, during World War II? Is the phenomenon found elsewhere? And is research going on into it in other places? This was the last question Ahmed Salim put to Dr. Mutiso

DR. MUTISO:

You see if one raises the whole general question of the participation of African women in politics in the wider sense, there'd always the phenomena called the market women in Western Africa. This has been studied, but the studies have been basically economic studies, they never really accentuated the social, political role. It seems to me that people should pay attention to the situation wherby in say the Western region of Nigeria, the Ibadan market women, just last year, managed to move on the barracks, and sort of hold them hostage for a couple of hours. This becomes quite political because it is not a matter of studying market distribution systems. We are hoping that we can interest other sociologists and political scientists to look at the political impact of women in the rural areas, in at least eleven other countries so at the moment we are shopping for funds for that kind of activity.

COSMO PIETERSE:

Dr. Gideon Cyrus Mutiso, on possible research into women's political role in African societies.

And with the hope that Institutions which may have the means to help this fascinating research, may come to hear about it perhaps through "University Report" - it is, until next week, this time, goodbye from me Cosmo Pieterse.