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Family Roles in Nigeria: Implications for Policies and Programs Relating to Women and Development

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Overview of the Country

In spite of increasing urbanization, more than 70 percent of Nigeria's 66 million people still reside in its tropical, rural areas, and agriculture continues to be a mainstay of the economy. Within its complex and diverse 340,000 square miles, Islam is professed by 50 percent of its people, English is spoken along with 250 tribal languages, and the geography ranges from uninhabited mangrove swamps in the Niger River delta along the Atlantic coast in the south, to the Sudan and Sahel savanna zones in the north.

Nigeria, one of the largest and most densely populated countries in Africa, is a leader among Black nations and the second largest supplier of crude oil to the United States. Unlike many other countries, Nigeria's oil-wealth has helped place development within economic reach.

However, sound national planning procedures, such as those which permanently integrate rural women into development efforts, can more rapidly bring about the increases in productivity, income, employment, and equality, which are necessary for development. This paper will address such issues.

Research Purpose and Methodology

Centuries before 1975 was observed as International Women's Year by the United Nations, the women traders and farmers of Nigeria had been making substantial, but often unrecognized, contributions to national and agricultural development. While the economic roles of urban West African women, and in particular the Yoruba, have been well documented, there is less research on the diverse roles of rural Nigerian women (8) (16). The purpose of this study, which was carried out from 1974 to 1977, was to examine division of labor and decision-making by sex for selected farm and household activities and to identify additional sources of women's income. Food consumption and storage,

women's involvement in extension and community activities, and marriage and child-rearing practices were also explored.

The results of this survey were used to delineate policies and priorities for an extension program designed to reflect women's roles in rural Nigeria, rather than ideas imported from abroad. The study was also used in a subsequent and parallel aspect of the program which was to identify appropriate curricula for training extension personnel at Nigerian schools of agriculture and universities. From 1973 to 1977, the author served as an advisor to this two-part program which was conducted collaboratively by the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. The program was among the first home economics extension efforts to emphasize women's roles in agricultural production and to establish policies promoting the integration of women in development.

A questionnaire was developed, field tested and revised in 1974-1975. The final interview schedule took approximately one hour to administer, and consisted of unstructured and structured questions, including check lists for various farm and household activities. The interview schedule was simultaneously translated from the original English into local languages as it was being administered in 66 rural households in eight geographic regions of Nigeria. Households were selected by the interviewers as representative of a cross-section of rural families in the area. Most of the questionnaires were administered by Nigerian field level extension workers during the rainy season, from late May to July, 1975. For much of the country, this is a period of intense agricultural activity, including planting, weeding and harvesting.

While the limitations of the data are realized, the households selected represented a range of farming systems and ecological zones. Ethnic groups included but were not limited to the Hausa, Fulani, Sokoto, Kanuri and Tangele

in the north, the Yoruba in the west, Igala in the near north, Igbo in the east, Urhobos in the midwest, Ogoni in the Niger River delta, and Ibibio, Efik, and Ekoi in the southwest. (Refer to the map in Appendix A.)

Results

Only three aspects which have important implications for development planning will be discussed here: (1) women's economic roles including farming activities, (2) division of labor in the household and compound, and (3) decision-making.

Women's Economic Roles. In Nigeria most rural women are economically active. Without exception, in all 66 households in this study, female adults were contributing economically, either through farming or by earning additional income by means of an astounding array of other activities. The latter included petty trading, pounding grains, pressing palm and groundnut oils, selling handicrafts, hair-plaiting, carrying homemade bricks to construction sites, sewing for others, and preparing food items for sale. In many cases women combined these activities with full or part-time farming. It appeared as if they had one foot in the traditional sector through subsistence agriculture, and the other in the modern sector, participating in the monetized economy through these income-earning activities.

In this study, women who described themselves as full-time farmers often reported eight-hour days in the field during the rainy season, working on both food and cash crops. A somewhat typical example was in the Niger River delta, where women grew cassava, okra, corn, cocoyams and plantain. Women also contributed their labor for weeding, harvesting and marketing of the main cash crops which included rubber, oil palm and cocoa. In this area, women who were full-time farmers reported the same number of hours in the field as

their husbands. All of the women sold excess food crops, while 40 percent reported having additional businesses as petty traders or seamstresses. Similar patterns were found among the Ibibio and Ekoi in the southeast, the Igbo in the east, and Urhobos in the midwest.

However the research indicated that open participation in agriculture was more limited in the predominantly Muslim northern areas where women are generally in seclusion (purdah) during daylight hours. This was not the case though for southern Muslim women belonging to the Yoruba ethnic group who do not usually practice purdah. Yoruba females have a long tradition of highly visible economic and social independence (6).

The ten northern Muslim households in the Zaria area included in this survey consisted of 16 women who demonstrated striking similarities to those in Simmons 1976 study (13). All of the households reported businesses in food processing, such as pounding grains for others and making fura (millet balls), or weaving cloth for sale. These businesses were conducted inside the compounds where the families lived. Simmons points out these women are motivated to earn money for personal items, for giving gifts to friends, and for providing gifts of food, clothing and money to their children. In nine of the ten households, young children sold the products outside. In the tenth household, the wife had no young children left at home, and since she was past childbearing years, was freer to move about. Husbands sometimes contributed capital, but expected repayment when goods were sold.

The use of children as sales intermediaries was not limited to the areas where women of childbearing age kept purdah. In the southeast, for 80 percent of households sampled, children sold food, drinks or other objects produced in the home. In the Niger River delta, the figure was 60 percent.

For the entire country, in almost every household sampled, men kept the

proceeds from the sale of cash crops, and in the majority of cases, women kept the income earned from food crop sales.

A surprising number of men in the southeast and in the southern delta area shared or kept the profits from the wives' businesses in sewing or petty trading. On the other hand, they also accepted more financial responsibility for their children's education than was noted in other areas.

Yoruba women, with their long-standing economic independence, retained financial control over their businesses. They were also more likely to have sole responsibility for their children's food, clothing and education. These conclusions are similar to those in an earlier study of Yoruba farm families in western Nigeria. Only five percent of the women were entirely supported by their husbands and only two percent of them did no work other than domestic activities. About 20 percent of the women received nothing from their husbands and provided everything out of their own earnings (2:42-43).

In nine of the ten Muslim households sampled in the Zaria area, women also kept the proceeds from their own businesses. However, some of the women who said that they kept the income they earned, also reported seeking their husband's permission to spend that money.

Boserup reports one of the highest rates of African polygamy among Nigerians, 63 percent of all marriages (2:40). The results of this study conform to those statistics, not only among Muslims, where up to four wives are allowed, but also among largely Christian populations. For example, in the southeastern area, among an all-Christian sample, 50 percent of the families were polygamous, with an average of three wives in each polygamous household. For an all-Christian sample in the Niger River delta, 90 percent practiced polygamy, with 2.5 wives per household, while in the midwest, 90 percent of the sample families were polygamous. In each of these areas, the rotational or long fallow

systems, whereby depleted land is left to grow back and regain its fertility, is the predominant farming system. As Boserup points out, additional wives are an asset and contribute to economic development when spare land is available for cultivation by them under this farming system (2:38).

Division of Labor in the Household and Compound. Not surprisingly, women were responsible for most activities in the household and compound, including food preparation and utilization for home consumption, sweeping and cleaning, fetching fuel and water, kitchen gardening, care of children, and preparation of food, drinks or objects for sale. Typically four to six hours per day were spent on these activities. The care of children was combined with other duties. A few men were involved in daily child care and some reported that they helped with kitchen gardens. The most time-consuming domestic activity was the preparation of food for home consumption, which often took four hours of a woman's day. The least time-consuming was sweeping and cleaning, which was usually accomplished in an hour or less. Children assisted with this and with fetching fuel and water, which often required one to two hours per day. For many households, water sources were several miles away. In the north, where ground water levels permitted wells, the task was easier. In the south and east, women, children and a few men often did laundry in streams. But males in the north usually hired outside labor for this task or washed their own clothes.

Only women in the south and east did much sewing of clothes at home, perhaps because a larger number owned sewing machines, listing "seamstress" as a second occupation. In the north especially, there was widespread use of male tailors for men, and female tailors for women. In the north also, it was men, not women, who purchased food for home consumption.

The only household or compound task for which men were entirely responsible

was housebuilding and repair. Since repairs were usually made only once a year and male relatives or friends could be called upon to assist, this activity did not require the significant year-around time commitment demanded by most of women's household activities.

Decision-Making. Two categories of decision-making were included in this study: (1) managerial decisions, such as who decides what work should be done for the household or farm, by whom, when and how; and (2) expenditure decisions, such as who decides what money should be spent, and for what purpose. These distinctions yielded some fruitful and interesting results.

For the northern households, both managerial and expenditure decisions were dominated by males. Mickelwaite (1976) noted this same power imbalance in favor of men in northern Nigeria (9).

For the rest of the country, expenditure decisions, especially those involving substantial sums, were likely to be made by men. Women were most likely to share in or influence management decisions, including those relating to farming activities. They were most influential in decisions about food and clothing, or the education and selection of marriage partners for children.

In conclusion, it seems that the segregation of sexes by occupation and responsibilities, noted by Tinker (1980) for Africa in general (14:6), prevailed throughout rural Nigeria and was most persistent in northern Muslim areas. The variety and the extent of women's participation in Nigeria's rural economy was noteworthy and appeared to exceed official 1980 estimates that women constituted 40 percent of the labor force and that half of these employed women worked in agriculture (17).

Implications for Policies and Programs Relating to Women and Development

Taken region by region, the results of this study may not be surprising; what is striking is the disparity between regions. This leads to the conclusion

that there is no one model suitable for the integration of rural African women into development efforts. The design of programs for rural women must be decentralized and cannot be restricted to macro-level planning carried out in a national office for an entire country.

It seems impossible to achieve and unreasonable to wait for solutions such as those proposed in the following report:

> ".....policy makers and project design officers could wait until results allow the specifications of a development model in which women are analyzed as a factor in labor/management and which can be generally applied, and then insist that AID use the model in such a manner that women are fully integrated into the project." (Emphasis mine) (9:100).

While it is obvious that programs for rural African women should include training related to agriculture, are we not getting to the point where we can state with some degree of specificity for certain regions of Nigeria exactly what those needs are? For example, if 98.4 percent of Yoruba women in a 1976 study (11) were engaged in marketing functions, such as storing, grading, standardizing, packing and transporting of crops, then we might begin by offering short-term agricultural training on these aspects of marketing.

In contrast, it would be inappropriate at this time to propose access to existing male-oriented agricultural extension services for northern Muslim women. Rather, efforts should focus on means to make their food processing industries more efficient and profitable through training in management and accounting, some form of consumer and production economics, techniques for nutritious, hygienic food preparation, and literacy and numeracy training when required.[1]

Women in seclusion could most effectively be reached in the evening when

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[1] While 25 percent of Nigerian males are literate, only 6 percent of females are, with even lower female literacy rates occurring in the north (17).

they are allowed to go out, in locations where they are permitted to gather, such as other women's compounds, at weddings and health clinics, or by means of radio broadcasts. Considering the shortages of extension personnel, one-to-one contact is impossible. The education and training programs described above must be supplemented by access to credit and intermediate technology appropriate for small-scale food processing. Machines for food processing industries in which women are traditionally involved should be: (1) inexpensive enough to be owned by women; (2) designed for the physical limitations of women, including weight, height and arm length; (3) inexpensive and small enough to be kept by individuals in their compounds, or portable and communally owned in order that women can combine their food processing work with childcare and other domestic responsibilities; and (4) designed with a basic mechanism having interchangeable parts, so that different seasonal crops can be processed (7:6). Other considerations for appropriate technology are identified by Carr (1978) and Tinker (1980) (3) (14).

For women in the south who are engaged in trading and vending, similar training could be offered after market hours in a centralized location. In addition, southern and eastern women require access to agricultural credit and training institutions, to agricultural extension services for production, processing and marketing, and to agricultural inputs, such as seeds and fertilizers.

Research on 31 Ngwa women who spent 340 days yearly on farming activities and who had weekly contact with the agricultural agent is as heartening as it is unusual (10). The agricultural agent happened to be a woman who was later assigned to the project described in this paper. The case illustrates the potential of training more women in agricultural institutions, who can in turn make greater efforts to reach female farmers.

Considering the widespread use of children as sales intermediaries through-

out Nigeria, the impact of the recently introduced Universal Primary Education (UPE) scheme requiring all children to attend school must be examined.[2] Can their labor be replaced in the south by cooperative marketing or in the north through more organized use of women past child-bearing age as distributors? The economic consequences of UPE may be a reduction of income to women in purdah, while the social consequences may be that fewer women will wish to remain in seclusion. However, northern Hausa women tend to define themselves as housewives first and see their crafts and trading as secondary roles (5). Universal Primary Education also implies that women are likely to assume more of the domestic and farm tasks which children assisted with in former times and the drift of males to the cities has already increased these responsibilities. But Universal Primary Education may also mean that as young females become more educated, they can be trained for salaried work in the modern sector, leaving more opportunity for profitable small-scale traditional businesses among older, less educated rural women.

It should also be obvious from this research that while traditional home economics extension programs directed solely at women's household activities are inadequate, development efforts which ignore these roles are insufficient also. There is little evidence from the industrialized world that development relieves women of most domestic responsibilities.

Perhaps it is more appropriate to re-direct some of the traditional home economics training, such as sewing and handicraft production. Clothing construction techniques, combined with small business management, might be

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[2] In 1975, almost half of the boys and a third of the girls were attending primary schools. At the secondary level, male enrollment was 24 percent, while female enrollment dropped to 14 percent, explained in part by the fact that almost three-fourths of Nigerian females aged 15-19 are married. (17).

taught as a home-based industry, since many households in this study used tailors or seamstresses in their villages. Bread and baby food were frequently purchased by families in this study. Improved or higher protein products, made by village women using local ingredients, could raise nutritional levels while creating cooperative village enterprises. Food and livestock production offer other income-earning opportunities. Stimulation of the rural economy through agriculturally related industries, such as the partial processing of food, appear to be viable home economics development strategies in which women have potential contributions.

Cloud (1977), Nnonyelu (1978) and Aremu (1979), in reporting the concerns and training requests of rural women in developing countries all mentioned areas traditionally associated with home economics: food preservation and gardening (4), child care (10), and production of local crafts for sale (1). And priorities identified at the 1980 Copenhagen Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women and reported by the USAID Office of Women in Development (15:41) support the need for further efforts in child care, family planning, and food production.

This paper argued for the development of decentralized and specialized programs which acknowledge the economic contributions of rural Nigerian women and take into account the vast and critical differences in their visibility and roles. These differences appeared to be related to complex factors such as religion, ethnicity, stage in the life cycle, ecological zone and types of farming systems.

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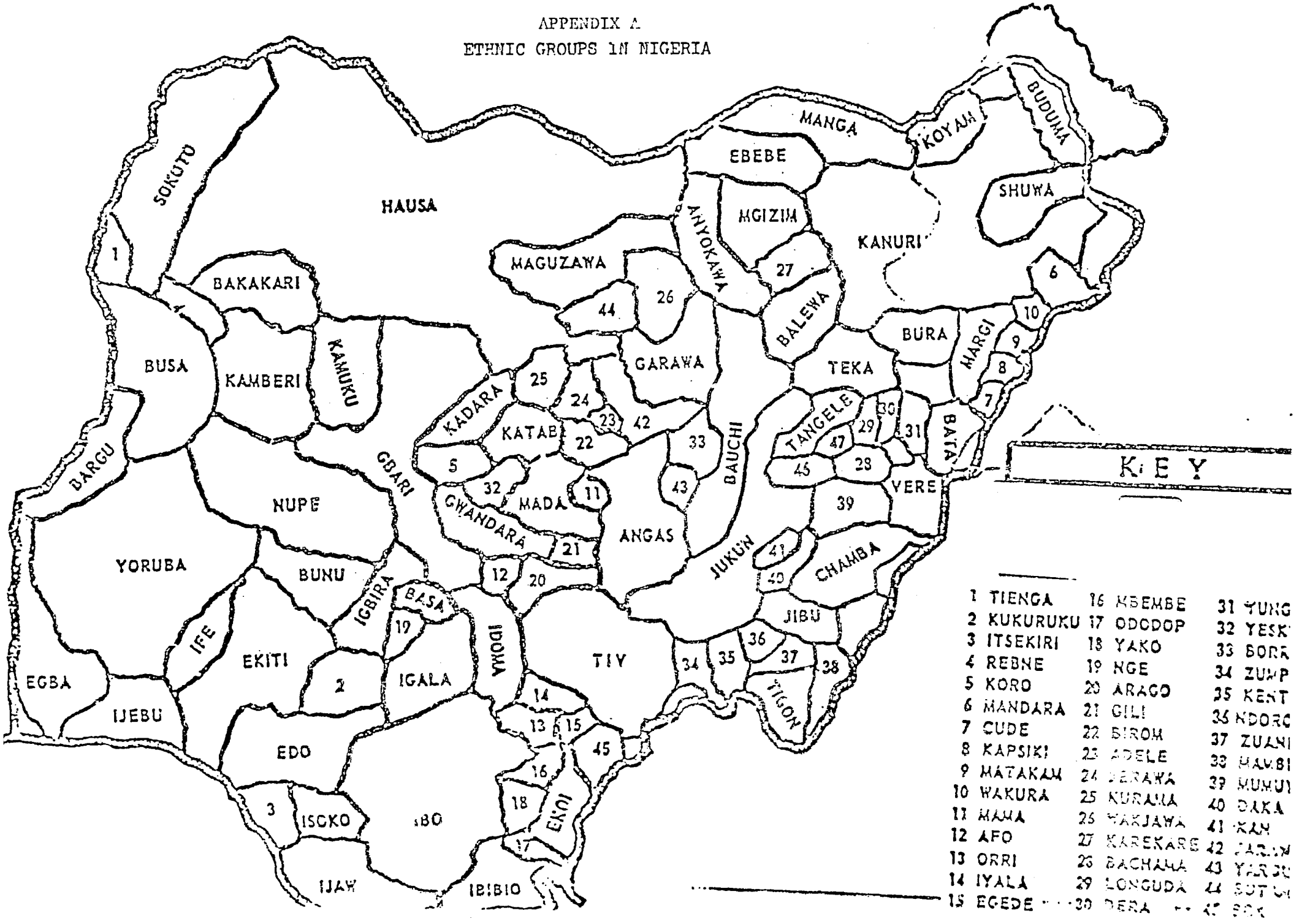
APPENDIX A

ETHNIC GROUPS IN NIGERIA