

African women in the economy

1 Women in the rural economy:
past, present, and future

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The great majority of African women are farmers. Most days they must work in the fields from four to eight hours, aided only by a simple hoe, in order to provide their families' basic food. They must also work a second labor day fetching firewood and water, and drying, shelling, storing and cooking the food from their gardens, all the while caring for their children.

The rural woman's labor day has changed little since the pre-colonial era, except that today it is longer and therefore harder. The social constraints which shaped a woman's economic and domestic work in the pre-colonial period still hold, although modified by the colonial integration of African rural economies into international economic systems. This chapter examines the impact of pre-colonial socio-economic structures and of colonial changes on today's rural African women and on the work they do.

Readers should be aware that research into pre-colonial traditions is a hazardous exercise. Social systems and cultural practices were obviously changing throughout the period due to internal contradictions, the interpenetration of different societies, and a millenium of long distance trade with the outside world. Source materials on African societies in the pre-colonial era are both scarce and problematic. Written records of eighteenth and nineteenth century observers are mainly reports of outsiders such as travelers and European anthropologists. There are more studies from the colonial period which are often informative but also limited by the biases of the colonial mentality, especially racism and sexism. Finally there are more recent studies by both foreign and African scholars based on oral history and interviews with old people who can recall various traditions from the early twentieth century. All these sources have their limitations, as informants sometimes attempt to reinterpret 'tradition' to support their own positions in social struggles, such as those between men and women.

esser extent for Zimbabwe and Namibia, Stephanie Urding discusses the movements' ideological commitment to the liberation of women, their strong emphasis on the political mobilization of women, and women's important roles in the armed resistance. In some cases these factors have led to important roles for women in the post-independence governments, but in most cases it is still too soon to tell whether women will retain their power and how the proposed changes in production will affect women.

In most African countries today, African women lack political power. Chapter 9 points out that as the locus of power has shifted from village and lineage to the centralized nation-state, politics have become even further removed from the arenas in which women have had influence. Less than two or three percent of the top leadership in African countries is female. One political forum for African women's issues is the national women's association or the women's branch of the national political party. The strengths and limitations of these organizations in articulating women's interests are discussed in Chapters 9 and 5.

Despite women's lack of power, public policy continues to have an enormous impact on women's status. Two factors have led to increasing concern among policy-makers with women's issues: the crisis in African food production and the pressure of the international feminist movement. Yet policies designed to increase food production may affect women farmers either positively or negatively, depending on how control of production and the rewards of labor are divided between men and women. In discussing this problem, Chapter 11 returns to the theme of the sex division of labor in agriculture elaborated in Chapters 1 and 2.

In Chapter 11 Barbara Lewis summarizes the impact on women of land tenure changes, settlement schemes, extension services, disaster relief, and technological innovations. Technological change is a particularly complex subject and deserves to be better understood. Lewis points out that innovations such as cooperatively owned corn mills have in some cases lightened women's labor, yet in other cases machine-powered mills and presses have threatened to displace women's vital cottage industries and create unemployment, since women have neither the capital to own the new mills nor access to alternative jobs. Finally, Chapter 11 compares three current development projects: one which has worked to the disadvantage of women and two which promise, despite obstacles, to benefit them. The factors which lie behind the differing outcomes are analyzed. The book concludes with the hope that African planners and international aid donors will make more extensive efforts to design projects which will bring genuine benefits to Africa's women.

Notes

- 1 The major source for this was is Meillassoux (1981).
- 2 For a full discussion of this issue and a review of recent literature in the field, see Strobel (1982).
- 3 This division of men's and women's roles was first proposed as universal by Michelle Rosaldo, 'Woman, Culture and Society: A Theoretical Overview', in Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974).

Pre-colonial period

Economic systems

Food farming in pre-colonial Africa was almost everywhere a system of

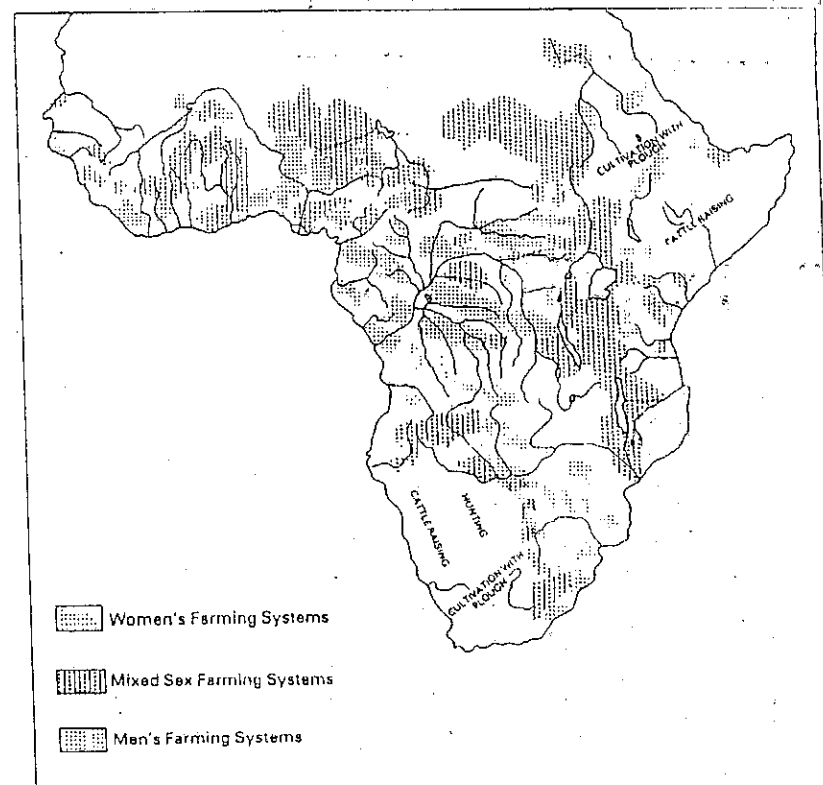
shifting hoe culture. A new field of one to two acres was cleared in forest or bush land once or twice a year. After two or three crops had been produced, the field was abandoned or left to fallow for 15 to 20 years. This type of farming system required either low population density and plenty of virgin land or the periodic migration of the community to new areas when the land was exhausted. The perpetual need for new farm land and also the episodic dangers posed to small stateless societies by expanding or slaving states made migration a perennial feature of most people's lives.

Men's role in extensive hoe agriculture was commonly limited to the heavy land-clearing phase, but they also played a military role in defending and acquiring land—a relatively frequent requirement with shifting agriculture. Women usually carried out all the major farming tasks—breaking up the soil, planting, weeding, harvesting, and carrying the harvest home—with little or no male help. African shifting agriculture is commonly referred to as a woman's farming system (Boserup, 1970).

In contrast, a small number of African societies practiced an intensive form of hoe agriculture, fertilizing their land or fallowing for very short periods. Intensive agriculture was found in mountainous areas where volcanic soils had high natural fertility, and in areas where invaders or aggressive neighbors had pushed smaller groups into limited landscapes. Due to the use of organic fertilizers, the terracing of slopes, the maintenance of water control systems, and systems of crop rotation involving close planting and more careful weeding, intensive farming systems usually demanded more labor than women could supply alone. Thus combined male and female food farming (usually with a sexual division of specific tasks) was more common among intensive than among extensive farmers.

Farming systems in which men performed the bulk of the work with little or no female help were rare in pre-colonial Africa. Male hoe farming was found in the savannah region which forms the southern border of the Sahara desert, for example among the Senufo described in Chapter 2, and among the Yoruba peoples of southwestern Nigeria and Benin (Dahomey). In some of these cases, Islamic women lived in household seclusion (purdah), while in the Yoruba case they worked in food processing, trade, and handicrafts. Oxen-plow cultivation was even more rare in the pre-colonial period, but where it existed, for example in Ethiopia and in a few cases in southern Africa, men sometimes took over most of the agricultural labor.

We can get an impression of the relative importance of women's, men's, and mixed sex farming systems from Map 1, originally published by Hermann Baumann in 1928. Baumann studied the sexual division of labor in 140 African societies described in anthropological studies and travelers' reports from the pre-colonial and early colonial periods. He found that women did all the field work, except clearing, in 40 percent of the cases, men did most of the work in 15 percent, while mixed sex farming systems prevailed in 45 percent (Baumann, 1928: 308-16). Women's farming systems dominated in tropical rain forests such as the Congo basin and were also common in Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Africa.



Map 1: The sexual division of labor in African agriculture around 1900
Source: Hermann Baumann, 'The Division of Work according to Sex in African Hoe Culture', *Africa*, 1, 1928, 293.

Agriculture was combined with cattlekeeping in many societies of east and southern Africa. Women usually took the entire responsibility for food farming while men herded the cattle and cleared the land. In strictly pastoral and nomadic societies such as the Masai of East Africa and the Fulani of the West African savannah, men herded and women milked the cows and produced butter. In hunting and gathering societies such as those of the forest dwelling Pygmy peoples and among the San peoples of the Kalahari Desert, men hunted and women supplied the regular diet of roots, berries and fruit.

The household and the state

African political systems ranged in structure from small stateless communities to vast hierarchial empires. There was, however, an element of continuity: all were based on the extended family as the fundamental socio-economic unit. The polygamous household, headed by one man with several wives and unmarried male dependents or, alternatively, composed of a group of married brothers and sons with their wives and

dependents, was the basic production and consumption unit in almost all societies. Within the extended family household, each wife and her children formed an economic sub-unit with a separate kitchen, fields for food production, and perhaps cattle. Each extended family was embedded in a socio-political structure characterized by networks of wider economic and political obligations based on kinship ties. Nonetheless, most households were self-sufficient economic units producing their own food, housing, and other necessities.

There were three basic categories of social and economic roles in the internal structure of the household: the top position of household head, the middle position of temporarily dependents males who would one day attain the position of household head, and the base position of permanent dependents. The permanent dependents were those persons who would never become heads of their own households: women in almost all societies and men who had been enslaved or who had become clients (economic or military servants) of a powerful household head whose protection they sought.

The division of labor in the extended family household reflects its structure. The household head, sometimes in conjunction with the lineage head or clan chief,¹ controlled the use of land and other economic resources (such as tools or cattle). He also controlled the labor of his family members. The household head allocated food fields to his wives, instructed them to feed clients and guests, and sometimes required that a portion of the harvest go into his personal granary. He distributed the field clearing, herding, and military tasks among the dependent males of the household. A patriarch with a large dependent family did little work himself.

The 'men's work' in agricultural and pastoral societies (land clearing, house-building, herding, and military tasks) was usually performed entirely by the dependent males of the household—the sons, younger brothers, nephews, clients, and slaves of the family head. 'Women's work' included food production, storage, and preparation, the manufacture of pottery, baskets, mats, clothing and other household goods, care of children and the sick, and a wide range of domestic and personal services for children and for men, especially for their husbands. This traditional sexual division of labor in the family has been reproduced in ideology and in practice for centuries. One of its most important legacies is the contemporary expectation that African women must feed their families, either by growing the food themselves or by earning the money necessary to buy it. Since most African women have enormous difficulties developing a sufficiently large cash income to purchase their daily food, either in town or in the countryside, the great majority are forced to spend the bulk of their labour time in subsistence food production.

During the pre-colonial era, women played important roles in the social and political reproduction of households and kin groups. When women were exchanged as wives, they provided their fathers and husbands with social, economic, and military links to other lineages and clans. The alliances created by marriage ties were important to the political prestige and the military strength of households and their heads. As Gayle Rubin points out, however, it was men who became the

partners in these relationships, while women were but the means by which they were created (Rubin, 1975: 174).

As wives and mothers, women also provided their husbands with the most valuable category of dependent—children. A large progeny was the key determinant of a man's social prestige, political power, and economic prosperity.

In most African societies, the key measure of a man's wealth was the number of dependents in his household (Meillassoux, 1964; Laburthe-Tolra, 1977: 154). The association of wealth with persons rather than with material goods is explained by the conditions of production. Unlike many other world areas, labor—not land—was the scarce factor of production in Africa. A man's ability to expand his control over land and his production of food and livestock depended crucially on the number of dependent men in his household and on the number of women farmers whose agricultural and domestic labor he could mobilize.

With control over people as the key to political power and economic accumulation, control over marriage was a vigorously defended patriarchal privilege. Until he was married, a young man remained a dependent who owed total obedience and economic service to his household head and patriarch (O'Laughlin, 1974: 313). No man could arrange his first marriage on his own, he had to wait for his father to 'give' him a wife. Marriage was the beginning of a man's social and economic emancipation. Once married, he could control the labor and output of his wife and eventually exchange his daughters in marriage for new wives. Marriage allowed men to accumulate dependents and social status; for women, marriage marked the transfer of dependence from father to husband.

Stateless and state societies

Many pre-colonial African societies had no permanent political structures above the household level. Socio-political linkages were formed on the basis of kinship, but positions of leadership or political power were rarely vested in a single person or group. In most stateless societies the ideology of equality among all household heads was widely respected. While differences in wealth and prestige inevitably emerged as heads of households and lineages strove to become 'first among equals', the basic rules of political and social organization were designed to diffuse political power. Decisions on important social and military matters requiring inter-household cooperation were made in a council of elders which grouped all the household heads concerned with the matter at hand. Because women were rarely heads of households, they took no part in the society's primary political structures, although women often formed similar, but less powerful, social and ideological organizations.²

The line between stateless and state societies in pre-colonial Africa cannot be clearly drawn. We find societies sometimes described as stateless in which the principle of equality among household heads was routinely violated and particular lineages gained political and military dominance. When lineage or clan chiefs were exacting both military allegiance and economic tribute from subordinate households and lineages, it no longer seems appropriate to call their societies stateless.

State societies in pre-colonial Africa ranged from hierarchical lineage systems to complex empires grouping several different societies under a single political center. Expanding states integrated subjugated peoples into a unitary polity in several ways: tribute systems in which ivory, slaves, and women had to be given to the king or ruling group; feudalistic labor service systems in which conquered peoples worked for the ruling family or for all members of the dominant ethnic group; and systems of direct slavery. In any state society there was a clear economic differentiation among households: the vast majority of families provided an economic surplus which was expropriated by the dominant strata.

The study of women's economic roles is more complex in state societies because household relations intersect with the social class and tribute relations of the wider society. An excellent example of the dual effect of patriarchal and feudal relations is provided in Ethel Albert's fascinating discussion of women's roles in the kingdom of Burundi (Albert, 1971). Here the conquering Tutsi king distributed land and cattle among his male kin. The king's relatives (called nobles) had the right to demand tribute and labor service from Tutsi and Hutu commoners. The pastoralist Tutsi looked after the cattle of the king and the nobility, while the agricultural Hutu worked the farms of the Tutsi as serfs.

Women's economic roles varied significantly with the class position of their husbands. The 'noble' Tutsi wife merely supervised the agricultural labor of male Hutu serfs. The 'commoner' Tutsi wife had to clean the cattle kraal, churn butter, and do a great deal of farming herself. The Hutu wife, her husband being continually away farming for the Tutsi, was left alone to provide all the food required for the survival of her family.

The feudal relations of the Burundi kingdom originated in the pre-colonial period, but they remain to oppress the lower class to this day. Albert remarks, 'most of the women of Burundi . . . must work to the limit of their strength so that they will not die of hunger. This is because most Rundi are of the inferior castes where men and women share the wretchedness of the poor' (Albert, 1971: 181). Like his wife, a Hutu man is exploited and impoverished. He is, nonetheless, a patriarch in his own family where his wife must 'kneel before him when she offers him his gourd of beer' (Albert, 1971: 187).

Slavery

Slave relations existed in both stateless and state societies. In most cases slaves were integrated into the household social structure. Female slaves were often designated as wives of the household head who claimed all their children as his own. To become the wife of the patriarch did not necessarily give a female slave any greater security than a male slave—both could be given as payment on a debt (this was often true of 'free' wives as well), and slaves of either sex were subject to serve as human sacrifices, especially at the funeral of an important master (Laburthe-Tolra, 1977: 1283-96).

In most African societies slavery was limited to a few slaves per household (MacCormack, 1977; Miers and Kopytoff, 1977). On the

other hand, in some state societies such as the Muslim sultanates of the West African Sahel, the wealthiest families might own hundreds of slaves who were either settled in agricultural villages or integrated into the patriarch's household as concubines or servants (Fisher and Fisher, 1971).

The topic of slavery in Africa and its relation to the various inter-continental slave trades is the subject of a great deal of recent research.³ Rather than try to review this literature, I will simply make three observations which are particularly pertinent to the themes of this chapter. First, the Atlantic slave trade of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries contributed to the growth of highly centralized and militarized African states against whose slave raids the traditionally stateless societies had little protection except distance and rugged terrain. Second, in the slaving societies which practiced slavery themselves, the majority of retained slaves were women, due to higher prices paid for males by the Atlantic slave traders, the fear that male slaves could be hard to control in great numbers, and the fact that the traditional economic roles of women and children made them highly useful in African agriculture and as household servants (Meillassoux, 1981; Manning, 1981). Third, some of the 'male farming systems' described earlier, such as the Hausa of the West African Sahel, made extensive use of both male and female slave labor in agriculture.

Kinship systems

A person's position in the family largely determined his or her economic role. This section will discuss the impact of kinship relations on work and economic position by examining the differences between patrilineal and matrilineal societies.

The majority of agricultural societies and all pastoral societies in nineteenth-century Africa were patrilineal, that is, societies in which the most important kinship relations are traced through the male line. At marriage a bride moved to her husband's village where she was expected to remain for the rest of her life. A woman's marriage usually established or reinforced an alliance between the heads of her own and her new husband's lineage. Nevertheless, for a long period the bride was considered a 'stranger' by her husband's kin (Paulme, 1971: 12). The stranger had to prove her fidelity to her husband's family by bearing several children for their lineage and by producing many good harvests.

In patrilineal societies a woman's economic security was more precarious than in matrilineal situations, because a wife farmed her husband's land and did not have firm land rights in her natal village. If the marriage was harmonious, all was well. But if the marriage was bad, a woman would not only lose her land rights if she fled from her husband, but she also risked losing those land rights for her children. Many women farmers still face this dilemma today.

When a man died in these patrilineal societies, his eldest son usually inherited his social position as household or lineage head. With his brothers, the heir also inherited land rights, cattle, material possessions, and, most important, the female and slave dependents of the deceased father. Daughters inherited little or nothing from their fathers; wives

never inherited from husbands. Widows and their unmarried daughters were themselves inherited by the deceased's heir. Thus, even after the death of her husband, a woman still belonged to the patrilineal family which had paid her bridewealth. She was part of a man's wealth, and society was organized to press her into accepting that role.

A widow had important incentives to accept her inheritor as her new husband. If she did so, she continued to enjoy the social acceptance and land rights her former marriage had provided. If she refused, she had to leave her husband's village, an option which put her sons in danger of losing their rights to the land she had farmed. Furthermore, if her children were beyond the age of seven, a departing widow could not take them with her; the children belonged to the father's lineage.

Matrilineality refers to the practice of tracing kinship allegiance and inheritance rights through the mother's family. In matrilineal societies, men inherited land and social positions from their maternal uncles rather than from their fathers. Maternal uncles also made the marriage arrangements for their sisters' children. But matrilineality didn't change the fundamental domestic principle of patriarchal rule. Men, rather than women, still controlled land, marriage, dependents, and politics. As in patrilineal societies, a woman was not consulted about the arrangement of her marriage, and marriage involved the same obligation to work in the husband's interest. When the husband inherited land, his wives were obliged to farm it for him, an obligation which often required abandoning their own fields in their maternal villages.

On the other hand there were several aspects of matrilineal customs which tended to improve women's economic and social security. First, a woman did not necessarily have to move away from her maternal village when she first married. If her husband had not yet inherited land from his maternal uncle, he would establish a household and farm in his wife's village. Second, if the marriage broke up, a divorced woman could reactivate land rights in her maternal village much more easily than divorced women from patrilineal societies (Hill, 1978: 221). Finally, if a woman divorced, her children remained with her because they 'belonged' to their maternal rather than to their paternal kin. One matrilineal society, the Senufo, is discussed in the next chapter.⁴

Pastoral societies

African pastoral societies were patrilineal and patrilocal. Five or six independent households usually grouped together in small villages which were moved twice yearly between wet and dry season pastures. Each household head, often the husband of several wives, was the social equal of the other household heads in his village. Each wife had her own one room house inside the village compound. In contrast to the prevailing practice in agricultural societies, in most pastoral groups women were the housebuilders whereas men built the thorn fences which surrounded the village and formed a protected kraal for the cattle at night (Dupire, 1971).

For men, economic and political rights were determined primarily through membership in clan-wide age groups. A young man normally passed from junior dependent status in his twenties and thirties to senior

elder status in his forties and fifties. Younger men were the primary herders and warriors while the elders, upon whom the junior males were dependent, directed the herd movements, negotiated water rights with other groups, controlled raiding and military activities, and arranged marriages (Hedlund, 1979; Reisman, 1980; Jacobs, 1975).

As in agricultural societies, women were social and economic dependents first of fathers, then of husbands (Bryceson and Mbilinyi, 1980). Women's access to cattle, the primary means of subsistence, was based on the fulfillment of their obligations as wives and mothers. A woman had to use her 'marriage cattle' to feed her family. The milk and butter she produced were shared among a wide network of kin and friends because the socially regulated use and sharing of food were vital to the reinforcement of communal relations and territorial cooperation with respect to land and water rights. A woman's cattle could also be used to provide bridewealth for her sons. In fact a woman had no effective personal claim to 'her' cattle because she had to hold them in trust for her sons (Dupire, 1971: 86). On the other hand, Dupire suggests that pastoral women were considerably less restricted than most women in agricultural societies on matters concerning choice of residence and choice of sexual partners. Still, like their agricultural counterparts, today's pastoral women work harder and longer than their husbands or sons in order to complete the tasks which are considered the social obligations of their sex (Reisman, 1980).

Hunting and gathering societies

While most agricultural societies engaged in hunting and gathering, only a very small number of African peoples, principally the Pygmies of the dense tropical forests and the San peoples of the Kalahari Desert (often called Bushmen), relied on hunting and gathering for their entire subsistence. Because these groups depended entirely on finding food supplied by nature, communities were small and highly mobile. Current research among the !Kung San of the Kalahari found groups averaging 35 people (Draper, 1975). Both men and women range far from the camps when seeking food. The camps themselves are moved at intervals of several days to several weeks.

In the pre-colonial period and even to this day, hunting and gathering societies had no apparent hierarchical domestic structure or patriarchal rule within extended family relationships. Marriage tended to be relatively impermanent. Wives could leave husbands or even the community itself with little difficulty, taking their children and simply joining another group. It was generally accepted that children 'belonged' to their mothers although neither boys nor girls were controlled in their economic and social behavior by parents in a manner comparable to patriarchal control over dependents in patrilineal and matrilineal societies. It is important to note, however, that !Kung women's rights in children apparently diminish when hunting and gathering groups begin to settle in villages (Draper, 1975: 108).

The egalitarian relationships among men, women, and youth in hunting and gathering societies contrasts strikingly with the subordinate position of women in other African societies. Kjaerby (1979) attributes

this to the fact that the labor of women and youth was not mobilized by men to produce a surplus product. It is also significant that people's total dependence on nature's products for food made it largely impossible to form large, stable communities. The possibilities for reproducing a strong patriarchal hierarchy were thereby reduced. Still, more research is needed if we are to understand how women in hunting and gathering societies escaped the economic and personal subordination which was so common in other African societies.



6

Tale of an Old Woman



There was once an old woman who had no husband and no relations, no money and no food. One day she took her axe and went to the forest to cut a little firewood to sell, so that she could buy something to eat. She went very far, right into the heart of the bush, and she came to a large tree covered with flowers, and the tree was called *Musiwa*. The woman took her axe and began to fell the tree. The tree said to her, "Why are you cutting me? What have I done to you?" The woman said to the tree, "I am cutting you down to make some firewood to sell, so that I can get some money, so that I can buy food to keep from starving, for I am very poor and have no husband or rela-

tions." The tree said to her, "Let me give you some children to be your own children to help you in your work, but you must not beat them, nor are you to scold them. If you scold them you will see the consequences." The woman said, "All right, I won't scold them." Then the flowers of that tree turned into many boys and girls. The woman took them and brought them home.

Each child had its own work—some tilled, others hunted elephants, and still others fished. There were girls who had the work of cutting firewood, and girls who had the work of collecting vegetables, and girls who pounded flour and cooked it. The old woman didn't have to work any more, for now she was blessed.

Among the girls, there was one smaller than all the rest. The others said to the woman, "This little girl must not work. When she is hungry and cries for food, give it to her and don't be angry at her for all of this." The woman said to them, "All right, my children, whatever you tell me I will do."

In this way, they lived together for some time. The woman didn't have to work except to feed the littlest child when it wanted to eat. One day the child said to the woman, "I am very hungry. Give me some food to eat." The woman scolded the child, saying, "How you pester me, you children of the bush! Get it out of the pot yourself." The child cried and cried because it had been scolded by the woman. Some of her brothers and sisters came, and asked her what was the matter. She told them, "When I said I was hungry and asked for food, our mother said to me, 'How I am worried by these bush children.'" Then the boys and girls waited until those who had gone hunting returned, and they told them how the matter stood. So they said to the woman, "So you said we are children of the bush. We'll just go back to our mother, *Musiwa*, and you can dwell alone." The woman pleaded with them every way, but they wouldn't stay. They all returned to the tree and became flowers again, as it was before, and all the people laughed at her. She dwelt in poverty till she died, because she did not heed the instruction given to her by the tree.

—Bondei