I am pleased to discuss the relevance of traditional agriculture as part of the cultural background in less developed countries. My foreign experience over the past five years has been in Africa, mainly Nigeria, but I have traveled and recorded observations in other West African countries and to a more limited extent in East Africa. For this discussion my remarks are restricted to West Africa, with a focus on Nigeria.

Nature of Problem

In the broadest sense, the problem of traditional agriculture is seen in the fact that the less developed countries are finding it more and more difficult to feed themselves. Two immediate facts stand out. First, the gap between current production and food needs in developing countries is widening. The deficit is now approaching 25 million metric tons of food per year. Second, food production per unit of land and labor in certain developing countries is declining relative to population growth.

The problem of low unit production has two attendant considerations. For less developed countries, and especially for Africa, there is a growing concern for nutritional deficiencies. These nutritional deficiencies may emerge from an absolute food shortage, from a shortage of the proper foods (especially protein), from poor selection and preparation of available foods, or from inadequate incomes with which to buy nutritious foods. Moreover, if we assume that economic development in the form of increased per capita real income will, in fact, come about, there will certainly be changes in tastes shifting to inferior status many of the starchy staple foods. Significant adjustments in production would then be required.

All of these aspects of the food problem are, I suppose, vital considerations for home economists.

Some Features of Traditional Agriculture in West Africa

The popular image of Africa is based more nearly on exaggerated stories than on detailed observations and intensive research. This inadequate knowledge of Africa has caused me to review relevant characteristics of African agriculture in considerable detail as a basis for mutual understanding.

*Dr. Johnson is agricultural supervisor, Africa Bureau of the U.S. Agency for International Development. The ideas expressed herein are those of the writer and not necessarily those of USAID.
Before 1959 only Ethiopia, Liberia, and South Africa were completely independent. This meant that the great mass of Africa was under colonial, protectorate, or trust status. A great deal of general economic development occurred during this time, particularly in the form of infrastructure and the exploitation of raw materials. Since countries of Europe controlled vast areas of the world in addition to Africa, it was customary and logical to produce raw agricultural commodities on the basis of comparative advantage. If, for example, climatic and other conditions were suitable for growing cocoa in Nigeria and Ghana, there was little need to undertake the research costs and the risks of trying to grow it elsewhere. The same reasoning was true for tea in India, sugarcane in Central America, palm oil and peanuts in West Africa, and the like.

The outcome of past history shows itself in the agriculture of West Africa today. In each country in West Africa there is a concentration on one or two export crops as a principal source of cash and foreign exchange earnings. In countries like Nigeria, significant research advances and certain technical changes were associated with the production of these cash export crops. The export sector was relatively progressive.

But the traditional food-producing sectors did not change during the colonial era. African economies have been supplemented, but modified very little little by the addition of cash export crops. The principal export crops are cocoa, rubber latex, coffee, timber, peanuts, and cotton. Palm kernels and palm oil are also important items of export, the fruit being collected mainly from wild trees. In addition to exports there are numerous kinds of trees, bushes, and annual crops whose products are utilized for direct local consumption and trade. These include bananas, plantains, papaya, mangoes, avocados, and kola nuts.

When tropical trees and bushes have been removed sufficiently in the forest zones to permit sunlight to filter in and in savanna areas where open land is available, patches of land in garden sizes are prepared for the planting of corn, pepper, root-crops (mainly yams, cassava and cocoa-yams) other mixed vegetables, and guinea corn. The numbers of such patches of food crops are likely to multiply near village compounds.

In association with traditional cropping, farm animals consist mainly of native goats, sheep and chickens in the forest zones, the tsetse fly being a killer of other domesticated livestock. Most of the commercial cattle are therefore confined mainly to savanna areas where the tsetse fly threat diminishes. The cattle are usually owned by nomadic people. A new arrival from western countries and temperate zone agriculture would no doubt be astounded by the apparent absence of conventional farms. Instead of the rotation of crops he would find the rotation of fields in a pattern of shifting cultivation. The seemingly disorganized interspersement of trees, bushes, and garden-type farms surrounding villages is typical of traditional agriculture in the area.

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1Infrastructure: The elements of an economic system that provide essential supporting facilities for the processes of production, but do not enter directly into those processes, as for example, the credit system, the transportation system, the education system, etc.
These simple facts are of major significance for agricultural development and policy in West Africa. In the traditional agriculture as found, there is little draft animal power for land preparation. It is doubtful that one would find more than a dozen privately owned tractors. Those that exist are confined mainly to government research stations, foreign plantations, and government-supported farm settlements or similarly organized farms. The indigenous farmer prepares his land for cropping by machet and hoe and tills it the same way.

In like manner, the tenure of land remains mostly customary. There are government forest reserves and experimental areas, and millions of farmers occupying the great mass of farm land. There is a descending order of ownership of land: the extended family has highest claim to the land; the immediate larger community of which the extended family is a part has the next highest claim. This larger community may be a village, or a group of villages representing a clan, or even a small tribe. But use rights in land are customarily allocated to extended families and subsequently to nuclear families within the extended family. Chiefs who represent the community possess land as do other families of the community, and they hold, in effect, loose trust rights over all village or community land. But the historic allocation of land for use was to families. These rights, though without strict legal sanction, are inheritable. Thus land tenure rights, which incidently represent prime rights in agricultural communities, center on the family but always within a rather fixed social context. The extended family in a village never becomes completely independent of its larger community, nor is there clear independence of younger generations (i.e., nuclear families) with extended farm families.

We may summarize this section by saying that in the traditional cultures of West Africa, the village, and more particularly the extended family compound, have become the units of survival. Economic functions were organized around traditional agriculture. These practices developed into institutions. But the institutions insure the perpetuation of subsistence rather than rapid economic development. The fact that commercial export crops are produced and sold does not alter this conclusion. In the case of arable export crops, we find that they have been grafted onto traditional farming practices, with little change in farm organization and layout, tillage practices, management and tools. It was found that adapted tree crops could be harvested in a manner similar to that used for wild trees. The habits of work and conduct were culturally oriented and for the most part remain so. For example, it is customary for men to clear and burn brush, prepare the land for planting and probably plant the new crops. Women then tend the crops until harvest. Ownership of certain crops follow sex divisions.

We could continue by relating other aspects of traditional agriculture. But it is clear that economic practices become caught up in all aspects of the broader culture, and this fact has definite implications for economic development.
Some Possible Implications

1. Since home economists are going to foreign countries as part of university contract teams and other groups, one point of interest may be how to approach traditional villages and traditional cultures when one goes into a new country. A beginning point is that the institutions designated for change must be thoroughly understood. It has been noted that the African agricultural village has always conducted its economic affairs in such a way as to assure survival for its members. But we are now asking, indeed demanding, changes in the old agricultural structure. In agricultural planning the goal now is to be economic advancement rather than the traditional one of group survival. This is nothing less than a disorganizing process of great magnitude. We should realize that shifting from traditional agriculture to modern agriculture represents a complete transformation. The main question is whether we and the citizens of underdeveloped countries fully understand the price that must be paid for the progress that is sought.

2. An attendant problem is that of trying to get a feel of life in the villages where traditional agriculture is carried on. By no means is this automatic. Mainly it is a problem of repeat visits, of gradually building up mutual confidences, of gauging what to attempt, and providing quick and deliberate follow-up for whatever is begun.

Home economists cannot function in isolation from other skills and services which may be available. The home economist should request the assistance of poultrymen, horticulturists, engineers, and others who can help to generate income in these traditional situations.

3. With regard to administrative problems, staffing problems, curricula development, and others, the colleges and schools of home economics will find difficulties equal to those in other parts of universities. But beyond these commonplace problems, I am apprehensive that the universities may not have fully grasped the difficulty of modernizing traditional agriculture. There is a tendency to go about it as if it were a problem common to those found in the states and local communities of the United States. This is far from the actual case.