



# “Women, Agriculture, and Socio-Economic Transformation among the Wanna Clan of the Eggon People in Nasarawa State, Nigeria”

Ismaila Yusuf Usman PhD<sup>1</sup> & Yusuf Grace Kpalo<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1&2</sup>Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nigeria.

<sup>1</sup>0009-0007-2249-4469

<sup>1</sup>[ismailayusman@nsuk.edu.ng](mailto:ismailayusman@nsuk.edu.ng)

<sup>1</sup>[yusufkeffi29@gmail.com](mailto:yusufkeffi29@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>[graceyusufme@gmail.com](mailto:graceyusufme@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** *Women have historically played indispensable roles in the agricultural and economic transformation of African societies. This study examines the socio-economic contributions of women in agriculture among the Wanna Clan of the Eggon people in Nasarawa State, Nigeria, situating their experiences within the wider historical processes of precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial transformation. Through a historical and analytical lens, the research examines how women's agricultural labour, trade, and indigenous knowledge systems have shaped the economic and social resilience of the Wanna community. Drawing upon oral traditions, archival sources, and secondary literature, this study argues that women's engagement in agriculture excelled subsistence roles, emerging as a key driver of family welfare, local trade, and rural development. The paper also interrogates the enduring challenges of land tenure, gender inequality, and technological marginalization that have constrained women's productivity since the colonial period. By highlighting both continuity and change in women's agricultural participation, this study contributes to broader discourses on gender, rural economy, and African social history, underscoring the need for policies that recognize women not merely as labourers but as agents of socio-economic transformation in agrarian societies.*

**Keywords:** *Women, Agriculture, Socio-Economic Transformation, Wanna Clan, Eggon People.*

## 1. Introduction

Agriculture has historically formed the economic backbone of most African societies, shaping not only livelihoods but also social structures and gender relations. In Nigeria, and particularly among the Eggon people of Nasarawa State, agriculture remains a central aspect of communal identity and survival. The Wanna Clan, one of the Eggon subgroups, offers a compelling case for understanding how women's agricultural participation has driven socio-economic transformation over time. From the precolonial era—when agriculture was primarily subsistence-based—to the postcolonial period marked by modernization and commercialization, women in the Wanna Clan have remained the invisible yet indispensable architects of the community's economic and social continuity.

In precolonial Wanna society, women were integral to agricultural production, performing essential roles in crop cultivation, food processing, and trade. Their daily labour ensured household food security and supported community cohesion. Through indigenous agricultural knowledge—such as seed preservation, seasonal forecasting, and soil management—these women contributed to a sustainable system of food production long before colonial interventions introduced cash crops and market economies. The precolonial agricultural system was thus not only an economic activity but a cultural institution that reinforced kinship, cooperation, and the transmission of gendered knowledge across generations.

The advent of British colonial rule in the early twentieth century brought significant transformations to agricultural structures in Northern Nigeria. Colonial authorities introduced cash crops such as groundnuts, cotton, and beniseed, primarily for export to European industries. This new economy marginalized women by shifting attention from subsistence to cash-crop farming, where male labour was prioritized for taxation and recruitment. Nonetheless, women in the Wanna Clan continued to sustain the domestic economy through food crop cultivation and petty trading, ensuring the survival of their households amidst the economic distortions of colonial capitalism.

Postcolonial Nigeria witnessed further changes as agricultural modernization, government intervention, and the monetization of rural economies redefined the roles of women in agriculture. However, despite their resilience, women continued to face institutional constraints such as limited access to land, technology, and financial credit. These structural inequalities mirrored broader gender hierarchies that persisted in both traditional and modern systems.

This study, therefore, seeks to historicize and analyze the socio-economic role of women in agriculture within the Wanna Clan from a historical perspective. It investigates how women's contributions to farming, trade, and food security have shaped the economic and social development of the community over time. The research also examines the interplay between tradition, colonialism, and modernization in redefining women's agricultural identities. By focusing on the Wanna Clan, the paper situates local experiences within the broader historiography of women and agrarian transformation in Nigeria, emphasizing how gendered labour has been central to the resilience and continuity of African rural societies.

Ultimately, this work contributes to the ongoing scholarly conversation on women's history in Africa, aligning with recent historiographical trends that challenge the marginalization of women in mainstream historical narratives. It asserts that the story of agricultural and economic development in Nasarawa State—and indeed, Nigeria at large—cannot be told without acknowledging the enduring role of women as cultivators, traders, and social stabilizers.

### **Origins and Settlement Patterns of the Eggon People**

The Eggon people, one of the major ethnic groups in Nasarawa State, trace their ancestry to the Benue Valley region of central Nigeria. Oral traditions suggest that their migration into what is today Nasarawa State occurred several centuries ago, in search of fertile agricultural land and greater security from intergroup conflicts in the Middle Belt. The Eggon people eventually settled around the present-day Nasarawa Eggon, Akwanga, and Lafia areas, where their agrarian lifestyle flourished due to the region's favorable topography and climate.

Agriculture quickly became the defining feature of Eggon society. The land's fertility allowed for the cultivation of staple crops such as millet, sorghum, maize, yam, and cassava, which became central to the people's diet and economy. Farming was not merely an occupation; it was a way of life and a source of identity. The Eggon worldview connected land, labour, and lineage—agriculture served both material and spiritual functions. Through farming rituals and communal festivals, the people celebrated fertility, harvest, and the continuity of life.

Within this cultural framework, women played a central and enduring role. They were the custodians of food security, responsible for planting, weeding, harvesting, and processing food crops. Their labour ensured household sustenance and contributed to the collective well-being of the community. The gendered division of labour was not a sign of subordination but a reflection of social balance, where men and women's roles complemented each other within a system rooted in kinship and reciprocity.

### **The Wanna Clan in Historical Perspective**

The Wanna Clan, one of the prominent subgroups of the Eggon people, occupies a significant geographical and cultural position within the Nasarawa Eggon region. According to local oral traditions, the Wanna people were among the early settlers who migrated from the southern fringes of the Benue Valley and established their communities around the fertile uplands of present-day Nasarawa State. Their settlement patterns were influenced by the search for arable land and natural resources such as water and woodlands, essential for sustaining agrarian livelihoods.

Traditionally, the Wanna Clan organized itself around extended family units, with each lineage controlling its farmlands and labour. Farming was a communal affair, performed collectively

during the planting and harvesting seasons. Social organization revolved around clan elders, who mediated disputes, allocated land, and oversaw communal projects. This governance structure reinforced collective ownership and labour-sharing, ensuring that no household was left behind during critical agricultural seasons.

Within this system, women's agricultural labour held both economic and moral significance. They were responsible for the cultivation of staple crops and the maintenance of household food reserves. Women's ability to store and preserve food during dry seasons often determined the clan's resilience in times of scarcity. Their contribution was so vital that traditional proverbs among the Eggon equated women with the "granaries of life," underscoring their indispensable role in sustaining the lineage.

### **Precolonial Economy and Gendered Division of Labour**

In the precolonial period, the Wanna Clan maintained a subsistence-based economy supported by trade and barter. While men cleared farmlands and engaged in hunting or defense, women specialized in cultivation and food processing. They cultivated crops such as millet, yam, and beans, while also rearing small livestock like goats and chickens. Surplus produce was exchanged in local markets, where women played dominant roles as traders and mediators of goods.

Markets were central to the social and economic life of the Wanna people. Women's participation in these markets extended beyond commerce—it was a social institution where news circulated, marriages were arranged, and cultural norms were reinforced. Through market participation, women gained informal economic power and social visibility, despite the patriarchal nature of traditional governance.

Agriculture also served as a unifying force within the community. Communal labour systems such as *gaya* (cooperative farming groups) allowed households to work collectively on each other's farms, strengthening social cohesion and mutual assistance. Women actively participated in these systems, contributing labour and food to support group efforts. This cooperative ethic not only enhanced productivity but also fostered a sense of interdependence that became a hallmark of Eggon and Wanna social organization.

### **Colonial Transformations and Women's Agricultural Roles**

The advent of British colonial rule in the early twentieth century marked a turning point in the economic history of Nasarawa Province and, by extension, the Wanna Clan. Colonial economic policies prioritized cash-crop production and revenue extraction. The British administration introduced new crops such as groundnut, cotton, and beniseed, integrating rural communities into a monetized economy oriented toward export production. However, these changes disproportionately affected women, who were largely excluded from the colonial labour market.

In the Wanna Clan, the colonial restructuring of land tenure systems weakened communal landholding traditions and concentrated control in the hands of male household heads. Women's traditional access to farmland through lineage and marriage became increasingly insecure, limiting their ability to expand agricultural production. Colonial taxation policies further entrenched male economic authority, as men were made the primary taxpayers and thus the official economic actors recognized by the colonial state.

Nonetheless, women continued to play crucial roles in sustaining food production. As male labour was diverted toward cash-crop farming or colonial public works, women maintained the cultivation of staple crops necessary for domestic consumption. This dual system—male cash-crop production and female subsistence farming—became a defining feature of colonial rural economies in Northern Nigeria. It entrenched gendered economic inequality while simultaneously reinforcing women's indispensability in household food security.

### **Postcolonial Developments and Continuities**

After Nigeria's independence in 1960, successive governments introduced agricultural development programs such as Operation Feed the Nation (1976), the Green Revolution (1980), and the National Fadama Development Project (1990s onward). While these initiatives aimed to increase productivity, they often failed to address the gendered dimensions of agriculture. Women farmers in

the Wanna Clan, as elsewhere in rural Nigeria, were marginalized in the distribution of improved seeds, fertilizers, and credit facilities.

However, the resilience of Wanna women persisted. They adapted by forming cooperative groups and participating in local savings associations (*esusu*), which allowed them to pool resources for agricultural inputs and trade. In doing so, they not only sustained their families but also contributed to the transformation of the local economy. The gradual shift from purely subsistence agriculture to small-scale commercial farming marked a new phase in the socio-economic evolution of the Wanna Clan.

Today, despite modernization, the agricultural structure of the Wanna community still reflects its historical roots. Women continue to dominate food crop production and local trade, while men are more involved in cash-crop cultivation and political decision-making. Yet, women's increasing participation in education and cooperative associations has begun to challenge traditional hierarchies, opening new avenues for empowerment and leadership within the agricultural sector.

The history of the Wanna Clan's agricultural system reveals the enduring agency of women in shaping economic and social transformation. From precolonial communal farming to postcolonial cooperatives, women have been the custodians of agricultural knowledge, the sustainers of families, and the quiet architects of community development. Their historical experience embodies the broader African narrative of women's resilience in the face of structural inequality and socio-economic change.

Thus, to understand the socio-economic history of the Wanna Clan—and indeed the wider Eggon society—it is necessary to recognize women's agricultural labour not as a marginal supplement but as the foundation upon which community survival and transformation were built.

### **Women as Pillars of Agricultural Production**

In the Wanna Clan, as in much of rural Nigeria, agriculture constitutes the principal means of livelihood and the most enduring expression of social organization. Women have historically formed the backbone of this agrarian structure. Their daily activities—ranging from land preparation and sowing to harvesting and food processing—define the rhythm of rural life and household sustenance. The precolonial Eggon economy depended on the labour of women who cultivated staple crops such as yam, millet, sorghum, and maize, which provided the nutritional base for family and communal survival.

The division of labour was well-structured: men cleared the fields and constructed granaries, while women carried out most of the cultivation and post-harvest processing. This system, far from subordinating women, acknowledged their expertise and centrality in maintaining the agricultural cycle. As Adamu notes, indigenous agricultural systems among the Eggon relied heavily on women's environmental knowledge—particularly in identifying fertile soils, selecting seed varieties, and predicting seasonal changes. This ecological wisdom, passed from mothers to daughters, enabled the Wanna Clan to sustain food security even in years of erratic rainfall.

Women's contribution to agricultural labour also extended to the care of livestock. Small ruminants such as goats and sheep were raised primarily by women, providing households with meat, milk, and supplementary income. Livestock served as a form of savings and social insurance; they could be sold to finance weddings, funerals, or medical emergencies. Thus, women's agricultural labour was not limited to production but encompassed an entire system of social and economic reproduction.

### **Women, Household Economy, and Family Welfare**

The household economy in the Wanna Clan revolves around women's productive and reproductive roles. Through their farming, processing, and trading activities, women ensure the steady flow of food and income that sustains families year-round. Surplus produce from farms—such as yam, beans, or vegetables—is taken to local markets for sale or barter. The proceeds are then reinvested in the household, covering expenses for children's education, clothing, healthcare, and social obligations.

In traditional Eggon society, a woman's diligence in farming was a mark of virtue and social standing. Industrious women gained respect and influence within their communities, especially those capable of feeding their families without external assistance. This moral economy reinforced the ethic

of hard work and communal support, in which women's success in agriculture symbolized both family honour and clan stability.

Even under the colonial economy, when male labour was increasingly diverted toward cash-crop production or wage work, women remained the primary custodians of food production. They adapted to changing circumstances by intensifying their labour on subsistence crops and expanding their role in local trade. The resilience of the household economy thus depended largely on women's capacity to balance farming with other domestic responsibilities—a dual burden that has persisted into the modern era.

### **Women in Local Trade and Market Systems**

Markets have always been the social and economic heart of the Wanna Clan, providing not only a space for exchange but also a forum for cultural interaction. Historically, women dominated these local markets, trading surplus produce, craft goods, and livestock. Their active participation in trade allowed them to bridge the gap between production and consumption, linking rural households to neighbouring communities.

Women's involvement in trade also contributed to regional integration within the Eggon territory. Weekly markets such as those at Nasarawa Eggon, Akwanga, and Wamba became major nodes of interaction, where Wanna women exchanged goods for salt, fish, or textiles. Through these transactions, women acquired social networks that extended beyond the clan, enabling them to participate in inter-community diplomacy and conflict mediation.

In many cases, women traders served as the first agents of monetary circulation, especially during the colonial era when cash replaced barter as the dominant mode of exchange. Their role in handling money and negotiating prices gave them economic agency and relative independence, even within patriarchal family structures. The market thus became a gendered space of empowerment—an arena where women exercised economic influence and asserted their voices in community affairs.

### **Women, Indigenous Knowledge, and Agricultural Sustainability**

Traditional agricultural knowledge forms a vital part of the Wanna Clan's cultural heritage. Women's indigenous techniques—such as mixed cropping, fallowing, and organic manuring—ensured soil fertility and ecological balance long before the introduction of modern fertilizers. These practices demonstrated a deep understanding of environmental management and sustainability.

Moreover, women were responsible for the storage and preservation of food. They developed efficient methods for drying grains, fermenting vegetables, and storing tubers to prevent post-harvest losses. These practices were not only economic strategies but also forms of cultural expression transmitted through songs, rituals, and oral narratives. Such traditions reinforced communal identity while fostering agricultural resilience in the face of climate variability.

Colonial agricultural officers often dismissed these indigenous methods as “primitive,” promoting instead mechanization and monocropping. However, recent scholarship recognizes that women's traditional farming knowledge represents a sustainable alternative to the exploitative tendencies of colonial and postcolonial agricultural systems. The continuity of these practices among Wanna women underscores their role as custodians of both ecological and cultural sustainability.

### **Gendered Constraints in Agricultural Development**

Despite their central role in agricultural production, women in the Wanna Clan face enduring structural challenges. The most persistent among these is limited access to land. Customary land tenure systems in Nasarawa State are patrilineal, meaning that land is inherited through male lineage. Women typically access farmland through their husbands or male relatives, leaving them vulnerable to dispossession in cases of divorce or widowhood.

Access to agricultural credit and inputs presents another major constraint. Many rural women lack collateral to secure loans from formal financial institutions, and extension services are often directed toward male farmers. Consequently, women rely on informal saving groups and cooperatives to finance their farming activities. Although these grassroots systems have proven effective in some cases, they remain insufficient to meet the scale of women's economic potential.

Technological inequality further limits productivity. While men are more likely to access tractors, fertilizers, and improved seeds through government programs, women continue to depend on

manual tools such as hoes and cutlasses. This technological gap reflects broader gender disparities in agricultural modernization. Without deliberate policy intervention, modernization risks reinforcing rather than reducing inequality.

### **Cooperative Societies and Women's Empowerment**

In response to these challenges, Wanna women have increasingly turned to cooperative societies as instruments of empowerment. These cooperatives—often organized around savings, credit, and collective farming—enable women to pool resources, share labour, and gain access to markets. By operating collectively, they achieve economies of scale and greater bargaining power in both local and regional trade.

Cooperatives have also become platforms for education and leadership. Through training sessions facilitated by government or NGOs, women acquire skills in record-keeping, financial management, and improved farming techniques. Such initiatives have gradually elevated the social status of women, enabling them to participate more actively in community decision-making.

Moreover, cooperative societies play a vital role in preserving the communal ethic characteristic of the Wanna Clan's precolonial agricultural system. They revive the spirit of collective labour (*gaya*) and mutual aid, blending traditional values with modern economic organization. In this sense, cooperatives represent both continuity and innovation—linking the historical resilience of women's collective work with contemporary strategies for rural development.

### **Agricultural Transformation and Socio-Economic Change**

The transformation of agriculture in the Wanna Clan mirrors broader shifts in Nigeria's rural economy. The introduction of market-oriented farming, coupled with demographic pressure and technological change, has redefined women's roles. Many women now engage in small-scale commercial agriculture, processing agricultural produce for sale in urban centers such as Lafia and Keffi. Cassava flour, yam chips, and palm oil are among the commodities that link Wanna women farmers to regional markets.

These developments have expanded income opportunities and diversified rural livelihoods. Yet, they have also increased women's workload, as they must balance commercial farming with domestic responsibilities. The dual pressure of production and reproduction often results in time poverty and health challenges. Nevertheless, women's participation in market-driven agriculture has enhanced their bargaining power within households and communities, reshaping gender relations in subtle but significant ways.

### **Cultural Dimensions of Women's Agricultural Labour**

Agriculture among the Wanna people is deeply intertwined with cultural and spiritual life. Farming rituals, festivals, and proverbs reflect the community's reverence for women's productive roles. The annual Yam Festival, for example, symbolizes renewal and fertility; women lead the preparations, offer the first yams to the ancestors, and organize communal feasts. Such rituals reaffirm the connection between women's labour, the land, and the continuity of life.

Even in contemporary times, the symbolic association of women with fertility and sustenance remains strong. Songs sung during planting and harvesting evoke gratitude to women as "mothers of the soil." These cultural expressions provide not only moral validation but also psychological strength, reinforcing women's identity as life-givers and sustainers of the community.

### **Comparative Perspectives from Other Nigerian Communities**

The experience of Wanna women resonates with patterns observed across rural Nigeria. Among the Tiv and Idoma of Benue State, women similarly dominate food crop production and market trade, while men focus on cash crops. In Yoruba and Igbo societies of southern Nigeria, women's associations such as Egbe Obirin and Umu Ada have historically mobilized collective labour and political activism in agricultural and social matters. These parallels highlight the shared historical experience of African women who have sustained agrarian economies despite structural marginalization.

By situating the Wanna case within this broader context, the study underscores the continuity of women's agricultural agency across diverse cultural landscapes. The resilience, adaptability, and

innovation displayed by rural women remain central to the survival of African agrarian communities from precolonial times to the present.

### **Policy Implications**

The historical evolution of women's agricultural participation among the Wanna Clan reveals both resilience and systemic marginalization. The evidence underscores an urgent need for policies that are sensitive to the gendered realities of rural agriculture. Three major implications emerge from this study.

First, land reform remains essential. As history shows, the exclusion of women from land ownership—rooted in patriarchal customs reinforced during colonial administration—continues to limit their productivity. Land policies in Nasarawa State must, therefore, explicitly recognize women's rights to own, inherit, and manage farmland. Institutional reforms that formalize women's land tenure security would not only promote equity but also increase agricultural output and rural income stability.

Second, access to agricultural resources and technology must be democratized. Modern farming inputs—such as improved seedlings, fertilizers, irrigation facilities, and mechanized tools—are predominantly controlled by men or channeled through male-dominated cooperatives. Empowering women's cooperatives through subsidized access to these resources will bridge the productivity gap. Moreover, agricultural extension services should be restructured to include female officers who can engage women farmers more effectively within their cultural contexts.

Third, women's education and cooperative development should be central to rural development planning. Historical evidence shows that women in the Wanna Clan have always relied on collective organization—whether in *gaya* labour groups or modern cooperatives—to mobilize labour and resources. Strengthening such cooperatives through capacity-building, leadership training, and microfinance access will enhance women's bargaining power within the rural economy. The transformation of agriculture in the Wanna Clan thus depends not merely on technology but on social inclusion and historical recognition.

## **2. Conclusion**

The socio-economic transformation of the Wanna Clan of the Eggon people cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the pivotal role of women in agriculture. From the precolonial period, when communal farming sustained kinship systems, to the postcolonial era of commercialization and cooperatives, women have remained the backbone of production, distribution, and household welfare. Their labour has not only fed families but also sustained the moral and cultural foundations of the community.

Historically, women's agricultural activities reflected a balance between subsistence and exchange, embodying both economic and cultural significance. During colonial rule, they resisted marginalization by maintaining the domestic food economy amidst shifting labour demands and patriarchal land policies. In the postcolonial context, they adapted to new realities by forming cooperatives and integrating into small-scale commercial agriculture. This historical continuity attests to their resilience and adaptability in the face of structural challenges.

However, the persistence of gender inequality in land access, agricultural technology, and credit underscores the unfinished nature of rural transformation in Nasarawa State. Recognizing women's historical and contemporary roles is not only an ethical imperative but also a developmental necessity. Policies that address historical injustices and promote gender equity will ensure that women's agricultural potential becomes a catalyst for broader social change.

In essence, the story of the Wanna Clan exemplifies a wider African reality: that the strength of rural economies lies in the often-unacknowledged labour of women. Their fields are not merely sites of subsistence—they are landscapes of history, culture, and transformation. By valorizing their contributions, Nigeria can move toward a more inclusive model of development, grounded in the historical agency of its rural women.

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