

THE FAMILY IN FRENCH WEST AFRICA

THE SITUATION OF WOMEN

REPORT 18

Overview

submitted to the Governor General of French West Africa

by Madame Savineau, Technical Adviser on Education

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Translator's introduction

On October 7th 1937, Marcel de Coppet, the Governor General of French West Africa, commissioned Denise Savineau, a colonial officer in the Education Department, to produce a study of the impact of French colonial rule on the lives of African women.

On 19th October 1937 Madame Savineau set out on her mission to collect the data for her report. She was away for seven and a half months during which time she produced a huge study made up of 18 reports totalling some 800 pages in length, mostly written and despatched while travelling through the territories of French West Africa.

The report which follows is a translation of the final and conclusive part of the study. In it Madame Savineau draws out what she considers are the key findings from the previous 17 reports, each of which focused on a different region of the French West African empire. Report 18 serves as a synthesis of and a conclusion to the 17 previous reports. Parts of the translation of the report are being annotated and will be added shortly.

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PREFACE

Having been given the responsibility of producing a study on the situation of women in French West Africa, I felt that I could best define the role that African women have been playing in society by examining indigenous and mixed-race social environments as a whole. The current report has been produced with this objective in mind. It sets out the major problems, and presents them in their social and human context, all the while paying close attention to everything that particularly affects women and children.

Following the directives I was given, I have pointed out where we are finding our job here difficult, and where we are making mistakes. I have done this in a direct manner but without any malice intended. Far from inviting any facile criticism, I would like to stress what immense efforts have been made and what remarkable successes have been achieved. My goal is to help those I have witnessed struggling so valiantly at their almost superhuman tasks, and I have considered it my duty to draw attention to the obstacles they are encountering and to offer them, in all modesty, what advice I can draw from my varied experience.

This report is the result of a year spent studying African customs, seven months of travelling, and all my previous experience of African village life¹.

The Report relates to the colonies of the French Sudan, Niger, Dahomey, the Ivory Coast and French Guinea.

¹ The author worked for four years in French Equatorial Africa before arriving in Dakar in September 1936. The author also wrote a book published in 1934 under her unmarried name, Denise Moran, in which she was highly critical of aspects of the colonial system.

