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## Food Crisis in Rivers State 1985 - 1990 A Critical Reflection

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*Abstract* - One of the critical challenges facing the Nigerian polity today is the need to adequately feed her citizenry. Within the indigenous economies of pre-colonial ethnic groupings, most dwellers produced enough food to cater for the society and exchange. The colonial economy disarticulated the food production equilibrium to the extent that in recent times, rapid urbanization and environmental degradation occasion by the exploratory activities of multinational corporated have impacted negatively on food production activities hence the call for a state of emergency in this sector.

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# Food Crisis in Rivers State 1985 - 1990 A Critical Reflection

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## I. INTRODUCTION

“Food” is anything eaten to relieve hunger or sustain life; and we really hardly need any extra amounts of that at anyone time; say a bag of gari or a barn of yams. Assurance of daily subsistence is all needed in accordance with the prayer, “Give us this day, our daily bread”. It is when that assurance of availability of daily sufficiency is threatened, necessitating greater cost to achieve a desired quantity or quality of food, that crisis begins to manifest. To allay or eliminate anxiety, panic or similar crisis in the food situation, it is necessary that food be available, at affordable price in wholesome condition. The latter conditionality is usually taken for granted until crisis strikes emanating from poor food quality or contaminated food. Irrespective of the definition, the importance of food should not be taken for granted. Why is food important?

## II. IMPORTANCE OF FOOD

Food is generally acclaimed as being next in importance to air and water for supporting life. Specifically, man takes food for the following reasons:

1. To provide energy for work
2. To provide heat and warmth
3. To replace worn-out cells
4. To facilitate growth

To accomplish the above objectives food after ingestion, is digested and its nutrients assimilated into the system. Nutrients, the only factor which gives relevance to food or the eating thereof, are:

- i) Sugars from the starchy foods such as the cereals (rice, maize, millet, guinea-corn etc).
- ii) Amino-acids from such protein foods as beans, fish, meat, eggs, etc.
- iii) Fatty acids from oils and fats.
- iv) Vitamins and essential salts from different sources including fruits and vegetables.

Students of history may recall that (King Jaja of Opobo's) main stratagem of winning the war against Bonny was to hurry up-river to the upper reaches of the Imo River estuary and plug the supply of food and economic power to the mother city-state of Bonny (Ofonagoro, 1979:40). He succeeded immensely, a coup begetting its own legality. Chief Will-Bride (Igbani) of Kalabari later followed suit in 1879 when the Kalabari dvii war erupted. His kinsmen followed in hot pursuit and thereby enacted the Kalabari civil war, not on Kalabari soil, but on Ikwerre land-on the banks of the New Calabar River which still bathes the shores of Choba in present-day Obio-Akpor Local Government Area (OBALGA).

Food, according to Ward Hunt, J. of the U.S. Supreme Court in Sewall V. Jones, 1 Otto (91 US), 187:

*“Is less brilliant, but more useful, than all the inventions for the destruction of the human race that have ever been known”*

## III. FOOD CRISIS IN THE RIVER STATE

There is no doubt whatsoever that, in Nigeria, the food situation in Rivers State has attained alarming proportions that describing it as “critical” may be euphemistic. Whereas a 50kg bag of imported rice during the presidency of Shehu Shagari was ₦42.00, in 2008 the same weight costs ₦9,500. The locally grown stuff which costs ₦500.00 in 1979, in 2008 is ₦6,800. Even if indecorously, gari costs even higher – about ₦1,200.00 for the same quantity. Traditionally costlier than refined petroleum itself, palm oil stands at about ₦180.00 per litre. A bunch of plantain now sells for between ₦600.00 and ₦800.00 (Moro, 1976).

Whereas the gloomy picture above may be the spectre mocking at most Nigerians who neither produce their own food nor inject some other consolation into the mainstream of productivity, the picture is infinitely worse for the Rivers man whose last refuge is his home-state.

He certainly has basket-loads of other crisis waiting for him, especially when the Bible has made it

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abundantly clear that “man shall not live by bread alone” (Mathew 4:4).

A consideration of the food crisis in the Rivers State should be seen as more than a simplistic topic comprising and ending with the physical availability of food in the market place or on the table. It should be seen as a holistic subject – matter of interest, not just to the citizen of Rivers State but to others. This last aspect of the consideration of the food crisis, from the economic perspective, should be of ultimate concern to women who, through the ages have the major responsibility for growing food. For example:

- 1) When, following the abolition of the slave-trade and the consequent development of plantation agriculture over vast tracts of the heart land of Africa, “thousands of men were drawn to work on the plantations for very low wages, the major responsibility for growing food, caring for the elderly and bringing up children” was thrown on the women-folk.
- 2) Recall also how, during the ill-fated Nigerian Civil War, women in Port Harcourt were trooping right and left on reconnaissance missions for food and returned with cassava roots raked from abandoned farms.

*When barn is bare, she rakes the roots, be it in peace time or in war”.*

- 3) It has since been admitted that the bulk of farm labour is contributed by women, particularly land preparation after clearing and slashing by the menfolk, as well as weeding which accounts for a quarter of the time expended on the farms.
- 4) In some areas of Bayelsa State, the menfolk precipitate a chronic food crisis by habitually consuming food while deliberately refusing to subscribe to food production or other productive activity. It is women who absorb the resulting punishment by providing thankless meals for the droning husbands.
- 5) The case of Panya, the Bomu woman who went to Kula to support her fisherman husband, but ended up providing, in addition, Okra and other vegetables for herself and others. “She went, she saw, she conquered”. Casting the past behind us, we may prayerfully hope that the natives of Kula and other Kalabari settlements will copy Panya’s example and utilize the innumerable virgin lands dotting their geography.
- 6) Food crisis neither begins nor ends with the farm or barn. Food crisis can only effectively be dispelled or disproved on the table where food is shown to be available ‘as and when due”. Needless to say, it is woman who achieves this feat everyday without leave or respite, usually unclapped and unsung. What then is responsible for food crisis in Rivers State? We shall examine the immediate causes of the crisis. It is hoped that knowledge of these

causes would contribute immensely to the improvement of food production and consumption.

#### IV. OIL ACTIVITIES

In this regard, the effect of oil activities would embrace exploration, exploitation, spillages, etc and culminate in the Injection of inflation into the economy via payment of bloated staff salaries, fringe benefits, etc. No doubt seismic activities attendant to oil exploration affect the fragile vertebrae of insect life in the soil. Incessant gas-flaring for decades cannot but decimate insect life so vital to pollination, distort the day/night phenomena essential for a balanced photosynthesis and, by its unabating noise, upset the life scheme and pattern of the surrounding fauna. It is a living fact that leopards, elephants and other wild animals have been scared away to safer zones (Onyige *et al.*, 1989:152).

But the worst hazard concomitant on oil exploration and exploitation may be spillage. The effect is immediately visible and far-reaching. It decimates all life-plant, marine and animal – immediately and for the foreseeable future. Nor is potable water spared (Nzewtunwa, 1980).

The vanishing of cocoyams from our markets has long been blamed on oil activities. The same goes for fishing, although other factors may share the blame (Onyige, 1979).

Movement to the nation’s new capital of Abuja and the resultant decentralization of oil administration has caused an upsurge of population in Port Harcourt, the Rivers State capital. Discounting the effect of that lurch on housing and transportation in Port Harcourt and its environs as being outside our purview, the effect on an already hopeless food situation can better be imagined. The fantastic take-home pay and terminal benefits of oil workers would simply aggravate the crisis out of proportion.

#### V. THE NIGERIAN ECONOMIC SYSTEM

Unfortunately, the Rivers State shares the same economic system with the rest of the country. The system seems to have no room for micro units. For example, if you took a well-priced, good-quality product from some other part of the world and passed it through the Nigerian system, it would emerge transfigured, its former feathers becoming such vibrating quills, that you would not wait for advice to keep your distance. That magic-lantern effect has happened with rice, newsprint, cars and iron rods, to name but a few.

The siege on the Nigerian economy has been partly blamed on the exchange rate. Once at par with the pound sterling, the Nigerian naira (Which is also our own currency) is now about 1/50 of the former, reflecting the stupor into which it has sunk and the proportionate hardship for its adherents. A false, refracted economy propped on high prices that are ever soaring; an

economy in which anything that goes up/never comes down; that is the picture of the Nigerian economy.

Hence, it would appear that the worst calamity that can befall the Nigerian in the street is for the country to decide on the production of any article. Whereas rice was ₦42.00 per 50kg bag in Shagari's regime, the price rocketed immediately prohibition was slammed on the importation of the essential commodity in a bid to stimulate local production (Moro, 1976). The story is the same for any product one cares to name.

## VI. LACK OF RURAL INFRASTRUCTURES

The Rivers State government cannot be commended too highly for its emphasis on road development, without which other facilities cannot develop. This fact underlies the wisdom in setting up DFRRRI, the Directorate for Food, Roads, and Rural infrastructure (Onyige, 1979).

If power, potable water, healthcare facilities, banking services and good schools for the proper education of the young are added to the rural package, it would re-direct the population drift to the village, to rejuvenate the stock of our dwindling food supplies. The very air is purer there and man, relaxed, tends to measure life with the ferrule, rather than with the wheel. With clean hands and pure heart, there may not be a better place to worship than the garden at the back-yard or the shrine in the woods where man can marvel afresh at the commonest mysteries of God – the re-enactments of creation. The absence of the needed infrastructure makes it impossible for those that would farm the land and settle. Their drift therefore have a direct bearing on the food situation in Rivers State.

## VII. GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT IN AGRICULTURE

Apart from research institutions and rare ventures like Risonpalm, government's grandiose agricultural programmes and projects have ended in failures. The result is that instead of alleviating our food situation, they have compounded and aggravated the crisis. A few examples would illustrate this point.

- i) The integrated poultry project at Atali, complete with staff, a feed mill and hatchery capable of producing ten thousand chicks per day has collapsed, while day-old chicks are imported from private hatcheries outside the state.
- ii) At Rumuodarnanya, headquarters of Obio-Aicpor Local Government Area (OBALGA), is another feed-mill, the establishment of which can hardly be rationalized, considering the idling facilities at Atali and Elingbu.
- iii) Iriebe on the Port Harcourt/Aba Express Road hosts a modern garri factory, of capacity, but its impact on the dreary food situation in the state is yet to be felt.

- iv) There is another integrated poultry project at Aluu in the same OBALGA, with a hatchery to the bargain. Complete with silos and offices, the feed-mill alone is worth a fortune. But all these, the bore-hole and generator, tractors and other structures and some staff merely wasted away. Like others owned across the country by the many different river basin development authorities, the entire farm was slated for sale to the public in accordance with guidelines enunciated by the Technical Committee on Commercialization and Privatization (TCPC). There was a surfeit of farm equipment and other heavy machinery.
- v) The project at Isiokpo was an integrated piggery project complete with structures, cassava farm, generator, bore-hole and pump spread on about ninety-three (93) hectares of land. Even after payment, the host community refused its sale to the public.
- vi) Unlike the two projects listed under (iv) and (v) above and owned by the Niger Delta Basin Development Authority, the Peremabiri Rice Project owned by the same authority, before the Nigerian Civil War, was reputed to have a capacity to feed West Africa. Yet, nearly a quarter of a century after the cessation of hostilities in 1970, the Rice project is unable to feed the Yenagoa Local Government Area (Yelga).

What do the above catalogues add up to? Expensive structures including warehouses, offices and living quarters, which are in decay, miscellaneous equipment that are better seen than described superfluous, staff, wasting assets and depreciating gear, un-utilized resources that could have generated so much activity and employment and, in the process, created so much wealth. This could have thrown quantum of food into the market through the combined hustle and bustle of human activity and the melody of the various machines (Moro and Onyige, 1989).

From the latent resources above, particularly of land and materials on the ground, Rivers State would have been exporting feeds for poultry and other livestock; every poultry product up to the feather; pigs and bacon for sausages; and rice to Sierra Leone, of all places.

The failure in Nigeria of government participation in business has become proverbial, until the disproofs contained in the achievements of Nigerdock and Risonpalm where Engineer Showemi and Andrew Uchendu have respectively given the lie to the truism above. The message appears clear: Government should concentrate on providing infrastructure-s and support in the form of extension services. Thus motivated, the citizenry will spring into action.

Mobility is indispensable to such staff who, among other things, have to update the farmer's (or fisherman's) knowledge, try to reconcile the farmer's results in the fields with the latest research findings, to monitor the farmer's activities generally and to submit reports to headquarters.

To begin with, mobility is often lacking and, where the extension staff dares to use personal initiative to reach the targets, he is very likely not to be reimbursed or, if at all, after such agony that will dissuade him from a repetition. The frustration of the extension staff will undoubtedly seep to the farmer, whose production will inevitably diminish to the ultimate chagrin of the house-wife or even of the bachelor. Lack of funds, office stationery, farm equipments and input will all be part of the package of frustration with which the extension staff is confronted.

## VIII. FREE EDUCATION

The concept of providing free education at all levels to the Nigerian citizenry is in accord with S. 18(1) of the 1979 Constitution and is reflected in S. 19(1) of the 1989 Constitution which came into effect on 27:8:93. Free education tends to shift emphasis to educational priorities, resulting inevitably in a decline in the workforce formerly available on the farm and, pro-rata, in the availability of food in the market (Nanka, 1979). The same rationalization would apply to fishing and, hence, to fish availability in the market.

The notion of free and universal education can hardly be faulted, even though some thinkers wonder the relevance of providing universal education without assurance of employment opportunities for all beneficiaries of the policy. Attention is only drawn to it here in an attempt to outline the morphology of the food problem, particularly in the Rivers State. When the loopholes and leakages in the apparatus are properly identified, it should be easier to re-deploy available resources to make up for resultant short-falls. We shall now examine the immediate causes of food scarcity.

## IX. IMMEDIATE CAUSES OF THE FOOD CRISIS IN THE RIVERS STATE

### a) *Paucity of Land*

With more than three-quarters of its 50,000 square kilometers occupied by water; with a considerable part of the remaining 12,500 square kilometers comprising wetlands, leaving very little of well-drained land for arable agriculture, with the proneness of the residue to flooding and erosion; with the dense vegetation which makes land clearing an intimidating exercise; even if we discount the host of a thousand other constraints on food production, it is no surprise that food scarcity in the Rivers State has degenerated into a crisis.

## X. CLIMATIC FACTORS

Climate factors such as wind, rainfall and drought seem to have an immediate effect on food production.

### XI. WINDS

A storm may not only have disastrous consequences for fishing crew and craft at sea, it may even prevent others from setting out to sea. The result in either case needs no further telling; scarcity of fish. But the effect of strong winds appears more telling on the availability of plantains in both the long and short run.

Strong winds occur in late February or early March every year in this part of the country, felling numberless plantain trees. Consequently, the markets are temporarily inundated with surplus plantain bunches. After the momentary glut, there follows a sustained scarcity till July when the oldest of the lucky survivors of the gale may have matured. This is the sequence every year.

#### a) *Rainfall*

More than the general importance of rainfall or water to plants, it is the pattern and quantity of rainfall which may have greater relevance to food production. There can be no better stimulus for the happy farmer than early rain. Early rain induces early planting and, hence, early harvest, examples are maize, vegetables and yam, the king of crops. Conversely, late rains signal late planting and late harvest, between which extremes there is bound to occur protracted food shortage.

Even early rain may sometimes need to be watched, for the periodicity of the available rains and also for the total rainfall in the year. Where, for example, a lull of drought follows a deceptive early rain which might have triggered early planting, the planted crops may be fatally scorched, necessitating a repeat exercise.

Moreover, the quantity of rainfall may precipitate flooding and even affect salinity and pH value of the sea, particularly in the brackish waters of Niger Delta. Thus, in the depth of the rainy season oysters around Abonnema, for instance, lose their taste, while many other fishes hibernate beyond the usual range of the local fishermen.

## XII. NATURAL FACTORS

### a) *Flood and Erosion*

Besides the cumulative and long-term effect of flooding and erosion prompting a resignation to the frustration attendant on frequent recurrence of such phenomena, there is the immediate agony of being condemned to unsettled living and concomitant planlessness. Such mode of living is clearly antithetical to farming or food production.

*b) Vegetation*

The high forest which succeeds the mangrove belt of the Rivers State makes land clearing a forbidding operation. The result is that the potential land clearing involved, limits the scale of farming to be undertaken and, hence, the quantity of food capable of production by a given farmer. The use of bull-dozers for mechanized clearing of land is less helpful than it may sound because of the scrapping, off the land, of the top soil by the equipment; the plant food being concentrated in the top soil. Also, the heavy rainfall of the state predisposes to the inevitable growth of weeds which, thereby, calls for constant weeding.

*c) Pestilence*

The development alone of veterinary medicine is enough indication of the importance which modern agriculture accords to the incidence of disease among livestock. Cattle, pigs, goats and poultry all have their prevalent diseases. Native chicken, for instance, are susceptible to fatal coccidiosis around December every year, about the time when they would have been most needed.

Although very rare, locust invasion is not completely unknown in these parts. So also is the attack of the mottled grass-hopper.

*d) Weeds*

Although, it might have been glossed over earlier, weeds constitute such a grave menace on the farm as to compel further attention here. About one-quarter of labour expended on the farm goes into weeding which is further aggravated by the heavy rainfall in the state. Some common weeds are the Guinea Grass (also called "elephant grass") and other types of grass.

### XIII. HUMAN FACTORS

*a) Abandoned Farms*

Negligence and indolence, both of which have already been cited have short-term effects which seem to be compounded in the abandonment of farms. At Obigbo, and Degema, for example, there are hectares upon hectares of unharvested cultivated oil palm, not to mention the thousands of wild palm waving in the virgin high forests of the former DELGA. There can be no doubt that full exploitation of the yawning plantations could bring down the cost of palm oil which, funny as it may sound, costs twenty times as much as refined mineral oil, notwithstanding the sophisticated technology and incomparable cost involved in the production of the latter.

The case of idling facilities at Atali, Aluu, Etingbu, Isiokpo, Peremabiri, Rumuodamanya, etc have already been cited. During a recent conversation with an agricultural official, the discussion centred on a capacity production of 18,000 eggs daily. When I asked for the

possible effect of such injection into the market system, the extension worker replied, "it will bring down the price of eggs".

*b) Lack of Enterprise*

The "Concise Oxford Dictionary, Edition at page describes "enterprise" as:

- 1) An undertaking, especially one that needs courage or offers difficulty;
- 2) Innovativeness

Panya applied her knowledge of traditional agriculture, as practiced in Bomu in Gokana Local Government Area, to the virgin lands of Kula and reaped a roaring harvest, whereas the Kalabari natives of Kula, for want of enterprise, simply sat down and bought their vegetables, maize, etc from several distances away. The same common denominator of enterprise pushed several Ogbia communities to steal the show from the vicinity of Peremabiri. While some Izon men droned over draught boards, their more enterprising womenfolk scoured the fields and ponds to provide thankless meals for the husbands. The "cocoa" bean, seed of the plant "cacao", was introduced into Nigeria by a Rivers man from Grand Bonny, but what is the position of the Rivers man in the scheme of the cocoa business today? The foundation of industry, even before capital, labour or other elements of production, it is enterprise that introduced the cultivated oil palm from Nigeria to Malaysia. That country is now exporting palm oil whereas Nigeria has since stopped exporting the product. On the other side of the spectrum, it may even be added that it was "enterprise" of one that introduced the Nipper palms from Indonesia to the Imo River estuary. Today the Nipper palm has edged out its host (the mangrove tree) from the brackish waters of Opobo and changed considerably the ecosystem of the area. If one may refer dispassionately to history, late Chief Awolowo's reason for insisting on applying different strokes to cocoa and to mineral oil in computing revenue derivation was the investment of personal enterprise in the production of the former.

The coaxing flattery above is at best a euphemism. It does not even brush the tip of the iceberg.

*c) Ignorance*

It may not be readily appreciated how much of food scarcity can directly be attributed to ignorance. For, although empirical conclusions may have been established in the course of generations, yet the full import of certain factors may be lost while the bases are taken for granted. A few examples:

i. *Ignorance of the Soil:*

The soil is generally assumed to be available to take our crops, but in reality we bother less about its nature, quality and attendant possibilities – the incidence of soil acidity and the danger of over-living.

ii. *Ignorance of Eugenics:*

While any crop may bring forth its kind, there is the fact of eugenics and the possibility of its profitable application. If some plantain bunches too hefty to be lifted by one man are compared to some low-yielding species, the most fitting retort may be "The difference is clear". Science seems to have come a long way in developing better rains of crops and livestock, making available higher-yielding, sturdier inputs as seeds, seedlings, cuttings and breed-stocks for the farmer's gratuitous use. It is for him to extricate himself from the web of ignorance and use what is his for the mere asking or taking.

iii. *Ignorance of the Potency of Chemicals:*

Ignorance of the potency of fertilizer could lead to its indiscriminate or wrong application with untoward consequences.

A fore-knowledge of weather conditions, gained through weather forecasts, may make it easier to preempt some "acts of God" like drought or flooding.

#### XIV. POPULATION GROWTH AND RURAL DRIFTS

Some demographic factors militate against food production and, therefore, induce food scarcity. Roads and infrastructure for industrial, commercial and residential accommodation are sine qua non for development. Simply put, land appropriated for such development purposes can no longer be available for cropping inasmuch as no one can eat his cake and have it.

To worsen matters, both the alienated citizenry and the influx of immigrants develop a distaste that tend to hold agricultural activity in disdain, although they continue consuming scarce food in order to keep alive. The end result remains the same: Vanishing food stocks without any hope of replacement.

In particular, the case of Port Harcourt may bear further amplification. At once the capital of the Rivers State and headquarters of the City Local Government Area (PHALGA); a railway terminus as well as a seaport and the only international airport serving Rivers and the other six Eastern States; the citadel of the oil companies, an industrial hub which boasts two refineries and a giant petrochemical plant, a vast fertilizer company, with another in the offing, and a countless host of other industrial concerns, hosting three universities and a ruyriad of ancillary educational institutions, three five-star hotels, sports stadia and inimitable conference venues; with a population of a million people, the City of Port Harcourt has since metamorphosed into a sprawling conurbation.

#### XV. DECLINING WORKFORCE

Labour is an indispensable component of agricultural activity or food production and will remain

so, no matter the level of mechanization employed. Conspiring to whittle the force available for work on the farms are several factors, a few of which may be mentioned.

#### XVI. RURAL DRIFT

The objective is to find greener pastures and the immigrants come from the countryside. Arriving at the city, they obviously continue to consume food, but now at others' expense (since they no longer produce anything), and more so before they gain another employment. In the context of food production, the immigrants who surge into the cities and other urban centres become a dead weight on those who remain back at home, wedded to the soil.

#### XVII. WANING FAMILY SIZE

Whereas an important reason for raising large families was to ensure a sufficiency of farm hands, the woeful national economy and a free nationwide education policy have rendered the average size of the Nigerian family ineffective for appreciable assistance on the farm. The result cannot be otherwise – reduced farm activity and consequent fall in food production.

#### XVIII. WOMEN'S UPLIFTMENT

Against a background in which culture and, even religion, ensured woman's confinement to inferiority and servility, the special roles of women in the home and on the farm may not be very surprising. However, the real shocker may be the scale of women's involvement in farming generally and, particularly, in food production. Apart from clearing the bush, planting and staking the king of crops, nearly every other job on the farm is done by woman: From planting nearly every other crop to weeding, harvesting, processing, (e.g. melon seeds) and marketing. Specifically, weeding takes not less than three tedious operations.

In the production of gari, it is women who harvests the cassava roots, conveys them home, peels and washes them for grating which, formerly done by men, is now done by machine, it is women who ties up the grated mash in sacks to squeeze out the water, later sift the fairly dry mash and ultimately try it to yield the final product, garri which is the most popular staple food in these parts (Hopkins, 1973).

But now many forces operate to diminish women's irreplaceable contribution in food production. Discounting the effect of death in reducing population generally, polygamy itself is on the wane, thereby reducing the necessary workforce. Education, apart from disenchanting recipients from the farm, takes such a long gestation these days as to look like a life sentence. Moreover, more women than men now go in for higher education. Similarly, more women than men

seem to opt for medical studies. There is hardly any facet of life that is not graced by a feminine presence from the judiciary and other branches of the civil service to the professions, and even in politics. The unfolding of the umbrella National Council for Women's Societies and the Better Life for Rural Women Programme seems to have capped the many laudable efforts and attainments in women's emancipation. If only it is remembered that from immemorial times food production was thrown on the female population after their male counterpart had been forcibly drafted to more physically challenging professions. The decline in food production is directly proportional to the stampede in women's education and consequent emancipation, reducing the number of hands earlier engaged in agricultural activities.

## XIX. EDUCATION

Having glossed over the involvement of women in education and the possibility of such involvement in distracting that vital group of farm hands from food production; and rather than open up a can of "worms" by digressing to the relevance of education generally in the subject-matter of availability or scarcity of food; I would here attempt to concentrate on the effect of prolonged regimentation in reducing the necessary workforce which could otherwise have been deployed on the farms or in fishing thus boosting food" production. Apart from the diversion of their combined workforce away from food production, the distraction of children of school age, who otherwise would have contributed in the agricultural sector should not be overlooked (Duruji, 1980).

Another factor to contend with is the duration and pattern of children's education. Whereas, before 1970, the child might have to spend only eight years (living with the parents) to complete his primary education and even stop there at to seek employment, the child may now have to school away from home for six (3 + 3), ten (plus four additional years for university education) or more years, in the event of his doing post-graduate studies.

What do all these explanations add up to? Depletion of farm labour, less hectare planted and, as a result, diminished harvest, paving the way for food scarcity and higher prices for whatever may be available.

## XX. AGRICULTURAL FACTORS

### a) *Out-Dated Technology*

Because of the old-fashioned tools and methods used, the different processes of food production become tedious, laborious and the resultant yields necessarily small. Whether for land preparation, making mounds, weeding or some types of harvesting the most popular implements used are the machete and the hoe. Even the lowly rake is hardly used in our traditional farming, not to talk of the wheel-barrow to

lighten potterage. What poor matches these primitive instruments are against a D6 or D8 bull-dozer for land clearing, the tractor-driven plough and harrow for land preparation or the combined-harvester for harvesting. In such a situation, the consequences cannot be otherwise, fast-ageing practitioners and minimum and costly products in the market-stalls.

Some of the processes entailed are worth recapitulating, if only in acknowledgement of the pain and sacrifice which go to ensure the meals we almost take for granted.

- i) In the initial preparation of the land prior to making mounds and planting, the forest or bush has to be cleared and the debris allowed to dry before burning. In the packing which follows and which precedes a second burning, not even the humble rake is used in our traditional farming.
- ii) The next stage comprises making the mounds or heaps and the real planting of the crops which, apart from the usual yam sets, cassava cuttings, maize and okro seeds, may have to include melon (egusi) to act as cover-crop to minimize the need for weeding.
- iii) The different crops having been planted, the next stage is the very important one of maintenance when the three weeding must be done in due succession before the cassava leaves converge in a canopy. It is also at this crucial stage that yams (the main crop for men) are staked and their tender vines trained. In rice cultivation, this is the stage during which birds have to be incessantly scared from the farms.
- iv) The fourth stage, harvesting, involves a lot of carrying by head ("potterage"), whereas the wheel-barrow could come in handy here. Except for yam which may have to be stored in a barn on the farm, the harvests are invariably conveyed home on the head and by foot.
- v) Mechanical hulling has taken the sting off the processing of rice, but the processing of melon seeds from gourds and the extraction of "ogbono" seeds from their fruits (by splitting the fruits open with knives) yawn for mechanization. The mechanical production of gain from cassava roots, from peeling to frying, is a tearless operation in factories equipped with modern, electrically-operated machines. Yet, like the subsistence farmer who bears the brunt of feeding the Nigerian nation, practically all the gain we consume is produced by manual frying in slowly – heated, custom-made pots. The process is so laborious that, before now, the reward from garri production never justified the labour entailed. Although there is now the mechanical grain grater to ease the traditional production of garri, the entire
  - a) Uprooting the cassava.
  - b) Carrying the harvest home, usually on the head and by foot.



- c) Peeling.
- d) Washing.
- e) Grating, now usually done by the power driven garri grater.
- f) Tying to extrude the water and thereby facilitate drying of the grated mash.
- g) Sifting.
- h) Frying.
- i) Bagging.
- j) Conveyance to the market by foot, land or marine transport The Nigerian woman trekking long distances to the market, her garri or other commodity on her head, is a very familiar sight.

## XXI. OVER CROPPING

It has been known from earliest times that planting on a given piece of land consistently for some years leads to a rapid degeneration of the soil and, accordingly, to a reduction in the yield from a given parcel of land. This is the bane of farmers in Gokana Local Government Area (of the state) due to insufficient land for the available farmers.

The knowledge of the danger of "over cropping" has given rise to the practice of "shifting cultivation" to allow the depleted land to fallow and thereby regain some of its lost nutrients. Another method is the application of fertilizer to the crops on the same land in order to boost production.

## XXII. POST-HARVEST LOSSES

It may not readily be appreciated how much of food scarcity may be attributable to post-harvest losses. But the real scale of the frequent disaster appears frightening, judging from casual observations around the market-places. But for our purposes the term "post-Harvest losses" will be expanded to include any untoward event which overtakes an otherwise available food item "between the cup and the lip". The item of food could be meat, fish or other edible marine product-not only "food" per se.

Among farm products the following areas may be identified:

- a) Injuries inflicted on yams during harvesting predispose victims to rotting; hence the need to take the greatest possible care in harvesting yams in order to minimize injuries to the tubers. Such fleshy fruits as pawpaw, avocado pear, mango, orange, etc. which may fall to the ground during picking may start softening at the point of impact. Sooner or later, the fruit may start to deteriorate from the impact. A way out is to harvest the mature fruits before they ripen so that the ripening occurs in transit. A practical application of this technique is in the export of pineapples or bananas – both overseas and the latter "locally" from Akain in Abua-Odual Local Government Area (ABOLGA) to Kano to support religious fasting. The mature bunches are

brought in huge canoe-loads to Degema (in the same Local Government Area) from where they are loaded in lorries for the journey to Kano, ripening taking place in transit. This was the process adopted by the Colonial Development Corporation (CDC) even before the birth of the Cameroon Republic, although refrigerated vessels were used from Duala or Victoria (Jaja, 1986) to Europe.

- b) In the cattle trade, disease may strike before the animal is slaughtered and, consequently, (hopefully) declared unfit for human consumption. Not only will such disaster precipitate a fall in the stock of beef in the market, but the value of the loss will also be worked into the total value of the remaining head of cattle, thereby increasing the price of beef, and, hence, reducing the affordability of the product in the market.
- c) In fishing three points may be identified at which "post-harvest" loss may occur. (i) In trawling a breakdown of refrigerating facility may cause deterioration of the catch, whereas among local fishermen a surplus catch, i.e. a catch which is too much for the capacity of the canoe, may compel a rejection of part of the catch for reasons of safety, apart from which local fishermen these days seem to have little problem of post-harvest loss. (ii) Their catch is bought off them by fish-mongers (who dry the fish on their own for later sale) or by others who transmit their procurement by speed boat to Port Harcourt for disposal. Post-harvest loss may set in here from yet three other angles:
  - i.) The fish might have been caught by violent means e.g. by the use of dynamite or other explosive, leading to speedy deterioration of the harvest of the sea.
  - ii.) Undue time lag between the time of catch and arrival at the point of sale.
  - iii.) Delay in arriving at the point of sale due to the craft developing a fault on the way.

Often enough, the fish-monger who re-sells her stock to other users may be unable to do so fast enough or the fish may have been spoilt at source due to violent means of fishing. Thus the middleman ends up being saddled with a quantity of spoilt fish on her hands. (iii) At other times it is the consumer who ends up with the deteriorated fish on her hands, perhaps after cooking. To such a loser, the disaster may well be a double tragedy; he loses both the goods and the cost (money) as well.

## XXII. TRANSPORT PROBLEM

Transport problems range from lack or unworthiness of roads to prohibitive cost of vehicles and maintenance, not to talk of looming fuel costs which at best may have been denied by the authorities. Without good roads it may be impossible to evacuate even available farm products, thereby precipitating a double

tragedy; non-availability or shortage of food items in the markets and impoverishment of the producer who remains saddled with the products of his labour, without any customer to buy them from him. In recounting the farmer's transport problems, it appears fashionable to forget the foot-paths that lead to the actual farms. The farm roads should be wide enough to take a motorcycle to the farms, as one sees around Abuja, to mitigate the tedium of the farmer, especially returning home after a hard day's job on the farm. Besides, farm roads would be invaluable for evacuating farm produce.

To facilitate fishing, all that need be done is general canalization to abridge meandering distances, align curves and bends of the creeks, dredge (where necessary) shallow creeks and provide berths and general navigational aids.

Apart from providing roads and improving routes, the cost of vehicles and spares are prohibitive. Needless to say, these costs are ultimately transmitted to the end user who is thus forced to pay higher prices for the available goods. Everybody should be grateful that wiser counsel prevailed on the issue of raising fuel prices. Any indiscretion on that could have sparked off a riot.

### XXIII. EXTINCTION IN THE IMO RIVER ESTUARY

In 1987 a woman spoke in trenchant Pidgin English on Radio Rivers. She was blaming an oil company for the near extinction of periwinkles in the Andoni ecosystem. Poor shell, what a load to bear? I itched to reply the concerned woman immediately and offer a layman's opinion, not necessarily to mitigate shell's liability, but to suggest that the real culprit might be the ungrateful Nipper palm introduced over a century ago from Indonesia by one staff then working with John Holt. The obstinate palm has stifled the native mangrove tree, to extinction and completely colonized the area (Nzewunwa, 1980).

The densest mangrove jungles nevertheless permit rays of sunlight to bless the marsh beneath. Simultaneously, air filters through to aerate everything around. In such a system which allows sunlight and air to interact with the saline marsh of the brackish environment it is not surprising that other forms of nature thrive and happily reaffirm their faith in "live and let live". But it is not so with the Nipper guests. No streak of sunlight strays into a Nipper vegetation which, as a result, becomes an impenetrable, forbidding maze suggestive of a spreading denizen of dreaded reptiles. No crabs to gallivant on the mud flats or on the mangrove props, no mud-skippers to flirt around, no periwinkles to creep along. With no bestriding mangrove trees, there is no conch or whelk to clamp on to mangrove roots and trees, nor razor-edged oysters to adhere to interlacing mangrove roots. Where have these

delicacies gone, with the erstwhile superintendent of the brackish Imo estuary?

Without attempting to hold brief for the Kalabaris, I guess that their geography might have seduced them away from Agriculture. Used to raking immediate harvest from the sea over countless generations, they seem to have lost the patience of planting and having to wait for as much as three months to expect the earliest results, e.g. fresh maize. Nor is the impatience diminished by their arrogance of daring to close down, at times for considerable periods, alien markets which might have offended them, and the eventual arrival of emissaries from the "penalized" community suing for peace and consequent re-opening of their markets. Such bluff hardly conduces to subjecting oneself to the painstaking discipline of the hoe.

### XXIV. LACK OF PROPER MOTIVATION

It is a known fact that it is the peasant farmer who feeds the Nigerian nation. It is the balance from his crop, after his domestic ration, which filters to the markets for sale. Therefore, it follows that, were his crop larger, his balance for the market would be larger, since his domestic ration would be fairly constant. Could the subsistence farmer think bigger, i.e. increase the scale of his farming, the market-places would be fuller with foodstuffs for sale, as would be seen from the following corollary.

The annual New Yam Festival is a very vibrant note of the Nigerian culture, even formerly among the Kalabari's who do not farm. They once had their "buru alali" (yam festival) which was, significantly, an annual event. The festival cuts across the former Eastern Region of Nigeria, i.e. the present seven Eastern States of the country. It surpasses Christmas festival among the Ekpeyes of Ahoada Local Government Area and Ogbas of Ogba/Ndoni/Egbema Local Government Area (ONELGA), for example.

But many cultures now seem to miss the kernel of the festival – the yam title called "Eze-ji" in Igbo language. Making much ado every year about the "New Yam Festival" without being famous for farming, reenacting the festival is very reminiscent of the nostalgia of watching a latter-day performance of the famous "Agiri" masquerade.

*"The real actors have gone with the steps; now we merely watch the mask-heads."*

Fortunately, the "steps" survive among some people today. At least in the former Obubra Local Government Area which now embraces Obubra, Yakurr and ABI Local Government Areas the yam title is the only accolade recognized by the communities. It consists of a display of four hundred ropes of yam, each rope carrying twenty yams. What this means is that an aspirant for the title will demonstrate his farming

prowess by displaying a barn of eight thousand (400 x 20) yams, excluding yams for the celebration and seed yams for the next cropping.

The point being pursued is that under the cultural stimulus of producing such a great surplus of yams, the title holder is contributing a lot to food availability in the community. It is about time we stopped chasing the shadow of merry-making attendant on the New Yam Festival and start chasing the substance, the "real thing", feeding the state, the nation and beyond. That is what others do, even without the fanfare of a festival.

## XXV. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, an attempt has been made at uncovering some of the challenges which inform food crisis in Rivers State. Some scholars no doubt would have thought that the period saw Rivers State food situation as vibrant. Based on the diversity and the dynamics of the food production, one can safely say that the people were able to evolve and engage in divergent viable economic endeavour that addressed their local needs.

Although one could add that like every other society, no matter how developed, they were not entirely self-sufficient. An investigation into the food situation reveal the poor productive level and the factors responsible for that. Whereas, one cannot deny various attempts made to shore-up food production in the state, however, these have become very infinitesimal as large numbers of people flow into the state to further increase demand for food which itself is not increasing. The hallmark of this argument is that Rivers State between the period under review, even with the rich endowment of natural environment were unable to develop the necessary food requirement to sustain the increasingly populace. Consequently, there is an urgent need to revolutionize food production within the state or between them and their neighbour or both.

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