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The Fading Glory Of Ekpoma Rice Production

Patrick Ochoga

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The University town of Ekpoma, in Esan Central local government area of Edo State, is not only popular with the citing of the only state owed tertiary institution, Ambrose Alli University, AAU, the name of the community also rings a bell with the production of what is popularly referred today as 'Ekpoma Rice'.

The appeal for the rice which constitutes one of the staple meals for the people within the entire Edo central senatorial district, adjoining communities and neighbouring states, is sadly, fast losing its popularity and appeal, owing to what researchers attributed to government's lack of interest in developing the agricultural production of rice for commercial export which will have certainly boosted the local economy of the locality.

However, pundits have argued in several fora that the choice for the

importation and consumption of imported rice by government and

other private stake holders is to ensure that we meets our bludgeoning population may be germane but to the detriment of local rice farmers and production especially Ekpoma rice or what other may refer to as ofada rice.

In spite of the fertile and abundant arable land, rice importation has dealt the killer blow to the farmers in Ekpoma, and exposes the people to the uncertainties generated from rice importation and consumption.

Presently, there are speculations that the rice imported into the country contains strains and grains suitable only for animal domestication and husbandry. Those who know about this, like Friends of the Earth International, FoEI, a worldwide Non-Governmental Organization, has led a consistent crusade against Monsanto and other big corporations involved in genetically modifying the genes of crops for a bumper harvest.

In laboratory tests, FoEI claims it has carried out on imported rice in Nigeria and Sierra Leone, FoEI alleges that some of the rice imported to both countries contains SI strains, fit only for animal husbandry.

From findings, Ekpoma rice is relatively easy to produce and is grown for sale and home consumption. In some areas there is a long tradition of rice growing, but for many, rice has been considered a luxury food for special occasions only. With the increased availability of rice, it has become part of the everyday diet of many in Nigeria.

The criticism of Ekpoma rice falls on the small stones that mix with it often times. After the rice has been par boiled, it is laid out on tarpaulins or tarred roads to dry. It is at this stage that there is a danger of small stones getting mixed up with the rice grains. Ekpoma rice faces competition from imported rice which favored for its long white grains. Imported rice, although widely considered less tasty, demands less preparation as it contains no stones. Removing stones require building designated threshing and drying floors among others will allow Ekpoma rice to compete with Ofada rice and imported rice from asia.

But despite the long years of lack of agriculture policy that will encourage local production of rice, Governor Adams Oshiomhole of Edo State had boasted that the state could provide Nigeria with all the rice supplies it needs if only the federal government could remove waiver on the commodity.

The governor disclosed this in a

recent interview against the federal government's decision to promote local production of food crops in states with comparative advantage on them.

He stated "Edo could do a lot if the Federal Government has coherent agricultural policies that do not provide the window for waivers, and expired rice and cheap rice to be dumped on Nigeria," he stated.

He decried the waiver granted rice importers by the previous administration, regretting that such has led to dumping of various goods in the country which has driven local producers of food items, including rice, out of business.

According to him, big rice millers in Edo State were already waiting to see if a new policy that favours local production will be implemented before they would return to the farms.

Oshiomhole, while noting that Edo has huge potential for massive rice production said such might not happen until the right policies are made, stressing that Leventis Group had promised that with the new administration in the country, and controversies over removal of duty waiver, it was willing to resume production adding that Dangote Group had acquired about 50,000 hectares of land for rice farming in the state and was enthusiastic to go into massive rice farming with the right policies in place.

The Oshiomhole further assured that his administration had waived land charges as incentives for big investors in agriculture and urged those interested in investing in the state to embrace the gesture.

In concerted bid to boost agricultural and rural development programme of rice that would guarantee food security and employment in Nigeria and Edo State in particular had kick started in Etsako Central Local Government Area of the state.

The programme, aided by an international consortium, Transformation Agritech Nigeria Limited is currently embarking on commercial rice production as it's core crop through mechanized farming covering over 10,000 (Ten thousand) hectares.

Group Operations and Project Development Director of the company, Dr. Sample Ibemerum explained that the favourable climatic condition of the Niger Delta region for rice made it imperative to engage in the programme which he said would also go a long way to generate

employment, eradicate poverty, evolve capacity building, training and exchange.

Dr. Ibemerum recalled that Vietnam was reduced to the fourth poorest nation in the world after the American war in 1975 but thereafter transformed itself to a major emerging nation through rice cultivation having being endowed with fresh water and swampy soil suitable for the crop adding that Nigeria could also do same to wipe out poverty and emerge a great nation.

However, a scientist and a lecturer in the Faculty of Agriculture, Ambrose Alli University, (AAU), Ekpoma, Edo State, Dr Agharese Osifo, lamented the relegation of local rice production to the background by successive government both at federal and local level.

He said Ekpoma rice is the best brand of rice in Nigeria because of its special unique quality which he noted made it acceptable and better than any other brand of rice in Nigeria adding that "it carbohydrate based is better than the Abakaliki or even the Thailand rice because it is extremely nutritious with some traces of vitamins, mineral and even proteins unlike other brand of rice.

Speaking on effort by government to tap into harnessing the economic potential that abound in the production, the academic don stated "I can tell you categorially that government is not doing anything, that is Edo state government and by extension the federal government in respect to supporting, improving or developing Ekpoma rice, this not indicting them or just a political statement, it is purely an academic or scientific statement.

"The reason why I stated that categorially is because of the agricultural policy for Edo state government and before this government too is the concept of privatization and as you well know the former minister of Agriculture Adesina clearly stated that as a matter of policy agriculture should be seen as a business and not a way of way life saying that government should not subsidize or help any agricultural product of farmer in any way because we operates a capitalist system"

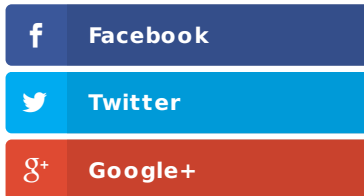
"In fact, Edo state through the commissioner of Agriculture, Hon Abdul Oroh several time have stated in the media that government will not engage in agricultural production and that include the Ekpoma rice we are talking about. And as you are aware some agricultural enterprises have been sold to foreign investors and

that is the sorry story of the Ekpoma rice.

“More importantly, also is the Egoro farmer settlement in Ekpoma, but sadly, the farm settlement is rusting away and it an opportunity for the government to develop this Ekpoma rice. Incidentally, Egoro farm settlement is where the faculty of Agriculture is where am a senior lecturer. The local farmers are still trying their best by planting the upland variety of rice.

He however adduced that quality of the rice had been the limiting factor hindering the export of local rice and noted that “most people will not like to eat Ekpoma rice not because they are not patriotic but because of the quality and standard”

“People like imported rice because it is clean and free of pebbles and stones. Nigeria is the biggest rice importer in the whole world and it consumes more rice than any country. The issue of growing Ekpoma rice for export does not arise because the total production of rice in Nigeria is 1.5 metric tonnes against the effective demand 5 million metric tonnes which is strain by importation and of course, we cannot export rice for this reason. However, they are agencies who give concession to those who want to grow it for commercial purposes,” he opined.



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