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THE ROLE OF AGRO-INDUSTRIES IN PROMOTING A FOOD CULTURE IN NIGERIA*

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The paper discusses in a general way the role of agro-industries in the promotion of a Nigerian food culture. It observes that the agro-industrial and trade policies pursued in the 1970s and early 1980s contributed immensely to a food habit characterised by preference for foreign and imported foods. Agro-industries in the present economic environment can contribute positively to the development of a Nigerian food culture through corporate promotions, investments in the production of local foodstuffs and funding of relevant research and development. The paper concludes that agro-industries should be supported in the development of an indigenous food culture by fostering an enabling environment for private sector investment improvement in entrepreneurial capabilities through training and providing basic research and infrastructural facilities.

For a long period, Nigeria has exhibited an ambivalent outlook in terms of consumers' tastes and preferences for food. Initially dominated by purely African diets favouring the consumption of freshly harvested, heavy and starchy food, the advent of cheap imported foods, especially processed ones, lightly packaged grains and livestock products, radically changed the Nigerian food culture into a mixed grill of both "foreign" and "traditional" food basket, usually referred to in catering parlance as "continental" and "local dishes". Many Nigerian public eating houses and hotels now serve a wide variety of imported foods. While the biological and chemical contents of both are generally the same, the major difference between them is mainly in the mode of preparation and presentation. In addition, most of the food items used for the exotic or continental dishes are often subjected to modern processing, packaging and preservation methods which tend to dictate the difference in their quality and taste. Many Nigerians now prefer the imported and/or exotic food items because of relative ease of transportation, attractive form/long shelf life and other forms of utility which consumers associate with them. In particular, one benefit derived from the reliance on modern processing of food is that it does not only preserve the natural form of the fruit item but also improves its quality and thus facilitates inter-seasonal availability of food and guarantees good prices for the food processors, distributors and retailers.

In the face of acute foreign exchange shortage, it has become increasingly difficult for Nigeria to maintain the level of food import that is consistent with this ambivalent food culture. In spite of this, many consumers have been reluctant to patronize the "traditional" foods, even in situations of out-right ban and high retail prices of some imported foodstuffs. One may argue then, that a logical solution to the problem is not to compel consumers to eat what is available, but to foster the development of an

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efficient processing, preservation and packaging system, which confers a commensurate quality on traditional foods. This therefore calls for the evolution of new techniques of packaging local food products and modification of some existing processes in the agro-allied industries in a manner that is consistent with both our natural factor endowments and the kind of feeding and/or dietary regimes we intend to retain or promote.

The objective of this paper is to attempt to present an assessment of current dietary regimes in Nigeria, analyse the problems and challenges, as well as discuss and suggest an agro-industrial strategy for promoting a food culture based mostly on locally available foodstuffs. The rest of the paper is divided into three parts. Part I contains a review of the agro-industrial and trade strategies and the implications for the Nigerian food culture. Part II identifies the role and constraints of agro-industries in promoting the Nigerian food culture while the last part contains some concluding remarks and policy implications.

I. A REVIEW OF THE AGRO-INDUSTRIAL AND TRADE STRATEGIES AND THE IMPLICATION FOR THE NIGERIAN FOOD CULTURE

Nigeria has pursued an agro-industrial and trade strategy based on import substitution. As the economy benefitted from increased foreign exchange earnings from petroleum exports in the 1970s, protective trade and tariff policies were put in place to encourage the emergency of a wide range of industries. Most of these industries were component assembly plants and agro-industrial enterprises. A review of Nigeria's industrialisation policies, the nature/structure of Nigerian agro-industries and the implications of their activities for the current food culture are presented below.

Industrialisation Strategy and the Structure of the Nigerian Agro-Industry

In Nigeria, the dominant strategy of industrialization has been import substitution. Efforts have been made to produce many consumer goods instead of importing them. One rationale for the adoption of this strategy was to encourage domestic production of these consumer goods (by importing components and engaging in final assembly) and thereby "industrialize from the top downwards" and eventually produce intermediate and capital goods. This strategy resulted in the emergence of protected enterprises, including agro-industries, which were not based on national factor endowments, with the result that their products were not only "new" and appealing to the Nigerian populace but often shifted demand away from their traditional counterparts and substitutes.

Two examples of this type of industrialisation in Nigeria can be illustrated. Firstly, many food processing industries have created or introduced completely new food products. Notable among these are: wheat flour milling, confectionery manufacturing, brewing, sugar, beverage and tobacco industries. Their products were not only new, and initially solely dependent on imports for their major inputs, but they successfully crowded out their domestic substitutes from the food baskets of many households. The second example consists of food processing, packaging and preserving industries such as rice and corn milling, vegetable oil, cassava, yam, spice, flavour producing and meat. Some of the products of these industries initially faced stiff competition from indigenous products and also from imports.

Subsequently, liberal trade policies which encouraged imports of brands of food items produced by these agro-allied industries were pursued on the basis of the argument that a substantial food gap existed which both the agro-allied industries and other domestic sources of substitutes could not effectively bridge. Moreover, it was the general perception that consumer exposure to these products through supplementary imports would help to create demand for them. A situation emerged which, while promoting domestic production of these products, allowed cheap imports of similar products into the country through an over-valued exchange rate and liberal import policies. Food importation was also seen as a means of keeping food prices low. The result was that most products from the agro-allied industries could not compete with the cheaper imported counterparts and that affected their growth considerably. Besides, availability of cheap imports led to the neglect of indigenous food products. For instance, the advent of beer, beverages and other alcoholic drinks witnessed a decline in the acceptability of palm wine, local gin, and other beverages and alcoholic drinks produced locally. It seems clear that cheap food imports and an improper agro-allied industrialization strategy inadvertently influenced our food consumption behaviour. It has helped to shape the ambivalent nature of the Nigerian food culture, and foster a situation where alien foods now constitute an important component of our daily food requirements.

Implications for the Nigerian Food Culture

Agro-industrial and trade strategies pursued in the 1970s and early 1980s failed to build on the potentials of a truly indigenous and traditional food endowment. They also failed, to a large extent, to take into account the rich and varied food cultures of the different ethnic groups in Nigeria. Like every facet of the economy, where modernisation and new products were mistakenly seen to mean progress, the trade and agro-industrial strategy strived to replace traditional food with "modern" diets. The speed, support and incentives given to the emergence of the so-called modern food culture were enormous, the cultural dis-orientation notwithstanding.

The outcome of the newly acquired food culture is quite apparent today. Most diets in urban cities revolve around alien foods. Tea, bread, porridge and confectioneries such as cornflakes, quaker oats, sugar and jam have become routine breakfast diets in virtually all urban households. Similarly, beer, stout, soft drinks and other alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages are consumed daily in most homes in large quantities. Yet, most of these food items have very limited domestic resource contents. In fact, wheat and malted barley, the major agricultural raw materials for the manufacture of many of these universally accepted foods are not grown in appreciable quantities in Nigeria. Although sugar-cane is grown in the country, it so happens that well over 80 per cent of table sugar found in most homes is imported.

The most worrisome aspect of this development is that despite the weak base for perpetuating these food habits, especially given our increasing inability to import them, consumers of these food items have found it difficult to change. Rather, agro-industrialists have assisted them to propagate these alien food intake habits by evolving recipes for their production whereby domestically-produced agricultural products, such as sorghum or maize, are used as raw materials. In other words, the alien foods will be perpetuated until they become a hard core of our food culture. Without doubt, food is one area where local resources could be adapted to meet various tastes without having to import them. In spite of these developments, all hope is not lost. Many

Nigerian households, especially those in rural communities, still rely on indigenous or natural foods to satisfy their dietary and nutritional needs. A general recognition of the benefits of eating these local staples in their natural form (not preserved with chemicals) and of not spending scarce foreign exchange on food imports, would be a driving force in shaping an indigenous food culture in Nigeria. The possibilities for the sustenance of such a culture are very enormous.

Nigeria, with its varied climate and vegetational types, produces a wide variety of crops and livestock from which the various traditional dietary regimes found in the country derive their origins. Thus, two broad cultural dietary regimes can be identified in the country based on the prevalent ecological crop and livestock production specialization. In the savannah regions where cereals, grain legume, vegetables, oil seeds and nuts, cattle, sheep, goat and poultry production predominate, the dietary regimes are woven around grains and livestock meals. Thus, dishes such as "tuwo schinkafa" made from rice and "suya" which is roasted meat, "kwili-kwili" which is made from groundnut and "fura" which is obtained from cow milk are very popular among Nigerians from this part (i.e. the middle belt and Northern parts) of the country. On the other hand, in the tropical rain forest zone and mangrove swamp of the south, where tree crops, root and tuber crops, vegetables, fruits, poultry, fishery, sheep and goat production predominate, the popular meals among the southerners are "pounded yam" "amala" from yam, "eba" or "fufu" made from cassava, and vegetable soups such as "ewedu", "okro", "egusi", "ogbono" with "bush meat", "fresh fish", chicken" and "goat meat". In actual fact, Nigeria has a very rich cultural heritage as far as food preparation is concerned, because the diverse and various communities throughout the country prepare at least a meal, a snack and even a drink from almost every food item or a combination of two or three items available in their localities. Example are "burukutu", a drink made from sorghum in the north, while sorghum also serves as a meal in this part of the country. In the south, we have "coconut rice", which is a special meal, and "coconut drink" with snacks such as "gurundi" made from coconut.

II. THE RÔLE AND CONSTRAINTS OF AGRO-INDUSTRIES IN PROMOTING THE NIGERIAN FOOD CULTURE

The lesson so far is not to deride the relevance of modern agro-industries in shaping a food culture. Certainly, if agricultural growth is to be raised, and market created for food products, higher productivity and better preservation and packaging techniques need to be encouraged by modern industries. Like other facets of national life and development, our food culture needs development and modernization. The process of modernization must be one that *supports* the traditional dietary regimes rather than one that aims at replacing it. The traditional diets, despite their relative popularity, should not be forced on Nigerians at all costs. On the contrary, the aim must indeed be change, but change that is securely rooted in the country's social and cultural contexts and food habits. Attention must be paid to proper methods of food preparation and hygiene. Thus, agro-industries need to take into account our culture, ways of life, ethnic preferences etc, in developing new food concepts and products in order to preserve our culture and tradition.

Supportive Roles for Agro-industries in Promoting Food Culture:

Three key roles could be played by agro-industry and the food services sector in promoting the Nigerian food culture. These are investments in corporate promotion, establishment of enterprises which support indigenous foods and investment in reasearch and development.

(a) Corporate Promotions

Quite a number of agro-food processing enterprises have invested in the promotion of the Nigerian-food culture. Food Specialities and/or Nestle Foods PLC, for instance, support and/or promote cooking competitions annually, in addition to weekly sponsorship of a television programme called "Magi Kitchen" designed principally to popularise Nigerian foods. This is just one company; many more agro-industries need to commit resources to this cause. Food service industries also have a key role to play. Many five star hotels in the country which parade a long list of continental menus such as "prawns cock-tails," "Chicken Piri Piri", "Chicken Jambalaya", "Steak with vegetables" and snacks such as "hot dog", "Cold cat" seriously need to complement this list with truly indigenous food. They need to serve more African fruits and vegetables which are in abundance in our markets and at reasonable prices than ice creams, "pudding," "pancake" and Indian chapatti.

(b) Promoting enterprises which support the Nigerian Food Culture

In setting their production objectives and goals, agro-industrial entrepreneurs have a significant role to play in ensuring that their investments aimed at increasing the supply of food do not destroy or alienate traditional food cultures. Project identification should take into consideration both the cultural milieu, traits, and habits which need to be sustained, in addition to the usual profitability objectives. For instance, rather than invest in the introduction of entirely new "food flavours", additives and products, investments could be directed at packaging indigenous flavours and spices. A number of agro-industries have adopted this investment approach, but greater scope exists for further participation and propagation by others.

(c) Research and Development (R&D)

Agro-industries have a key role to play in pioneering research into efficient processing, packaging and marketing methods that would promote indigenous food cultures. One area which requires immediate attention is the pioneering of research into industrial production of indigenous food recipes, development of techniques which would remove the drudgery and enhance indigenous food preservation and preparation. There is also the need for adaptation of existing plants to process indigenous grains in the form fit for preparation of native dishes. With regard to recipes, a few companies have invented and packaged ready to make menus and ingredients such as "vegetable soups", "poundo yam," "dawavita" etc. These are perhaps, innovations which came into being, not as a result of conscious research efforts, but because of a reaction of some existing plans to increase demand for these local food items as their imported counterparts are priced out of reach following devaluation of the naira exchange rate.

A lot needs to be done to remove the drudgery involved in food preparation.

For instance, the yam pounder and other grinding machines found useful in the kitchen are imported from manufacturers who do not themselves eat pounded yam and stew. In the face of such developments, agro-industries have a key role to play by investing in R&D in order to produce other implements relevant in promoting a desirable food culture. For example, coconut soup, jollof rice with mixed vegetables and assorted fruits could be packaged to meet continental taste while "edikang ikong" (mixed vegetable soup) and pounded yam could be a Nigerian equivalent of a typical Chinese dish. It is recognised that in attempting to assume this new role, the agro-industries will have to overcome many constraints. Some of these constraints relate to inadequate/defective planning, consumer resistance to agro-industrial food products, weak base for research and product development and weak infrastructure.

(i) Inadequate Corporate and Strategic Planning

In Nigeria, not all agro-allied industries have long-term blue-prints and strategic objectives designed to meet long-term food needs of Nigerians. Existing blue-prints and plans often focus on profit considerations within the short-run and hardly take into account the long-term view of Nigerian food requirements within the cultural context and in a dynamic situation. Haphazard and defective plans about the supply of processed food products often result in the production and distribution of food items which fail to build on and promote traditional diets. Defects or inadequacy in planning is not peculiar to the agro-based industries alone, but it is universal. For corporate plans to yield desired results, they must be derived from well-conceived national priorities and objectives. Unfortunately, Nigeria has a checkered history of poor implementation of most national plans which has manifested itself in low productivity and poor economic performance. It is hoped that the private sector would take the lead in correcting past mistakes and in promoting national ideals, including a truly Nigerian food culture.

(ii) Consumer resistance to agro-industrial food products

Sometimes, consumers display a negative attitude to many food products and brilliant initiatives by food processors. For instance, it is known that when yam pounding machines and "poundo yam flour" were introduced, even enlightened urban consumers displayed some lethargy towards their use and adoption. Even now a lot of people still believe that pounded yam from the yam-pounder machine is different in taste from the one obtained from mortar and pestle. Many consumers initially displayed a lot of lethargy towards the consumption of many manufactured food flavours such as thyme, curry and maggi which other households can hardly do without. Consumer resistance appears to be greatest for food items and recipes which have home-made counter-parts. This problem could be overcome through education and other product promotional measures.

(iii) Weak base for Research and Development

Despite the fact that advances in biotechnology holds the key to progress, especially in food-related ventures, most agro-allied industries in Nigeria have failed to strengthen their research capacities for improving, adapting and marketing new technologies and for enhancing the rich food culture of the nation. Indeed, most industries have no

suitable laboratories for conducting serious and meaningful research on food product substitution and on how to influence and propagate Nigerian indigenous food habits. A related problem is the weak base for national research into diversification of local foods, recipes and packaging. Only two research institutes, Federal Institute for Industrial Research, Oshodi, Lagos (FIRO) - and the Project Development Agency (PRODA), Enugu have helped to pioneer research into food packaging and recipes at the public sector level. The private sector, led by such companies as UAC, Food Specialities and Kingsway, is making modest research contributions but commercialization of research findings has been slow and the general response of many private investors and agro-industries in that regard has been poor.

(iv) Weak Infrastructure

In general, weak infrastructural facilities have adverse effects on businessness, and tend to limit the initiatives of entrepreneurs in venturing into enterprises which require efficient functioning of economic and rural infrastructure. The key constraints posed are that they limit the integration of rural and urban markets, seriously hinder accessibility to inputs and services and increase costs of doing business. Poor roads and transportation services, poor storage facilities, shortage of drinking water, lack of or incessant power failures all combined to increase the costs and risks of investments in agricultural products processing and food preparations which are highly perishable and difficult to handle.

III. SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This paper has emphasized the role agro-industries could play in order to sustain and popularise indigenous Nigerian food cultures. It notes that both agro-industrial and trade policies pursued since the early 1970s contributed, in no small measure to the present ambivalent food culture in Nigeria. In particular, it notes that in spite of the preference for foreign and imported foods by many Nigerians, especially in urban centres, Nigerian foods, recipes, and diets are still very popular. The paper further shows that agro-industries have three key roles to play in supporting an indigenous food culture. These are by corporate promotions/propagation, investments in the production of local food stuffs and through research and development. The extent to which agro-allied industries would succeed in encouraging greater intake of indigenous foods would be determined by the degree of their involvement in helping to overcome basic constraints which relate to inadequate corporate and strategic planning to enhance Nigerian food culture, pervasive consumer resistance to agro-industrial food products and weak base for research and rural infrastructure.

In conclusion, the paper notes that increased supportive role of agro-industries is central to Nigeria's effort to evolve a viable, enduring and indigenous food culture. To this end, firm and clear-cut policy directions and leadership are needed to overcome past policy-induced problems and current impediments to progress in making indigenous foods have a mass appeal. The watchword should be pragmatism - involving a conscious step-by-step move towards making more agro-industries aware of the need and benefits of shaping an enduring Nigerian food culture. The agro-industries too, need to respond to incentives and improved enabling environment the government has been providing to the private sector. There is need to nurture industries which have the desire to broaden the local choices in a typical Nigerian food basket in line with

preferences over time. The priorities for active measures which are supportive of the need for a sustained indigenous food culture which the government and the private sector could take include:

(i) Fostering an enabling environment for private sector investment in the production of agro-industrial products

Entrepreneurs generally seek a stable business environment before they invest or participate in an economy. In view of risks involved in agricultural ventures, agro-industries need suitable investment climates to enable them promote our food culture in the course of their normal activities. Fortunately, the Structural Adjustment Programme is creating an appropriate macroeconomic environment for the private investor to take advantage of. Special incentives can be used to promote investments which support our food cultural heritage. Exemptions from import duties on relevant machinery, tax holidays, enhanced access to credit and foreign exchange are some schemes that can be introduced to attract investments in the required area. These incentives need to be formulated to promote employment through labour-intensive technologies and to increase value added through greater reliance on local resources. The regulatory and administrative framework for enjoying such incentives should not be bedeviled with bureaucratic bottlenecks. Related to this is the need to strengthen both private and public sector capacities for implementation of investment plans. Availability of information holds the key to speedy entrepreneurial responses to market incentives to produce desired products, including foods which are a part of our culture.

(ii) Support for entrepreneurial capabilities

There is need to support entrepreneurial capabilities through short-term programmes of training to acquaint them with innovations and food packages worthy of investments. Opportunities should be provided for small scale food processors to learn new processes and commercialize innovations and local food recipes. In addition, there is need to step up campaigns to stimulate consumer awareness of available agro-industrial products and recipes. This is also necessary to overcome cultural rigidities and biases against new food products and to stimulate demand for them.

(iii) Strengthening Research and Development

Government and donor agencies need to encourage agro-industries in forging a national food culture by funding basic research facilities and by helping to disseminate commercially viable food recipes developed by local research institutes. Existing large-scale food processing industries need to complement government efforts in this direction.

(iv) Improvement in the quality of infrastructure and services in the economy

In order to minimise production cost and ensure competitiveness of products from agro-allied industries which support the Nigerian food culture, there is need for functional infrastructural facilities and services. Government needs to provide basic and economic infrastructure and to see that they function well in order to reduce the costs and risks of productive investments, especially those designed to promote our rich food cultural heritage.

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