

THE PRESERVATION OF AGRICULTURAL HERITAGES: A PREREQUISITE FACTOR TOWARDS ECONOMIC NATIONALISM IN THE SOUTH-EAST OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

A call to return to agricultural farming has been a global call on a daily basis from different countries of the world. As such it has formed a hinge for economic advancement and sustainable development in most developed countries of the world. But with the wake-up of globalization Africans especially in the South-East of Nigeria, abandoned this rich cultural heritage for non-agricultural economic advancement. Hence, the resultant effects of this, are seen in various ways ranging from loss of many cultural heritages, corruption, brain drain, loss of jobs, kidnapping, and so on. Economic nationalism here gears towards the struggle or going back to preserve the traditional agricultural system found within the South-East of Nigeria which has been a source of economic development to the region in the past years. And of course, improving the agricultural system already in existence through globalized mechanized farms is seen in various ways, which remains the key to economic nationalism. This research employed a culture area approach in analyzing data and found out that due to non-mechanized ways of farming and lack of proper policies by the government, it led to the abandonment of agricultural heritage that has been the center for economic development.

Keywords: Agriculture, Heritage, Economy, Southeast Nigeria, Africa

Introduction

It has been confirmed and known judging from the past history, that agriculture was one of the key factors that facilitated the emergence and economic development in the Southeast of Nigeria and Nigeria in general. This is because agriculture was and has been the principal occupation of the majority of people in Nigeria before and after the arrival of Europeans. The massive fertile land mass in Nigeria cum favorable climate that supports agricultural productions paved the way for agricultural productions both for subsistence and commercial farming. Lawal (1997) added that agricultural products from different ecological zones and parts of the country were predominantly displayed and exchanged in different markets by farmers and traders. Of course, these agricultural products or goods were exchanged or distributed in those primitive days by a system of exchange (trade by barter) before the introduction or the use of different currencies. This facilitated the movement of agricultural products to their proper destinations and the introduction of new agricultural products in different zones or parts of the country. It also accounts for many zones not to depend on one type of agricultural product for yearly cultivation.

The proper use of human and material resources in agricultural production was done excellently, labor was largely provided by families, extended families, groups, slaves, and peer groups or hired laborers as the case may be in those primitive days. Though mechanized form of farming is taking place but not yet fully in the south-east of Nigeria which necessitated the abandonment of agriculture among the youths.

There are wide range of ideas and beliefs about land in the southeast of Nigeria which they have and which allowed them to maintain a complex agricultural system and other land use systems. Hence, Uzozie (2002) remarked that:

The Igbo concept of land (*Ala, ale, ana, ani*) is deeply rooted in religion. *Ala* (land) is a goddess, the source of life, of fertility, prosperity, and food. She is also the final repository for all human beings after death. *Ala* keeps constant watch over all the activities of men and ensures that people behave in accordance with prescribed traditional norms. (p.450).

With this idea behind the mindset, the southeast people in exploring the gift of land given to them by the gods keep or maintain certain natural balance to maintain the fertility of agricultural productivity which may be inform of offering sacrifices and avoiding certain taboos against the land. This explains the classification of land systems we have almost in all the south-east region of Nigeria, many scholars like Meek (1937) and Chubby (1961) classified land systems into four categories namely sacred or taboo lands, virgin forests, farmlands and individual holdings, and two broad categories namely compound land (*ani uno, ani mbubo*) and farmland (*ani agu, ala ubi*) respectively. Again, there was an abundant land system of ownership, some belonged to the whole community, and some belonged to the clans or villages for distribution during the yearly farming season or for residential and infrastructural buildings. Again, these lands are being shared or sold by communities for other purposes rather than for the cultivation of agricultural products, and some for infrastructures by the government and individuals.

However, Obi (1963) and some scholars later remarked that the Igbo or the southeast of Nigeria have no general classificatory system. They use many lands depending on the objective. The real fact is that all the land is potential farmland depending on how the settlement took place in the area concerned in this age of globalization. It is worthy of note that in the farming process in the southeast in the years past, they equally considered these important factors concerning the land to be cultivated before engaging in the agricultural productions like geographical location, ecological or season of the year, vegetation cover, soil or rock structure, drainage systems, ownership or tenure land system. These are put in consideration to determine the types of crops to be planted. But in this age, technology has helped to improve the crops, soil texture, and drainage system that makes it possible to engage in agricultural productions throughout the year. The implements for agricultural

productions have been also improved, and hoes and matchets or other notable implements are being replaced by various machines that can be used to work on many hectares of land in a few hours. This promotes economic stability and operation feed the nations.

Worthy of note is that most early farmers in the southeast of Nigeria were peasant farmers who engaged mainly in crop production and meagerly in livestock production. Okwuosa (2002) remarked that:

Their principal occupation on the farm is food crop production with livestock production as a supplementary programme. The men, the heads of households, own the sheep, goats, pigs, and cattle, while the women own the poultry. The stock raised are the local genotypes and these are raised under the traditional system of husbandry. (p. 505).

This means that the early farmers were not into full agricultural productions or mechanized farming but purely subsistence farming and that crop production was their main occupation. Achebe (1958) also portrayed that yam production was the main crop being cultivated in those early days and he recounted how Okonkwo borrowed eight hundred seed yams from Nwakaibie and four hundred seed yams from his father's friend. However, many scholars believed that the raising of sheep and poultry were done by women and not by men as remarked by Okwuosa (2002) in the above citation.

The above background shows how agricultural production was being carried out in the primitive ages before it started to undergo changes and the introduction of new means of improving it. And to show that it has been sustaining the life of the southeast people in the day-to-day living, but critically the write-up will show why it was abandoned gradually by the people who took it before as the source of livelihood. Hence, there is a call to go back to this heritage that was found to be the engine hub of economic growth and stability. This is what is regarded as economic nationalism which is a move towards making the production of agricultural products in a mechanized form the mainstay of wealth in the southeast of Nigeria.

Agricultural Heritage: A Factor Towards Economic Nationalism in the South East Nigeria

Nationalism has been defined as a consciousness on the part of individuals or groups, of membership in a nation, or of a desire to forward the strength, liberty, or prosperity of a nation (Akinyele, 1997). The principles of nation-building and self-determination revolve around the building of an economy, judicial system and economic nationalism. Economic nationalism refers to a set of policies and practices aimed at protecting and promoting a nation's economy, often with a focus on domestic industries, resources, agricultural production, and markets. It emphasizes the idea of economic self-reliance and sovereignty, seeking to reduce dependence on foreign entities and maximize national economic interests. Economic nationalism can manifest through various measures, including trade barriers, agricultural

exports, subsidies for domestic industries, currency manipulation, and regulations favoring local businesses.

In the context of southeast Nigeria, economic nationalism involves strategies to boost the region's economy, prioritize local resources and industries, and reduce reliance on external products and borrowings by state governments, though, it has been argued in different fora that borrowing is not bad when it is used for industrialization or production and not for consumption which is the problem of Nigeria government. This could entail promoting and supporting sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and small-scale enterprises that are essential for the southeast economic development. Preserving agricultural heritage, can be seen as a form of economic nationalism because it emphasizes the importance of leveraging local agricultural practices, resources, and knowledge to drive economic (agricultural) growth and sustainability within the southeast region.

According to the Agriculture & Food Security Policy Commission Report (2024), economic nationalism in the South East of Nigeria through agriculture can be achieved through the following ways-: increased investment in agricultural infrastructure, promoting of local food system, supporting small-scale farmers, developing agro-industries, implementing protectionist policies, encouraging research and development, supporting cooperative farming, developing agricultural value chains, promoting sustainable agriculture practices and developing agricultural education and training programs. By implementing these strategies, the southeast of Nigeria will promote economic nationalism which in turn will improve the livelihoods, of farmers, and people, creating jobs and economic growth and sustainability, protection of domestic markets, utilization of local resources, and ensuring food security. Overall, economic nationalism in the South East of Nigeria aims to build a strong and self-reliant economy that benefits the local population, preserves agricultural cultural heritage, and contributes to the region's overall development and prosperity.

Challenges Facing Agricultural Heritage in Economic Nationalism in Southeast of Nigeria

Modernization and technological advances present a double-edged sword for agricultural heritage in the southeast of Nigeria, while modern techniques and technologies can improve agricultural productivity, they often undermine traditional farming practices and indigenous knowledge systems. Reports from various scholars showed that the indigenous techniques of farming produce more harvest than technologically advanced methods that are alien to our soil formation and processes. Uzozie (2002) affirmed that:

The high productivity was the result of much longer fallow and better farming techniques...when their soils yielded three corn cobs on one stand and huge yams weighing upwards of 20 kg. Here, in the core of Igboland we have the most intensive and advanced form of

traditional agriculture employing various methods, including heavy applications of farmyard manure, and much, to increase productivity. (p. 486).

Again, one of the most outstanding features of agricultural farming in southeast of Nigeria is the ability or tendency to mixed cropping. The farmers grew in each plot of land a little of everything needed for subsistence farming and this helped in the management of soil for farmland for some farmers who did not have many plots of land for farming. These mixed and inter-cropping systems according to Uzozie (2002) also influence the rate at which new lands are cleared, the techniques of cultivation that will be in use, the distribution of farm labor in any field during the agricultural year, and the nutritional habits of the people. Most times crops like cassava, cocoyam, yam, maize, and pigeon peas are all planted in one plot of land, but with mechanized farming and technological advancement, this is no longer possible for many reasons. So, one can argue or agree with most scholars that the introduction of modern farming equipment and genetically modified seeds often leads to the abandonment of traditional agricultural practices. According to Okoye and Nwankwo (2018), these modern methods tend to overshadow the rich indigenous knowledge systems that have sustained local agriculture for centuries.

Another harmful factor towards preserving the agricultural heritage in the southeast is too much dependency on external inputs from modern agricultural mechanization which relies heavily on synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and machinery, which can create a dependency on external suppliers. This dependency undermines local economic nationalism, which seeks self-reliance and sustainability (Nwosu et al., 2019). Apart from this dependency, most times the process and the products received from other continents does not yield much harvest because variation in soil texture and other factors involved. It has been found that imported fertilizers most times destroy our land or soil with the harvest expected to earn, or the products harvested spoil easily because it was not cultivated with organic manure which has been the normal thing applied to the soil, fertilizers at that moment becomes hostile to the crops planted and the soil itself. The issue of many farmers not being educated on how to use these agricultural products and machines to maximize profit cannot be ruled out. The land system ownership being operated in the southeast is also a problem, where a group of people owns a portion of land, access to lands belonging to farmers who want to use machines becomes a problem because the cultivated land belonging to another person is destroyed in a bid to gain access to one portion of land. This is quite in contradiction with the western world where a farmer owes many hectares of land.

Land fragmentation and urbanization significantly impact the preservation and nationalization of agricultural heritage in the southeast. The reduction of arable land for rapid urbanization leads to the conversion of agricultural land into residential and industrial areas. Real estate development is the key to the creation of wealth in the southeast as of today, this is seen from the call to southeasters to develop their region

and to drive home the concept of *aku-luo-uno* syndrome, which is being clamored by many state governments in the southeast of Nigeria. This reduces the available rich land for traditional farming practices (Adesope et al., 2021). Meek (1937) classified land in Igboland into four broad categories: sacred or taboo lands, virgin forest, farmland, and individual holdings, but all these lands are not seen as they used to be. For these classifications, enable the traditional farmer to infer the sustainability of the land in question to be used for maximum potential harvest. Again, land fragmentation results in smaller, less viable agricultural plots, making it difficult to maintain traditional farming practices that often require larger contiguous areas. According to Eze and Agwu (2020), small landholdings also hinder the implementation of sustainable farming techniques that are characteristic of agricultural heritage.

The decline in agricultural education and the transmission of knowledge poses a significant threat to agricultural heritage in the southeast of Nigeria. The menace of migration to urban areas and to other countries of the world by young people for education, employment or to escape hardship from the rural areas and in the country hampers greatly the transmission of traditional agricultural knowledge. Equally, lack of interest according to Nwankwo and Eze (2019) among the youth in farming or agriculture in general further causes the loss of the traditional knowledge indigenous to the southeastern part of Nigeria. The youths, these days focus on white-collar jobs, and dishonest ways of being wealthy which have no foundation in creative outputs. Hence, agriculture is always relegated to the background, coupled with the fact that some youths who are interested in farming or agricultural production found the mechanized form of agriculture to be too expensive and the government on its own does not subsidize or help in providing some machines necessary for agriculture. Anazodo (2002) highlighted that in the previous years in Nigeria, all ministries of agriculture in the states of the federation, operate tractor hire services for farmers in their respective states to encourage private investment in mechanized farming, but this service is expensive and mostly unavailable all the time.

Modern educational curricula introduced in the school system today focus more on contemporary agricultural practices and less on traditional methods, this factor according to Onyeneke et al (2016) leads to a disconnect between academic knowledge and indigenous ways of farming. Apart from this factor, most schools from primary to tertiary institutions have not given agriculture its proper place as part of the learning necessary for growth and process of feeding the nation.

Climate change and environmental degradation present profound challenges to the agricultural heritage in most parts of the country in Nigeria especially in the southeast. Changing climate patterns affect the growth cycles of traditional crops, making it difficult for farmers to rely on historical knowledge for planting and harvesting (Eze and Agwu, 2020). Anyadike (2002) further explained that the

southern parts of the region are only 530 kilometers away from the equator, hence solar radiation is high all year round. It affects the farming seasons with its irregular radiation over southeast Nigeria. With high temperatures, all year round, rainfall with its seasonal variations appeared to be the most climate change element that affects the time of cultivation. Equally, environmental degradation, such as soil erosion and deforestation, reduces the fertility of the land and undermines traditional farming systems that depend on specific environmental conditions. According to Adesope et al. (2021), this degradation leads to a loss of biodiversity, which is crucial for maintaining agricultural heritage.

Agricultural heritage in the Southeast of Nigeria faces significant challenges as seen above, even as of today the menace of herders is not yet handled by the federal government of Nigeria which is a very serious threat to agriculture. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that balances the benefits of modern agriculture with the preservation of traditional practices and knowledge systems, ensuring the sustainability and resilience of local economies in the southeast of Nigeria.

Agricultural Heritage: its Roles in Reshaping the South-East of Nigeria

To explain how agricultural heritage will contribute to economic nationalism in the southeast of Nigeria, one has to delve into various aspects such as the historical significance of agriculture in the southeast, the role of agricultural heritage in shaping cultural identity, its economic implications, and how agricultural heritage aligns with economic nationalist agenda in general. This is why Njoku (2008) attested that:

Igbo traditional economy stood on a sectoral tripod that embedded agriculture, manufacture, and trade. These sectors had an inter-dependent relationship; the health of one sector impacted that of the others. With specific reference to manufacture and trade, it should be stressed that manufacture, provided the context for trade, that is, the distribution of goods from areas of plenty. At the same time, trade stimulated manufacture by providing a vent for the disposal of surplus production, thus moving the economy away from subsistence to market orientation. (p. 47).

From the above, it can be adduced that one of the aims of promoting or preserving agricultural heritage is its potency in creating major economic growth in the southeast and reducing the tendency of the youths to engage in uncivilized activities inimical to the people around them. But if these will take place, government in power has to mobilize and support agricultural farming as it is done in the other developed countries of the world. Agriculture has been the backbone of the economy in the South East of Nigeria for centuries, with traditional farming practices deeply ingrained in the region's cultural heritage. According to Nwankwo and Eze (2019), indigenous farming systems in the region have evolved over generations, reflecting a deep connection between people and the land.

The agricultural practices have played a great role and continue to play a great role in the southeast, this is seen through the closely intertwined cultural identity of the people of the Southeast which is displayed in the form of cultural festivals either at the beginning of any farming season or during the harvesting seasons. Before the cultivation season starts, sacrifices are made to appease the gods and to request for bountiful harvests. Iwuagwu (2008) asserted that sacrifice is normally done at the door of the yam barn where yams are stored. So, during the celebrations especially during the harvest season the sons and daughters of the Igbo people and beyond come back home to celebrate and make peace with each other. Onyeneke, Anyanwu, and Eboh (2016), confirmed that farming traditions, rituals, and folklore are integral parts of the region's cultural heritage, shaping social structures and community cohesion. Earlier, Afigbo (1980) affirmed that:

Agriculture in Igboland was highly ritualized....The beginning of the farming season, the date of which varied from one part of Igboland to another for ecological reasons, was a formal occasion marked by a festival and a ritual. It was the same with the beginning of the harvest season which was marked by the very important New Yam festival. It was not only the practice of agriculture that was ritualized. But those crops, especially yam and cocoyam, which constituted the backbone of Igbo agriculture were also ritualized, and each was believed to have a spirit force, *arusi*, which laid down the specific code of conduct for cultivating, harvesting cooking, and eating it. (pp. 126-127).

This ritual has been part and parcel of the cultural identity of the southeast people, and this has continued to define them as people, hence it is showcased through the agricultural heritage being celebrated yearly even beyond the shores of the southeast, in the distance foreign countries where the people of the southeast live as foreigners, they come together and celebrate these festivals in union with people at the homeland. Here, cultural displays of different kinds are done and some prominent sons and daughters are given chieftaincy titles.

Agriculture remains a significant contributor to the economy of the Southeast when it is viewed from the angle of trade and commerce. A study by Okoye and Nwankwo (2018) highlights the economic importance of agriculture in providing employment, income generation, and food security for the region's population. Furthermore, indigenous crops and livestock breeds hold economic potential, contributing to both subsistence and commercial farming activities (Adesope et al., 2021). Apart from employment opportunities, Afigbo (1981) affirmed that selling of agricultural products in the precolonial times helped in the development of long-range trade which involved the development of regional trade within the southeast and the development of long-range trade linking the southeast with their neighbors. According to Afigbo:

The two kinds of long-range trade developed in consequence of

differences, or growing differentiation in ecological conditions, leading to a situation in which one part produced more of one kind of goods that it could consume, and had to exchange the excess for those goods which it needed and could only get from its neighbors who either produced them or were in a position to procure them from their other neighbors. (p. 131).

This transaction laid the foundation to the southeast people being known as traders all over Nigeria and beyond. The transaction of agricultural products and other things has continued to showcase and promote the economy of the people in the southeast. Preserving agricultural heritage in the southeast of Nigeria aligns with the goals of economic nationalism globally by promoting self-sufficiency, local empowerment, and cultural preservation. According to Eze and Agwu (2020), efforts to conserve indigenous crops and livestock breeds not only safeguard biodiversity but also strengthen the region's resilience to external economic pressures and control over erosional menace taking place in the southeast of Nigeria. Recently, several state governments in power in the different states in the southeast have continued to plant more trees both for economic reasons and to control environmental erosions in different parts of the states of the southeast. With the planting of the different types or species of palm trees in most part of the southeast, the region is again reclaiming its first position towards the production of palm oil for export and other things connected with the growing of palm trees, and other economic trees. Ovat (2024) reported that this year(2024) alone, the Anambra state government has flagged off and planted trees to maintain urban forestation, for ecosystem stability, food and agricultural security, and erosion control across the cities in Anambra state, and for climate regulation.

Economically, the viability and productivity of crops have increased more than it used to be in previous years, more people especially youths have moved into both subsistence and commercial farming, thereby reducing the rate of unemployment in the states of the eastern region of the country. With this development, food security is assured especially organically produced food which ensures the health of the people with the local foods produced locally than imported food items. But in due time, with the supply of constant power supply and prevention of herders from entering or destroying the farm, the activities of the farmers will increase the internally generated revenues of the states more than any economic activities being engaged by the state governments. This will confirm that agriculture has been the mainstay of the Nigerian economy and it has been dominated by the peasants before and after the independence, then gradually declined from 1970, as the Nigerian government found new and false love with the oil sector and neglected the agricultural sector.

Conclusion

Therefore, agricultural heritage plays a crucial role in promoting economic nationalism in the South East of Nigeria by preserving cultural identity, supporting local economies, and fostering self-reliance. Efforts to conserve indigenous farming practices and biodiversity not only contribute to sustainable development but it also aligned with nationalist agendas aimed at promoting the interests of the region and its people.

With the agricultural sector in full development and financed by the federal government, the over-dependence on the oil sector will be a thing of the past by the Nigerian government as exemplified by the region of the southeast of Nigeria. From the above discussion, it is possible to march towards economic nationalism through agriculture which will ensure a prosperous future for all regions of Nigeria with regard to food security. Embracing this agricultural heritage, government intervention is highly needed, which will surely foster innovation, create jobs, enhance food security, and reduce the menace of kidnapping factor all through the country as it is gradually taking place in the southeast of Nigeria. This again, will drastically reduce dependence on the importation of food items, boost locally produced food, and give value to Nigeria's devalued and inflated economy. So, there is a need to go back to the mainstay of the Nigerian economy by the government support and allocating more to it in the national budget and ensure its implementation. This has sustained many countries of the world to survive economically even in the time of war. This can be seen when the Ukraine government despite the ongoing war with Russia, still donated 25,000 metric tons of wheat to support the World Food Programme (WFP) in providing emergency food assistance to 1.3 million crisis-affected people in North-East Nigeria (Anyagafu, 2024). This shows that agriculture is very important in the stability of any country, so there is a need to go back to agriculture by the government of Nigeria.

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