

**REMARKS AT THE VALEDICTORY SYMPOSIUM FOR PROF O. C. AWORH: THE
ROLE OF LESSER KNOWN CROPS IN ADDRESSING FOOD AND NUTRITION
SECURITY IN NIGERIA**

By

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First, let me start by thanking God for sparing my life to see this special day. That this is happening right here and now, with me hale and hearty at the age of 70 in a country where the life expectancy for men is 55 years (compared to 64 years in Ghana and 81 years in the UK) underscores God's grace and the special favour that I have received for which I will be eternally grateful.

Second, what a great honour to be surrounded by such an array of highly accomplished mentees who have deemed it fit to honour me in this way at great expense to themselves in time and money. I have had the privilege of my former students becoming my Head of Department; a rare privilege that you can only enjoy in academics. Not succumbing to the pressures and opportunities of leaving Nigeria for more lucrative positions in foreign universities has turned out to be the best decision that I have made under God's guidance and it truly took His guidance for me to decide to stay on at the University of Ibadan, when upon returning to the University after a sabbatical at the University of Leeds and University of British Columbia in 1987, I was offered an appointment, without an interview, to help set up a new Department of Food Science in a university abroad.

My Vice-Chancellor, Sir, there is a serious shortage of academic staff in the Department of Food Technology and I wish to plead with you to look into this as a matter of priority and urgency. By the grace of God, of the eight academic staff in the Department (indeed, there are only seven now as one actually retired last year), four are my former PhD students, two were supervised for their PhD by my former PhD students (second generation) and I was the Internal Examiner for the one who has a PhD in Agricultural Engineering. So, I am surrounded in the Department by a cherished team of witnesses with shared experiences for which I am very grateful.

Third, the theme of this Valedictory Symposium was carefully chosen by my mentees to reflect the area in which I have devoted a great deal of my research. Lesser-known crops receive little attention in international science and are referred to as orphaned crops. So, working with them, especially from the standpoint of preservation, processing and value addition, may not be as academically rewarding in a sense as working with conventional crops. But as has been aptly demonstrated in this symposium, we ignore them at our own peril. Sustainable food security cannot be based on a few crops- rice, maize, wheat and soybeans- that account for a major proportion of global food supply. By far my most cited work was on soybeans, whereas work done with our traditional African fruits such as African mango ("oro" in Yoruba), African star apple ("agbalumo" in Yoruba; "udala" in Igbo), hog plum ("iyeye" in Yoruba) and others are far less cited even though published in the same high impact international journals because there are few researchers in the

area and lack of interest by mainstream international science. So, while working with conventional crops may be more academically productive in terms of citations, the opportunities for breaking new grounds and advancing knowledge offered by lesser-known crops, I believe, are far more challenging, exciting and rewarding.

Sustainability can only come from diversity and for us we have as part of our rich biodiversity hundreds of lesser-known and under-utilized traditional crops and wild food plants of great horticultural, nutritional and environmental significance. Some of them are forest resources that play major role in carbon sequestration and are critical to reversing the adverse effects of climate change. We must not be deterred in drawing attention to our lesser-known indigenous African crops even though it may not be as academically “productive” in the short term as working with conventional crops. Indeed, just over a week ago, an opportunity at drawing attention to these lesser-known and under-utilized crops was missed because of lack of knowledge. To the uninformed, research on these lesser-known crops and wild food plants that are often the richest and cheapest sources of essential nutrients, especially to the rural populace, and are available at certain critical periods when other sources of foods are unavailable, and are adapted to harsh growing conditions and grow without the need for fertilizers, pesticides and other inputs, is of little consequence given their low economic value. But the rural populace are very much aware of the health-promoting benefits of our traditional fruits and vegetables. Many of them such as bitter leaf or “ewuro” (Yoruba), “okazi” (Igbo), “efirin” (Yoruba), baobab leaf or “kuka” (Hausa) etc., are used in traditional medicine and their critical roles in the management of diet-related, non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular diseases are now being recognized and acknowledged by the scientific world. They are functional foods and important components of traditional African diets with immune boosting properties and are rich in plant bio-actives (nutraceuticals) with antioxidant and enzyme inhibiting properties and that sequester or bind potentially toxic constituents and act as scavengers protecting against cancer and neurodegenerative diseases. Indeed, some of these lesser-known vegetables are now being referred to as super vegetables on account of their great nutritional value, chemotherapeutic and health promoting properties and other unique qualities.

I am glad that the African Journal of Food, Agriculture, Nutrition and Development (AFJAND) published by Honourable Prof. Ruth Oniang’o has shown an interest in this symposium. My greatest joy is that there is a critical mass of knowledgeable, gifted, hardworking, dedicated researchers that will take this work further for the benefit of food and nutrition security in this part of the world. There is no greater honour, no greater legacy and no better prize than this assurance as I retire. By the grace of God, I will continue to advance this noble cause even in retirement.

Finally, I wish to express my profound gratitude to my most cherished mentees and the Department of Food Technology for organizing this Valedictory Symposium in my honour, and to the erudite keynote and session speakers for their inspiring, thought provoking and scholarly presentations, and to all who have found the time to attend out of their very busy schedules, either physically or virtually.

University of Ibadan Conference Centre, Ibadan, Nigeria, 9th November, 2021