

**ASSURING FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY IN AFRICA BY 2020:  
Prioritizing Action, Strengthening Actors, and Facilitating Partnerships**  
April 1–3, 2004, Kampala, Uganda

**SUMMARY NOTE**

**CHANGING ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS:  
THE ROLE OF AFRICA’S CULTURAL LEADERS**

**Keynote Speaker:** *Wole Soyinka*, Professor Emeritus, Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria; Director of Literary Arts, International Institute of Modern Letters, University of Nevada; and Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature

**Title:** “We Make Our World”

**Date:** April 3, 2004

Let me begin by establishing the credentials of a literary mind for intervening on the subject of that basic, but sometimes mysterious world of food. I assume that those who invite me here did so because they were aware of my qualifications on the subject. My audience may not be so well informed, and even the organizers themselves may be unaware of some secret testimonials that I can boast of, right from childhood. Also, it is conveniently the case that the credential I shall now present enables me to advance from the socio-cultural and economic lessons of a remarkable member of the family of tubers, a food crop known as the yam, to proposals for a re-integration of food consciousness, not only within the mythological base of Culture, but in science and technology. In numerous West African cultures — the Igbo, the Yoruba, the Igbira, and Idoma among others — the yam aspires to a quasi-mystical status and is celebrated as such. However, just to bring us down to earth, or more accurately in this case, simply to ensure that we have our feet firmly planted in earth, let us first deal with the gastronomic versatility of this crop.

As a matter of fact, the yam is not that unique in this respect — that it, in its versatility. Like most tubers, including the sweet potato, it can be eaten boiled, roasted, fried, chipped, reduced to powder, and transformed into a glutinous paste, etc. etc. It is, however, exceptional in the sense that it is the one tuber, to our knowledge, that is also pounded. I do not say mashed, like that bland pretender the potato, but pounded in a dug-out wooden mortar whose origin is definitely lost in the mists of antiquity. Of the various methods of consuming the yam however, none appears to have attained both the gastronomic and ceremonial status as the pounded form. In Yoruba society, this form is known as *iyán*.

The foregoing, which is common knowledge, is not however the credential that I wish to present as conferring on me the authority to speak on this subject. Be it known then that, sometime around the age of four or five, I fought my best friend over a bowl of this very food item — *iyán*, the pounded yam. It was an episode, I believe, that I subconsciously left out in my childhood memoirs — *AKE*. Osiki, the best friend in question, was much older and somewhat bigger than I, but not so big as to justify the size of his morsels which, at that miniaturized age of a four-year old, seemed at least the size of a grape fruit. The speed at which these morsels also vanished down his throat — at least three times the speed of light — struck a negative chord in my rudimentary sense of justice. I objected, we parted company, but it did

not take very long for friendship to be resumed. From then on, however, my mother ensured that we ate from separate bowls.

At some stage or the other, I do not recall exactly how, I did lose my passion for *iyán*, which I find rather strange, in retrospect, since the pounded yam is a food to whose glory much praise is lavished in the poetry of the Yoruba, a tradition that I acknowledged through my own translation, and in an essay on Yoruba attitude to food titled: SALUTATION TO THE GUT. Another source for this lyrical enthusiasm can be found in the play THE IMPRISONMENT OF OBATALA, by Obotunde Ijimere, an exegetical play on the travails and the moral compass of that god of purity, Obatala. Rarely do we find an item of food that attains such rapturous liturgical association with the gods, and one to which is credited even an ethical symbolism — purity of mind. Yet another deity is intimately associated with the pounded yam, this being Sango, the god of lightning. Indeed, Shango's ritualistic seat is the wooden mortar turned upside down.

I may have lost that early ardour for *iyán*, but that food item unwittingly imparted some sociological lessons that do not appear to have faded with time. Osiki and I attended the same primary school. His school uniform was threadbare, and his books appeared to be in the same condition. My parents absorbed him into our household, with other stray waifs, and only gradually did I realize how much Osiki depended on those occasional meals in our home for his very sustenance.

It was a sobering, social datum that sank deeply into my subconscious. Mine was by no means a family that rolled in opulence, but a schoolteacher's income, reinforced by small-time trading of a wife could sustain the household and also provide for the familiar 'extended family,' which included members who had no blood connection of any sort. I believe however that today, compared to millions of Osiki's age in the world we now inhabit, Osiki would swear that his was also a privileged childhood, even without his watching contemporary footage of children from the hunger zones of the continent, their stomachs bloated in malnourishments, victims of perennial drought and of war displacements year after year, but also victims of the improvident attitude of African leadership. Today, Osiki would stare, unbelieving, at the images of homesteads where the only evidence of abundance would be swarms of flies in competition for the least moisture on the eyes, lips, and nostrils of human beings sunk in lassitude. He would shudder at the attenuation of limbs of soon-to-be mortal statistics that continue to rebuke a continent of such diverse, and abundant material resources. He would recoil at the portent of once thriving farming villages, whose productive routine has been drastically attenuated by HIV/AIDS, the surviving inhabitants being wide-eyed orphaned children, looking lost, uncertain of the source of their next meal.

Food is allied to culture, in the most organic, interactive way, and one may be brought to the aid of, in enhancement of, or celebration of the other. We observe this, not only in the already mentioned lyricism it invokes in some societies, but in the sheer weight of multiple creative arts that are dedicated to the planting season and harvesting, elaborate performance gatherings that also serve the purpose of cohering the community. Most of us, however, would prefer such collaboration to avoid the external dependency mode, such as once occurred in one of the critical periods of food shortage, when a helpless visage of the continent came to be stamped, some years ago, on global consciousness. I readily admit that I am not a fan of pop music, but at least I had kept my dislike for that frequent travesty of the musical art away from the actual creators — that is, until I heard the name of a certain Bob Geldoff!

The cause of my dislike was quite perverse. Bob Geldoff was guilty of performing a duty that I considered mine, ours, the duty of that extended family that was the ethos of the upbringing, I am certain, of most of us here. Bob Geldoff was the name that became identified — need I remind you? — as the main initiator of a music concert whose centerpiece was the famous 'We Are the World.' My dislike of Bob Geldoff, in other words, had nothing to do with music, but with pride, racial pride. Who was this man, this foreigner who took it on himself to fill in a space of disregard, of indifference to the plight of a people by their own leaders? There was, without question, also a sense of frustration, even envy. Only two years, before that world music concert, I was editor of the African journal

*TRANSITION*, later to be renamed *CH'INDABA*. We warned of the crisis of drought and famine in parts of Ethiopia, based on first-hand reports. We attempted to dramatize the beginnings of another round of famine-induced migrations of Ethiopian villages, while the Emperor Haile Selassie wined and dined foreign dignitaries in the splendor of his palace. To drive the point home, we published a facsimile of the menu of a typical banquet that took place in the imperial palace, side by side with images of starving families in makeshift camps.

Two or three years later, under the so-called people's revolutionary regime of Mariam Mengistu, we were obliged to return to the same scenario of leadership planlessness, only it had worsened beyond imagining. Once again, millions of humanity were on the move, in flight from certain starvation. The lessons of the previous years, in Tigre and other provinces, had not been absorbed. African humanity, it seems, has always been expendable to most leaders. Human skeletons, both of adults and children, denoted trails that were reminiscent of the routes of the trans-Saharan slave routes that many, incidentally, like to pretend never did exist. The continent was absorbing the bleak lesson that, in the critical fulfillment of the primary mission of feeding its people, there was hardly any difference between neglect of the feudal kind and the myopia of revolutionary messianism.

What was singularly aggravating about the new famine in Ethiopia was that the increase in human suffering had been caused by an ill-digested notion of the production strategies of collectivization. The ruling Dergue, stuffed full of textbook notions for the transformation of the means of production through centralism, commenced a policy of deliberate displacements, uprooted and dispersed entire peoples to artificial villages that took no note of their traditions. Of course, those traditions had proved inadequate, but the inhuman revolutionary zeal of The Dergue only made matters worse. The death toll mounted. The conscience of the world could stand it no longer. The pen may be mightier than the sword, but music proved more efficacious than both. Revolutionary slogans gave way for the lyrics of the pop musician, reminding the affluent that indifference to material deficiency in one part of the world merely underlined the moral deficiency of the rest. I felt this rebuke personally and took a violent dislike to this man of conscience called Bob Geldoff.

Many here will recall Chinua Achebe's *ARROW OF GOD*, a work that offers itself so readily today as parable of social responsibilities and the consequences of their betrayal. The conduct of a central character in that novel, Ezeulu, the priest and spiritual guardian of the deity, Ulu, in an Igbo community, is a cautionary tale for the contemporary leadership of our continent. Of Ezeulu's priestly duties, none was more crucial to the survival of the community than his role as the sign reader and transmitting medium of the planting season for the new yam. If the harvest failed, and that meant, if it was not planted at the right moment — for instance, before a seasonal change burnt the yam seedlings in the earth — starvation was guaranteed for the ensuing year. The manner in which this authorization was provided goes to the very heart of an integrated community existence on many levels, and indeed goes to the heart of what I have described as the quasi-mystical status of the yam, underlining the cyclic nature of earth's renewal.

In Chinua Achebe's narrative, that signal is withheld by Ezeulu. The entire village waits on their priest, but he has a bone to pick with his people. He is smarting from a humiliation meted out to him by the colonial authority in the person of a Captain Winterbottom and, additionally, from a political slight he has received from his community. And so, Ezeulu refuses to 'see' the new moon, whose appearance communicates to him the moment that he must eat the final, symbolic tuber from the harvest of the previous year. He remains deaf to the pleas of the elders, and turns a purely ritualistic procedure into a literal one. The welfare of the community is imperiled, but Ezeulu is unmoved. The priest, rather than make his world with his spiritual will and authority, was unmaking it, content to watch community unravel at the seams.

Let me insert here the contemporary parallel that the conduct of Ezeulu evokes: it is the spiteful policies of some of our politicians who, because a constituency or the other cast their votes for the opposition, or have shown opposition to their political agenda, proceed to impoverish that region, withholding public facilities — health, education, roads, water supply including rudimentary boreholes,

farming equipment, fertilizers, etc. etc. Their language is: *you withheld your votes, now go and eat your ballot.*

Chinua Achebe, when he embarked on that work, may have been unaware that he was setting down a contemporary morality tale that is so applicable to the plight of the continent, and the betrayal of natural expectations and confidence that a people have a right to demand of their leaders. For one thing, when he wrote that novel, the notion of famine on the scale of the last two decades was unheard of on the continent, not even in the Sahelian regions, or indeed in former colonies such as the Congo where traditional food production systems had been subverted by colonial policies that forced their subjects to substitute cash crops for food crops. I refer here to that period when thriving societies were turned into mere production appendages of King Leopold's commercial empire, a period of enforced quota systems, failure to attain which was punished by the slicing of ears, slitting of nostrils, and amputation of limbs.

In the colonial period narrated in that work, the oil book had not yet arrived to displace food as the primary preoccupation of peoples, resulting in once self-sustaining communities, now amalgamated into independent nations, finding themselves compelled to import even basic foods of which they were once, in some cases, exporters of surplus.

When *Arrow of God* was written, neither the author nor anyone else had ever heard of a devastating affliction called HIV/AIDS.

Chinua Achebe's community of the deity, Ulu, is the paradigm of our continent — a continent awaiting the signal that would inaugurate a comprehensive 'planting' that will sustain its people, that is, the annunciation of a creative, sustainable strategy that is attuned to the realities of uneven industrialization, new national entities, calling up a remedial response to the breakup of the organic productive systems of pre-colonial society, its demographic shifts and the consequences of our brutal civil wars. Could it be that IFPRI aspires to be the resurrected spirit of Ezeulu? But with the admonition that a community cannot wait on the voice of one individual alone but must act collectively and methodically! IFPRI — well, not as euphonious a name as Ezeulu and hardly what one would deem a wholly indigenous initiative but, as we say in my part of the world, if the man sees the poisonous snake, but it takes a woman to kill it, all that matters to the homestead is that the snake is dead. Let Hunger writhe, and die!

When ARROW OF GOD was written, in the early sixties, the oil palm industry of Southern Nigeria was still flourishing. The landscape of the Northern parts was adorned with groundnut pyramids, attaining such an iconographic status that they were used on the national postage stamps. It was not mere nostalgia, but the necessity for our self-indictment, a bitter stock-taking that wrung the following lines out of me, lines from the poem *Elegy for a Nation*, in the collection, *SAMARKAND and Other Markets I have Known*:

We grew filament eyes  
As heads of millet, as flakes of cotton responsive  
To brittle breezes, wraith-like in the haze of Harmattan  
Green of the cornfields of Oyo, ochre of groundnut pyramids  
Of Kano, indigo in the ancient dye-pots of Abeokuta  
We were the cattle nomads, silent threads through  
Forestries and cities, coastland and savannah  
Wafting Maiduguri to the sea, ocean mists to sand dunes

Alas for lost idyll ...

... Ghosts are sole inheritors.  
Silos fake rotundity — these are kwashi-okor blights  
Upon the landscape, depleted at source. Even  
The harvest seeds were long devoured. Empty hands  
Scrape the millennial soil at planting.

‘Even the harvest seeds were long devoured.’ Yes, both figuratively out of greed and by incontinent leadership, but sometimes also from necessity, as happened in Igboland during the Civil War, a condition that must be recognized as the continuing fate of many African zones of civil war today, where anti-personnel mines reduce the yield potential of land even further, and finish off what HIV/AIDS has begun. In *SAMARKAND*, I was indeed evoking the nation that we once knew, but Nigeria was only one of many such travesties. At least, there had been war in Nigeria, with the attendant distortion of productive priorities. The ascendancy of a war industry that resulted in the abandonment of multiple economic devices, but agriculture most especially, was a phenomenon that simply transferred itself to the oil industry once oil was discovered. Not even successive attempts at mobilization under slogans such as *OPERATION FEED YOURSELF*, *OPERATION FEED THE NATION*, *OPERATION THIS AND WHATEVER ELSE* have succeeded in resuscitation of the farm as primary source for a people’s food security. Often, the main target of these endeavors was youth, how to turn the sights of youth away from the glitzy attractions of urban living and challenge them with the vital contributions that can be extracted from that basic resources — land!

Nigeria is only an illustration. No one requires to be told that that this anomaly is spread all over the continent, and even in nations, like Ghana, that did not undergo the production distortions of civil war or an oil boom. I was sojourning in that nation when the markets dried up, the staple food *kenke*, made from fermented corn, shrank until it virtually vanished into its leaf wrap, while the supermarkets display cases had nothing in them but shelled coconuts. That was a paradox. There was no shortage of food in the land but there was starvation. Food crops simply rotted away on the farms for lack of transportation, thanks to the incontinent conduct, indifference and neglect by the ruling military.

We cannot exactly return to that integrated phase of communal life where the very process of cultivation — like other forms of life preserving labor — was related to the overall cultural being of the community, but we can, come reasonably close. We can re-invent the gods, exploiting their timeless functionalism. I propose this dimension, not merely because I am a compulsive mythologist, but because I would like to see, when the new sign-reader and interactive medium — Ezeulu-IFPRI — next sounds the gong for planting, that it is not merely ‘experts’ who are summoned, but a fair representation of the small-scale, even subsistence farmers who have remained faithful to their vocation, are also closer to earth than most of us here and are sometimes unconscious researchers into the science of food. It helps, of course, if we can link them, through familiar cultural symbols, to the world of modernity and constant technological innovations.

The two relevant deities here are, firstly — none other than that confessed favorite of mine, Ogun, in all his myriad transformations, the god of metallurgy and the patron deity of agriculture, a role that he shares with that of another deity — Orisa-oko. Orisa-oko is the very spirit of leaves, the farm and the moist elements, while Ogun is the technological impulse that transforms Nature — from the most rudimentary hoe and machete, to the complex combine harvester, the churning mills and transportation conveyances.

There are several models on whose scaffolding such basic, life-affirming strategies, the antithesis of hunger and starvation, can be mounted. I see no reason why a day cannot be dedicated annually to the culture of food renewal, its science and technology, utilizing the seasonal festivals of Orisa-oko and Ogun, or their equivalents in other African cultures. Regional or continent-wide, it does not matter, its goal being to marry the cultural wealth and celebration of relevant mythologies to a forward focus on modernization through recall and innovation. Let it never be forgotten that, in the liturgies of worship, traditional songs and rituals are lodged much knowledge concerning not merely the science of crops for food but for the pharmacology of healing. From the spirit of that past, new songs will emerge attuned to the present, abandoning the charity propelled ‘*We are the world*,’ that song of dependency, for the self-affirmation of ‘*We make our world*.’

I envision, in short, a working Festival that recovers the ethos of farming integration with life sustaining processes, encounters that anticipate, not simply respond to devastating vagaries of Nature. Technical expositions, contests, with awards, that will stimulate inventiveness in food preservation

techniques, pest control, experimentation in the cultivation of new varieties, disease resisting strains, high yield varieties, promotion of organic fertilizers that do away with controversial chemicals — in short, an entire revolution in our approach to the food sciences that were developed for other climates, other soils, and other industrial cultures, giving primacy of place to our own authoritative voices — not simply the politicians' — over the merits or demerits of genetically altered crops. The past has much to teach, even if the present rides on the engines of the future.

The trajectory of surplus and scarcity would be plotted in scientific caucuses that would be part of such a Fiesta, with also of course a gallery of negativities as correctives, those hideous scars on the African conscience that watched millions perish from neglect. Culture and Cultivation are deeply entrenched in traditional society. The younger generation — that is, the future, is primary target, those who are more at home with Nintendo Games than with a creative engagement with the soil that has nourished their ancestors from pre-history, and sustains their very existence. If we can appeal to a youthful sense of imagination and excitement at the potential of this neglected field of resources, I believe that half the battle against hunger would be no battle at all, but a celebration of Nature in transformation, stimulated by our home evolved ingenuities.

Yes, culture and the arts can prove handmaidens of cultivation. We have a choice however — either to create our own cultural incentives that motivate productivity and lead to self-reliance, or await the handouts from the charity of the world. We must remember, however, that there is a condiment that must be swallowed with the food of charity, a chastening ingredient that is known as — Pride. The choice is therefore no choice at all. We owe it to the future that those same fly-infested mouths of want, that presently occupy the gallery of a failed past, are filled with a self-empowerment that will launch a new chant from the Sahel to the Cape: ***We Make our World!***

*Note: This note has not been edited. The views expressed in this summary note are those of the author and are not necessarily endorsed by or representative of IFPRI or of the cosponsoring or supporting organizations.*