The politics of rice production in Nigeria: The Abakaliki example, 1942-2020

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Abstract: Rice is one of the important food items consumed in Nigeria. Nigeria also has abundant land for rice cultivation. Despite this, rice production was at a very low under both the military and civilian rules between 1966 and 1999. This was however not the situation in Eastern Nigeria between 1942 and 1965. The coming of President Muhammadu Buhari in 2015 amidst many challenges has demonstrated that rice could be grown in large quantities in Nigeria. This paper examines rice production in Abakaliki since 1942 and argues that sufficient rice has not been harvested because of the total absence of political will which could transform rice production to ensure economic growth. This paper combines both primary and secondary sources such as newspapers, archival materials, oral interviews, journals, and books.

Subjects: Physical Geography; History; Classical Studies

Keywords: Rice; political will; production; income; policy

1. Introduction
Igbo land covers modern-day Imo, Anambra, Enugu, Abia, Ebonyi, and parts of Rivers, Delta and Edo states of Nigeria. Abakaliki the capital of Ebonyi State is well known for rice cultivation consists of various Igbo sub-groups, namely, Ikwo, Izzi, and Esza. Mgbada notes that the people of Abakaliki belong to one father Ezekuna who had four sons namely Ezza Ezekuna, Ikwo Noyo, Izzi Nnodo, and Ezzamgbo Obanjala. (Mgbada, 2012:115) According to Smock, the people of Abakaliki speak a dialect of Ibo but one that is mutually unintelligible with other Ibo dialects (Smock, 1972:242). Furthermore, each of the four Abakaliki clans—Ikwo, Ezza, Izzi, and Ngbo claims a common ancestor who symbolizes the clan’s unity and which of course assist them politically (Smock, 1972:242).

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
The consumption of rice in Nigeria is dependent majorly on imported rice with low percentage of local rice production to augment the citizen’s food need. This is a matter of great concern since Nigeria is blessed with vast fertile land for rice production. The negative impact of bureaucratic and government policies on rice production makes it impossible for steady sufficient rice to be grown in Abakaliki area of southeastern Nigeria since 1942. This paper strongly insists that logical implementation of good policies on rice will launch Nigeria as food security destination of Africa.
Rice is of great antiquity. Rey Tannahill in her book *Food in History* traced the spread of rice civilization and cultivation to about three to four centuries after 1000 B.C and also in the Indus valley civilization (Tannahill, 1973:124). Also in Chinese civilization in the first millennia, rice cultivation was in existence and various species of rice existed namely pink rice, white rice, yellow rice, mature rice, and winter rice (Tannahill, 1973:152). Rice is widely consumed globally. Some species of rice has always been domesticated in West Africa before 1500. Hopkins listed among many crops to include fonio rice (hungry rice) which had been domesticated in West Africa before the coming of the, Trans Atlantic Slave trade (Hopkins, 1973:28). However, the preference for yam over rice may not be unconnected to some factors such as soil and rainfall, which suits yam production more than rice (Hopkins, 1973:28). An interesting account insists that rice species such as *Oryza brevilegulata*, *Oryza barthi*, and *oryza glaberrima* was cultivated in the Senegambia basin around 1500 (Okonkwo, 2016:5). Furthermore, rice was among the food items in the list of ships departing Cape Verde between 1513 and 1515 (Okonkwo, 2016:9). *Oryza glaberrima* species of rice has been traced to the Nupe area of northern Nigeria (Chukwuemeka, 2001:65).

Nigeria occupies eminence in rice production as the largest producer of rice in West Africa producing over 40% of the regions total production as of 2014 (Nwobia & Adesope, 2010). In Nigeria, out of 4.6 million hectares available for rice production only 1.7 million hectares are put to rice cultivation (Nwobia and Adesope, 2010: 3) Nigeria is equally the largest importer of rice and its importation figure stood at 11.61 million metric tons since 2000 (Nwobia & Adesope, 2010) Rice production in Nigeria between 2001 and 2003 was estimated at 2.03 million megagrams while consumption was 3.96 million grams(Nwobia and Adesope, 2010: 4). Between 2005 and 2015, Nigeria’s monthly import bill on rice alone stood at between N148b to N917b (Odumade, 2016b:16). Whereas in the 1960 and 1970s, agriculture supported about 55% of the nation’s economy because dairy farms were created in Agege, Ikorodu, Epe and Badagry which is now used for hotels, filling stations, and others. As such, the same sector currently contributes 19% to the Nigerian economy (Odumade, 2016b:16). As it stands, Nigeria spends about N7 trillion on the importation of food items and most unfortunately even with the increased rate of about 12.2 million rice farmers as of 2018, rice production is yet to commensurate with its demand.(Odogwu, 2018):25). This paper examines the historical dimension of the origin of the cultivation of rice in Abakaliki, government policies on rice production in Nigeria 1970–1999, and the role of Muhammadu Buhari’s administration is encouraging rice cultivation. The position of this paper is that there is an urgent need to look at circumstances that make it impossible for the mass production of rice to take place in Nigeria.

3. Historical perspectives on the arrival of rice farming to Abakaliki

Rice popularly known as *osikapa*, *eresi* or *ereshi* was introduced in Southeastern Nigeria by the colonial Department of Agriculture to swampy areas of Abakaliki, Afikpo and Ohaozara in 1942 (Iwuagwu, 2008:29). Rice cultivation in Abakaliki was necessitated by the acute food shortage that came into existence during the Second World War, as foreign brands of rice could not get to Nigeria. It was workers from the colonial Department of Agriculture that came to domesticate rice in Abakaliki (Ottenberg, 2005:131). They also brought an Asian long-grain variety *Oryza sativa* that originated from Guyana (Ottenberg, 2005:132). The Abakaliki soil is the Savannah type suitable for growing rice (Smock, 1972:242)

Attempts to domesticate rice production in Abakaliki witnessed stiff resistance. Available records show that among the Ikwo, IZZi and Ezza speaking people of Abakaliki, rice cultivation was heavily opposed by local farmers. Ottenberg accounts that the Izzi resisted rice farming on religious ground for fear that rice production would spoil yam crops. The Ezza according to him, “consulted a native doctor in one of the years in the 1950s, because of poor yield in yam production and were told that rice cultivation was responsible so they attempted to stop it (Ottenberg, 2005:143). The case is not different in Ikwo as one Chief Onwe Ogah was challenged and his rice farm destroyed for planting what the people considered as grasses (Amiara, Oral Interview,2019). Abakaliki
ordinarily is known for resisting foreign ideas and new techniques in cultivating rice was not an exception. According to Smock:

‘As new and more profitable rice-growing techniques have been introduced, it is more often the outsiders who lease rice land in Abakaliki who are the ones adopt the new technique rather Abakaliki people. Attempts to introduce other new farming techniques have met with more suspicion and fear than one usually encounters elsewhere in Eastern Nigeria.(Smock, 1972:244)

Rice is easy to cultivate and nurture when compared with yam and cassava. It was in realization of this fact that people became more interested to engage in rice production as new addition to their staple foods need. The prospects of rice farming in Abakaliki were clear because of the type of soil. Abakaliki like Ishielu and Eguhbo areas in Uzozie view have hydromorphic soils suitable for rice farming (Uzozie, 2002:493). Furthermore, he noted that rice in Abakaliki can be grown profitably without artificial irrigation as annual rainfall is greater than 1500 mm, the land is fairly level and the soil is clayed (Uzozie, 2002:495). In addition, rice ranks first, accounts for about 40% of the total cropland in clayed soil with annual rainfall of about 1500 mm, and thus requires little or no irrigation at all (Uzozie, 2002:493).

By 1945, rice production was beginning to yield results. Approximately 600 acres was mapped out for rice cultivation in Abakaliki Division and 70 in Afikpo Division. By 1954, there was about 18,000 acres in Abakaliki and 11,300 in Afikpo, and by 1959, Abakaliki had reached 20,000 acres with 95 rice mills while production in Afikpo was some 18,000 acres with 27 mills (Ottenberg, 2005:132). In 1950s a number of formal rice milling associations composed of stranger Ibo developed (By this we mean people of Igbo ethnic stock but not from Abakaliki) (Ottenberg, 2005:140). They purchased rice not milled from farmers from Abakaliki and Ogoja areas (Ottenberg, 2005:136) In 1956, the first Abakaliki Rice Mill Owners Association was organized (NAE, AIPROF 5/1/47,1955). This development created disparity and discrepancies in terms of the various Rice Mills Association in Abakaliki. On November 3, 1955, the Colonial District Officer in charge of Abakaliki noted that: “ the Abakaliki Rice Mill Owners Union was not a registered organization under Lands Ordinance Cap 107 Vol.4 Laws of Nigeria.” (NAE, AIPROF 5/1/47,1955). On December 12, 1955, the colonial government decided that the Abakaliki Rice Mills Association be registered under the Companies or Business Names Ordinance (NAE, Perm Sec. AIPROF 5/1/47,1955).Between 1952–53 year alone, rice mills in Abakaliki had the capacity to produce about 30,000 tons of rice(NAE, Ag Department of Labour, AIPROF,1954).

By 1960, there were about 95 rice mills working in Abakaliki mostly owned by foreigners. This was in addition to two diesel mills in operations by 1948 with one at Okpoho(Akpoha) and one in Abakaliki town(Ottenberg, 2005:134).Over time, the Rice Traders Association lowered the prices of rice transportation and was able to handle the shipment of 21,892 tons of rice out of Abakaliki between March 1958 and February 28, 1959 (Ottenberg, 2005:142). The kind of relationship between Abakaliki people and the stranger Igbo was two sides of the same coin. In his PhD thesis in History, Mgbada argued that meaningful development began to take place in Abakaliki only with the arrival of the ijekebe a name given to other Igbo groups domiciled in Abakaliki (Mgbada, 1999). Martin Elechi had a different view of the kind of relationship that existed between the people of Abakaliki and other stranger Igbo groups that stayed in the town. According to him:

By contrast, businessmen from other Ibo areas were often rejected by a large proportion of the people of Abakaliki Division. Lands were grabbed and women taken as wives but in condition and status that better classified them as slaves. The seed of discontent had been sown(Elechi, 2000:23)

By 1960, the Abakaliki brand of rice became known all over Nigeria and beyond. Rice was transported alongside passengers and their personal belongings to Enugu, Afikpo, Umuahia, Aba,
Portharcourt, Calabar, Onitscha, Benin, Lagos, Ibadan and Ghana (Ottenberg, 2005:137). Collaborating this claim, Dr Micheal Okpara former Premier of Eastern Nigeria noted that Eastern Nigerian government by 1965 realized about £3 Million from rice exportation to Ghana (Elechi, 2000:33). Okigbo recalls that by 1965, Abakaliki was already a rice-milling centre of Nigeria as rice was brought from Benue and Sokoto to the town for milling. In addition, rice from Abakaliki was sold in far away Dahomey, Togo and Ghana (Okigbo, 1993:104). This excellent development is now history and in spite of huge re financial investment in rice production, the journey to self-reliance in rice production is still far. In 2013 a report showed that the value chain in rice production indicate that an average rice farmer in Abakaliki has a personal consumption rate of 15%, domestic market had 65% and the urban market consumed 20% (Chidiebere-Marx & Maris, 2017):107. The implication for this development was that there was no rice available for exportation.

It should be recalled that Rice Mill Society in Abakaliki was listed as a Cooperative, and they had access to loans from the General Cooperative Bank of Eastern Nigeria in Enugu, and were regularly advised by the Agricultural Department (Ottenberg, 2005:140–141). It could be against this background that Nwali noted that long before the creation of Ebonyi State in 1996, Abakaliki was known as having the highest concentration of rice mills in West Africa (Nwali, 2019:40).

The politics of Rice Mill continued sometime in November 15 1977 when the land used for the construction of the Rice Mill was leased by the Abakaliki Local Council for a period of 99 years. Subsequently, in September 1989, the Rice Mill Association in Abakaliki was registered as a company with the incorporation name Rice Mill Company Nig. Ltd. With Registration number RC.136,8000. On 1 January 2000 customer’s right of occupancy with respect to the entire area of land measuring 1938,404 square meters occupied by the company was issued by the Ebonyi State Government (Akpa, 2017:42–43).

In addition, the success of rice cultivation in Abakaliki as we shall examine proved successful because of two factors namely government political will and the role of the Missionaries like the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria. In 1960, Dr. Akanu Ibiam as the Governor of Eastern region was visited by some Norwegian Missionaries who came to indicate willingness to assist rural farmers to master modern technique in agriculture. He directed them to Ikwo where they established the Norwegian Church Agriculture Project (NORCAP) (Elechi, 2000:103). Dr Akanu Ibiam was an exceptional leader and was committed in agricultural and rural development (Ukaogo, 2015:132–145). NORCAP was an agricultural institution established in Ikwo in 1962 in cooperation of the Government of Eastern Nigeria, the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria, and was founded by the Norwegian Church Aid (Eze, 2011:582).

From onset, NORCAP had about 40 ha of land for crop trials, seed multiplications and was able to give out about 250–300 bags of seed rice (Eze, 2011:585). In addition, there was a tractor-hiring unit for rice farmers and two rice mills were established (Eze, 2011:587). NORCAP played significant role in the formation of cooperative societies and as a result, between 1966–1967, three cooperatives for rice farmers emerged (Eze, 2011:593). In 1977/1978, respectively, about 12,000 tons of rice was produced and unfortunately, by 1978/1979, only 300 tons of rice was produced because NORCAP was already withdrawing its financial support (Eze, 2011:607). Notwithstanding this development, D.I Njoku had this to say:

Presbyterian Church handed over NORCAP to the then Anambra State Government in the same year while the takeover ceremony was held in 5 March 1982. Before the handover to State Government, NORCAP was valued at three million five hundred thousand (£3,500,000) pounds sterling with overhead cost of two hundred thousand (N200,000) naira in 1981 (D.I. Njoku, 2015:231).

The success recorded in rice cultivation in the 1970s is that scientific techniques of rice cultivation has been learnt by people who could plant in rows while maintaining specific gaps of three to 5 cm.
apart (Chukwuemeka, 2001:70). In the mid-1980s, local production namely from Abakaliki area, provided bulk of rice consumed in Igbooland (Okeke, 2008:41). In the 1970s there was an outburst of rice disease known as blast Pyricularia oryzae known to the people as Nsi nwanyi rice and in 1981 there was brown leaf spot rice disease that ravaged farms (Chukwuemeka, 2001:80). By 1989, Uzo Uwani another rice-producing community in Igbooland had its own share of gall midge disease (Akpa, 2017:4). Rice cultivation suffered setbacks in the 1990’s with the outburst of rice gall midge (an insect) that attacked rice farms and made many farmers bankrupt and in addition to governments insensitivity in providing subsidies and fertilizers (Steensel, 2009:58). This development (outburst of gall midge) has resulted in the cultivation of upland rice known as ereshi elu egu as swamp rice was under severe attack (Steensel, 2009:58). In the case of upland rice, the land was usually cleared of its vegetation between January and early March as planting commences between mid-March and usually lasted till the end of April (Chukwuemeka, 2001:68–69). The advantages of planting swampy rice are numerous. One is that it does not require elaborate wedding (Chukwuemeka, 2001:79). Out of about 25 varieties of rice recommended for Nigerian farmers, only five were upland varieties while the remaining 20 were for swarm production (Akpa, 2017:2–3). The contribution of the ordinary rice farmer like Helleiner pointed out has to do with the eagerness of the farmer to adopt new techniques and to develop something out of nothing (Helleiner, 1966:68). In Ebonyi, farmers under the Agricultural Development Programme and in conjunction with the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development got fertilizers but in most cases it arrived 2 months after planting season have commenced (Chidiebere-Mark & Maris, 2017):105).

Attempts to improve rice cultivation by the government has continued but not without políticing. For example, Chief Martin Elechi’s administration (2007–2015) installed three standard rice mills in the three senatorial zones of Ebonyi state namely Ikwo (central), Ebonyi (north) and Oso (south) (Odogwu, 2018):25. Considerations on accessibility by the people concerned were the least in the choice of establishing the aforementioned rice mills. The case was challenged at the Industrial Court with Rice Mill businessmen pointing out lack of basic amenities like water and access roads as rationale behind their refusal to move to the new sight (Akpa, 2017:46). Still on the lack of political will to encourage genuine rice farmers, Elechi’s government as recorded by Agu intervened on Rice Union elections scheduled in 2011 as the government-sponsored candidate Deacon Joseph Ununu emerged just as anti-government Rice Union leader Emeka Nwankashi emerged also as parallel leader (Agu, 2017:55). On arrival to office as the Executive Governor of Ebonyi State, the Umahi’s administration in 2015 procured 40 tractors and earmarked about 40,500 hectares of land for rice production (Akpa, 2017:45).

4. Policies and the politics of rice production in Nigeria 1970–1999
Since 1970, the government has been showing interest in rice production yet the turn out in terms of production is not commiserated with the money invested in the rice sector. On May 21 1978, the Federal Government launched Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) to address decline in agricultural productions, galloping food prices, increasing food import bills and accelerating rural-urban flight of youths (O.N. Njoku, 2014:321). Rice importation did not decline until 1981 as a result of some policy measures put in place to check the importation of the commodity. Even then, the quantity imported on annual basis was over 300,000 tons. Imports dropped significantly from 1985 when the ban was placed on rice. Although rice importation began to rise again in 1991, a major importation did not begin until after the lifting of ban in 1995 (Akpa, 2017:20). Nigeria’s rice production made some remarkable gains from 1980 to 1989. The area under cultivation grew from about 400,000 hectares in 1980 to 900,000 hectares in 1989. Paddy rice production increased from about 600,000 tons in 1980 to about 1,422,000 tons in 1989 (Akpa, 2017:19). The launching of the Green Revolution on April 14, 1980 was another milestone in the history of agriculture in Nigeria (Obi-Ani, 2010:69).

Shehu Shagari’s administration had steady increases in annual budgetary allocations to agricultural sector 12.1% in 1980, 14% in 1982 and 16% in 1983. Farm implements were purchased like 200 tractors, 50 ten-ton lorries, 250 mobile ridge threshers, 250 irrigation pumps, 250 sorghum,
and millet threshers (O.N. Njoku, 2014:324). In addition, the government distributed 500,000 tons of fertilizers, 500 shellers, and 500 threshers (Obi-Ani, 2010:70–71). In old Anambra State, the Jim Nwobodo led administration introduced the Food for the Peoples Programme (FPP) and about 949 metric tonnes of milled high-quality rice was sold to the public to stabilize the market price in the state and also about 25,000 hectares of land was shared to about 5,000 farmers and out of 20,416 metric tonnes of fertilizer, the Abakaliki the rice hub of the state got 7410 metric tonnes (Twelve Months Anambra State Civilian administration,1982:12–13).

The Shagari’s administration gave an additional grant of N20 million specifically for improved rice production (Obi-Ani, 2010:76). In 1981, about N4 million out of the N11.6 million allocated for the importation of fertilizer was misappropriated. Rice consumption in Nigeria had risen by the late 1970s and early 1980s to the level that rice became a staple food in the country as the cost of importing rice increased (Obi-Ani, 2010:75–76). In order to boost agricultural production, the regime embarked on the construction of a Nitrogenous Fertilizer Plant at Onne in Rivers State in April, 1983. The plant according to a report was expected to produce about 1000 tonnes of ammonia-based fertilizer, 1500 tonnes of area-based fertilizer and 100% type fertilizer per day (Obi-Ani, 2010:72). In all of these efforts by the government to ensure food abundance, the Green Revolution was a failure. Daily Star report of October 31, 1981 had this to say about the fraud in rice importation as follows: ‘the NPN-controlled Federal Government placed importation of rice under closed licence and then proceeded to grant special licences to the NPN contractors to import rice’(Rice Import, 1981:1).

The administration embarked on massive food importation of wheat, rice and other items. With time, Alhaji Umaro Dikko the Minister of Transport in Shagari’s cabinet was appointed to be in charge of the fraudulent Presidential Task Force on rice importation, which became an avenue for political patronage (O.N. Njoku, 2014:325). Max Siollun(2013:32–33) captured the involvement of Umaro Dikko in the rice scam as follows:

To the public, Dikko, the combative Transport Minister, was the ultimate personification of 1980s corruption and shady deals in Nigeria. Stories of his alleged corruption are legion. As well as being Transport Minister, Dikko headed a notorious presidential task force set up to alleviate food shortages by distributing imported rice. The task force was accused of hoarding rice in order to exacerbate existing food shortages and drive prices even higher. It was also accused of issuing import licenses to businessmen with connections to the ruling NPN.

The Presidential Task Force in Rice (PTFR) was engaged to import rice into the country and sale of the final consumers at N38 per a bag (Obi-Ani, 2010:76). Available evidence indicates that out of 200,000 imported bags of rice, 90,000 bags were sold to traders at the official price of N38 and the rest was sold to an individual at the selling price of N38 (Obi-Ani, 2010:77). The effort of the government to checkmate the increasing cost of rice became a futile exercise. By the time the Muhammadu Buhari military regime came to power on January 1, 1983, it made unsuccessful attempts to encourage local rice production. However, in its resolve in fighting corruption, on July 5, 1984, there was plan to kidnap Umaro Dikko as “Diplomatic Bag” from his London residence to face charges of corruption in Nigeria for his involvement in national rice fraud during the Shagari’s regime(1979–1983). This action severed Nigerian Diplomatic relationship with Britain as the Federal Military Government of Nigeria was the major suspect of the kidnap plan (Siollun, 2013:39).

In 1986, after Buhari administration has been toppled, the Ibrahim Babangida administration established the Directorate of Food, Road and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) with specific objectives to support local community, finance road network so as to increase access to food, encourage food production, road development and rural water supply (O.N. Njoku, 2014:326–328). For eight years of political leadership between 1985 and 1993, no meaningful progress was made during
Babangida’s administration in terms of encouraging local rice production. The administration of Ernest Shonekan (1993), Sani Abacha 1993–1998, Abdusalam Abubakar (1998–1999), Olusegun Obasanjo (1999–2007) and Musa Yaradua (2007–2009) did not show interest in rice production. Professor Tunji Akande lamented that in the year 2000, out of about 25 million hectares of land cultivated to various food crops, only about 6.37% was cultivated to rice (Akande, https://unep.ch/etu/etp/events/Agriculture/pps_nigeria, 2019).

The aforementioned administration lacked the political will to pursue policies that will encourage local rice production except for the Presidential Rice Initiative launched in August 2002 with the objective of boosting rice production (Akpa, 2017:21). Before this time, in April 2001, government reintroduced fertilizer subsidy to the tune of 25% amounting to about N 3.5 billion (Akpokodje, 2003:16) Meanwhile, the use of rice straw or bran as manure is a widespread phenomenon for rice farmers in Ogoja, Abakaliki and Adani to augment with fertilizers in short supply (Longtau, 2014:40).

President Goodluck Jonathan’s Transformation Agenda 2011–2015 had agriculture as one of its area of focus. This was made evident in the launch of the Agriculture Transformation Action Plan (ATAP) on March 14, 2012, (O.N. Njoku, 2014:335) which was targeted at increasing agricultural production and crop production more especially rice. Like its predecessors, no meaningful target on local rice production was met. During Jonathan’s era, rice farmers cried out for assistance as record placed Nigeria as spending about N 1bn daily to import rice. His hope to improve local rice production according to the then Minister of Information Mr Labaran Maku was to come in 2015 (Ibileke, 2014:38–39). By 2015, President Jonathan lost election to Muhammadu Buhari.

5. Rice and the Nigerian economy since the arrival of Muhammadu Buhari administration since 2015-

On arrival to office, Buhari’s administration began a process of revolutionizing the agricultural sector. His principal target is to boost rice production. According to Bolaji Odumade, between 2005 and 2015, Nigeria monthly import bill rose from N 148 billion to N 917 billion and most of them imported food items can be produced in Nigeria (Odamad, 2016:16). Just before the institutionalization of the Central Bank of Nigeria “Anchor Borrowers” programme to enhance rice production, available records show that in 2006 alone in the space of 5 months, a total of 24,992 metric tons of rice valued at N2,335,131,093 were imported through the land borders (“Protecting Local, 2018:15). Furthermore, the report noted a total of S 5bn worth of different goods including rice are smuggled into Nigeria annually through Benin Republic alone. (“Protecting Local,” 2018:15).

The Muhammadu Buhari’s administration on November 17, 2015 introduced the Anchor Borrowers Programme to enhance rice production (Olafioye, 2019:10). The economic implication of this policy is that within 2 years in late 2017, rice importation from Thailand fell from 644,131 metric tons in September 2015 to 20,000 metric tons in September 2017, a drop of over 90% was witnessed (Olafioye, 2019:10).

The administration of President Buhari has encouraged the introduction of various varieties of rice. As of 2018, available species include R8, CP, 308, Max, and Apia (Odogwu, 2018:24). The price of rice in 2018 is as follows: “R8 was sold N5000 or N5200, CP or 308 is N5,600, and Max was sold for N6000.” (Revolutions, 2019:11). With recent improvement in de-stoning and milling of rice, the consumption rate of local rice has gone high. Unfortunately, many people still believe that locally made rice are full of sands and stone. Nigerians are not very patriotic when it comes to patronizing indigenous made food.

In 2017, Ebonyi State Government got N3 billion from the Federal Government of Nigeria and it was distributed to 14,642 farmers (Paulinus, 2018:32). This is an improved outcome compared with the development in the rice sector in 2016. About 150 hectares of land was mapped out by the
state government for rice cultivation in 2016 while in 2017 about 250 hectares of land was developed for rice cultivation (Odogwu, 2018):24). By 2018, rice farmers increased to 35,636 and tons of new breeds of rice was procured (Odogwu, 2018):24). For example, FARO 44 and other breeds of rice were shared to farmers. In addition, the Ebonyi Fertilizer Company has been reactivated as NPK 12:12:17 and NPK 20:10:10 was shared to farmers to boost production (Odogwu, 2018):25).

The Federal Government on its own has encouraged so many states in Nigeria for the purpose of boosting rice production. In Cross Rivers State, the federal government in June 2018 commissioned rice seedling factory with the hope that the factory will produce rice resistant seedling capable of improving rice production from three tons per hectare to nine tons per hectare (Dailysun, 2019:24). In the first quarter of 2019, Edo state got N5 billion from the Central Bank of Nigeria under the Commercial Agric Credit Scheme for rice and maize production. The government target is to harvest 17,000 tons of rice from about 4,400 hectares of land in Iguoriakhi, Iguomon, Illushi, Warraki and Agenebode. An estimate of N1.2 billion will go for rice cultivation, N2.2 billion for crop production, and N2.3 billion for land allocation (Edo Government,2019:24).

In spite of so many successes recorded by President Buhari’s administration in rice production, it is not yet uhuru. A lot of factors still militate against the government diversification programmes especially with emphasis on rice production. For example, a good number of rice farmers are yet to have access to reliable supply of high-quality local paddy, as dry season production is yet to be practicable in Abakaliki(Revolutions,2019:11). Furthermore, flooding and other natural factors like birds also militate against rice farming. It is important to state that rice production should be treated as private agro business. Rice farmers must be identified, given subsidy like fertilizers and loans irrespective of their party affiliations. The Central Bank of Nigeria must work with farmers as cooperatives and not necessarily disbursement funds to state governors who pay counter pact funds and more less use the money given to them to finance political activities and elections.

Unlike previous political dispensations, rice farmers within the period of 2015 to 2019, now have sign of relief in terms of patronage. One of the rice farmers attests as follows:

"Nigeria and rice farmers have not had it so good like this. Today, there an organized market for rice farmers to sell their paddy rice directly to the companies and making profits not through their agents again who have been making money and subjecting us to debts (Olafoye, ’2019: 10)"

In addition, rice smugglers have not given up and their activities undermine federal government effort to boost local rice production. In 2018, 5 billion USD worth of goods including rice was smuggled into Nigeria (“Protecting Local, “2018:15). An estimated volume of over 2 million metric tonnes of parboiled rice was smuggled into Nigeria (Odogwu, 2018):10).Following the closure of land borders in August 2019 to December 2020 by the Federal government of Nigeria with the hope to boost local rice production, the impact was captured in a report as follows:

"Since Nigeria closed its land borders, the price of rice, a major staple in the country has been on the rise. According to a report by Business Day Newspaper, the price of a 50kg bag of imported rice, which was selling at N14,500 before the closure of the border, now sells for N27,000. Locally produced rice has not been left out of the party as the price of Lake rice (a product of an alliance between Lagos State and Kebbi State) has increased 22% to N16,500 from N13,500 before the closure of the border(Border Closure Hitting The Price of Rice,2021)"

The closure of the border against rice importation and the increase in tariff of rice coming into Nigeria by 70% was in the interest of the nation’s economy. Regrettably, the corruption virus that has eaten deep into the nations fabrics also contributed in the inflation of the prices of local rice. There was relatively not adequate supply because the funds released to farmers by stake holders was not sufficient to engage in mechanized farming as expected. The road networks leading to rice
farms have not been constructed and hoarding of rice by farmers to create artificial scarcity also contributes to this setback. The storage facilities built in Abakaliki areas are now like relics of artifacts for future museum. There is no renewed efforts to establish a kind of cooperative that will provide the needs of the rice farmers at the grass root. The Buhari administration’s dream of self sufficiency in rice production could still be fully realized if the grass root farmers are identified and their needs provided directly.

6. Conclusion
As we have shown in this paper, rice production in Abakaliki in the period between 1942 and 1966 was supporting the nation’s economy in terms of foreign exchange. From the onset of the military junta, and their policies in agriculture, it is clear that only lip service was paid to rice production. The colossal failure of the various government policies to agricultural production such as Operation Feed the Nation(OFN), the Green Revolution, the Imo-River Basin Authority and so many others points to the direction of the lack of political will.

As discussed, the Uthman Dikko saga of rice importation fraud is a clear manifestation of government unwillingness to boost local agricultural production. The government at the local, state and Federal government over the years did not show enough commitment in terms of providing subsidies that will boost rice production. Local farmers need to be trained on how to produce rice for commercial purpose and why technical assistance to boost rice seedlings should be pursued.

Since the inception of Buhari’s administration in 2015, an improvement has been recorded in rice production in Nigeria and in Abakaliki in particular. All is not uhuru yet. The partisan politics of the government of the day is still a hindrance in securing loans and subsidy for agriculture. The fertilizer and subsidies needed for rice production is still being politicized in spite of the Federal Government laudable achievements in agriculture. Farmers are yet to have access to low interest loans and the real rice farmers are yet to be identified.

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The year for “Akporokaje, 2013” has been changed to 2003 to match the entry in the references list. Please provide revisions if this is incorrect.
