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Identifying the Potential of 'Pona' Yam for Geographical Indication (GI) Labelling in Ghana

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Introduction

The interest for food products produced with local knowledge and with a defined geographical origin, bearing a geographical indication (GI) labels (Protected Designation of Origin, Protected Geographical Indication or Traditional Specialty Guaranteed) is growing and consumers are increasingly demanding such products (FAO, 2009). Geographical Indications have advantage compared to other geographic identifiers for food, because of their mix of characteristics. A Geographical Indication identifies a good as originating in a delimited territory or region where a noted quality, reputation or other characteristic of the good is essentially attributable to its geographical origin and/or the human or natural factors (ITC, 2009). According to Reviron et al. (2009), every GI product has to meet two conditions: - first, it must have specificity linked to a territory ("terroir"), which makes the product clearly distinguishable from its competitors from other regions. The specificity comes from geographical characteristics including climate, soil and/or traditional production/processing knowledge. The second is producers and consumers' acknowledgement that the product has a name and is trustworthy; its reputation is acknowledged by consumers (and other clients such as restaurants or second processors) who link the name with a specific quality origin. A GI is therefore defined by four characteristics: a recognised typicality/uniqueness compared with competitors and linked to the territory, a delimited geographical area for production, a specific production process documented or undocumented code of practice and a name with a good reputation among consumers. Products that have these characteristics are potential GIs even if there is no legal framework in the country that offers registration (Reviron et al.2009).

Ghana is endowed with a diversity of landscapes that have influenced the quality, reputation and other characteristics of several differentiated agricultural food products in specific areas giving them the potential to qualify for Geographical indications (GI) labelling. However, this enormous potential has not been exploited in the same way the EU does it and gain billions (approximately 15 billion) of Euros per annum from agricultural origin food products registered with protected Geographical Indications. Pona is a yam variety produced by a large proportion of small to medium scale farmers in Ghana. It is the most popular and preferred of all yams for both local and the international market (Otoo et al, 2010). Pona is so desirable that it is often difficult to find enough tubers, especially during June and August when it is off-season. Despite the desirability, its producers are still among the most impoverished group of people in Ghana. Poverty in the savannah ecological zone of Ghana covering the three northern regions - Northern, Upper East

and Upper West and part of Volta and Brong Ahafo regions – remains high at 52-88% (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014). This paper examined the potentials of pona yam for GI labelling. Specifically, the paper assessed the experiences of producers, sellers and consumers experiences with attribution of territorial qualities to pona yam.

Material and Methods

The study started with literature review of GIs (global to local) and listing of 30 known agricultural origin products in Ghana. This was followed by an inventory of potential GIs products through a quick market survey in four open air markets. In order to have a broader representation of views, one market each was selected in the four ecological zones in Ghana. The markets included Konkomba yam market in Accra (coastal zone), Kumasi Central Market in Kumasi (forest zone), Techiman Market in Techiman (Transitional zone) and Tamale Central Market in Tamale (Savannah zone). Respondents were sellers and consumers of agricultural products selected accidentally by the research team. A checklist was used during the inventory. In all, 40 respondent were interviewed comprising 20 traders and 20 consumers. Using typicity/uniqueness linked to the territory, a delimited geographical area for production, a specific production process and a name with a good reputation as the score criteria, the 30 products were ranked. Pona yam was among the top five products after the score ranking. Purposive sampling was then used to select pona yam for the in-depth study. Both primary and secondary sources of data were used. Respondents in the main study included pona yam producers, sellers and consumers. Since the sample frame was not known for the design of a probability sample, respondents' selection was based on snowball sampling. A sample size of 212 was chosen. This consisted of four in-depth interviews each with producers, sellers and consumers. A survey was also done with 100 producers, 50 sellers and 50 consumers using semi-structured questionnaires. Krachi (in Volta Region) and Salaga (in Northern Region) districts were purposefully selected for the study. The communities and respondents were also selected purposively. In addition, one focus group discussion was organized with producers. Quantitative data generated were subjected to descriptive analysis using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 19. For qualitative data, statements were extracted and transcribed, categorized/classified and read through. Data was then manually coded and analyses conducted. Triangulation was the method used in validation.

Results and Discussion

Pona Yam Production Areas

Almost all respondents (producers, sellers and consumers) said that pona yam is mainly produced in the northern savannah regions of Ghana particularly in Northern, Brong Ahafo regions and the northern part of the Volta Region *“When people talk about good yam, they indirectly refer to pona yam grown in the savannah areas in the north. Every yam seller knows pona yam comes from the north”* (Yam seller in Konkomba Market, 2015). They specifically mentioned districts in the Northern, Brong Ahafo and Volta Regions where the product is produced. Most respondents agreed that it is the most popular farm product in the districts they mentioned and it was said to be cultivated by every farming household. *“You cannot call yourself a yam farmer if you do not farm pona yam”* (pona yam farmer, 2015). About its marketability, respondents were unanimous in stating that savannah pona yam was in high demand compared to its competitors. It research confirmed it was also the most preferred yam variety among yam consumers in Ghana and outside the country. A yam trader said that one common question that consumers usually ask when they come to buy yam is whether they (yam traders) sell pona yam. *“I will not eat any boiled or fried yam if it is not pona”* (Pona yam consumer, 2015).

Awareness of the GIs Concept

The result of the survey conducted revealed a very low understanding about the concept of GIs among respondents. No respondent was able to explain the concept of GIs. Respondents were however aware that some products specificity and reputation were environmentally attributable. However, they were not aware such quality link of a product to its environment has become a form of an intellectual property right that is widely used across the world particularly in Europe for valorisation of agricultural products and for the protection of traditional knowledge, environment, biodiversity imitations and a form of quality guarantee for consumers. After explaining the GI concept to a respondent, this is what he said, *“So you mean there is even a legislation on the concept you are talking about? I am not aware and I am very sure most of my colleagues and producers are also not aware of such an act of parliament. I even believe that at the various ministries and departments that should be responsible for its implementation, officers would not have any clues. This includes the sector Ministers, directors and even the lawmakers if you dare ask them”* (A pona yam exporter, 2015).

Unique Characteristics of Pona Yam

All respondents (producers, sellers and consumers) said that the product (pona yam) had unique characteristics. They mentioned its mild sweet taste (55%), soft and smooth in the mouth when eaten boiled or fried (10%), its juicy content (29%) and the inviting aroma(9%) as the unique features of the product (Figure, 1). *“You can tell from a distance when someone is boiling pona yam. Its aroma is so inviting my brother”*. (A pona yam producer, 2015).

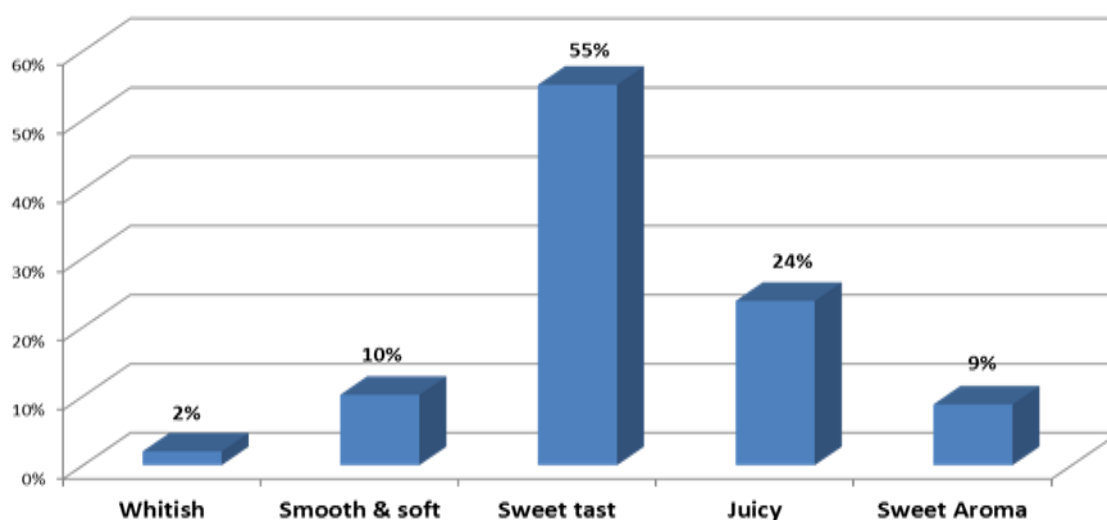


Figure 1: Unique Characteristics of Pona Yam

Field Survey, 2015

Geographical link

Almost all respondents were of the view that the product unique characteristics were linked to a place and people. According to producers, many small and medium scale farmers using traditional knowledge and methods known to specific tribes living in the savannah ecological zone of Ghana particularly the Konkomba tribe produce pona yam from the northern savannah areas in Ghana. According to them, pona yam farming has a long local history in the area. The people living here have been farming it since ancient times. This traditional knowledge and

method in the production process from start to finish is embedded in their culture and cannot be learned by a stranger overnight. *“People think pona yam farming is easy, it is not for “small boys”. The reason why some people think it is easy to farm it is that it is common during the harvesting season. You see, it is not everywhere or every soil in the savannah area that you can grow pona yam. You must be an experienced pona yam farmer to know this. Producing the seeds, raising the mounts and the timing is traditional knowledge. When to sow, how to sow, harvesting and storage are all linked to traditional yam farming knowledge and practices by our people. It is our way of life”.* (pona yam producer, 2015). The producers also indicated that the soil type, which they described as is deep and moderately drained and the rainfall pattern which they also described as moderate and evenly distributed over six to seven months play an important role in the unique quality of pona yam. *“My tribe people are like nomads. We have migrated from one area to the other to find suitable soils to farm, particularly yam. This area was the last stop of my ancestors. If the soil were not suitable for its cultivation, they would have moved on. The soils here is the most suitable for the production of our long cherished agricultural product, which is yam. We cannot tell you which specific minerals and in what combinations are found in the soil here but we know through experience that the soil here is special for pona yam production.”* (Pona Yam Producer, 2015, Focus Group Discussants). They also said the breed was revealed to their ancestors by the gods among other yam varieties. Dickson & Bennah (1995) documented the physical environmental characteristics of the savannah ecological zone of Ghana and came out with descriptions similar to those given by the pona yam producers.

Conclusions and Outlook

This paper has shown that pona yam from the savannah areas in northern Ghana has all the four core characteristics of a GI, namely; a recognised typicity/uniqueness compared with competitors and linked to the territory, a delimited geographical area for production, a specific production process although undocumented and a name with a good reputation among consumers. The product also has a long history in the territory and the market potential exist in both local and international. The proportion of the product-related local jobs in the local territory is potentially high because so many people are producing the product and the potential effect on the local economy and food security maybe high. What is lacking is awareness about the concept of GI among stakeholders. Among key actors, awareness raising is necessary for GIs certification to get started in Ghana. We conclude that there is a potential for pona yam from the northern savannah areas of Ghana to be registered as a GI perhaps with a name as “Ghana Savannah Yam”.

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