



## 2010 AWARD Fellow Mobolaji Omemu

<b>Position:</b>	Senior lecturer
<b>Institution:</b>	University of Agriculture, Abeokuta
<b>Country:</b>	Nigeria
<b>PhD:</b>	Food/Industrial Microbiology University of Agriculture, Abeokuta, 2006
<b>Mentored by:</b>	Folake O. Henshaw, Dean College of Food Science and Human Ecology University of Agriculture, Abeokuta

*Research area: Upgrading traditional food technology, focusing on microbiology, nutrition, and biotechnology of African foods.*

Mobolaji Omemu is working to prevent infant and child mortality that is often caused by diseases linked to the heart of the home—the kitchen.

In Nigeria, mothers prepare *ogi*—a traditional weaning food—by soaking, washing, grinding, sifting, and fermenting maize meal. The wet *ogi* is then cooked in bulk and stored, but it often becomes contaminated during storage.

“When a child has diarrhea, mothers don’t associate the illness with their food,” says Omemu. “They’ve never had any training, so they don’t understand contamination or nutrition. *Ogi* is stored in water that is discarded every two days, so any nutrients get poured out along with the water.”

Omemu believes that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. She wants to prevent child illnesses, instead of merely treating them, by upgrading the processing and packaging of indigenous foods. “I want to learn more about the processes that cause food contamination and spoilage. Molecular characterization of the bacteria and fungi involved in processing and contamination will help to improve our food products and our children’s nutrition. It will allow me to develop recommendations for mothers to prepare and store food in ways that prevent those contaminants from thriving,” explains Omemu.

A possibility thinker, Omemu says her post-graduate studies at Hebrew University of Jerusalem influenced her outlook. “I was amazed at how Israelis manage what they grow in the desert. It broadened my mind about what you can do in and with agriculture,” says Omemu, who won a scholarship in 2009 to study agricultural resource management. “I learned that you need to be careful in the way you harvest if you want to avoid postharvest problems.”

Omemu also won two scholarships to study food safety and quality management in the Netherlands, and in 2009 she attended a course in Basic Molecular Biology Techniques for DNA Technology offered by the International Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology in Italy.

A member of the Nigerian Association of University Women, Omemu encourages young Nigerian women to stay in school and to consider careers in agricultural science. "Agriculture used to be dominated by men and so people say, 'My grandfather was a farmer and he didn't go to school. Why would I want my daughter to study agriculture?' We need to expand understanding about what agriculture involves." Omemu says it doesn't make sense to talk about agriculture without mentioning food. "Since women are typically responsible for food processing, they should be more involved in agriculture."

Omemu expects that AWARD will help her develop professionally in several ways, including networking and collaborating with other scientists.

"As a post-PhD scientist, you're often left alone to develop yourself. AWARD brought me together with a mentor whom I already knew, but the fellowship made it happen," says Omemu. For her, work/life balance as a mother of four young children is a challenge. "Most women have to choose between home and career, and the home usually wins. Opportunities are often lost by the time the kids are grown and gone," she says. "My mentor studied in the United States for a year when she had two small children. It will be a big help to discuss how she managed this."

Omemu also plans to strengthen her leadership capacity in a male-dominated sector. "Sometimes as a woman, you're a lone voice. I want to build my confidence so I can be a better leader."

*Omemu is one of 180 African woman scientists who have won an AWARD Fellowship. AWARD is a professional development program that strengthens the research and leadership skills of African women in agricultural science, empowering them to contribute more effectively to poverty alleviation and food security in sub-Saharan Africa. For more information, visit [www.awardfellowships.org](http://www.awardfellowships.org)*

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