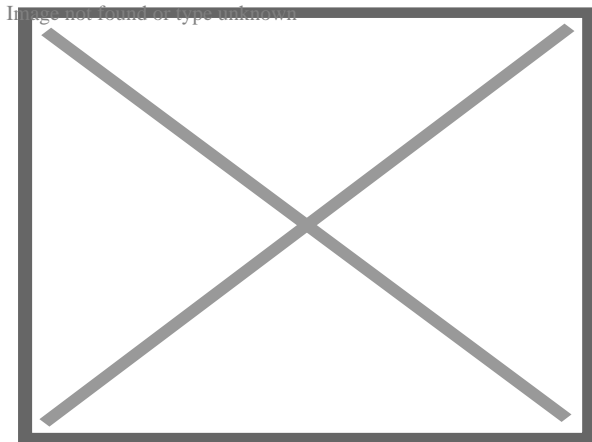


## Opuah Abeikwen: Fighting to protect Nigeria's indigenous crops

Opuah Abeikwen was introduced into agriculture and food production by his grandmother, a famous pigeon pea farmer in her local Nigerian community. At the age of 10, he followed his old grandmother to her farm and saw how the plant is grown. He was thrilled by the yellowish, crown-shaped leaves. Many years later, he visited his grandmother's farm and discovered that her once-colorful pigeon pea was looking impoverished, with rotten stems and brownish leaves due to an attack by the stick rot disease. This assault against one of Nigeria's important indigenous food plants is still ongoing, pushing the crop to the verge of extinction.



Kenyans protest the decision to lift a ban on GMOs. Image:: Star, Patrick Vidija

Abeikwen's quest to protect and restore this indigenous crop motivated him to delve deeply into agriculture, earning degrees in genetics and biotechnology. During his first degree project, he focused on this plant disease and observed that several research results were left on laboratory shelves due to the lack of political will and opposition to the use of genetic engineering to tackle agricultural challenges.

In 2014, he mobilized his immediate family and friends and spoke to them about how biotechnology can help address some of their agricultural challenges. His aim was to unravel more information about what he was studying. As his network expanded he created an online community and began to engage them about the importance of this technology.

"Although I have severally been accused of being on the payroll of both government and private entities, my greatest motivation is the love for what I do," he revealed.

Two years later, Abeikwen was nominated by the Cornell Alliance for Science to participate in a leadership program in Tanzania where he was trained in strategic planning and grassroots organizing.

This exercise gave him more exposure to the principles of communication and massively impacted his online interactions. He took his advocacy to his alma mater and mobilized 30 champions who signed up

and joined him in his campaign.

Later in the same year, this young rising star attended the Cornell Alliance for Science Global Leadership Fellowship Program, which further provided him the opportunity to build on his existing knowledge and expanded his network globally.

Abeikwen's participation in the Fellowship increased his reputation, and he suddenly became a powerful voice in the biotechnology sphere.

"The fire in my belly kept burning, and in 2018 I co-founded the first ever 'Science Café' in Nigeria," he recalled. "The experience was one of my most challenging moments in life. At some point I felt like giving up, but with courage and passion the café was established."

He has managed the Café well, reaching out to many Nigerians through various initiatives like the "Science Hangout" and a talk show.

Abeikwen also worked with allies to support the commercialization of pest-resistant Bt cotton in 2016 — Nigeria's first genetically modified crop. He subsequently collaborated with other Nigerian Global Leadership Fellows to advance this year's approval of Bt cowpea, Nigeria's first GM food crop.

With the knowledge he obtained on how to raise funds during his Fellowship at Cornell University, Abeikwen applied for and won a grant that enabled him to expand his small fish farm.

He believes biotechnology can solve some of the problems in the fishery value chain. So he advocates for the use of the technology in fish production to create a baseline for discussion ahead of Nigeria's plan to go into animal biotechnology.

In recognition of his achievements, Abeikwen has been appointed by one of his networks as the chapter representative of the Young Professionals for Agriculture Development (YPARD). Under this platform he solicits for the inclusion of young people in agricultural development.

"The secret behind my passion is the feedback and encouragement I receive from everyone that has been part of my life," he said.

**[Etta Michael Bisong](#) is a science journalist, editor and contributor to the Alliance for Science**

**This article originally ran at [Cornell University's Alliance for Science](#) and has been republished here with permission. Follow the Alliance on Twitter [@ScienceAlly](#)**