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On participation in the Promotion, Development, and Dissemination of NERICA Rice Varieties in Uganda

I had a chance to stay in Uganda for three months as a short-term expert for the Promotion, Development and Dissemination of NERICA Rice Varieties (rice breeding). Uganda's capital city, Kampala is on the Equator. However, as it lies at an altitude of 1,300 m, the city is green and the climate is quite pleasant with an annual mean temperature of between 21 and 25 degrees and with an annual rainfall of around 1,200 mm.

Uganda's staple food is cooking banana, maize and cassava. Of these, the most popular is the cooking banana which is called "Matoke" in the local language. In town markets, one can see heaps of green Matoke as in the photo, and one can immediately see that the Ugandans consume a large quantity of Matoke. Cooked Matoke is like a sticky mashed potato, and tastes slightly sour rather than sweet (see the photo on the right with a plate). Rice consumption, comparatively speaking, is much lower than Matoke, but it does not mean that Ugandans do not like rice. Rather, they see rice as a special feast for celebration occasions. In particular, for the farmers in rural areas, rice is a dream food they could only eat a small number of times per year.

In recent years, rice consumption is on the increase in Uganda, and I could even have rice at restaurants in small towns. Over a half of rice consumed, or 80,000 to 100,000 tons of rice, is imported, and increasing domestic rice production is an important issue in Uganda's agricultural development. Irrigated lowland rice cultivation in eastern Uganda which has many wetlands is expected to be strengthened. At the same time, there is a growing expectation for the introduction of NERICA cultivation in order to increase domestic rice production. NERICA is an upland variety and can be grown without irrigation and therefore the potential for application in Uganda is high. Since 2004, JICA has been providing assistance to NERICA cultivation by sending long-term experts. As a result, NERICA cultivation has grown from zero to in excess of 18,000 ha.

My assignment this time was mainly to provide training for variety characteristic investigation within the agricultural experimentation center, and I did not have many opportunities to visit farmers. However, I could at least witness farming areas to learn that farmers in Uganda cultivate a variety of crops such as banana, maize, cassava and pulses rather than depending heavily on one crop. For eyes used to seeing rice cultivation in paddy fields in Asia, the scenery with the upland NERICA being cultivated as part of a field with various crops looked very fresh. Compound cultivation is effective as a means of spreading risks at the time of disasters such as drought. In addition, by rotating crops, the negative impact of continuous cropping can be avoided. In the traditional agricultural system, NERICA cultivation seems to be incorporated in a natural way. I felt that this naturalness is a major factor for the smooth expansion of NERICA cultivation in Uganda.



Typical meal in Uganda –
the yellow paste with arrow is Matoke



Typical farms – pulse and maize
at the front and NERICA, maize and
bananas at the rear



Morning at a Kampala market

(Kojima, July 2007)