

THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF KOLA NUT IN THE IGBO TRADITION OF NIGERIA

Nwosu Florence

Department of Linguistics and Nigerian
Languages, University of Ilorin
chi4evareal76@yahoo.com

**Muhammed, Abubakar; Yinusa, Raji Abdullateef and Abdulbaqi Salihu
Zakariya**

Department of Sociology,
University of Ilorin

Abstract

This paper discusses the significance of kolanut as a symbol of life and hospitality in Igbo tradition. The importance of Igbo kolanut (óji Igbo) in Igbo people's ceremonies cannot be overemphasized. Igbo people from the southeastern Nigeria are globally known for their rich culture. Traditionally, apart from burial ceremony, every other ceremony like reconciliation, oath taking, traditional marriage ceremonies and a host of other ceremonies are graced and opened with the presentation and the breaking of the kolanut. Igbo Kolanut is paramount in any occasion that ancestors are meant to partake in. Upon the intrusion of Western cultures which foreign religion signposts kolanut still represents the traditional Igbo values and practices striving against the upsurge of Christianity and foreign cultures in every social occasion in Igbo land. Since tradition is a way of life of people, in spite of all that may have been presented to visitors in Igbo homes or in Igbo social gatherings, it is the inclusion of or the initial presentation of óji that signifies acceptance, happiness and good heart toward the visitors. It is therefore recommended that the celebration of kolanut as a symbol of life and hospitality should be encouraged and should also be passed on to the future generations of the Igbo people for the growth and preservation of Igbo tradition.

Keywords: Tradition, Acculturation, Kola nut, Rituals, Cotyledons

Introduction

“Omenala ndi Igbo” (Igbo culture) are the practices, custom and tradition of the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria. It comprises archaic practices as well as new concepts added into the Igbo culture either by cultural evolution

or by acculturation. These customs and traditions include the Igbo people's festivals, ceremonies, dance forms, attire, cuisine, language and beliefs.

Obiefuna (1978) submits that "In Igbo traditional life, no distinctions were made between the sacred and profane, fact and fiction, history and poetry; all served the same purpose in a world where the natural and the supernatural interchanged hands..." Nonetheless, there is a natural union between the natural and supernatural in the Igbo society and this phenomenon confirms the truth that religion is natural to man. In some cases, there can be distinction between the religious and profane without a possible separation of the two. In such cases, any separation does violence to the harmony and tranquility in the people's culture.

Kola nut (ójí Igbo) occupies a unique position in the cultural life of the Igbo people and it is an age-long tradition. In the original Igbo society, *Oji* is the foremost thing that is presented to any visitor in an Igbo home by the father of the house or by the male member of the family as the case may be.

Oji Igbo is served before an important Igbo function begins, be it marriage ceremony, settlement of family disputes or entering into any type of agreement or covenant, to mention but a few. At any village function, the titled man or a village head is presented with kola nuts which play a very important social and ritual role in the Igbo culture. The kola nut is the highest symbol of Igbo hospitality. Whenever kola-nuts are serve in a gathering, the matter to be discussed at that particular time is regarded as very vital. The offering of water, drinks, food and meat is not regarded as so important in Igbo culture as compared to the offering of kola nuts. When an important guest visits a community, kola nuts are brought out and handed to an elderly person or the chief priest.

Kolanut

Kola nut among the Igbo people of Nigeria is something bigger than the popular seed crop tree grown in the Central and Western part of Africa. Although it serves diverse roles in the life of some Nigerians, for instance, in the Yoruba culture, a specie of kolanut called "obi abata" is used for prediction. However, in Igbo land, it still goes beyond the aforementioned, hence among other things; it plays other important cultural functions like tracing of seniority in the gathering of Igbo people. In the same vein, kola nut performs other greater diverse customary obligations than ordinary chewing

it for its narcotic effect. Among the Igbo people, it is food, and as such, accompanied by a deserving feast.

Kola nut like yam (king of crops), commands adoration and enjoys many acolytes. As a food, kolanut is eaten with relish. Emotional and cultural attachment to kolanut in Igbo land makes it religiously infectious. Adherents of the culture of kolanut, which without exaggeration involves every Igbo from several religious background, gender and caste, find in the kola nut lobes a cultural vehicle that conveys their world view. There is no Igbo cultural symbol that has received an equal attention as the kola nut.

Oji Igbo, botanically referred to as cola *acuminata*, used to contain more than two cotyledons or seed leaves which is the materjal that is chewed. *Oji Awusa* or *gwo*, - cola *nitida*, has only two cotyledons. In Igbo traditional rituals and ceremonies, the *gwo* is not a valid matter: only the Igbo kola, "cola *acuminata*" is acceptable.

There is a popular but cheap etymology of the kola nut, "Oji": O = Omenala (custom); J – Jikotara (that unites); I= Igbo. Thus *oji* means "Omenala jikotara Igbo" (ikembavoiceonline.net), that is, "norm that unites the Igbo". Cola *acuminata* and cola *nitida* are both regarded as having the same symbolism in general and private cases except on occasions like serious traditional ceremonies like traditional marriage, settlement of land dispute, reconciliation and other traditional sacrifices where only the Igbo kola is used. Nzeako (2007) explains that there are some traditional ceremonies that can never hold unless there is Igbo kola nut to perform the rituals that are involved in them. These traditional ceremonies include, killing of cows for a chieftaincy title, sharing of landed properties, traditional coronation like Igwe, Ichie, Ozo, Eze and the rest of other Igbo traditional titles. Ezeugo (1985) made a revealing research on some aspects of Igbo culture, and *Oji* symbolism featured prominently in his exercise. Kola nut and its tree are regarded as the first fruit and tree on earth.

The sacredness of the kola is by nature in Igbo land, for example, the dry wood of the tree is not used as firewood. Kola nut is a symbol of life, and for this reason, many profound and mysterious interpretations and formalitie are accorded to it.

The Igbo kola is always accompanied by wine or drink because the Igbo say that "Onye nyere agbara *oji* ga-enye ya mmiri o ga-eji elofe ya" [One who gives a deity kola has to give him water with which to swallow it]. In a general sense, the kola nut in Igbo land constitutes a remarkable social

symbol of hospitality, life, peace, kindness, good-will, commensality, fraternity, reconciliation and integrity. Kola is a typical multi-referential social symbol (www.Igbonet.Com)

Traditional rules guiding presentation of the kolanut

Ezeugo (1985), says that

"The kolanut is the 'bread' of Igbo sacramental communion, and must therefore be specially presented, broken, shared and partaken by all the parties and families in every marriage ceremony as the final consummation and blessing."

The reference to the bread of Igbo sacramental communion shows that in Igbo Traditional Religion, everyone present at a sacrifice participates in the consumption of the sacrificial meal, and the children are not left out. The importance of the people's communion in Igbo native rites is analogous to the priest's communion in the Catholic Church in the sense that every priest who celebrates is bound to partake of the communion. No other symbol represents Igbo communal spirit more than the kola nut. In the same way, when a kola nut is presented to a visitor in one's home, it shows acceptance and welcome.

Presentation of kolanut to an Igbo visitor shows a sense of welcome in the same way that denial of kola nut denotes displeasure and disapproval. Ezeugo goes on to talk of kola presentation saying that "Oji is the first thing served in every function or ceremony, personal or communal agreements, welcoming of a visitor to an Igbo home, and settlement of family disputes."

Basden (1966) records that in Igbo land, welcoming or entertaining a visitor is not complete without the sharing of the kola nut. Immediately after the prolonged greetings in the traditional manner,

...the kola nut is brought forth on a dish or saucer or, what is more correct, on a wooden platter (a small box fitted with a cover) prepared and kept for the sole purpose of presenting kola nuts.

Basden goes deeper in the description of the kola presentation, stating that in the dish are one or more nuts. The owner first receives it from the slave attendant or one of his wives. He takes a nut and puts it to his lips, thus signifying that it is about to be offered in good faith. This symbolic

action proves him to be free from malice. The dish is, thereupon, passed to the visitor.

The kola presentation is not essentially descriptive; rather it is at the same time a symbolic action. The symbolism in the kola presentation comes out clearly when many people are in attendance. The social aspect is clearly brought out because the *Oji* is carried from one person to another according to a trace of kinship relationship starting from the home of the host, spreads out in the direction of left to right movement and comes back to the host. This symbolic action is a manner of headcount or a way of checking the identity of all the people in attendance in any gathering before any type of discussion could be held.

The kola presentation symbolizes peace and welcome; and if one makes a mistake while carrying the kola round, '*ike oji*', he is traditionally dealt with according to the norms operating in different communities. This kind of error is considered as very grave and indicates that the offender is not so responsible and may not be a reliable person.

Rights and Rituals of Breaking the kolanut

Another consideration that brings out the symbolism in kola is the question of the rightful person to break it. Is it the youngest or eldest in any given gathering? There are two major traditions: In the south of Igbo land, the youngest in any group breaks the kola, while in the north-west and northern parts of Igbo land the eldest person breaks the kola. In both cases, the breaking of kola helps in the tracing of seniority. The young man, tradition says is preferred because he is presumed to be innocent, and his hands are not polluted by blood-shed in battle. This tradition has a loophole because at times there are gatherings where no one is really young, or where the youngest in the group is also elderly. This tradition is nurtured by the philosophy of Igbo ethical Puritanism (Ukaegbu, 2013). The puritan ethics or mentality is strongly founded in Igbo land. The old-man tradition is preferred because the eldest man blesses the kola, holds the *Ofo*, and represents the authority of the ancestors.

One of the strongest reasons for religious activities like blessings by the eldest person is that in Igbo traditional society, the firstborn or eldest man in a family or *umunna* (kindred) assumes some traditional priestly functions *ipso facto*. It is more by reason of his traditional function (*obu ofo*) and not necessarily because of his age that the eldest man is preferred; and this is

why today, the eldest man gives an ordained minister present at a particular occasion the kolanut to bless as a privilege at least to respect his anointing (as an ordained of God).

The blessing of kola, "igo oji" in Igbo land, is the right of the eldest person in any gathering or it may be that of the Eze (king) as the case may be. However, the oldest person is preferred in most cases because he is the custodian of truth and closer to the ancestors. In the evolutionary trend of the tradition, an ordained minister or one consecrated to God now takes precedence in the blessing of the kolanut; but the eldest person or the Eze who has this right will give or transfer it to a minister as a privilege (as an anointed man of God) and not as a right.

The Ndi Ichie Akwa Mythology gives an account of the blessing of the oji in Igbo land. Nwosu (1983) argues that the principle behind this Igbo kolanut culture is that the nut cannot be broken without saying of prayers or incantations by the eldest in the gathering. This gave rise to the proverb 'He who brings kola brings life' (Nwachukwu 2012), because in the kolanut prayers, the elder in addition to his wise sayings normally requested for peace, prosperity, long life, happiness and protection from all misfortunes.

Not only do the Igbo say prayers before the breaking of the kolanut, no traditional Igbo would drink or eat without sharing at least, with the ancestors. Thus, Uzuoku (1983) postulates that "The kolanut, a symbol of life and commensality which is never omitted in the morning cult, is broken. The traditional part for the spirits (the radix) is given to them, and those that are present share the rest."

The kola libation or blessing is employed in all occasions, formal and informal in Igbo land as exemplified below:

(The person blessing the kola nut)

The Listeners' responses)

Igbo	(Gloss)	
Eke kere elu, keeala, taa oji,	[Creator of Heaven and Earth, eat kola nut]	"Isee"
Amadioha taa oji,	[Amadioha eat kola nut]	"Isee"
Ala nwe mmadu taa oji,	[The gods of the land eat kola nut]	"Isee"
Ndi nwe ezi taa oji,	[Founders of this habitat, eat kola nut]	"Isee"
Agwu isi taa oji,	[Agwu isi eat kola nut]	"Isee"
Ogwugwu taa oji	[Ogwugwu eat kola nut]	"Isee"
Eke taa oji	[Eke eat kola nut]	"Isee"
Orie taa oji	[Orie eat kola nut]	"Isee"

Afo taa oji	[Afo eat kola nut]	"Isee"
Nkwo taa oji	[Nkwo eat kola nut]	"Isee"
Nyenu anyi omumu	[Give us fertility]	"Isee"
Nyenu anyi ogologo ndu	[Give us long life and good health]	"Isee"
Na ahụ isi ike		
Nyenu anyi aku na	[Prosper us]	"Isee"
Iheenwenwe		
Chupurunu anyi ajo mmuo	[Send away from us every evil]	"Isee"
Na ajo mmadu		
Egbe bere ugo bere, Nke sirị ibe ya ebela, Nku kwaa ya.	[Live and let live, whichever says that one should not live should die for its sake]	"Iseeeeee"

Eke kere uwa is one of the Igbo names for God; in this case it means "the One who made the world". Ogwugwu is a local deity to whom the town's market, Eke Ogwugwu is dedicated. A brief analysis of this kola-prayer shows that all beings, spiritual and human are invited to partake of the kola and therefore accompany this family meeting. But ultimately the blessings to the sons come from Eke kere uwa (God) through the deities and the ancestors. This cosmic meeting is made possible, thanks to the kola symbolism of commensality. In this case, the kola symbolism unites man, the ancestors, cosmic forces, the deities and God. As a symbol of life, the kola libation makes clear this truth whenever it is celebrated.

Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory takes as its starting point the common place that there is a price for every thing and everything has its price. All contacts among men rest on the schema of giving and returning the equivalence (George, 1950). Exchange theory is of the view that there exists a lot of mutual exchanges going on around us; this is very much in line with the popular saying 'you scratch my back and I will scratch yours too'. The theory is of the view that both overt and other less obvious types of exchange are based on fundamental and universal principles of human behaviour. Kola-nut presentation to guests in the Igbo society is quite within this very schema.

Many great scholars have shown concern with the central role exchange plays in human social life. Many of them have concluded that exchange particularly gift is the basis of social cohesion (Wallace & Wolf, 1986). This is because gift of kola nut is not just a subset of behaviour but rather an important process of social interaction in the Igbo tradition. It is

equally noted by many scholars that voluntary actions of individuals are motivated by the returns they are expected to bring. Very importantly, the need to reciprocate for benefits received in order to continue receiving them serves as a starting mechanism of social interaction. Group norms particularly the fundamental and ubiquitous norm of reciprocity regulate exchange transactions, and a refusal to reciprocate brings with it group sanction. Guests do not refuse kola nut as gift in the Igbo tradition. Kola nut offering is not the type of economic exchange that involves bargaining but this one brings with it love, affinity and friendliness (Homans, 1958).

The emphasis of the kola nut presentation is on the impression management that could be deduced from the social interaction particularly on how the presenter presents himself. Blau (1964) argues that, social exchange obligation cannot be specified and stipulated in advance; reciprocation and expanded exchange are accompanied by a parallel growth of mutual trust. Hence, the presentation of kola nut to visitors or guests which originates from tradition, generates trust in social relations through collective approval.

Traditional Meaning attached to the Number of Cotyledons in kolanut.

Kola with one cotyledon is a dumb kola or *Qji ogbu*. It is called *qji mmuo*, that is, kola of the spirits. It is not eaten. Kola with two cotyledons is equally a dumb kola and it is not eaten. This is the main reason why the Igbo people do not use the *gworo* or *cola nitida* for rituals or in serious traditional celebrations. Kola with three cotyledons is called "*qji ikenga*", that is, kolanut of the valiant. Only warriors or brave men and traditionally consecrated or ordained persons are permitted to eat this kola, as a matter of principle. Kola nut with four cotyledons is called "*qji udo na ngozi*", that is, "kola of peace and blessing". It is the normal kola and signifies good fortune. The number 'four' is very sacred among the Igbo. It pinpoints the welcome and approval of the gathering by the gods of the four Igbo market days – Eke, Orie, Afọ and Nkwọ (www.ocean-anaedo.org). Kola with five cotyledons is "*qji ubara mmadu, omumu na ukwu oma*" that symbolizes increase in procreation, protection and good luck. Kola with six cotyledons indicates communion with our ancestors, that is, "*qji ndi mmuo na ndi mmadu jiri gbaa ndu*". Kola nut with seven cotyledons shows that a very great blessing awaits the person or group of individuals present during the breaking of such kind of the kolanut. (Nze & Imo, 2010)

Significance of the kola nut

The Igbo people have many different kinds of rituals in many social settings, and many of these rituals include the use of the kolanut. The nut grows from the kola tree and contains more caffeine than a serving of tea or coffee. It also contains a heart stimulant, kolanin, which increases alertness and suppresses hunger. Warriors in Igbo land were often given the kola nut before they went into battle.

It is used in purification rituals as well as in sacrifices in which ancestors are meant to partake in it. Most importantly, however, the kolanut promotes social interaction between members of the Igbo community, in social gatherings, including friends' visits, marriage, child dedication and others. The Igbo people use the kola nut to welcome a guest and either establish or reinforce their interaction rate (Uchendu, 1964).

The *ojiugo* (a species of Igbo kola nut), or white kola nut, is distinguished from other coloured kolanuts as socially important and is considered a symbol of luck, social distinction and potential prosperity. Guests are presented with a kolanut as a symbol of welcome, and especially welcome if they receive a white kolanut, which can happen on purpose or by accident.

Kola nuts are important for both formal and informal events. The most important events in the Igbo community are weddings, and title acquisition. At these occasions, it is especially important that kola nut be presented first before anything else. Informally, kola nut is simply used as food, because it is recognized as thirst-quenching and as an energy-sustainer. But anytime a kola nut is presented to people who do not share the same residence, a formal situation is created. The nut is first presented to the host who then presents it to the next ranking male in his family. It is passed through male lineage and ranks and then presented to the guest who in turn gives it to the host, but it almost never passes through the hands of a woman. After the presentation comes prayer for life, peace, and the downfall of the enemies. Kolanut is used in peaceful ceremonies, so also it is used for mediating crisis in situations. It is perhaps in this way that the symbolic nature and role of kolanut becomes very manifest (Nwachukwu, 2012).

When two villages or families or husband and wife or even siblings are at war or into disagreement, kola nut is taken to the traditional head of one of the offending parties as an appeal for ceasefire and reconciliation. It is a common saying among the people referring to somebody or a village, that

“achigaara ya or ha oji”, which means that “kola nuts are taken to him or them” a situation that may arise say, from a person or village alleged of crime, adultery or poison. The essence of “achigaara ya oji” or “kola nuts have been taken to him” becomes an instrument of summons to the accused to come and defend himself or prove his innocence before the accuser (Nwachukwu, 2012).

Conclusion

The role of kolanut in the Igbo tradition is very important. Kola nut among the Igbo people is more than the mere name kolanut as it is called in other parts of Nigeria. In the Igbo tradition, kolanut is food; it is accompanied by serving feast and commands a lot of adoration and acolytes.

The cultural and environmental attachment to kolanut tradition, make it a beautiful issue that is worth celebrating. Apart from the cultural and emotional attachment of tradition which the symbol of kola nut is associated with, it is also useful socially and essentially as an economic commodity. Kola nut is important for many titles acquisition. Its presence in any event is an indication that all is well. Presenting it in the appropriate order and manner before guests at any occasion is a value that is socially important.

Therefore, for this beautiful element of a tradition in the eastern Nigeria to be sustained, its rites and values need to be well documented. Planting of the economic tree of the kolanut must be sustained; otherwise, there will be massive shortage of the commodity. There is the need for more enlightenment and education on the new breed of Igbo people that exist today; this is to ensure that the sanctity of the rites is maintained.

References

- Basden, G.T. (1966). *Niger Ibos*. London: Frank Cass and Co. Ltd.
- Blau P. (1964) *Exchange and Power in Social Life*. New York: John Wiley
- Chuku, G. (2005). *Igbo Women and Economic Transformation in Southeastern Nigeria, 1900-1960*. New York: Routledge.
- Ezeugo, S.N.I.U (1985). *Research and comments on Igbo culture*: Unpublished Art., Olupe.
- Georg, S. (1950) *The Sociology of George Simmel Glencoe III*. The free Press
- Homans, G. (1958) “Social Behaviour as Exchange”. *American Journal of Sociology*, LXII
- Nwachukwu, Mc Philips www.vanguard.com 12/4/2012

- Nwosu, I.N.C. (1983). *NdiIchie Akwa mythology and folklore: Origins of the Igbos*. Lagos, C.S.S. Press.
- Nzeako, J.U. T (2007). *Omenala Ndi Igbo*. Ikeja: Longman Plc.
- Nze, A. I. and Imo, G. (2010). *Nchikota Akwukwo Maka Sinjo Sekondiri*. Nnewi: Mis-Fav Publishers
- Obiefuna, A. K. (1978). *Some aspects of traditional moral heritage with particular reference to the Igbo people of Nigeria*, Art. In Lucerna, Enugwu, Bigard Memorial Seminary 1 (1) .25
- Okafor, I. E. ikembavoiceonline.net. Nov. 29
- Uchendu, V. C.(1964). *Kola hospitality and Igbo lineage structure. Man: A record of anthropological Science* LXIV, 47-50.
- Ukaegbu, J. O. (2013). *The Kola nut as an Igbo cultural and social symbol* www.lgbonet.com
- Uzokuwu, E.E. (1983). *Igbo world and ultimate reality and meaning* In Lucerna, Enugwu, Bigard Memorial Seminary..4, (1) 14. www.ocean-anaedo.org/pages/kolanut.aspx 2013
- Wallace, A. R., and Wolf, A. (1986). *Contemporary Sociological Theory*. New Jersey, Prentice- Hall, Inc., Englewood diff.