

KOLA NUT: KOLANUT AS AN EMBODIMENT FOR COMPLETENESS OF THE IGBO CULTURE

Chinyere J. Anidobe and Uche Joy Uzoalor

Abstract

Of all the cultural practices of Ndi Igbo, the use of kolanut (oji Igbo) ranks highest in rituals and other social gatherings. In performing these rituals, there is always fair-play especially in the presentation. Presentation of the kolanut is often used as a check on the identity and genealogy of the male folk in any Igbo gathering. The writers also portrayed the kolanut as a true WAZOBIA. In kolanut presentation, the case of some Igbo women that distinguished themselves in the service to the nation was also highlighted.

Introduction

Culture is a people's total way of life which manifests itself in behaviours that have certain factors in common. Such behaviours represent the moral anticipated response of society members' participated responses in music, dance, marriage system, burial rites, religious, rituals and the like. Supporting the above explanation, Maduka, (1980: 253) state that *"the functioning of every part of the human body is molded by the culture within which the individual has been reared not only in terms of diet, explosive ... and experiences but also the way he is born into a society with a definite culture has been fed with disciplined, folded and put to sleep, punished and rewarded"*.

No wonder, the BBC English (1992) defined culture as consisting of ideas, customs and art produced of by a particular society. Bearing this in mind, the people's religion includes among other things the rituals, the rites and the likes. Culture can also be seen as an advanced developmental process of the human powers such as the body, mind and spirit through training and experience. It is a complex whole which include language, knowledge, art, religious, beliefs and practices, code, institutions, traditional moral code, law and general philosophy of a race or community. Simply put, culture is the totality of a way of life of a people. That is the way they do their own things.

Kola nut in this paper is studied, established and presented as an embodiment of a necessity for completeness of the Igbo way of life. Igbo culture is incomplete without the kola nut. In fact, kola nut is so important in Igbo cultural symbol that there is no cultural symbol that has received an equal attention as it has. In the words of Ubesie (1978:10), there is no known town in Igbo land that can boast of having and fulfilling all the traditions with which the Igbo are known. But there is one tradition that is universal among the Igbos and that is the use of kola nut and not one can say how and when this started. There is a popular but cheap etymology of kola nut, Oji: O = Omenala (custom), J = Jikotara (that unites), I = Igbo. Therefore, to sum it up, Oji means "Omenala jikotara Igbo" (custom that unites the Igbo).

Origin of Kola Nuts

It is not quite clear when and how kola nut came into Igbo land; but it is among the many nuts found in West African sub-region. In Nigeria up to twenty species of kola are recognized. These fall into four sub-general groups. Bodard (1954) group it thus; parvosema kola, haplo kola, macro kola. Of these, the sub-genus kola is the most widely cultivated and it has more than a hundred species of which only four are edible. The edible species are kola verticillata, kola megalcophylle, kola nitida and kola acuminata. The last two are the only species grown in large scale in Nigeria.

Kola acuminata otherwise called "Oji Igbo" by the Igbo has lobes or cotyledons ranging from three to seven or even more. It is the specie eaten and respected by the Igbo. Nitida otherwise called "Oji Awusa" by the Igbos or "gworu" by the Hausa has just two lobes or cotyledons.

Kola nitida and acuminata are well grown on large scale by the western Nigerians, eaten on a large scale by the Hausas of Northern Nigeria while it is well revered by the Igbo of the eastern Nigeria. No ritual or traditional performance is complete without the presence of the kola among the Igbo.

According to some Igbo traditional rulers, kola nut and the tree are the first trees created by God. And as such it is sacred by nature. Because of its sacredness, the dry wood of kola tree is not used as fire wood in Igbo land.

Interpretation and Significance of the Kola Nut in Igbo Communities

In Igbo land, any Igbo traditional setting, be it ritual or any other ceremony, the kola nitida that is Oji Awusa or group has no place. This specie is regarded as invalid. The only species that is recognized by the Igbo in their rituals and ceremonies is the kola acuminate known as “oji Igbo.” Kola is seen among the Igbo as a symbol of life and unity. Hence the common saying by the Igbo that he who brings kola brings life ‘O wetara oji wetara ndu’, Achebe (1958: 14). For this reason, many profound and mysterious interpretations and formalities are accorded it. One significant feature of the “Oji Igbo” (kola acuminate) is that it has lobes or cotyledons ranging from three to seven or even more in some occasions. But if by accident or otherwise a kola nut happens to have no lobe, it is regarded as ‘oji ogbi’ that is, dumb kola. This type is taken as ‘ojimuo’ – kola for the spirits. This is not eaten but thrown away to the spirits. In addition, any ‘oji Igbo’ with two lobes is also not eaten but thrown away. In some cases, the parties concerned go for a diviner for clarification and appeasement of the gods/spirits (Nwapa, F. 1968).

In some parts of Igboland, kola nuts with three lobes are referred to as “Oji Ikenga” which means kola nut for the valiant, heroes and achievers. Ikenga is known and taken by the Igbo as a symbol of achievement; as such, such kola nut with three lobes is eaten mainly by warriors, the brave, the achievers, the ordained and consecrated as a matter of principle and respect.

Also, majority of Igbo communities regard kola nut with three lobes as “Oji Okike.” Among the Igbo, “Okike” is the creative deity. For this, a kola nut with three lobes is regarded as a symbol of fertility. Kola nut with four lobes signifies the Igbo native week of four days – Eke, Ori, Afor and Nkwo which also represent the four market days in every part of Igbo land. In some Igbo communities, the kola nut with four lobes is called “Oji udo na Ngozi” that is kola nut of peace and blessing.

Furthermore, kola nut with five lobes is regarded as good luck especially to the person that broke it. It is called ‘oji ubara mmadu, omumu na ukwu oma’ which means the kola nut of increase in procreation, fertility and good luck. On the other hand, a kola nut with six lobes shows communion with the ancestors that is “oji ndi mmuo na mmadu jiri gbaa ndu’. On breaking this, all the lobes are not eaten rather the smallest is selected and thrown out for the spirits and gods. This attitude shows direct link between the Igbomen and his ancestors. That is link between the living and the dead.

Ascending a kola nut with seven lobes is regarded as ultimate and signifies perfection. Therefore, before this is eaten, the oldest man in the village will have to offer sacrifice to the village deity before it is eaten. Where the oldest man is not available the lobes are tied and kept until he is available. When available, he then performs the rituals which are more of thanks to gods before all that are present will then partake. In some areas, this type of kola nut is accompanied with a big cock. Where the cock is not available, the said kola nut is kept until the cock is produced by the host. The cock when produced is then killed and cooked. The kept kola nut is then brought out and shared with the cooked cock among those present.

Respect Accorded to the Kola Nut (Oji Igbo) in Igbo Land

In the first place, this species of the kola nut under review is the only one revered and used for rituals and other Igbo ceremonies. For this, a lot of respect is accorded to it. In most Igbo communities, it is an abomination for a woman to pluck or even pick a kola nut even if the tree is hers where she is privileged to own one. On seeing a mature one, she has to find a male to do it for her no matter how young the male is. Where a woman does it herself, it is regarded as an abomination that should be cleansed. The gods must be appeased. Theft associated with yam tubers and coco-yam are regarded as sacrilege against the gods. So people who are involved in such thefts are not allowed to break kola nut in any gathering until the gods are appeased and such people certified clean.

Because kola nut signifies communion between the gods and man, any man that committed an abomination in the community is not allowed to break kola nut or even partake in the eating in some communities. Moreso, in any Igbo gathering, an Osu or Ohu must never break or bless kola nut among the amadis (free born). Kola nut can never be substituted although some other things could

be used as kola nut for a visitor but those things are not respected, honoured nor are they used for rituals. I mean things like; Amara, mmiri, wine and the like.

Ironically, a woman that nurture and brings out kola nut in a gathering is not allowed to break it. Kola nut is not even shown to her when it is passed around. This is termed an abomination in a normal Igbo gathering of men and women. All these are so because of the high status given to kola nut (Oji Igbo) in Igbo land. The principle that woman should be seen and not heard, is fully applied here.

Presentation and Breaking of Kola Nut in Igbo Land

The presentation of kola nut is so important in Igbo world view that a host who could not present it to his guest is usually full of profuse apologies. However, such apologies by a host are taken as a demonstration of goodwill and hospitality. This presentation of kola nut to a visitor or a group of people does not only signify goodwill and hospitality but also symbolizes an act of respect. In Igbo land, oji is the first thing served in every function or ceremony, be it personal or communal. It may be for welcoming a visitor or for settlement of a family dispute. Immediately after the usual prolonged greetings in the traditional manner, kola nut is presented in a dish or wooden platter specifically made for kola nut presentation. There may be one or more kola nuts in this platter. The host then first receives the kola nut from his wife or servant as the case may be. He takes one, touches it on his lips as a sign of offering it in good faith and free of malice. The platter is then passed to the visitor who touches that and then returns to the host for blessing and breaking. This goes on with a lot of talk (Achebe, 1978; 94-95).

In some Igbo communities, the visitor takes one of the nuts and pockets before returning the dish to the host for blessing of the remaining one. The one taken by the visitor is called “Oji rue ulo, o kwuo onye chere ya”, meaning when the kola nut reaches home, it tells person that presented it. In a community like this, if you have just one kola nut in the platter dish, the host normally accompanies it with some amount of money; just a token and this is taken by the visitor as a kola nut that will be taken home.

The social aspect of kola nut and the long talks that go with it is more symbolic when many people are to partake in the eating. On presentation, the Oji is carried from one person to another according to a trace of kingship starting from the home of the host. It then moves from left to right and then back to the host as the case may be. This is a way of checking the identity of all the people present before any discussion is made. In the course of this, if one made the mistake of carrying the kola the wrong way (ipa oji), he is traditionally corrected. Such mistakes are frowned at. This is one of the ways by which the Igbo youths are trained.

Blessing of the kola nut that is “igbo oji” is the sole right of the eldest person in any gathering, or that right may go to the Eze/Igwe (King) as the case may be. However, the eldest is preferred in most cases because he is the custodian of truth and regarded as the closest to the ancestors. The principle behind the kola nut culture is that it cannot be taken without saying of prayers or incantation in a gathering. The eldest in addition to his wise sayings normally request for peace, prosperity, long life, protection from all ills among other things. The share for the spirits (the radix) is then thrown to them and all present share the rest.

The kola nut (oji) in Igbo land is a veritable symbol of democracy. In the sharing, no one is cheated. No matter how small the quantity is, it must go round. Hence the saying ‘mboaka o no ebee mere na oji ezughi’ meaning where is the finger nails that the kola nut was not sufficient. It is argued that kola nut sharing practice is the only Igbo social institution that does not discriminate in terms of class or status.

Apart from the functions of democracy and unity which the kola nut performs for the Igbo, there are other functions this sacred fruit performs. In covenant keeping, it is of vital importance. It is called igba ndu in Igbo. Here the two people or parties as the case may be are expected to eat kola nut with their own blood as sauce. But in some cases, the kola is not eaten rather, they just hold it and say what the covenant is. The belief is that there is nothing stronger than human blood. This was used by cultists in the olden days. Once, this is done the deal (covenant) is sealed. Both parties will then aspire to keep the covenant. Breaking it means breach of the covenant and that is termed abomination. To appease the other person or parties or even the gods, the kola nut must be brought in again.

The kola nut is also used for oat-taking. At times in some Igbo communities, when certain things that are bad like; the theft of yam tubers, poisoning, secret willful destruction of farm crops and the like start happening, the need for oat-taking comes in (Ubesie, 1978:10). ‘The procedure is that the suspect are brought out in an open place preferably “ama” or market place, or shrine of a particular deity to take the oat (inụ iyi). Kola nut is placed on the ground and after some incantations and sayings, the suspect is expected to crawl to where the kola nut is and picks it with his/her mouth. The belief is that if the suspect committed the said crime, he will happen to him. He will then come out, go round town to declare his innocence. This will be after some stipulated days – “Izu asaa” that is 28 days. Where someone is suspected of poisoning another person, in some areas, on the burial day, a lobe or lobes of kola nut will be placed on the body of the deceased and the suspect(s) is made to take the lobes with the mouth. If actually the offence was committed by the suspect(s) their sins will find them out within a space of time. Thus, they are punished accordingly or even pay with their lives in some cases.

For an Igbo man, food is of vital importance. Because of this, in a typical Igbo setting, the first thing a man does is to bless and eat kola nut. The eating is called “Igba azi.” This is just an appetizer (foundation for other foods). This can carry him far into the day before any other thing finds into his stomach. The belief is that if the man travels out with an empty stomach and meets an angry god seeking for one with an empty stomach as a bait, he will be free because he has something in his stomach.

As an energizer, kola nut is also used. Renounced Igbo orators have been known to keep awake to recite their speeches through the help of kola nut (ọji). Man is a social being and the Igbo is not an exception. In interaction, there is bound to be problems. When an Igbo of the lesser status has a problem, he goes to a richer person for help. He does this with some kola nuts. A non Igbo may just see it as mere kola nuts, but for an Igbo, it has a lot of connotations. In the first place, it is a sign of respect to the reach person. On the part of the beggar, it shows humility. So from the aforementioned, we have seen that kola nut is highly held and performs a lot of functions both religiously, socially and otherwise in Igbo land.

Conclusion

In the process of this paper, it was noted that there are many species of kola nut but the specie that is relevant to the Igbo is the kola acceminata (ọji Igbo). Looking at the symbolism accrued to it, we noted that it is used as a symbol of reconciliation, covenant keeping, oat-taking, respect and appetizer. It is also a symbol of hospitality, life, peace, kindness, goodwill, commensality, fraternity and integrity.

The kola (ọji Igbo) is a typical multi-referential social symbol while the eldest blesses, the youngest breaks and serves in a social gathering. It is the exclusive right of the priest to break kola nut during Igbo rituals to the Arusi or god. The honour, respects, high regard and attention given to kola nut (ọji Igbo) by the Igbo reveal that it is part and parcel of the Igbo cultural identity.

Recommendations

In the course of this paper, it has been seen that the kola nut is the true “WAZOBIA”, cultivated in the West, eaten by the Hausas and highly respected and ritualized by the Igbo. So it could be used for national unity. It was also seen through this paper that the sharing of kola nuts reflects that of federal character where everybody gets a fair share. There is no marginalization in the sharing. So this should be emulated by the nation. That no one be oppressed.

But it was discovered that to some extent, kola nut is male oriented – women should be allowed in to some extent. In areas where women are highly discriminated upon, women should be allowed to own kola nut trees freely, pluck and pick the fruits. In “ipa ọji), women should be shown the kola nuts in a gathering just as their male counterparts. The idea of a woman bringing out kola nut, hands it over to her husband but in passing around and other things she is relegated to the background does not look sensible. It should be made as part of those privileges women enjoy in this 21st century. Moreso, we have some women that have distinguished themselves out. An Igbo adage says; “Nwata kwochaa aka, o soro ogaranya rie nri”, meaning that if a child distinguished himself out, he will dine with the rich.

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