

Research Article

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'He Who Brings Kola Brings Life': Communicating the Significance of Kolanut among Igbo People of NigeriaOdo, Ogochukwu Nneoma¹, Nwokeocha, Ifeanyi M.² & Ezegwu, Daniel*³¹National Open University of Nigeria²Heritage Polytechnic, Nigeria &³Glorious Vision University, Edo State, Nigeria**Article History**

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Abstract: Culture is defined as all the ways of life including arts, beliefs and institutions of a population that are passed down from generation to generation. In every human culture exists a mark of identification which portrays their homogeneity as an entity. In this regard, this paper dwelt on the meaning, history, antecedences and various importance attached to Kola nut as a significant socio-cultural symbol in Igbo land. Despite western domination on the indigenous African values through modernity, the essence of Kola nut as a symbol of Igbo hospitality, cordiality, celebration, unity and integration remains evergreen. This work established that there are two types of Kola nut consumed in Nigeria; 'Cola acuminata' and 'Cola nitida' (Oji Igbo and Gworo). Oji Igbo which has its botanical name as 'Cola acuminata' is valued and revered in Igbo tradition where its sacredness is attached to the foundation of Igbo origin (Ntu Ala Igbo) and marriage covenant between the spirits and the humans. Information gathered through Interviews shows that the essence of "Oji Igbo" in any social, religious and traditional celebration in Igbo land cannot be overemphasized, in order words any traditional gathering becomes incomplete and inconsequential without the presentation of Kola nut.

Keywords: Kola nut, Igbo, Cola acuminata and Cola nitida (Oji Igbo and Gworo).

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INTRODUCTION

Over the years, studies have extensively documented the significance of Kola nut across various ethnic dichotomies in Nigeria. It is mostly planted and harvested for sales in large quantity by the Yorubas in the South West Nigeria, mostly consumed by the Hausa and Kanuris in the North and mythically celebrated and ritualized by the Igbo of South East Nigeria. Kola nut is seen as an object that depicts life, progress and peace. About 40 kola species have been described in West Africa, however the kola species of economic importance in Nigeria are Cola acuminata and Cola nitida. Both species are important economic crops in the forest areas of West and Central Africa, Caribbean Islands, Mauritius, Sri Lanka and Malaysia. Kola nut is an important economic cash crop to a significant proportion of Nigerian population who are involved in Kola nut farming, trading and industrial utilization. Kola nut has, for hundreds of years, served as an important article of internal trade in Nigeria and other parts of Africa. Kola nut farms were owned through inheritance (Ndagi, 2012). The study will focus on the significance of Kola nut among the various clans in Igbo land, it will further determine the presentation, blessing and breaking of Kola nut among the various clan in Igbo land.

Adega (2016:24) defines Kola nut as the seed of the cola tree which contains caffeine and is chewed or made into a drink. It further stated that Kola nuts are the seeds of certain species of plant of the genus Cola, placed

formerly in the Cocoa family Sterculiaceae and now usually subsumed in the mallow family Malvaceae. They are usually trees native to the tropical rainforest of Africa. Cola nitida (Gworo) can be creamy, white or yellow while Cola acuminata (Oji Igbo) ranges from white, deep red and when dried can be brownish in colour. In the course of the work, the researcher will answer these Research Questions - what is the significance of Kola nut among the various clans in Igbo land? What way is Kola nut presented, blessed and the procedure for breaking of Kola nut?

At the time of writing, the researcher was confronted with limited time and the study centred on primary sources, through interviews. The study will be relevant to researchers and students in Communication and Africa Discipline.a



Fig 1. Gworo (Cola Nitida)

Fig 2. Oji Igbo (Cola Acuminata)

Fig 3. Oji Ugo (a specie of Oji Igbo that signifies the dowry paid by Aji Ike the Spirit Wrestler)

Source: Vanguard News. (2022, March 7).

Historical Account of Kola nut in Igbo land

The Igbo origin of Kola nut although it has been established that the Kola nut is indigenous to West Africa and that it has many species, but the most common species in Nigeria are Cola nitida and Cola acuminata. Cola nitida (gworo) has only two cotyledons. According to Ukaegbu (2020:11) in Igbo traditional rituals and ceremonies, gworo (Cola nitida) is not valid, the only acceptable one is the Cola acuminata (Oji Igbo). The historical origin of the Kolanut among the Igbo's is largely based on oral sources, is just in recent times that these traditions started to get documented.

The origin of the Kola nut among the Igbo can be traced back to the special relationship between humans and the spirit beings. Obineche 2018 cited in Onwu-Otuyelu (2020:97) asserts that the beginning of time, the living world (Man) was related to the spirit world. In the olden days, man and spirits were interacting in various levels of exchanging festivities and ceremonies like sports competitions. During one of these competitions which was wrestling, one spirit which was called 'Aji Ike', he was a spirit wrestler who could not be defeated by any human wrestler. In those days, these spirit wrestlers easily attracted the love and affection of the opposite human virgins. One of such women was the Ugo Onobo who was deeply in love with Aji Ike whom she later eloped with to the spirit abode located at the depth of Cross River at Okwuruike.

The disappearance of Ugo Onobo became a nightmare to her two brothers, Agala and Ogbu Onobo and the entire community at large, they kept their search alive for their sister. It went on till people began to ridicule the two brothers in the market square or any place they deemed fit of not being man enough to protect their only sister. This became unbearable for these brothers who vowed to keep no stone unturned until their sister- Ugo was found. The search led them to the diviner (Dibia) to inquire the whereabouts of their sister. The Diviner advised then on what to do which was that by the time the chicks start returning to the roost and the sun is gradually sinking close to setting, they should go to the brink of the Cross River Okwuruike during ebb-tide there, stand there and call their sister's name seven times and she will answer. Then follow the echo of her voice, then it will lead them to the bottom of Cross River, they will find her living with Aji Ike, the Great Spirit wrestler. The two brothers complied with the directives from the Diviner, and they found their Sister-Ugo. As they arrived at their home, they found their sister pregnant, Aji Ike seeing them was so excited and went into his room and brought out the white chalk (nzu), coconut with water as drink and kola nut. The chalk he gave them to smear on

their faces as welcome gesture, the coconut with water, he served them as drink and food. Finally he gave them the ***Kola nut which symbolizes dowry*** for their sister, Ugo. The two brothers were very angry and rejected these offers but demanded to take their sister home irrespective of her condition, Aji Ike accepted their request but pleaded with them to accept the gesture of his hospitality. He told them to go home with their sister who was pregnant along with the offerings.

"Use the chalk to welcome your guests as I did to you, tell them how glad I was when you visited me; plant the coconut and when it grows and bears fruits, take one, break it into four parts and leave it broken on the road. By this act, you have given me my own share of it and then you can eat the rest of it and subsequent harvests with your family and guests." Concerning the kola nut, he instructed them to plant also, but when it bears fruit and it is harvested, they should break the pod, pick one of its seeds with four divisions signifying the cotyledons (lobes or eyes) these they shall hold in their left hand, cast with a statement of thanks and in so doing, Aji Ike said, "you have given me my share. Then break and share the rest with your guests. ***As I have presented you the kola nut as dowry on the head of your sister, Ugo, so must you present kola nut with regard to every marriage in every human home as the celebration between the world of the living and that of the spirits.***" Aji Ike took back the baby through miscarriage on the Ndele Bridge, the two brothers performed the rituals as they were instructed by Aji Ike. The red colour on the kolanut is attributed to Agala Onobo's blood that stained red some of the seeds in the process of breaking the first product of the kola nut in the land of the living. While the kola nuts with white colours are called Oji Ugo as a reference to Ugo Onobo who was the first woman ever to have kola nut as her bride price. The above legend helps us to understand the reason behind the etymology among the Igbo that Oji (kolanut), the "O" stands for omenala (Tradition/Custom), "J" represents jikotara (joining) and "I" stand for Igbo. This is to say that ***Oji means "Omenala Jikotara Igbo", which means "Custom that unites the Igbo"*** (Unya, 2021).

Statement of Problem

The study tends to establish the meanings that various Igbo community attribute to the breaking of kolanut during various events and festivals. This study intends to establish the variance as against the general assumption concerning kolanut. A lot of studies have been carried out on Kola nut like Kola nut: revisiting the Igbo socio-cultural values and identity by Obineche (2017), The kolanut: Its symbolic significance in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart by Bawa et al (2008) and kolanut: Nigeria's seed of togetherness by Nwachukwu (2012). There are so many works that have been published on kolanuts but this work is particular in dealing with the semantic understanding and meaning of the Igbo proverb which states that "He who brings kola brings life."

LITERATURE REVIEW

Under the Literature Review, the various works on kolanut from the point of view of several scholars were considered.

The kolanut and the accompanying rituals that go along with it symbolize the customs and signs of respect between the leaders of the Igbo tribe in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). In Igbo land as depicted by the novelist, the Kolanut nut is a crucial part of many ceremonies and gatherings, but it appears in the novel primarily as a way of welcoming visitors to one's home. As a symbol, it is used in West Africa by the Igbo of Nigeria to grace social rituals of hospitality such as welcome offerings to guests, sacred offering in religious rites and prayers, in ancestor veneration. As a **mark of respect, the kolanut is broken with knife and then followed immediately by prayers.** In prayers, the forefathers of the Igbo, people are beacons to come and participate in the eating of the kolanuts and to guide and protect them in the mission that brings the people together.

In Igboland, it is also planted to mark out land boundaries; and also used to identify where children's placentas are buried and as decorative trees in front of shrines. Across the country, there are instances when kolanuts are not eaten or one allowed the honour of breaking the kolanut. For instance, in Igboland, one is not allowed to break the kolanut in one's maternal home. Also, women are not allowed to bless and break the kolanut, (Nwachukwu, 2012).

The kolanut is believed by the Igbo not to hear or understand any language aside Igbo language, this gave birth to this statement '**Oji anaghi anu Bekee**' (**Kola nut does not understand the English Language**), the breaking of the kolanut and prayers are to be said in Igbo language by anyone who is performing the above function. After the prayer is said, the Kolanut is broken, shared and everybody eats it. This sharing of the kolanut symbolises unity, reconciliation and together among kinsmen.

Presentation of Kolanut in Igboland

Kolanut is presented in any gathering by the host, whereby the oldest person is given the privilege to break the kolanuts into lobes for the people involved to pick a lobe out of it. There must be a formal presentation of the kolanut. Ogbukagu as cited in Nnamdi-Eruchalu (2012:54), affirms that there is no function or ceremony performed in any part of Igbo land that presentation of the kolanut does not take precedence. Kolanut is to Igbo people what the prayer book stands for the Christian world, (Nnamdi-Eruchalu, 2012). It is a fact that the blessing of the kolanut is exclusively done by the old who are known for their mastery of oratory in their effort to either express an act of gratitude or give praise to the Almighty-Supreme God, the gods, deities, goddesses as well as ancestors in a special language.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), emphasizes that the Kola nut is articulated as a food stuff of primary importance in the life of Igbo people. It is based on this that Achebe submitted that the livelihood of the Igbo community revolves around the kolanut. This is because it offers to play a role of unity, harmony and solidarity. Among the multiple roles it plays in society, it has social, spiritual, ideological and economic functions. Achebe depicts his people using kolanuts to fulfill different societal functions, thereby testifying that his own social background is the sum total of his history, culture, philosophy and religion. A kolanut cannot be presented or broken into lobes in Igbo land by a woman, it is considered as 'alu' which means taboo.

The African tradition has undergone significant upheavals in terms of religion, social structure, language and values; but the kolanut presentation, breaking and eating is one of the cultural heritages of the Igbo that has withstood all manners of encroachments and intrusion by the western civilization, European forces of development, urbanization and religions. Once the kolanut is broken, its pieces are distributed to everyone starting with the eldest, by the youngest among them. When kolanut is presented at any event, the host hands it down to the oldest man among his guests. The oldest man now shows it to everyone present and then passes it around when each of them records his approval by touching the Kola nut, greetings and prayers are said to the gods and the ancestors.

Ezeugo (2021:22) asserts that the presentation of kolanut is an evidence of social harmony, love and happiness for one another. Thus, he compares the presentation and breaking of kolanut to the Catholic sacramental communion and calls kolanut, the 'bread' of Igbo sacramental communion which must be carefully and specially presented, blessed, shared and partaken by all the parties present in an event. Basden (2021:23) states that hosting is not complete without the sharing of kolanuts. He added that immediately after the prolonged greetings in the traditional manner, the kolanut is brought on a dish or saucer or a wooden platter. In the dish are one or more kolanuts, the owner first receives it from the slave attendant or his wife, he takes the kolanut and puts on his lips which signifies that is being offered in good faith. This act proves him to be free from malice, after which it is passed to the visitor. The admiration and significance of kolanut can clearly be seen in the modern method of hosting of many visitors or groups. The social aspect of the kolanut can be appreciated when the kolanut begins its journey from one person to another according to the closeness of kinship or the type of relationship until it returns back to the host. This is called 'ire oji' (selling of kola) and the action buttresses the popular saying in Igbo land which states that "**Oji Eze no Eze n'aka** (**the King's kola has returned to the king**).

This symbolic presentation is a kind of headcount in a way, it helps to identify those present before the discussions in a gathering begin. The presentation of kolanut can be very technical in Igbo land, if any mistake is made while carrying the kolanut around in the gathering, it attracts a penalty or spells a feeling of doom. The offender is liable for irresponsible, uncultured or unreliable manner of the kolanut presentation.



Fig. 4: Kola nut Ceremony and its presentation in Igbo Land.

Source: Vanguard News. (2022, March 7)

Kolanut Lobes: Significance and Interpretations in Igbo Cosmology

Cola acuminate (Oji Igbo) is officially recognized as the kolanut that has cultural significance and attachment. However, cola nitida (Gworo) is also consumed by the Igbo especially during social gatherings along other snacks and refreshments. It is consumed alongside other fruits and vegetables such as garden eggs and bitter kola but no special cultural value is attached to it. Unya (2021:8) affirms that cola acuminate (oji Igbo) is the type that has different cotyledons and each lobe represents different meanings and interpretations.

These are some of the classifications and interpretations

- **Oji Ogbi or Oji Mmuo (dumb Kolanut):** Most Igbo scholars do not start their categorization of the kolanut with the above which has one cotyledon. The reason is that a kolanut with a single cotyledon is rare in Igbo land. If by default, a kola nut with single lobe is seen, it will be seen as a sacrilege because it signifies a taboo, abomination or doom. This is usually thrown away because it is considered not to be appropriate for human consumption.
- **Oji Agbara (Two lobed kola or nut of the spirits):** Kolanut with two cotyledons is seen as 'Oji Agbara'. This is because in the Igbo cosmology, the number two lacks balance, is seen as unstable, it is avoided and associated with bad omen.
- **Oji Ike or Oji Ikenga (Three lobed kola or kolanut of the valiant):** It is at this point that the

positive meaning of Kola nut begins, it signifies good omen, it is a typical structure of the Igbo family, father, mother and children.

- **Oji Udo na Ngozi (Four lobed kolanut or kolanut of peace and blessings).** This symbolizes the blessings attached the four traditional market days in Igbo cultural setting which are 'Afor, Ori, Nkwo and Eke.
- **Oji Omumu (kolanut of increase and procreation, prosperity, protection and good luck or five lobed kolanut):** It symbolizes bountiful harvest, which is interpreted as wealth, increase and multiplication of children. Expectant parents and newly married men will always want to partake in this kolanut. Its occurrence is rare in social gatherings, but anytime it is seen, it is viewed as a sign of abundance.
- **Oji Ogbugbandu (kolanut of covenant or bond with the ancestors or six lobed kola):** This is a kind of kola with six cotyledons which is not common but when it occurs it is a symbol of covenant or communion between the gods and men. The smallest cotyledon of this kolanut is thrown to the ancestors to show the direct link between the living and dead in Igbo cosmology. It is usually hard to find this type of kolanut, but its appearance signifies special visit for the man who prayed for the kola, this is manifested through extreme prosperity and blessing on the man who broke the kola which is usually celebrated by killing something with blood for example chicken or goat.
- **Oji Asaa-Asato (Kola of seven and eight):** This is also a rare appearance of kola, but appears in a long while, especially during a most difficult situation. But when it is seen, it symbolizes supernatural effects. This represents the four market days, the four day week cycle, the three dimension of man and the trinity. These spiritual symbols make it most cherished and the most valuable sign of good omen.

Semantic Deduction of kolanut among Various Igbo Clans

The following gives a deeper and well rooted interpretation of what Kola nut means to different Clans in the South Eastern zone while considering the statement, He who brings Kola brings life.

- **Acceptance:** The kolanut is an indispensable fruit among the Igbos because the presentation and the sharing of it signifies oneness, love, gratitude, peace and kindness. The kolanut symbolizes friendship which any host is always willing to share with their guests although its monetary equivalent is so cheap but the fruit is revered among various clans in Igbo land. When a host fails to present a Kola nut to a guest or tries rendering an apology for not having kola in his house, is immediately interpreted as a sign of unacceptance. In some cases, the guests do not disclose their mission until the ceremony of the presentation of Kola nut is observed. *'The acceptance is shown by the popular proverb among*

the Igbo that he who brings kolanut brings life’.

The hospitality that the acceptance of Kola nut offers is equally the same as the shame that the rejection of kolanut brings. For instance, as portrayed in Achebe (1958) when Okonkwo beat up his wife during peace week, the priest of Ezeani asked him to take away his kolanut and said to him “I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors. When your kolanut is rejected, you must do everything within your power to atone for your transgressions.

- **Cooperation:** When the kolanut is presented, it shows the parties gathered are unified, there is an agreement, they will cooperate among themselves for their common goal. It is usually eulogized with the words ‘Egbe bere, Ugo bere’ (live and let live).
- **Solidarity:** Beyond acceptance, once kolanut is broken, it fosters love, peace, openness among the group. The truest symbol in any gathering of the Igbos both in Nigeria, America, United Kingdom, Germany and so on is the Oji Igbo.
- **Recognition:** When kolanut is broken by the oldest man in the clan, it moves in order of seniority in the clan, till it is received back by the host.
- **Unifying Agent:** One of the significances of the kolanut is unity. When kolanut is presented and broken amongst people in a gathering it depicts unity and strength among them.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the study is the Semiotics theory which was propounded by Ferdinand de Saussure 17th Century. The Theory is the study of how words and other symbolic systems of Communication make meaning, (Franz,2021). For the study at hand, we shall be considering the meaning of an inanimate object among the various Igbo clans. What are the meanings inherent in kolanut as a symbol? Is the symbol of kolanut universally understood among those with in the clans? The theory will help the researcher in understanding the non-verbal communication of kolanut which is revered in Igbo land.

METHODOLOGY

Given the nature of this study, it is only appropriate that **Interview** was adopted as the **research design** to specifically Interview 50 persons across the south Eastern zone. According to Berger (2000, p.111) the simplest way to describe the interview technique is to say that it is a conversation between a researcher (someone who wishes to gain information about a subject) and an informant (someone who presumably has information of interest on the subject).

The population for this study comprised of 50 persons from the 5 states in the South Eastern zone, where 10 persons were selected respectively from Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo. The study adopted purpose sampling technique to interview some selected respondents who have knowledge of the subject matter.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Unit of Analysis

The Unit of Analysis comprised interviewing 10 persons each from the five states representing the South Eastern zone of Nigeria

Table 1: What is the significance of kolanut among the various clans in Igbo land?

Variable	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Acceptance	45	90
Rejection	0	0
Can't Say	4	8
No significance	1	2
Total	50	100

The Table above shows that out of the 50 research works under review, it shows that 45 (90%) stated that the Significance of Kola nut in their Community was Acceptance.

Table 2: What way is kolanut presented, blessed and the procedure for breaking of Kola nut?

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Saucer/Oldest/Knife	46	92
Hand/Youngest/Hand	1	2
Cloth/Anyone/Cloth	2	4
Can't say	1	2
Total	50	100

Drawing a conclusion from the above table, we can answer Research Question 2 by saying that kolanut is presented in a saucer, blessed by the oldest member of the family and it is broken with a knife. This can be seen above from the indication of 46 respondents (92%).

DISCUSSION

The researcher considered 50 responses through interviews. A greater percentage of 90% agreed that kolanut in the South Eastern part of Nigeria signifies Acceptance. The 92% of the respondents categorically stated that kolanut (Oji Igbo) is presented in a saucer, blessed by the oldest person in the clan who is present at the gathering and finally broken with a knife into smaller pieces and moved from one person to the other to partake in the sharing of the kolanut before the business of the day could be looked into.

CONCLUSION

The study dwelt on explaining the significance of the saying *‘He who brings kola brings life while considering the various clans in Igbo land.* Simply put, The Kola nut presentation and rituals sustains the Igbo

way of life. Life is seen through the presentation of kolanut in various gathering in Igbo land. The kolanut is always linked to acceptance, good luck, hospitality, friendship and peace. In the various clans in Igbo land without the presentation of the kolanut, most discussions are withheld because it signifies hostility and rejection. Kolanut is very essential to the livelihood of the Igbos from the South Eastern part of Nigeria. The kolanut makes every ceremony in the South Eastern part of Nigeria complete eg New Yam Festival, Traditional Marriages, Ito Ogbo, Iba afa, Igba Ofala, Chieftaincy, Ekpu Ani, Funerals, Masquerade Ceremony and Emego. Kolanut cannot be broken up till date without it being celebrated, prayed upon and shared between parties present in the event. It takes the Yoruba's about 7 to 10 years to grow a Kolanut tree, the Igbo's celebrates the kolanut while the Hausa and Kanuris eats the Kolanut. Kolanut is a symbol of unity among the Igbo people all over the world. The presentation and breaking of kolanut in Igbo land are always followed by prayers both for the host and guest for wealth, longevity, peace and fruitfulness. Kolanut is revered till date among the Igbo's and it's only celebrated by oldest man in a gathering. The Host and the Celebrant of the kola are always seen to have brought life and good tidings to all who are present at the gathering.

Recommendations

- Those who live in the Urban and Rural areas in recent time have resorted to new ways of entertaining their visitors with European products like biscuits, juice, sweets, chocolates and wines, is not that they hate Kola nut but because it has become a scarce fruit, the Government needs to encourage Kola nut farmers, to avoid the fruit going into extinction, (Obineche, 2017).
- Because of the height of wickedness in the world, Kola nut presentation and sharing is now perceived as an avenue to poison a person, this is because of how wicked the thoughts of man has become, this worked better in the olden days than now, because they lived in brotherliness, this is a call for man to repent from his/her wickedness, so we they can exist communally.
- The Foreign Culture brought to us by the colonial masters are gradually taking over Africa and the Igbo's can boast of foreign culture better than their local tradition, from the way we greet, our dressing and food we eat, this is actually one of the customs of the people which has stood the test of time, if it can still be here, even after we are gone, what efforts are we making to teach the younger generation the relevance of Kola nut, because is only what we pass down to them, they will continue with even after we are gone.
- Kolanut tradition, should be encouraged since it affords individuals the opportunity to interact with other community members regardless of class affiliations.

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