

ETHNOGRAPHY OF COMMUNICATION: A CASE STUDY OF KOLA NUT BREAKING IN UMUCHU TOWN MEETING

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Abstract

Talking or speaking is free. But no one has the freedom to talk anyhow, especially when other parties are involved. It is the society and culture of any community that set the norms of speech. This paper examines the Ethnography of Communication as it concerns the breaking of kola nut in Umuchu town general meeting. It looks at the way communication is patterned and organized as a system of communicative competence of native speakers. What kola nut is, the dignities accorded it in Igbo, its significance, the determinants of who breaks it in a socio-cultural event, the symbolizations of the various number of pieces of it and the various norms associated with kola nut breaking--- all these are ethnographic issues; how does the linguistic performance of kola nut breaking as exemplified with Umuchu community here bring out these values of the Igbo? This paper looks for the answer. Hyme's Ethnography of speaking proposal guides this investigative bent. Sticking to Hyme's paradigm, the paper establishes that kola nut breaking is the commonest chance for prayers in most socio-cultural settings, and that age and title constitute the key determinants of who breaks the kola nut in the Igbo community.

1.0 Introduction

There are some social and cultural variables that affect the way we use Igbo language or communicate with other people in any given community. According to Finch (2000:222), “All societies have their own rules or conventions concerning how language should be used in social interaction”.

The area of concentration of ethnography of communication is the speech community. This paper is set to study the way language is used in social and cultural situations. It digs into whether Hyme’s (1974) Ethnography of Speaking proposal helps as a guide to bring out the communicative competence of a native speaker. Our search-light is beamed on Umuchu town’s general meeting to see how communication within it is patterned and organized in the customary breaking of kola nut as a system of communicative events reflecting the culture of Umuchu in particular and the Igbo in general.

Umuchu town is an Igbo speech community in Aguata local government area of Anambra state. It is surrounded by such other towns as Amesi, Uga, Achina, Akpo, Umuomaku, Umunze, Arondizuogu, and Akokwa. In Umuchu community, the breaking of kola nut is accorded strict customary regard, honour and respect that are characteristic of the Igbo macro-community.

We are going to explore the avenues of the status of kola nut, the presentation, the acknowledgement rights, the actual breaking and the announcing of the number of pieces before the kola nut is eaten. Umuchu general meeting which involves representatives from the twelve villages that make up the town will be used as a case of illustration. But in doing this, we intend to be guided by Hyme’s (1962) ethnography of speaking proposal. We are set to analyze the various components of the proposal with the view to showing how the communicative competence of any native speaker of the language is manifested. Thereafter, we shall look at the related literature, break down explicatively the components of the proposal before establishing some findings and conclusion.

1.2 The Theoretical Framework

As far as matters involving speaking are concerned, Hymes's (1974), in his ethnography of speaking proposal, has provided us with a framework which we can use. The individual letters that render the word SPEAKING, as an acronym are what Hymes has adapted to account for the various factors that have to do with speaking.

It is therefore, this framework that constitutes the basis of our theory herein. We are relying on it to describe all the elements that are relevant in understanding how the communicative event of kola nut breaking in Umuchu speech community arrives as its set objectives. And this objective is to accord kola nut, through this breaking process, its due honour, regard and respect as is characteristic of the Igbo community.

2.0 Review of Related Literature

Ethnography of communication could be said to consist of "...patterns of discourse in culturally institutionalized speech situations" (Fowler, 1976:92). The word, pattern, goes to show that in the linguistic performances that we have, they are all referring to some cultural conventions that are already regular and generally recognized. The breaking of kola nut in the Igbo-speaking community as is exemplified here with Umuchu town is already an age long recognized regular cultural convention that follows a particular pattern.

Discussing about the scope and focus of ethnography of communication, Savile troika (1982:3) brings out a general question he believes that takes care of the subject matter: "what does a speaker need to know to communicate appropriately within a particular speech community and how does he or she learn?" It is clear from here that a knowledge like that, plus the necessary skill to apply or exhibit such knowledge, make up the communicative competence of that person. It is this same communicative competence that is to be unraveled here using the breaking of kola nut as typified in Umuchu.

Breaking of kola nut according to Ofomata (2004) is an age long custom of the Igbo which nobody could give details of when it started. It is a custom that has been a property of the Igbo for many years in the past. Even the coming of the Europeans to Africa could not affect it. All activities of civilization still left this custom intact. There is virtually no part of Nigeria where kola nut is given the kind of honour that the Igbo give to it. Kola nut is not the only tree or fruit the Igbo have, but they use it for many purposes in different occasions.

Umuchu is the focus. It is the natural setting, the basis for the first hand observations of behaviour of a group of people by ethnography. After all, according to Duranti (1997:85), “an ethnography is the written description of the social organization, social activities, symbolic and material resources, and interpretative practices characteristic of a particular group of people”.

Whosoever learns to use language, any language at all, such a person must also learn how to use that language in order to do certain things that people do with that language. This, again, is the communicative competence. Its concern “...extends to both knowledge and expectation of who may or may not speak in certain settings, when to speak and when to remain silent, whom one may speak to, how one may talk to persons of different statuses and roles...” (Saville-Troike, 1996:363).

Hyme’s SPEAKING paradigm agrees with this. It is not only a reminder that talk is a complex exercise and demands for skills, but also shows that one must have sensitivity and consciousness for the eight factors that the SPEAKING proposal represents. If anything is not properly done, it signals that one of the factors has been neglected. The Hyme’s eight factors are as follows; “S” is for Setting and Scene, “P” is for Participants, “E” is for Ends, “A” is for Act sequence, “K” is for key, “I” for Instrumentalities, “N” for Norms of interaction and interpretation, and “G” for Genre (Wardhough, 2006).

With the use of these factors, the dignity of kola nut in Igbo would be disclosed and more revelations would be made about the social and cultural situations of the Igbo pertaining to kola nuts, called “Oji” in Igbo language.

In words of Amadiume (1988:v), ‘Omenala iwaoji nwereonodu di elun’ebeomenalandi ozọ di, n’ala Igbo. O na-egosi obi oma”. (The custom of breaking of kola nut occupies a very high position amongst other customs in Igbo land. It shows a good spirit of welcome that makes a visitor to know that he is ver well received).

What is more? For the simple fact that “ethnography of speaking focuses on the role of language in the communicative behaviours of speech communities, i.e. ways in which language is used in different cultures” (Agbedo 2000:170), this elevated regard of the kola nut would be more easily appreciated in the here-in used sample case of Umuchu representative speech community. The Umuchu community is made up of twelve villages that are grouped into three blocks in order of seniority that comes into play in such general or collective matter like sharing and kola nut breaking.

The three blocks of Umuchu villages are IHITE, AMANASAA and OKPU NA ACHARA, in their order of seniority, respectively. The most senior block, Ihite, is made up of Ugwuakwu, Umugama and Ozara-Akukwa. The neut senior block, Amanasaa consists of Umubuilo, Umubuogu, Umujogwo, Umujum, Amihie, Ogu and Osete. Then, the last block, OkpunaAchara, is made up of Ibughubu and Achara. These blocks would subsequently come into relevance in the kola nut breaking issues proper.

3.0 The Kola Nut Matters

Here, the concern is to do a step-by-step treatment of the issues that have bearing on the kola nut breaking subject matter.

3.1 What is Kola Nut?

It is the kola tree that produces the fruit that is called kola nut. It is a kind of edible fruit that appears normally in lobes or combined pieces held together by natural provisions. The combined pieces naturally held together. The combined pieces or lobes could be naturally broken and chewed or eaten. Mostly, kola nut is known to have pink-like colour, though some appear yellowish.

3.2 The Respect for Kola Tree and Kola Nut

Kola nut is not eaten in complete whole but in pieces with customary rites. In Igbo land, it is an abomination for a woman to climb kola tree how much more, bring down the fruit from the tree. A bad, notorious person, or a person who has committed an abomination do not break kola nut in Igbo land. It is an abomination to steal kola nut in Igbo land (Ofomata, 2004).

3.3 The Significance of Kola Nut

Traditionally, it is not good for any responsible head of the family not to have kola nut in his house all the time; he uses it for early morning prayers of thanksgiving to God daily. Kola nut signifies peace, love, unity, joy, good spiritedness and harmonious social relationship amongst people. In the views of Ofomata (2004), corroborated by Amadiume (1988), kola nut is used to accord visitors good ceremonies, establishing covenants, child naming ceremonies, reconciliation ceremonies, casting our evil spirits in the house, in starting meetings and many other ceremonies or occasions.

3.4 Kola Nut piece(s) Symbolizations

Kola nut comes in different types. There are Hausa kola and Eagle kola nut (golden kola). The Igbo refer to Hausa kola nut as *oḣiAwusa* and eagle kola nut as *oḣiugo*. Both types are eaten by the Igbo, but the Hausa one is never used for prayers or any traditional or social occasion.

Contrary to that, *oḣiugo* is always a thing of joy whenever the Igbo notice it. It is seen to be a sign of good things to come and something of prestige. The Igbo do not use any non-Igbo kola nut any official or traditional ceremony. However, the main point of this section is that the number of pieces of kola nut broken symbolized something for the Igbo.

(a) Single Piece Kola Nut

Any kola nut that does not divide into any piece, but remains as it is, is regarded as a bad omen and is referred to as *oḣiogbi* (dumb kola nut). It is never eaten but thrown away as useless.

(b) Double – Piece Kola Nut

Any kola nut that divides into two parts when broken is also a bad kola nut, indicating something ominous. It is immediately thrown away. If eaten at

all, it will be by an old man that understands many secret or hidden things about life.

(c) Three-Piece Kola Nut

When broken and the kola nut turns into three pieces, it is a good one, especially called *ojilkenga*. It is a kola nut for a great strong man.

(d) Four-Piece Kola Nut

A four-piece kola nut is a very good one seen to symbolize the four Igbo market days: Eke, Ori, Afo, Nkwo. According to Amadiume (1988:3), it is called "*ojiawe*". It also indicates that good fortunes would follow the person.

(e) Five-Piece Kola Nut

When kola nut breaks into five pieces, it is a sign of multiple children, a very good kola nut. It is called "*ojiomumu*" (child-bearing kola nut) Amadiume (1988:3).

(f) Siu-Piece and More

According to Amadiume, any kola nut that breaks into siu pieces is believed by our ancestors to indicate that the evil spirits want some food. What is done in effect is that one piece is usually thrown away in line with the tradition.

3.5.0 The Order of Kola Breaking in Umuchu General Meeting

As aforesaid, kola nut is not eaten wholesomely by the Igbo. It is normally broken, and the breaking of it follows some strict customary procedures that are generally known; a procedure that must be observed by all, irrespective of the person's background, age, financial, social, educational or spiritual standing. Summarily speaking and for a start, some full-fledged kola nuts are normally presented in a tray by the president to the entire meeting. Once this is done, the plate of kola nut becomes the property of the entire Umuchu indigenes there present in the meeting, and it is subject to the traditional ways of kola nut breaking. At this point, we have to resort to the Hyme's "Ethnography of SPEAKING" proposal to explain how the rest of the communicative events of this kola nut breaking unfold.

3.5.1 The Setting and Scene(s)

This refers to the time and place where the speech event occurs. The place is the Umuchu town hall and the meeting starts at about 10am. The setting

arrangement is such that the seats are in rows and columns with a long open passage at the centre, everybody facing the Executive officers table right there in front.

3.5.2 The Participants (P)

Here, it is meant the various combinations of speaker-listener, addresser-addressee situations, especially those that have some roles to play. In that wise, the participants are from 100-120, 120-150 or 180-200 members of the meeting who are all indigenes of Umuchu. They are all adult males both young and old; no woman at all. There are no rooms for teenagers.

3.5.3 Ends (E)

The reference here is about the outcomes that are conventionally known, plus the personal aims each participant targets to achieve. The major outcomes are that the programmes and activities of the meeting are exposed to them and their rights in the meeting are secured, including the right of their own block being presented or shown and given one full kola nut like others.

3.5.4 Act sequences (A)

Reference is made here to the actual form or content of what is said, trying to mirror the words used, the manner of usage and how it relates to the topic on hand. The main utterances are the word of the president as he presents the kola nut by indicating in Igbo the source or giver of the kola nut. He says, 'Nke a buoji m na-asuruunuka anyi wee bidonzuko a' (This is the kola nuts I am offering you all for us to commence this meeting).

After the rights of the different blocks of the villages in Umuchu have been observed, the Igwe of Umuchu or in his absence, the oldest man from the oldest block or the most senior village (Ugwuakwu) in Umuchu would let their oldest man in attendance say the kola nut breaking prayers as follows: Chinekekereiheniile, onyezarambaraigwe ọna-achakanzu, onyena-ahuiheniile.(God who created all things, who swept heaven making it to shine like chalk, you who see all things).Ngozigika anyi jioji a ario n'ahaUmuchuniile(Your blessing is what we pray for on behalf the entire Umuchu community). N'ihugi, anyi buumuntakiri na-asaahun'afon'afon (Before you, we are children who take birth only at the stomach

level). Onyewetereoji, weterendu (He who brings kola, brings life). N'ihia, anyi na-asi na Umuchuga-adi oo (For this, we say that Umuchu should be oo). Mmiriatala (Let the river not dry). Azuanwula (Let the fish in water not die). Onyesiteren'oji asianyidi ndu, ndukpokwayaihuo (He, who through the kola nut, wishes us life, let life meet him face to face). Iheanyina-arijo Olisa bi n'igwebumumunwokenaomumunwaanyi (What we pray for to God in heaven is the birth of male and female children). Anyina-arijokwaiheakuakunaiheenwenwe, odimmaezinaulo, ikwunaibe (We also pray for wealth and prosperity, the good of the family, maternal and paternal relations). Nkeonyeakolaya, n'ihina o bu a hughie ihe a na-ata mere nke a kpun'onuji wee hushieanya (Let one's possession not elude him, because it is lack of what to chew that makes the only one in the mouth to suffer from too much chewing). Ihe anyi ga-erikpoo anyi ihu, nkega-eri anyi abiana anyi nso (Let what we will eat come to us and what we won't eat not come near us). Chukwuokike, bikomeekaumu anyi na-asopuruokenye, makanaonye fee eze, ezeeruoya (God-the-creator, please let our children respect their elders, because it is he who serves the king that will in turn become a king). Osebuluwa, wepuruanyionwumberede, nye anyi ogologondu (God, take away from among us untimely death, give us long life). Onyekenyeihenanku, yanyibaya, manaonyeekenyeghi ihenanku, o tufereolu (If one has anything tied to his firewood, the firewood will be heavy on his head, but if not, the person will not feel any weight on his head). Nkeonyemetere, yaburu (Let a person suffer the effects of his misdeeds). Nkeonye ma yamaraya (Let what a person knows also know that person). Iheonyesiyakwemmadu, yakwekweya (Whatever one says that fits another person, let it also fit that person who said it). Ndi choroka anyi di ndu, Chinekenye ha mma, ma ndi choroka anyi nwuo, ha buruokukouzakpuouura (Those who want us alive, let God give them goodness, but those who want us dead, let them go to bed before fowls).

Ukwuakponaanyin'ojije, ukwuakpona anyi n'olila (May no evil touch us as we travel and none as we return from the trip). Onyeanywula ma ibeyaefula (May nobody die or get lost). Oganiihu Umuchukaanyina-arijo (What we pray for is the progress of Umuchu). Na nzuko a, anyiga-ezukotamma (In this our meeting, the outcome will be good). KaChineketaajji a n'ogbeka anyi taayan'ibe (May God chew this kola in full while we chew it in pieces). Kaanyitaayatandu, were ndujeere gi

ozi.....isee (May we chew it and derive life from it, and use the life to serve God.... amen).

With the kola nut prayer finished, the oldest man from Ugwuakwu village or the Igwe of Umuchu, would announce the number of pieces the kola nut has broken into, as the man who rightfully broke the kola nut.

3.5.5 Key (K)

Key refers to the tone, manner or spirit in which the message is put across to the audience. Everything said is done with a tone of formality and seriousness. The participants that are not involved in kola nut prayers communicate non-verbally until the last word during which they will all respond: Isee (amen)

3.5.6 Instrumentalities (I)

This refers to the options of channel e.g. oral, written or telegraphic. Everything is done or said by word of mouth using Umuchu dialect with no code-switching, because kola nut does not understand any other language except Igbo language.

3.5.7 Norms of Interaction and Interpretation (N)

The reference of this one is to standards that must be observed, dos and don'ts that may be encountered in speaking and cultural specifications. One of the norms in kola nut breaking in Umuchu is that kola nut is not eaten entirely like that. One must go through the traditional rites of prayers and showing it first to closer relations before outsiders. Kola nut is not presented to any woman in Umuchu; only to men. A woman does not break kola nut in Umuchu. A man does not break kola nut in his in-laws place, neither could any man do so in his mother's place. A non-titled man dares not break kola nut where there is a titled man. It is the latter's right to do so. At the shrine, it is the chief priest that breaks the kola nut by right. If he is not a titled man, the latter could touch it for him, and then he breaks it.

Customary, in a gathering of only women, they normally seek out any man, even if a child, to break the kola nut for them. It is better to starve one of food in his host's house than to starve him of kola nut. It is the oldest man

that breaks kola nut in Umuchu, unless it is in a man's house and he has not broken any kola nut in his house for that day. As required by tradition a person who has no kola nut to give his visitor must make excuses for that by saying any of these:

- (a) Ejide m unuugwooji (let me be indebted to you for the kola nut I lack)
- (b) Biko, oji jukwaraulo (My house is filled with kola nut)
- (c) Abali ataaloji (the night has eaten the available kola nut)

Traditionally, in Umuchu, if one lacks real kola nut to offer his visitors, the person could use bitter kola, coconut or any available thing as an alternative.

3.5.8 Genre (G)

This refers to clearly demarcated types of utterances used, such as proverbs, prayers, riddles, lectures, etc. Proverbs are mainly used in kola nut breaking. At times, some jokes would be part of it.

4.0 Findings and Conclusion

The entire exercise of looking into the ethnography of communication of the Igbo through Umuchu version's of kola nut breaking has been a worthwhile one. It has enabled us to know more than before.

If not for anything, we have seen how important the society and culture of any Igbo community cannot be toyed with. The community members value their social and cultural norms so much. It is their heritage. They preserve and uphold any cherished custom from age to age. What is a common fruit? What is special about kola nut? An average Igbo man is not bothered about these kinds of questions. All he knows is that it is the culture of the Igbo to accord honour to kola nut from the point of presentation, showing it around to the participants up to the point of breaking it before it is eaten. This practice defies religion class and even European influence of civilization. It has come to stay and must stay.

Women are not shown the kola nut officially and they cannot break it even for themselves. Age is respected in breaking the kola nut and so it is. Nobody could break kola nut in the shrine except the chief priest in charge

of the shrine. That all these norms are known and observed is made possible by ethnographic studies. So, competence in a language is no longer a matter of being able to produce the right words or grammatical constructions of the language, but also having the mastery of the appropriate use of the language as the occasion demands. Being able to know the right things to do or say, how to say, when to say, to whom to say it during kola nut breaking is all very important. It shows communicative competence.

The paradigm of Hymes has been our guide. We have seen how relevant his eight factors of ethnography of speaking are from the Setting, Participant, Ends, Acts, Keys, Instruments, Norms and to the Genres, many aspects of the Igbo culture of kola nut breaking are touched to reveal the native speaker's communicative competence.

But Hyme's proposal has some flaws. It lacks the ability to present the story or the process of the event in a chronological order. What it does is to pick summarized aspects of the cultural event. A person who does not know the Igbo kola nut breaking culture will be at a loss using Hyme's proposal for the presentation. So the proposal needs to be revised along this line.

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