

SYMBOLIC IMPORTANCE OF KOLA NUT IN IGBO WORLD-VIEW

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Abstract

As an embodiment of a necessity for completeness of the Igbo way of life, Kola nut is so important in Igbo cultural symbol that no other symbol is received as equal to it, especially in areas of ritual, social gatherings and welcoming of visitors. In presentation of the kola, there is always fair play and a check on the identity, seniority and genealogy of male folk in any Igbo gathering. This paper tries to mirror the place of symbolic significance of kola nut to African world-view with particular reference to Igbo society.

Keywords: Symbol, Kola nut, Igbo, World-view

Introduction

Culture is a people's way of life which manifests itself in certain factors common to the society, such as in music, dance, marriage system, burial rites, religious rituals and the likes. Anidebe also states 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 the diet, explosive...and experiences but also the way he is born into a society with a definite cultures"¹ Culture is a complex whole which include languages, knowledge, arts, religions, beliefs, and practices, institutions, traditional moral codes, laws and general philosophy of a race or community. In this topic, we are to focus on the symbolic significance of kola nut to African world-view with particular reference to the Igbo culture since the Igbo culture is never complete without the presentation and breaking of kola nut. The Igbo name for kola nut is *Oji*. Kola nut is so important in Igbo cultural symbol that there is no cultural symbol that has received an equal attention that is universal among the Igbo and that is the use of kola nut and no one can say how and when this started. '*Oji bu Omenala Jikotara Igbo*' meaning: kola nut is the custom that unites the Igbo. It was found that up to twenty species of kola nuts are discovered, among these, kola acuminate, otherwise called *Oji Igbo* is recognized by the Igbo and it has lobes or cotyledons ranging from three to seven or even more and is the specie eaten and respected by the Igbo. Opata affirmed that "one of the peculiarities of *Oji Igbo* is that it has several lobes ranging from three to seven or occasionally more. The lobes are classified into males and females."²

The Symbolic Significance of Kola Nut in Igbo Society

Okoye said that in Awgbu Town, “Oji is a great symbolic object in our Town which is offered to serve as a warm reception, open mindedness, joy, prosperity and long life which is presented to a visitor or a stranger.”³ In Igbo land, any Igbo traditional setting, be it ritual or any ceremony, the Kola *nitida* (Oji gworo, Oji awusa) has no place. This specie is invalid. The only specie that is recognized by the Igbo in whatever activities is the Kola *acuminate*(Oji Igbo). Kola nut is seen among the Igbo as a symbol of life and unity hence the common saying ‘O wetara Oji wetara ndu’ meaning: he that brings kola brings life. Achebe also confirmed this by saying that “many profound and mysterious interpretations and formalities are accorded it.”⁴ Some symbolic interpretations given to oji Igbo is associated with the number of lobes or cotyledons each kola has. It is reported , according to Opata, that there are some kola nut that has no lobes. *Oji dara ogbi*- dumb kola nut and is eaten by pregnant women. Some have two lobes and is regarded as abominable by the Igbo people...and is mostly thrown away and not used to offer any sacrifice.⁵ Nwadinigwe opined that *Oji* is used to foretell the future among the Igbo and its message is discerned from the number of lobes contained in it when broken.⁶ It is worthy of note here that *Oji* Igbo contain both male and female lobes and this also helps to interpret the message of a particular nut depending on the occasion or purpose for which it is broken.⁷

A kola nut with three lobes is regarded as *Oji Okike* in many parts of Igbo land and as a result regarded as a symbol of fecundity or fertility. It is also said to symbolize the three heart stone, the tripod stand on which traditional cooking takes place. Other areas regard it as *Oji ikenga*, which is the symbol of success or achievement.⁸ Nwadinigwe added that “Oji with three lobes symbolizes celebration hence it is called ‘*akwukwa n’ ato*’ meaning a tripod cooking instrument containing only three males. Where a three lobe kola is broken, it is usually a thing of joy and everybody partake in eaten it because it shows that their *ikenga* is established.⁹ This is eaten mainly by warriors, the brave, the achievers, the ordained and consecrated as a matter of principle and respect. The kola nut with four lobes symbolizes the Igbo native weeks of four days-*Eke, Ori, Afor* and *Nkwo* which also represent the four market days in every part of Igbo land. The kola nut with four lobes is called ‘*Oji Udo na Ngozi*’ meaning: the kola nut of peace and blessing. Nwadinigwe asserted that “this kola nut...has two males and two females. If in a marriage ceremony that it is broken, it signifies that the new family will have a prosperous marriage blessed with male and female children.”¹⁰ The male lobes are known by one single line that runs from the head of the lobe to the tail while the female one is identified with two lines that run parallel from head to the tail.¹¹ Kola nut with five lobes is regarded as good luck. *Oji ubara mmadu, Omumu n’ ukwoma* meaning kola nut of procreation, fertility and good luck.¹² Opata opined that it is a symbol of the power of many, emphasizing the importance of numbers *Igwe bu ike* meaning ‘there is power in being many.’¹³ This speaks of general prosperity and extended lineage as the lobes contain two males and three females.¹⁴

A kola nut with six lobes shows communion with ancestors-*Oji ndi mmuo na mmadu jiri gbaa ndu*. On breaking this kola nut, all the lobes are not eaten, rather the smallest or perhaps the female lobe is thrown out for the spirits and gods. This is the link between the living and the dead.¹⁵ Nwadinigwe viewed that six lobes kola nut signifies bad omen if it contains three males and three females because it is believed that a man is superior to a woman and therefore any situation that will connote equality between man and woman is abominable and should not be allowed. But where a six lobes kola nut is broken and it is found to contain four males lobes and two female lobes, the kola nut is taken to be good and eaten.¹⁶ A kola nut with seven lobes is regarded as ultimate and signifies perfection, but before this is eaten, the oldest man in the village will have to offer sacrifices to the village deity with either cock or goat and it must be cooked with yam and presented along with the seven lobes kola nut, including palm wine, by the host to all the people present for equal sharing.¹⁷ Nwadinigwe described it as having three males and four females lobes signifying large family '*Omumu*' and prosperity '*Uba*', a time of joy in Igbo land.¹⁸ Nowadays, kola nuts produce more than seven lobes, though this is rare, people consult diviners and elders to ascertain the meaning and the message that follows the number of the kola nut lobes.

The meaning and the symbolic significance of *oji* can also be looked at from three perspectives, at the individual, communal and religious perspectives. At the individual perspectives, *oji* is a sign of goodwill manifesting in several places like welcoming a stranger. It is the first thing to present to a visitor, that is why the Igbo say, *Mmuo ma obu mmadu ga eri efi ma obu ebule, Oji bu mbu* meaning 'Any spirit or man that would eat cow or ram, the first thing which takes precedence is kola.'¹⁹ It is only in situations of conflict, mutual suspicion between two parties that kola nut presentations can be deliberately avoided. The presentation of kola nut is so important in Igbo world-view that a host who cannot present it to his guest is usually full of profuse apologies. Presentation of kola nut also indicates respect from a younger to the elder one. The younger ones are expected to give or serve the kola to the elder as a mark of respect. In various Igbo communities, *oji* is used to achieve a variety of objectives. The first is that the presentation, blessing and breaking of kola nut signals the beginning of the meeting. Not just the opening prayer, it is a major instrument of prayer. Not only that, it is a factor for forging a continued link between the dead and the living. It serves as an avenue of invoking abstract forces, deities and divinities to be witnesses to the proceedings of the meeting. The remarkable thing about sharing of kola nut in the public is the logic of the traditional power sharing of community. Kola nut sharing practices in Igbo land depict the list of seniority of members present and this takes place in two ways-seniority by the community or village group from where one comes, and seniority going by the age of individual present.²⁰

In Igbo society, no ritual performance is complete without first beginning the prayer with kola nut. The priests have the sole right to break kola nut whenever he wants to perform some rituals, whether the oldest member is there or not. This is

why it is believed that kola nut is associated with power and leadership. Any priest that wants to perform any ritual must start with kola nut. That informs the saying, *Mmuo ga eri ji, mmanya ma obu ewu, oji bu mbu* meaning, 'a deity that shall be offered a yam, wine or goat, the first thing to offer to it is kola.' The priests has enormous power such that if they refuse to give a go ahead to a collective ritual activities, no person belonging to that group can partake in that ritual action.

The Social Presentation and Breaking of Kola Nut.

According to Opatá when he was quoting Akinbode, "Throughout Nigeria, kola nuts are used as gift and are widely circulated on important occasions such as marriage, funerals, child naming or coronation ceremonies. A kola nut gift to Hausa woman on the birth of a child is a mark of highest honour."²¹ In Igbo land, *oji* is the first thing served in every function or ceremony, be it personal or communal. Immediately after greetings in the traditional way, the next thing is the presentation of kola nut in a dish or wooden platter. There may be one or more kola nuts in the platter. The host then receives it from his wife or servant, as the case may be, and presents it to the visitors who touches it and then returns it to the host for blessing and breaking. This is when they say *Oji eze dikwa eze n' aka* meaning, 'the king's kola still remains in his hand.' After these practices, the host then prays with the kola to God, gods, goddesses, divinities, forces and the ancestors of every one present by calling them one by one to come and bless the occasion.²² In some Igbo communities, the visitor takes one of the nuts and pockets it before returning the rest to the host for blessing and breaking. The pocketed one is described as 'Oji rue ulo, okwuo ebe osi' meaning: when the kola reaches home, it tells where it comes from. Here, if the host has just one kola nut, he would have to substitute the other kola nut with money so that the visitor takes it home in place of kola nut. In the blessing, (Igo Oji), the eldest person in any gathering deserves the sole right. That right may go to *Eze* (King), but the eldest is preferred for he is the custodian of truth and closest to the ancestors. The eldest, in his wise sayings and prayers, request for peace, prosperity, long life, protection among others and the share of spirits would be thrown to them and all present shares the rest.

Kola nut is a veritable symbol of democracy for no one is cheated while sharing. Kola nut sharing is the only Igbo practice in its social institution that does not discriminate in terms of class or status. Kola nut is also of great importance in covenant keeping. It is called 'Igba ndu'²³ 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. The high degree of sanctity accorded the kola nut throughout Igbo land is likened to that of forbidden fruit of paradise in the sense that women are forbidden from either planting, climbing, plucking or breaking the kola nut. This does not mean that men are holier than women in Igbo society but it is just a question of a mentality similar to the biblical regard for women. The denial of women's right to break kola is more of social character and organization and does not in any way imply inferiority towards women.

Conclusion

In the process of this paper, we emphasized that there are many species of kola nut but the specie that is relevant to Igbo is *kola acuminata* (Oji Igbo). Looking at the symbolic significance associated to it, we noted that it is used as a symbol of love, purity, clean mind, a symbol of welcome to the visitors or guest, a symbol of reconciliation, covenant keeping, oath-taking, respect and honor. It is also a symbol of hospitality, life, peace, kindness, goodwill, fraternity and integrity. The kola nut (Oji Igbo) is a typical multi-referential social symbol. While the eldest blesses, the youngest breaks and serves in a social gatherings. Presentation and the breaking of kola marks the actual beginning of any social ceremony in Igbo land such as marriages, settlement of disputes, welcoming of guests, village meetings or *Umunna*, State organized social events and traditional events like new yam festival etc. It is the exclusive right of the priest to break kola nut during Igbo rituals to the *Arusi* or gods. The honour, high regard and attention given to kola nut by the Igbo reveal that it is part and parcel of the Igbo cultural identity and we have a good lessons to learn from it, such as respect for the opinion of others, respect to the elders, hospitality, dialogue, conflict negotiations, spirit of tolerance and forgiveness and the spirit to face the future with open mind.

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