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Kola Nut: Revisiting the Igbo Socio-Cultural Values and Identity

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Abstract

In every human culture exists a mark of identification which portrays their homogeneity as an entity. In this regard, this paper is a reminiscent of the history of kolanut as a significant socio-cultural symbol of identification of the Igbo origin of hospitality, unity and integration. Although scholars have written extensively on kolanut as generally significant in Nigeria heterogeneity: grown and harvested in commercial quantity in the west (*Yorubas*), consumed almost as food in the north (*Hausas*), and is mythically celebrated and ritualized by the *Igbos* of south east Nigeria. From the historical and phenomenological perspectives, it is discovered that although there are two types of kolanut consumed in Nigeria; cola acuminata and cola nitida (oji Igbo and gworo), the meaning and symbol of *Oji Igbo* (cola acuminata) in particular, is more valued in Igbo tradition where its sacredness is attached to the foundation of Igbo Origin (*Ntu Ala Igbo*), and a marriage covenant between the spirit and the humans. Sources gathered through interviews, participant observations and secondary materials show that “Oji Igbo” is so significant that no social, religious and traditional celebration in Igboland is deemed complete and meaningful without it. It is regrettably observed also that this cherished kolanut cultural identity is almost at the verge of extinction

especially among the young and modern day Igbos who tend to abandon the kolanut value and identity on the altar of modernization and globalization. This paper therefore called for a socio-cultural and religious revival of the Igbo kolanut culture as an indefatigable mark of Igbo foundation and identity.

Key Words: Kolanut, Igbo, value, identity, cola acuminata and cola nitida (oji Igbo and gworo)

Introduction

In Nigeria in general and the Igbo in particular, hospitality is a remarkable symbol of joy, cooperate existence and happiness. This symbol is epitomized in the values attached to kolanut. Kolanut, also known as “cola acuminata” as the origin of the word kola (<http://ionbaron.org>) is one of the most frequently used and culturally important substances in the Igbo world and feature prominently in initial hospitality ceremonies crucial to the success of any social or ritual understanding. Kolanut as a substance is regarded as having ritual powers for peace, long life, prosperity, and unity; also used for sacrifices and functions, as a facilitator of communication between men and the gods. Though petite in size and nature, kolanut is very indispensable in Igbo life (Igbo Arts: community and cosmos, 1984, pp. 62-63).

In the same vein, kolanut is very significant in Nigeria culture, not only known for its origin to American and European soft drinks and its use by laborers to diminish hunger and fatigue, but more for its sacred significance among the three major regions of Nigeria (Igboguide.org). It is interesting to note that its value is highly recognized in the entire country with its name and usage: to the Yoruba, it is called “*obi*” and it is in this culture that kolanut is highly produced in its two categories as “*obi abata* (cola acuminata) and *obi goro* (cola nitida). Kolanut is widely consumed in the north among the Hausas of Nigeria where it is popularly called “gworo”. Among the Igbos of eastern Nigeria, kolanut is highly revered and celebrated in every significant gathering where it is popularly called “*oji*” in its two classifications as “*oji Igbo*” (native kola (cola acuminata) and oji *Hausa* or gworo (cola nitida).

Definition of Kolanut

Kolanut can simply be defined as the seed kernel of a large African tree grown commercially around the world, particularly in Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Brazil and other parts of South America. It is extremely popular amongst different inhabitants who use it differently as traditional symbol, as medicine –caffeine containing stimulant and for religious purposes (food and flavouring). kolanuts are consumed in different forms –chewed raw, powdered and mixed with liquid as a drink, or can be eaten dry. Kolanut is primarily derived from three species of the cocoa tree family: cola acuminata, cola nitida and cola Vera. These species are said to have originated in tropical West Africa, but can also be found in some areas of Brazil and West Indies

where they were believed to have been introduced during the slave trade. Kolanut typically grows in trees of different heights and sizes depending on the soil and climatic conditions. It begins its products with flowers in either white or yellowish colours. Its fruits are in pods, each of which is clustered about a dozen (less or more) roundish and oval shaped seeds of nuts. The nuts may be of different colours: red, pink, or white when opened from the pod whose arrangement look similar in their natural configuration (Nkemakolam Joseph, 2002, p. 31).

Origin of Kola Nut

The enquiry into the origin of kolanut is shrouded in controversy as the Igbo origin itself. This is because while kolanut as a seed has universally Western acclaimed origin, the Igbo has a mythological claim of the origin of kolanut in Igbo historiography. Tracing the Igbo origin of kolanut, Onyioha in Onwu-otuyelu (2009, pp. 13-14) linked the root of kolanut to the relationship between humans and the spirit beings, leading to the human's migrating over to the spirit-world in an ocean floor at a price and a directive. This legend is generally accepted among the Igbo traditional custodians like K. O. K. Onyioha (prophet of the Gordian religion) Eze Silver Ibenye Ugbala of Okporo and the Obila of Okporo village. It holds that in the beginning of time, the living world (man) was related to the spirit-world, that men and spirits were interacting to the level of exchanging ceremonies and festivities like sports and competitions.

In one of these competitions - (wrestling), one spirit being called *Aji Ike Ugburuoba* stood so unconquerable by any human wrestler. As such, sports heroes would easily attract the love and affection of the opposite sex; women within the living beings began to fall in jealous love with this hero spirit, Aji Ike. Prominent among these women was *Ugo Onobo* who was so obsessed and madly in love that she eloped with *Aji Ike Ugburuoba* to his spirit abode located at the depth of the Cross River at Okwuruike. This sudden disappearance of Ugo Onobo posed a nightmare not only to her two elder brothers, *Agala* and *Ogbu Onobo*, but to the entire community who did not give up in search for her. To the two brothers, the search became more imperative when they were openly ridiculed in the village square for being weaklings because of their inability to locate their one and only missing sister, Ugo.

This challenge became so unbearable that Ogbu Onobo and his brother Agala vowed to stop at nothing till they had found their only sister, Ugo. The search led them to a diviner "*dibia*" to inquire of her whereabouts. Their hope was elated when the diviner told them this:

By the time chicks start returning to their roost and the sun is gradually sinking close to setting (About 4pm), go to the brink of the cross river at Okwuruike during ebb-tide there, stand and call loudly out the name of your sister, Ugo Onobo, seven times and she will answer. Then follow the echo of her voice; it will lead you to the bottom of the -

cross-river. There you will find her living with Ajike Ugburuoba, the great spirit wrestler (Onwu-Otuyelu 2009, p.15).

The two brothers complied strictly to the directives of the diviner and behold they found their sister with Ajike Ugburuoba. On entering the house, they found their sister pregnant. In excitement, for the visit of his brothers-in-law, Ajike went into his room and came out with the native chalk (Nzu), coconut with water as drink and kolanut. The chalk, he gave them to smear on their left wrist as a welcome gesture; the coconut with its water, he gave them as drink and food, and the kolanut, he gave them as dowry for their sister, Ugo. In anger, the two brothers rejected these offer but demanded to take their sister home even with the pregnancy. The helpless Ajike consented to their request but pleaded with them to accept his gesture of hospitality. He told them to go home with their sister, though pregnant, but along with the presentations. When you get home, he said, 'use the chalk to welcome your guests as I did to you, to tell them how glad I was when you visited me; plant the coconut and when it grows and bears, 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 families and guests.' But with the kolanut, 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, Ajike said, "you have given me my share. Then break and share the rest with your guests". He continued, 'As I have presented you the kolanut as dowry on the head of your sister, Ugo, so must you present kolanut with regard to every marriage in every human home as the celebration between the world of the living and that of the spirits'. Although Ajike took back the baby from Ugo through a miscarriage on the Ndele bridge, the two brothers performed the rituals as Ajike directed. As for the red colour of kolanut, the legend attributed that to Agala Onobo's blood that stained red some of the seeds in the process of breaking the first product of kolanut in the land of the living. While some of the white colour seeds are called *Oji Ugo* as a reference to Ugo Onobo who was the first woman ever to have kolanut as her bride price (p.18).

To the Igbos, kolanut and its tree is regarded as the first tree and fruit on earth (Eze Silver Ibenye Ugbala of Okporo). Kolanut is not only known for its origin in many American and European soft-drinks and its chewing by laborers to diminish hunger and fatigue, but more for its sacred significance in Igboland.

There is a popular acronym in the etymology of kolanut among the Igbo regarding its origin in Igboland. Such etymological acronym is *oji*, the three Igbo letter name for kolanut:

O - means *omenala* (customs)

J - means *jikotat* (that unites)

I - means *Igbo*

Hence, oji means “Omenala jikotara Igbo” – custom that unites the Igbo.

The two types of kolanut -cola acuminate and cola-natida (*oji Igbo*- native kola and *Oji Awusa*- gworo as Housa kola) are both regarded as having the same symbolism in general and private cases except in their uses on occasions like deep traditional ceremonies as in traditional marriage, sacrifices, oath taking and Igbo festivals where only the Igbo kolanut (cola acuminate) is used. To the Igbos, kolanut is a symbol of life – relationship, hospitality and socialization, hence, the Igbo saying that *onye wetara oji wetara ndu*” (he who brings kola brings life). This is also the reason why many profound and mysterious interpretations and formalities are accorded to kolanut among the Igbos.

Types, Colours and Components of Kolanut in Igbo Land

There are two basic types or species found in Igbo land as it is domestically called in Nigeria. The first type is the kola nitida also known as “gworo” or “Oji Hausa” (Hausa kola). This type of kolanut has only two cotyledons and it is either colored white or red (see Fig. 2). Kola Nitida has no much significance or impact in Igbo traditional culture. It is called Oji House because it is the common type of kola hawked and consumed more by the Hausas in particular and every other Nigerian in general without any mystical or cultural meaning attached to it. Although it can be presented in social gatherings and activities in Igbo land along with garden egg, bitter kola and alligator pepper, as a welcome gesture and entertainment, as the case maybe, but no other special cultural myth or symbol is attached to it than the usual Igbo hospitality and socialization.

The second type of kolanut in Igboland is popularly known and called “Oji Igbo” (Igbo native kola-acuminate see fig 1). This specie has two colours- white and red. The white is called *Oji Ugo*. *Ugo* means eagle in Igbo, but this does not mean the eagle kola. Rather, ugo here represents the legendary Ugo Onobo, the first human wife of the spirit wrestler, Ajike for whom kolanut was presented to the living brothers by the spirit husband, Ajike. The red colour kolanut is attributed to the legendary Agala Onobo’s blood that stained some kolanut seeds in the process of breaking the very first product of kolanut harvest in the land of humans.



Fig 1: Oji Igbo (Cola Acuminata) Known for its multiple cotyledons



Fig. 2: Gworo (Cola nitida) Known for with only two

However, “Oji Igbo” (acuminata) is the type the Igbos attach much importance because it contains varying cotyledons and each cotyledon has a mystic meaning that is culturally attached to it (Onwu-Otuyelu 2009, p. 20). This shows that Oji Igbo is held in a high esteem among the Igbos for reasons of traditional importance which contributes to the attachment of meanings to its varying cotyledons ranging from one to seven.

In its interpretation and meaning, a kolanut with single cotyledon is rare in “oji igbo” because it is not only abnormal, but it signifies a taboo or abomination and has no good use in Igboland. Hence, it is called “oji Ogbo”- dumb kolanut, oji Agbara or Mmuo (kolanut of the spirit) and as a result, it is not eaten by anybody but rather thrown away probably to the spirits (Ukaegbu internet).

In the same vein, kolanut with two cotyledons is also seen as “Oji agbara” and while it is generally thrown to the gods in some parts of Igboland, in some parts it is eaten by the oldest man who will invariably perform some sacrifice before eating it. This is the main reason why the Igbos do not accept the use of “gworo” (cola nitida) for rituals or any serious traditional celebrations or prayers.

However, the positive myths begin with three cotyledons. The kolanut with three cotyledons is associated with a strong mystic symbol as “Oji Ikenga” or “Oji Ike” – kola of the valiant/the brave. It is only the warriors or the titled men- Nze na Ozo that are permitted to eat this type of kolanut in Igboland.

Kolanut with four cotyledons is called *Oji Udo na Ngozi* which means “kola of peace/harmony and blessing”. The number four is a very sacred number in Igbo culture as it symbolizes the four traditional market days that mark the Igbo week: eke, orie,

afor and nkwo. These are said to have been named after the four Angels of God in charge of the four corners of heaven and earth.

Kolanut with five cotyledons is called *Oji Omumu*, meaning kola of increase in procreation, prosperity, protection and goodluck. It also symbolizes abundant harvest, which the Igbo interpret as wealth, increase and multiplication of children. Expectant parents and the newly married especially men, will always crave to partake of this kola.

One with six cotyledons is often rare, but when it occurs it is a symbol of covenant or communion between the gods and man. It is called "*Oji Ogbugbandu*", bond with the ancestors. It should be noted that the smallest cotyledon of this kolanut is thrown to the ancestors to show the direct link between the living and the dead in Igbo cosmology.

Kolanut with eight cotyledons signifies "joy and happiness" and a symbol of royalty. It is said that this specie spores the titled men to exhibit their wealth and power as each contests to buy it for his family for the fortune that the kolanut is purported to have in stock



Fig 3: Kolanut in the shell/pod, ripe and matured for harvesting



Fig 4: Oji Igbo showing the different colours –white and red

Uses and Roles of Kolanut

The versatile roles and uses of kolanut have accorded it a global recognition as ritual symbol, medicine, and for food and flavouring. It is interesting to note that the Igbos of Nigeria were conversant with all these roles and uses of kolanut before the incursion of the scientific application and discovery of the uses and roles of kolanut. This is why the Igbos trace its origin to Igboland whose cultural myth and symbols are best interpreted in the use and image of Kolanut.

The Ritual and Symbolic Roles of Kolanut

Kolanut features prominently in all aspects of Igbo life from cradle to grave. It is not only highly valued, but is an indispensable product that commands an exceptional respect among all produce in Igbo land (Onwu-Otuyelu, p. 25). Kolanut is a symbol of friendship as its presentation to one's guest surpasses any other symbol of hospitality which any host can show among the Igbos even though the monetary value of kolanut is relatively cheap. The inability of a host to either present kolanut or to render an unalloyed apology for his inability to guests is interpreted as a sign of unacceptance as the guest will express disgust in terms such as "my host did not even offer me kola". In some cases, a guest may not disclose his mission until after the kolanut has been presented to him.

In rituals, kolanut is highly important to the Igbos. The living and the dead share or partake of kolanut. The ancestors, deities and malingering spirits are requested to share from the kolanut and allow the living unmolested. It is in this regard that kolanut is traditionally seen as a sacred nut which is used as a link to communicate with the gods (spirit beings), hence it was chosen by the elders as the king of all seeds. In such prayers (rituals), bits of the kolanut are waved over the head in symbolism, expressing the exchange of kolanut for life and thrown out to the spirits and the ancestors. The diviners need kolanut to appease and seek the favour of their invisible spiritual agents in their professional routines. Upon suspicion of any laxity in the responses of the spirits to his operations, the diviner is forced to present more kolanuts to awaken them from their slumber or sleep since it is believed that kolanut drives away sleep even among spirits as among the living. In such cases, the diviner may even chew the nut and spit it on all the items that represent the deities in the shrine.

Even among the Yoruba of Nigeria, the ritual symbol of kolanut is of great significance. They apply the kolanut in a special form of divination called "Obi divination" in which the diviner asks a question to the spirits and throws four pieces of kolanut to them (Adeyemi, 2012 www.vanguardngr.com). The way these kolanut pieces land are interpreted by the diviner as the answers to his or her questions. In all these, it is only the native kolanut (*Oji Igbo or Obi Abata in Yoruba*) that can be used for such rituals because it has multi-cotyledons with multi-meanings/ interpretations unlike the kola nitida - *gworu or Oji Hausa (Hausa kola)* that has only two cotyledons (Ejiogu, 2016).

Medicinal Use of Kolanut

Kolanut is scientifically proved to be medicinal and as such, its medicinal value and thirst preventing power is generally recognized in the modern times. Kolanut is high in caffeine as well as a number of other phyto-chemical compounds including betaine (a natural red pigment), kola red, phenolics, tannins, theobromine and theophylline. Its bitter and stringent flavour is used as digestive aid before meals to stimulate gastric juice and bile production. Also, its caffeine and theobromine content make it a potent

neuro-stimulant that is used to combat fatigue. This was the reason why among the West African elites in those days, tins of cigarette and kolanuts are complementary items of conspicuous consumption. It was popularly known as *Acada biscuits* (Academic biscuits) as a euphemism for kolanut coined by and current among West African University students. This is against the background of the students' convictions that kolanut are needed to prevent fatigue to sustain and encourage longer and more sustained mental and muscular deity which is demanded in academic work (Onwu-Otuyelu, 2009, pp. 25-26).

Kolanut and its extracts are also used in the treatment of respiratory conditions such as asthma and whooping cough as its caffeine, theobromine and theophylline content acts vasodilators that dilate the blood vessels, allowing for greater circulation of oxygen. Other medical uses include the treatment of toothache, diarrhea, exhaustion, headaches, and hunger (as appetite suppressant because of the caffeine content), malaria, nausea, poison antidote, sedative, stimulant and tonic. Kolanut leaves can be boiled and used locally for bathing or inhaled as a malaria therapy. It should be remembered that in May, 1886, Dr. John Styth Pomberton, a pharmacist from Georgia USA, mixed the kolanut extract and coca with sugar, carbonated water and caramel colouring to create the first coca-cola recipe (Ejiogu, 2016). Today, Coca-cola drink is the most popular and the most consumed all over the world.

Kolanut as Food and Drink Flavouring

Apart from the socio- ritual and medicinal uses or values of kolanut, it also has a nutritional value both to the Igbos and the non-Igbos who use the kolanut. In west Africa, it is common to see manual labourers and farm workers chewing kolanut as they go about their daily labour, as source of strength after or in-between meals. Sometimes, it is chewed to diffuse tension just as what the modern chewing of gum represents. Moreover, kolanut is often used as a type of appetizer to enhance the taste of the food to follow, as its astringency cleanses the palate and stimulates saliva production.

Kolanut is also taken as a source of some B- vitamins, as well as protein, starch and sugar. In Africa, Muslims often substitute kolanut for alcohol since their religion forbids them to drink or use alcohol or addictives. This may be the reason why in Nigeria, while kolanut is produced more in the west, celebrated in the east among the Igbos, it is highly consumed in the North by the houses, hence the kola nitida is generally known in Nigeria as *gworo (Oji Hausa- the Hausa kolanut)*.

Since John Styth Pemberton in his discovery in May 1886 created the first coca-cola recipe, kolanut has remained the distinctive source of flavor for colas, and certain brands of soft drinks and tonics around the world. Today, for instance, coca-cola company is one of the richest companies around the world and a household name in drinks and tonic entertainment around the world. Even today, when it is purportedly

claimed that coca-cola no longer use kolanut for their drinks, but other alternatives like synthetic derivatives for its flavors, kolanut remained their historic beginning.

However, irrespective of the obvious negative effect on body chemistry which can lead to such problems like insomnia, high blood pressure, increased heart beat among others, kolanut has remained a cherished commodity that attracts huge economic prospects globally. Kolanut trade is a profitable commodity that has made name in the international trade for the production of drinks and pharmaceutical products (Uchendu, 2004, p. 28).

Kolanut Ceremony and Presentation

The kolanut ceremony is a cultural heritage of the Igbo which cannot be fathomed by the incursion of modernization in Igboland. It is an evidence of social harmony, love and happiness for one another. For this, kolanut becomes the first thing to be presented during occasions, settlement of disputes, welcoming of visitors in an Igbo home, and sacrifices. The presentation, breaking and ritual of kolanut is indispensable within Igboland. Since kolanut is the “bread” of Igbo sacramental communion, it must be carefully and specially presented, blessed, shared and partaken by all the parties and families in every ceremony (Ezeugo 1985, p. 6). It is observed that the Igbo welcome is not complete without the presentation and sharing of kolanut. Following the prolonged Jewishlike greetings in the traditional Igbo manner, kolanut is then presented on a disk or a wooden platter (Basden, 1983) (See Fig. 5 below).



Fig 5: Kolanut Ceremony and its presentation in Igbo Land

The host first receives it from either his wife or his child and sometimes touch it on his lips to prove that the bearer has no malice or evil intention and then passes it on to the visitor(s).

Moreover, the beautiful symbolism of kolanut presentation in Igboland comes out clearly in the presence of many visitors or group. The fullness of the social aspect

comes clear as the kola begins its journey from one person to another according to the closeness of kinship relationship from the home of the host and spreads out to different directions within the audience and returns back to the host. This is called *Ire Oji*- selling of kola. When it comes back to the host, there is a saying that *Oji eze no eze n'aka* (the kings' kola has returned to the king). This symbolic presentation is a kind of headcount in a way of identifying all the people in the audience before any type of discussion could be had. This manner of kola presentation in Igboland is very technical in the sense that any mistake made while carrying the kola round the gathering attracts a penalty or spells a feeling that the offender is irresponsible, uncultured or may not be reliable. In some cases, the offender is asked to pay some token for violating the rule of kola presentation.

The Kolanut Ritual/ Prayer

The kolanut ritual is the traditional prayer or blessings offered before the kolanut is broken and shared. Immediately the kola is returned to the host, it is considered presented, and then the prayer (ritual) *Igo Oji* follows (see Fig. 5). In Igbo culture, it is an undisputed right of the eldest person in any gathering from the side of the host to pray with the kola. This preference, in most cases, is because of the believe that the eldest person is the custodian of truth and closer to the ancestors. In the evolutionary trend of the Igbo tradition, a minister or one consecrated to God takes precedence in the blessing of the kolanut. Yet in this, the eldest person or the traditional ruler may transfer this right as a matter of privilege to the minister.

Traditionally, it is said that “*Oji anagh anu olu oyibo*”, meaning that kola does not speak or understand English. The following are the rituals, prayer or incantation of kola by the eldest person in the gathering mostly in Igbo proverbs or wise sayings:

Onye wetara oji, wetara Ndu he who brings kola, brings life.

Ndu miri, Ndu Azu, miri atala, Azu anwuna – the life of water is the life of fish so
water should not dry and fish should not die.
(Nwosu, I.N.C 1983:60).

Obiara nga onye abiagbulaya mgbe o na-ala, mkpumkpu aputala ya n'azu

My visitor should not come to kill me, so that when he returns, hunch back should not follow him as a repercussion (the last sentence is mine).

Other prayers include;

He who brings kolanut brings life and he who accepts kolanut accepts peace. May the gods of our land bless the bringer of this kolanut. May he also bless those of us who will eat it. May he replenish the source several fold that he may be able to serve others with kolanut in future (Onwu-Otuyelu, 2009, p. 29).

The Breaking of Kolanut

Presentation of kola in Igbo land does not end with the prayer or incantation but includes the breaking and serving of kolanut. To this effect, another event that brings out the kola symbolism is the question of the rightful person to break it. There are two major traditions as regards who breaks the kolanut. In the southern part of Igboland, it is the youngest in a group that breaks and shares the kola; while in the north-west and northern parts of Igbo land, it is the eldest person that breaks and shares the kola. In both cases, the breaking and sharing of kolanut helps in identifying seniority. Those who align with the young man tradition are of the view that the young is preferred because he is presumed to be innocent and has not soiled his hands with blood-shed in battle or wickedness. Even though this tradition may have some flaws since at times the youngest in a group may also be elderly, but this tradition is born out of the Igbo philosophy of ethical purity.

However, the old-man tradition is preferred by some because the eldest man as the custodian of tradition, blesses the kola, holds the *ofo*, the symbol of authority of the ancestors. This is in line with the Igbo traditional culture that the eldest man in the family or kindred assumes some priestly functions. This is why in the modern Igbo society the eldest man may give an ordained priest/minister the kola to bless as a privilege. It is noted that it is the Aros of Ohafia (Abia State) that abrogated the eldest-man tradition through their revered "*long juju –chukwu*" diety and willed the right of breaking kolanut in the gathering of the Igbos as a nation to the youngest person. This may have been done against the backdrop that the Aros are considered the youngest of all Igbo family groups but the most enterprising (Nwosu 1983, p. 60). Another solution to the kolanut breaking problem is where the eldest man blesses the kola and gives it to the youngest to break and share.

The sharing of the already presented, ritualized and broken kolanut is not done anyhow but in its tradition of seniority. A novice in Igbo culture may incur a fine (penalty) in sharing kolanut without recourse to the order of seniority and relationship. If it is within people from different communities, states, and nationalities, an unbroken kolanut is given to each as *Oji Akpa* (take away) with the proverb that *Oji rue ulo, o kwue ebe o si bia-* when kolanut gets home it will tell its story. It is believed in Igbo tradition that no one after a visit to an Igbo land or family will get home with a kolanut and will not tell his people or family how he came about the kolanut. It also shows that his host welcomed him and showed him some good measure of hospitality.

The Sacredness and Taboo of Kolanut in Igboland

The level of sacredness and sanctity accorded to kolanut throughout Igboland can be likened to that of the biblical "forbidden fruit of paradise". This sacredness is observed from the planting, nurturing, plucking, breaking and other aspects of kolanut even to its tree, wood and leaves. Women are forbidden from either planting, climbing,

plucking or breaking of kolanut (Eze Ugo, S.N. I.U. 1985, p. 22).). This does not mean that men are holier than women in Igbo society, but it is born out of the cultural mentality of the Igbo which is similar to the Jews in regard for women even in the bible. This can also be said to be in line with the social status the Igbos accord to women. The fact remains that women break and share Igbo kolanut when they gather in their usual cultural groupings of *umuada* or *umumgboto* independent of men. However, it is traditionally required that even in such gathering of women, if any male is sited, be it a toddler in the mother's arms, the kolanut should be touched to his hand before it is broken as a mark of respect for the sacredness of kolanut.

In Igbo land also, when kolanut is planted (only by a man) and as it grows, it is watched, preserved and nurtured by a family head, because of the strong feeling that if a woman nurtures the kola tree, it will wither and die instantly. In some cases, the kolanut tree is barricaded with fence to ward off any intruder.

Apart from the kolanut taboos associated with women, an unclean person such as criminal, murderer or a person who is known to have desecrated the culture will not touch or attempt to pluck kolanut. If he does the tree will shed off all its leaves and nuts as well. In some Igbo cultures, kolanut may not be plucked on a particular market day especially the great market day of the community, just as there is a particular traditional day when no one goes to farm and marriages cannot be contracted as well. Such days are considered as traditional days for the gods and can spell a bad omen to the humans if violated. Even though the kolanut leaves can be boiled for medicinal use, its wood should not be used as firewood in Igboland.

Conclusion

In Africa, the idea of hospitality is a very significant expression of social and cultural love and unity. Although the symbol of hospitality differs from culture to culture, in Nigerian culture, kolanut is very significant; not only known for its origin in Europe and American soft drinks, but among the three major tribes of Nigeria. It is a common but unique seed among Nigerians: produced in the west by the Yoruba as *obi*, consumed greatly among the northern tribes as *gworo*, and ritualized/celebrated among the Igbos as *oji*. To the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria, kolanut is a seed of great honour and respect. Among the two types of kolanut; cola acuminata (oji Igbo) and cola nitida (gworo), the former (oji Igbo) is one of the most frequently used and culturally important substances in the Igbo world and features prominently in all initial hospitality ceremonies regarded as crucial to the success of any meaningful social or ritual understanding.

The importance of kolanut to the Igbo is attested to by the mythological claim of kolanut origin in Igbo historiography. This myth linked the foundation of Igbo origin (Ntu ala Igbo) to kolanut as being derived from the spirit world when men and the spirit beings were in common relationship. Hence, kolanut becomes the single custom that unites the Igbo (omenala jikotara Igbo). In its ritual values, every aspect of *oji Igbo* is

celebrated with meanings that project unity, love, productivity and myth. For instance, each cotyledon of Igbo kolanut (*cola acuminata*) has a meaning attached to it. While its colours have cultural significance, the tree and even the leaves have their medicinal values as well as taboos associated to its usage or application. It is not planted and nurtured like every other seed-bearing plant, but is guided with several cultural laws and gender inhibitions; it is also used for sacrifices, covenant, traditional and ritual prayers as well as in the celebration of joy and sadness.

With these, there is the urgent need to revive the cola culture of the Igbo even in the contemporary modern generation as a practical effort to sustain the Igbo cultural heritage.

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