

THE COSMOLOGY OF KOLA NUT (OJI-IGBO)

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Abstract

There is a long standing Igbo adage that says, “while the Yorubas of Southwest Nigeria plant kola nut, the Hausas of Northeast/west of Nigeria eat kola nut, the Igbos of Southeast Nigeria show reverence to kola nut”. This has presented kola nut not just as an edible nut for the Igbos of Southeast Nigeria, but also a natural nut with some socio-cultural connotations and implications that are entangled in Igbo cosmology. It is against this background that the writer sought to carry out a concerted investigation of the place of kola nut (oji Igbo) in Igbo culture, with a view to understanding the socio-cultural connotations of Kola nut in Igbo cosmology. The result of the study has revealed that kola nut (Oji Igbo precisely) is symbolic in Igbo culture and tradition with diverse implications on the people's worldview.

Keywords: Kola nut; Cosmology; Igbo; Culture and Tradition

Introduction

Kola nut is the fruit produced by the Kola tree, which is of two main types: *Cola acuminata* (oji Igbo) and *Cola nitida* (oji Hausa or gworo). Kola nut is a caffeine-containing plant. The trees of kola nut, which reach heights of 40 to 60 feet, produce a star-shaped fruit, which is about the size of a chestnut, this little fruit is packed with caffeine. Kola nuts have a bitter taste when chewed fresh (<https://www.healthline.com/health/kola-nut>).

Cola acuminata (oji Igbo), which has more than two cotyledons (seed leaves) is of high socio-cultural importance in Igbo land (Okpoko and Emeafor, 2018). Oji Igbo (*cola acuminata*) is held in high esteem in that it signifies the beginning of every ceremony, as an object of communion between man and man and between man and spirits, it stands for love, loyalty, unity, honesty and stability of social structure (Uchendu 1967 in Chidume et al, 2015). Umeogu, Onebunne, Ojiakor and Etodike (2019) remarked that the communion of oji Igbo is central to the life of the Igbo, to buttress its undeniable status, the traditional breaking of kola nut precedes any ceremony in Igbo land, be it an ordinary visitation to a friend's house, child dedication, marriage ceremony or new yam ceremony.

Oji Igbo is the most celebrated natural nut in Igbo land. Its myths and interpretations are philosophical among the Igbos of Southeast Nigeria (see Ene, 2018; Ibeabuchi, 2013; Ukaegbu, 2013). Although with minor variations, the nut is celebrated among the Igbos in southeast Nigeria and some other areas of south-south Nigeria where Igbos are found. Following from the aforesaid, this discourse investigates the uses of Igbo kola nut among the Igbos and its ontology. Other issues discussed in this paper are feminism and Igbo kola nut, colours and symbolism in Igbo kolanut.

Uses of Kola nut

It is used in making covenants

- ~~It is used to determine the fate of a journey or expedition~~
- ~~It is used in invoking blessings~~
- ~~It is used in invoke the spirits~~
- ~~It is used in performing sacrifices~~
- It is used in swearing oaths
- ~~It is used to initiate marriage rites and intensions~~
- ~~It is used for petitioning~~
- ~~It is used for the settlement of disputes~~
- ~~It is used in giving warnings~~
- ~~It is used in giving gifts~~
- ~~It is used in sending massages to third parties in Igbo cosmology~~
- ~~For making incantations~~

Kola nut and Events in Igboland

- ~~Welcoming visitors~~
- ~~Marriage rites and ceremonies~~
- ~~Coronations and Ofala engagements~~
- ~~Title taking~~
- ~~Naming ceremonies~~
- ~~Rituals and sacrifices~~
- ~~Birth celebrations~~
- ~~Other traditional gatherings and discussions~~

Ontologies of Kola nut in Igbo Culture

- ~~● *Oji bu Eze'* (Cola nut is the king) – Kola nut is the king in plant kingdom. It is great, not in size but in significance in Igbo culture.~~
- ~~● *Oji bu ndu'* (Cola nut is life)– It is a sign of life among the Igbos and this explains while it is not venerated during deaths.~~
- ~~● *Ndi ochie taa oji'* (Ancestors, eat cola nut) – Cola nut is seen as the connecting rope between the living and the dead. And Igbo's believe that one can only succeed when he is at peace with the ancestor.~~
- ~~● *Onye wetere oji wetere ndu'* (Who brings cola nut brings life) -- Cola nut is seen as one of the greatest gifts someone can offer to visitors or present during gatherings or other traditional engagements in Igbo land.~~
- ~~● *Oji ruo uno, o kwuo ebe osi'* (When cola nut gets home, it will explain where it came from) – Cola nut is animised, hence it explains destinations of journeys.~~

Cotyledons and Interpretations

Igbo cola (cola acuminata) has various cotyledons with mystic meanings and interpretations among the Igbos. For instance:

- ✍ A cola nut with single cotyledon is rare in Oji Igbo and not only abnormal but signifies a taboo. It is called “Oji Ogbo” dumb kolanut, Oji agbara or Mmuo (cola nut of the spirit). Such cola nuts are not eaten but thrown away.
 - ✍ Cola nut with two cotyledons is also seen as Oji Agbara. Ccola nut should be more than two cotyledons. When it is two, it is also called “Oji ifilifi” which must be caste away because it is a bad omen among Igbos. While in some parts of Igboland such cola nuts are thrown away, in some parts it is eaten by the eldest who must have performed some sacrifices before eating it. This is why Gworo (Cola nitida) is not valued in Igbo culture.
 - ✍ The positive myths start with cola nut with three cotyledons. Such cola nuts are associated with a strong mystic symbol as 'Oji Ikenga' or 'Oji Ike' (cola nut of the valiant or the brave). Such cola nuts are only eaten by the community warriors or Nze or Ozo in Igbo land. Also when it is three, it signifies tripod “Akwu kwa ito, ite esiri”
 - ✍ Cola nut with four cotyledons is called Oji 'Udo na Ngozi' Which means 'cola of peace/harmony and blessing'. The number four is a sacred number in Igbo culture and it depicts the four market days (Eke, Orie, Afor, Nkwo). These are said to have been named after the four Angels of God in change of the four corners of heaven and earth.
 - ✍ Cola nut with five cotyledons is called 'Oji Omumu' meaning cola nut of increase in procreation, prosperity, protection and good luck. It also symbolizes abundant harvests which the Igbos interpret as wealth, increase and multiplication of children.
 - ✍ Cola nut with six cotyledons is a symbol of covenant or communion between the gods and man. It is called Oji Ogbugbandu (bond with the ancestors). The smallest part of these cotyledons is thrown to the ancestors to show the direct link between the living and the dead in Igbo cosmology.
 - ✍ Cola nut with seven cotyledons also denote good omen and prosperity as that of six cotyledons.
- Cola nut with eight cotyledons signifies joy and happiness, and a symbol of royalty. The wealthy and royal families strive to buy and eat such cola nuts to represent their socio-cultural and traditional status in Igbo society.

Sexuality and Cola nut among the Igbos

Igbo cola nut (cola acuminata) depicts sex. It always has boys, girls or boys and girls. When it is mixed up with boys and girls i.e. two boys and two girls, it is a sign of profitable fertility in a marriage of the presenter of the colanut or he who is praying with the cola nut. But when it shows only boys or girls, it is interpreted as disproportion in fertility, and should be prayed against.

Feminism and Igbo Cola

Igbos see cola nut as a sacred object that should not have direct contact with women who are menstruating or have menstruated. Menstruating or menstruated women are not allowed to climb the cola nut tree,

present it to visitors, pray with it before the visitors, or pick a portion from the traditional cola nut plate (Okwa Oji) directly to eat. It is only the male child, no matter how young, can do this on behalf of the woman. In some cases, a young girl who has not started menstruating may be asked to do part of these activities. Hence such girls are seen as undefiled and sacred in Igbo cosmology.

Colours and Symbolism in Igbo Colanut

Igbo cola nut can come in two colours – white or red. The white is called 'Oji Ugo' and Ugo means eagle in Igbo. This does not mean 'the eagle cola'. Rather Ugo means the legendary 'Ugo Onobo', the first human wife of the spirit wrestler, Ajike for whom kola nut was presented to the living brothers by the spirit husband, Ajike. However, the red colour kolanut is attributed to the legendary Agala Onobo's blood that stained some cola nut seeds in the process of breaking the very first product of cola nut harvest in the land of humans.

Conclusion

- Discourse on Igbo cola nut cannot be contained in one single lecture as this, hence the need for the summary.
- Cola nut is a fundamental part of the Igbo culture and tradition.
- It is the heart of Igbo cosmology and they remain inseparable.
- The Igbo nation venerate cola nut more than every other nation in Africa
- Igbo do not see cola nut as an edible nut but an object of ritual, myths and traditional engagements.

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