

COVER PAGE THE SYMBOLISM OF KOLANUT IN IGBO COSMOLOGY: A RE-EXAMINATION

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Abstract

This paper considers the symbolism of kolanut according to Igbo worldview. How kolanut helps to shape the people's philosophical ideology especially, in relation to religion. The roles of kolanut within the Igbo socio-cultural context and the values attached to these roles will be examined. The roles of kolanut as a means of socialization, education and transmission of cultural values from the preceding to succeeding generations will come under consideration. Equally, this paper looks at the traditional rules regarding not only the uses but more essentially the mode of kolanut presentation, blessing, breaking and sharing of kolanut. How these rules and kolanut have persisted in the face of social and cultural changes which have affected the Igbo people shall be reviewed. The roles played by kolanut in Igbo religion will come under study, this is to correct some of the misconceptions by writers who are motivated by Eurocentric idealism but quite oblivious of the Igbo cultural setting and the place of kolanut in it. The onslaught of Western civilization causing the change of attitude among the young generation towards kolanut as a vital aspect of our culture tends to pose a threat to the future and survival of kolanut. Again, the study of Igbo culture as many have done, rarely gives an indepth knowledge on the concept, roles and symbolism of kolanut as one of the sacred objects like Ofo and Shrines in Igboland. Most times it is forgotten that without kolanut, shrines cannot be attended to. Many people think that the spiritual significance and sacramental symbolism are not worth exploring. They therefore refuse to try and discover the ritual ramifications, claiming that to probe into the mystery demystifies the matter. Kolanut symbolism is not mysteriously inexplicable. It is a revered symbol of social intercourse with deep social relevance.

Keywords: Communion, Consecration, Igbo, Kolanut, Religion

Introduction

To the Igbo, the kolanut is not just the small seed, in actual fact the seed is very bitter to taste. It is merely the non-juicy unattractive, reddish or yellowish small content of the pod of a tree called *osisi oji* (kolanut tree). The Oji tree does not grow to a great height. The kolanut is caffeine laden and often prevents one from sleeping when chewed, yet the Igbo love and honour it. Kolanut excels more in Igboland for socio-cultural significance compared to its value than in any other ethnic group in West Africa. The predominantly Muslim Hausa and other northerners offer kolanut as a symbol of hospitality, but without elaborate ceremonies. The fact is that the rites of presentation, blessing, breaking, and distribution of kolanut in Igboland are much more solemn than we recognize. They symbolize a social and ritual bonding between the living on one hand, the living and the departed on the other. It is a ceremonial covenant of hosts and guests with benevolent ancestral spirits and deities in the presence of Aní, the Earth Deity. Chinua Achebe put it succinctly in his new book, "The kola

nut was a sacred fruit and had a very distinct and distinguished role to play in Igbo life and culture”.¹

Symbolism of kolanut

The kolanut content is not conceptualized ordinarily by the Igboman but much in philosophical dimension as the totality of the Igbo culture with psychological providence for him. This is deduced from the Igbo cosmology which places him higher than other animals. Kolanut, therefore plays a large part in shaping man’s view, particularly, emphasis is placed on the number of halves of a kolanut. Naturally and culturally, the Igbo kolanut must have more than two cotyledons and when two, it is called “*oji Ifilifi*” which must be cast away because it is a sign of bad omen.² Number two in Igbo culture stands for something bad and it could be inferred from the pre-colonial era when twins were born and thrown into the “*ajo ofia*” (evil forest). When a cotyledon is three, it signifies good omen and also tripot “*akwu kwa ito, ite esiri*”. Four cotyledonous kolanut is an indicative of acceptance by gods in Igboland signifying four native market days namely Oye, Afor, Nkwo, Eke showing equality and social justice. Five cotyledonous kolanut is referred to as “*oji Ikenga*”, six cotyledons is a sign of prosperity which means that prosperity of the man that prayed and broke the kolanut is guaranteed. Seven cotyledons also denote good omen and prosperity. From eight lobes are highly valuable but rarely found, they are signs of good omen, if such are seen or broken.

One may then be compelled to ask, how is ontology manifested through kolanut? In many expressions, Igbo people say, “*Oji bu eze*” kolanut is the king in the plant kingdom and therefore the first before the rest in Igbo culture. The kolanut is great not in size but in ideal of its significance to Ndigbo, *Onye wetalu Oji, wetalu ndu* (he who brings kolanut, brings life). With all its significance in Igbo culture, “*Oji*” is demanded and presented in all things concerning “*omenala*” (culture). Kolanut must be blessed, broken and eaten before any discussion or activity in Igboland can commence.³

Social dimension of the symbolism

Before any kind of discussion is carried out in any Igbo gathering, there must be a formal kolanut presentation hence in an ideal social life, kolanut comes first. Kolanut presentation is a precursor at receptions, important meetings, and customary ceremonies. G.T. Basden records that Igbo welcome is not complete without the sharing of the kola nut. Immediately after the prolonged greetings in the traditional manner, “...the kola nut is brought forth on a dish or saucer or, what is more correct, on a wooden platter (really a small box fitted with a vocer) prepared and kept for the sole purpose of presenting kola nut.”⁴ Who offers or presents kolanut is determined by factors culturally discernible.⁵ One definite decree is that no guest presents kolanuts to his host. The idea of taking “kolanut” to a titled man is a literary interpretation because, in Igboland and indeed Nigeria, “kolanut” has come to mean anything from bribe to gift from the heart and on to police extortion. The person that offers kolanut is usually the host, the number of kolanut offered is normally from two upwards depending on the type of social gathering or forum and they are placed inside a traditional kolanut tray called “*okwa oji*”. It is not usually presented alone but with alligator pepper (*zingiberaceae melaguata*) or flavoured and peppered peanut butter paste normally called “*ose Oji*”. In some parts of Igboland, the host puts some amount of money together with the kolanut in the kolanut tray, the money is referred to as “*ego Oji*” (kolanut money) and is meant exclusively for the visitor/s.⁶ Each person must accept the plate or wooden bowl and thank the host with a brief statement, without profusely praising the host for the reception and or approving excessively the quality and quantity of offering. People must also try not to touch the kolanut. Don't pick up one and start a sermon. In some areas, you could be asked to keep the one you just touched! Simply say “*Onye wetere oji wetere ndu,*” (He who brings

kolanut brings life) a popular phrase of relay messengers. Dabbling into short, inapt and or inept idiomatic phrases demands a good grasp of the host's culture, his dialect, and the particularities of rites in the area. One should rather concern oneself with making sure the plate of kolanut is properly relayed. Wrong relays, especially in agnate (*umunna*) settings, attract a smack on the wrist.⁷ Before the visitor is expected to say the objective of his mission or visit, he is expected to eat kolanut first, hence the Igbo adage “*Obia taa oji, okaa ihe obiara*” (when a visitor eats kolanut, he says the objective of his mission).

The presentation of kolanut has an important dimension that many people fail to recognize. It is a time to get acquainted with everyone present. By following a certain pattern of relaying kolanut, the people present find out who comes from where. For example, sons of women born in the kindred are given some priority over other guests; sons-in-laws and their kindred also receive special positioning.⁸ By establishing who hailed from where, we know who is who. Hence, whenever kolanut embarks on this "relay race," it is said that "*oji agawala ijem itu agburu.*" (Kolanut has embarked on a journey to establish lineages). It is in the course of this journey that whole lineages are linked. The elder celebrant makes sure this reaffirmation of relationships is properly conducted. Kolanut reaffirms the concept of unity in diversity.⁹

It has come to a point where people of other ethnic groups sit and watch how men who are enmeshed in affluence sit down and debate one other to a standstill over a simple seed. And it marvels to see all the Mercedes Benz, Infinity, Lexus, Toyota, Roll Royce and 4x4 trucks parked outside the venue where this caffeine-laden nut rules. Any wonder why Ndigbo call kolanut the king; he who brings it, a king and a provider of life; and those who partake in the communion are blessed with long life, happiness, love, and prosperity. Hence, the last words before the now much-relayed kolanut goes back to the host are "*Oji eze di eze n'aka.*" (The king's kolanut is in the king's hand). This saying is important; it confers supremacy on the host by popular proclamation. And the solemn part of the ceremony commences with no decent person speaking over the kolanut. A man in his house breaks the kolanut regardless of his age because there is this adage “*Eze bu eze be ya*” (a king is a king in his house). The host or the eldest male in the immediate kindred of the host consecrates kolanut. This is common sense; the guests do not know the deities, spirits, and ancestors to whom the host prays, or how these unseen beings are addressed. It does not matter the rank of the guest, be he a lord or a priest, the host is king in his house. Any other thing is "*omenenu*" (counterculture) and un-Igbo.¹⁰ The Igbo society is rigidly organized around the agnate system, (*umunna*). Each *umunna* has its deities and ancestral spirits. No visitor has a clue, nor is expected to know, about the clan's inhabitants of the invisible world. It is not uncommon for Igbo elders to chide departed elders for not interceding enough to ameliorate sufferings. A visitor does not know this; he may not chide an ancestor, and he has no clue what deity he must mention nor those he must ignore. Consecration of kolanut is done in Igbo language hence this phrase “*Oji anaghi anu asusu ozo*” (kolanut does not hear foreign language). The indulgence of non-Igbo guest is craved during consecration, however, what was said during consecration can be explained to him later. Consecration of kolanut and other formal phases of kolanut rites are skipped at wakes and funeral ceremonies. Kolanuts are presented, broken, and shared without the rites.

After the consecration, the person that blessed the kolanut naturally breaks it. However, it is unethical that an elder should also split the kolanut and serve everyone. So, in many areas of Igboland, the elder holds on to the kolanut with which he prayed and delegates a younger man to take care of the actual breaking of the nuts. It does not necessarily have to be the youngest. In all Igboland, the elder reserves the right to break or delegate. In some communities, elders break the kolanut into small pieces, where the services of the youth are

not needed. An elder may point out mistakes as a means of imparting knowledge to younger ones.

No matter who breaks the kolanut, the host starts first by picking and eating the first piece as a show of his sincerity and to prove the wholeness of the kolanut. First, he offers bits to Ani, other deities and ancestral spirits. Then he dips his own piece into the flavoured and peppered peanut butter paste and chews it. Then others follow suit. If the host is not known to chew kolanut, he exhales onto it as a sign of sincerity or he may taste the “*ose oji*” or in alternative, another kinsman should take the kolanut first and eat it. This establishes the purity of the kolanut.¹¹

There is no hard and fast rules on how the kolanut is distributed to the congregation or guests present, as long as a woman does not take a piece before a man from the same plate. In some communities, the distributor starts with the elders indifferent of their ages and moves down to the younger people. An exception may be the matriarch of the clan who is sometimes served along with the elders, but not before the host. It does not matter if the host is her son or grandson.

Religious dimension

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. It's a way to religious practices, hierarchical recognition and to crown it all, the symbol of Igbo hospitality.¹² The kolanut is what the Igboman uses in his morning prayers to the supernatural being and veneration of his ancestors after washing his hands and face.

There is sacredness in *cola acuminata*. Chewing kolanut is not like chewing gum or coconut or another plant but it is chewed with a moral conviction. In this state therefore, it stands as a covenant for life for those that chew it. Invariably, kolanut is eaten under a sense of solemnity and sense of reverence due to the ancestors' participation in the communion through libation. The breaking of kolanut is a very ritualistic act and fulfils the kolanut symbolism. This is due to the ceremonious way in which it is presented, the ceremonial breaking of kolanut consists of presentation, prayer, breaking and sharing which symbolizes communion.¹³

The importance of kolanut to the Igbo nation is strictly socio-ritualistic. It transcends biological and physical dimensions; it extends far beyond the known world into the unknown world of departed ancestors, spirit beings, and deities. Most important, it re-affirms man to the most merciful deity in our world: Ani. Everything is linked to the Supreme Force (Chi) and Eke (the creator of heaven and earth), forces that the Igbo believe have power over the known and the unknown, over the living and the departed, and over all physical and paranormal manifestations in Cosmos.¹⁴

The role of women

Igbo people are rigidly paternalistic and agnatic, not uterine. Everyone bears his or her father's name. A woman married into a clan or community may have to live there long enough to understand the intricacies of the tradition and history. On the spiritual plane, women are considered the future of mankind. It will be imprudent to involve them in dealing with spirits and deities, some of which are not known for their benevolence. However, a woman may openly present the kolanut to the head of household, even in the presence of distinguished guests, but it must not be during menstrual cycle or during postpartum period (*omugwo*).¹⁵ Young boys and premenstrual girls are therefore preferred. No matter who brings in the kolanut, the man of the house takes charge of the proceedings. Before blessing, he should announce to females gathered: “*Umunwanyi, oji abiara*” (Womenfolk, kolanut has

arrived.) No woman may present kolanut to an assembly, bless, or break the kolanut. Women are not allowed to officiate at kolanut communions for roughly the same reasons that the Catholic Church does not allow reverend sisters to consecrate the Holy Communion.

Women are not supposed to climb or pluck kolanut pods from the tree.¹⁶ During distribution no woman takes a piece of kolanut before a man from the same plate. This was possible because men and women sat apart in public gatherings, a tradition that was adopted by the churches. In large gatherings, there is no way all the men present are going to be served before the women, therefore, a man should pick at least two pieces: one for his wife, if she wants to eat.

Influence of western civilization

Western civilization and all it encompasses including Christianity. The sacredness of kolanut has been violated to the extent that people now use kolanut to poison others, forgetting that kolanut is to be consumed under a sense of solemnity and sense of reverence due to the ancestors' participation in the communion through libation. Again, some neglect to pray before breaking and eating this source of life (kolanut) "*onye wetalu oji, wetalu ndu*" (he who brings kolanut, brings life). This makes one to ask, for what spiritual purpose is the plumule of kolanut thrown outside before chewing? It is thrown out to the gods looking over us in reverence due to their protection, guidance and to enhance fruitful communal living.¹⁷

In the olden days, while the prayers over kolanut are being said, people are supposed to stand up but with Western influence, the reverse is now the case. These days, *cola nitida* (Hausa Gworo) has started appearing in social functions in place of *cola acuminata*. Initially, first sons and womenfolk were not supposed to climb nor pluck kolanut(s) pods from the tree but now because of the quest for money and ravages of Western influence, these things are happening. Cases abound of where politicians holding kolanuts in their hands while addressing crowds make promises and accede to agreements they have no intention of keeping or fulfilling. Such acts, desecrate the sacredness and prestigious nature and value of the God sent kolanut.

Conclusion

With the coming and contact of the Europeans with the Igbo, the latter saw a culture that was quite different from theirs. They were inquisitive to find out what this new culture was all about and this was quite natural of an enterprising people. The wave of Western culture has swept through our people and we have discovered that we are almost stuck to it. Now, is the time to look back. Now is the time to stop and think, ask questions as the headway of the average Igboman and initiate the move for a rediscovery of our identity in terms of culture. Although a complete comeback is not envisaged, we cannot all the same get lost.

We have had examples of empires and civilizations which have come and gone but which are still survived by the contributions they made – the Egyptians by their pyramids and geometry, ancient people of Israel by their religion, the Greeks by their philosophy and athletics, the Arabs by their commerce/seamanship and the Romans by their politics and sense of justice. Therefore, I am making a contribution to the study of an important area of our culture through which the Igbo can leave their mark on the sand of time.

External influence has adversely affected the symbolism of kolanut in Igboland that one may be tempted to assume that the future of kolanut is bleak. But that is not to be! According to Ogbalu, "kolanut is one of the fruits which cannot be removed by the people not even by the Whiteman from Igboland".¹⁸ Since, kolanut serves as a precursor at receptions, important meetings, customary ceremonies in Igboland, some people believe in "*onye melu ihe nna ya melu, melu nma*" (he who repeats his fathers deeds, has done well).

The rules of Kolanut Communion are fairly established in Igbo communities. The details and the dialects may differ, but the rules are basically the same.

By and large, from all indications it has been proven that kolanut Communion is a generic religious phenomenon which serves as the base and offshoot of the socio-cultural life of Igbo people. The Kolanut Communion is much more than a symbol of hospitality: it is a sacred covenant among the living, between the living and the departed, for the adulation of *ndiichie* (ancestors). It is a solemn sacrifice to benevolent deities in the presence of *Ani*, the Earth Deity, in supplication that the divine will of *Chineke* (the Supreme Force and the Creator) be done on earth. Any attempt to do away with kolanut is a threat to the traditional belief of the Igboman because it serves as its nerve centre. Therefore, we must fight for the survival and continuity of Igbo customs and traditions especially the concept of kolanut, its symbolism and usefulness despite all threats of destabilization and extinction.

End notes

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