

# Kola Nut (ỌJÌ) In the Cultural Life of Igbo People: Its Position In The Modern Society

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**Abstract:** Kola nut is a nut content of a pod produced by a tree called kola nut. In English, it is called kola acuminate. A pod may contain two or more nuts interlaced in their setting depending on their size. Kola nut is reddish in colour and smallish in size. It is not sweet. To Igbo extraction of Nigeria, kola nut is so important, so indispensable in almost all their cultural and ritual activities. Kola nut occupies a significant position in Igbo culture. Kola nut is highly honoured and respected in that no meaningful gathering in Igbo land can take place without first of all honouring kola nut - kola nut must be brought, prayed with, broken and eaten by all the people present before important discussion begins. The eating of kola nut by all the people present signifies that they all have clean mind. They have no evil in their hearts, so they are qualified for blessings that accompany the eating of kola nut which the ancestors, the gods and the great God send to them. Kola nut is a means through which the living maintains a link with the ancestral world, the gods and the great God. In this paper, the writer investigated why kola nut is so highly respected in Igbo land and its position in the present society in Igbo land. The writer is arrived at the conclusion through oral interviews conducted on the elders in society and through extensive reading of books that treats kola nut.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There are two types of kola nut - ọjì Igbo (Igbo kola nut) and gworo (ọjì Awusa). Ọjì Igbo (Igbo kola nut) is called kola acuminate in English, while gworo is called kola nitida. Gworo is light yellow and when broken, it is brownish. It is eaten by mainly Hausas and some Yoruba extractions of Nigeria. The Igbo people can also eat it but it is not used in any cultural and ritual activities. It has only two cotyledons when it is broken. Ọjì Igbo (Igbo kola nut) is reddish in colour and heart shaped. It occupies unique position in Igbo cultural life. It is used for their ritual purposes, for marriage ceremonies, settlement of disputes, entering into any form of agreement and in so many other activities. Kola nut is used as a link between Igbo people and their ancestors, the gods and the great God (Chukwu). It signifies clean and pure heart one has towards his fellow man; therefore, ọjì is the first thing offered to the visitor by his host at his arrival.

## 2. WHY KOLA NUT OCCUPIES SUCH SIGNIFICANT POSITION IN IGBO LAND

According to Ministry of Education and Information, Cultural Division Enugu Pamphlet (GPE 1443/76/177/5,000) which explains the reason thus: "When our founding fathers visited Chukwu in heaven on Chukwu's invitation, on their departure, Chukwu asked them to choose a fruit from all the fruits in his orchard. Our founding father choose kola nut. On reaching home, it was planted and when ọjì tree started yielding fruits, our forefathers started using the seed to welcome their guests just as Chukwu had used it in welcoming them".

Because Chukwu gave kola nut as a reception to our forefathers, our forefathers use kola nut as a reception of visitors and for their ritual purposes, they then handed down the practice to the children from generation to generation until it gets to us. Kola nut as the king of all the fruits which came down to us from the gods, is therefore used in communicating with gods and the ancestors. Kola nut therefore signifies clean and pure intention one has for the other.

## 3. PRESENTATION OF KOLA NUT

Igbo people are generally known for their warm reception to their visitors. In support of the above claim, Umeasiegbu (1969) says "kola nut is presented to the visitor whether the host is aware of his coming or not." When a visitor arrives in the house of his host, his host firstly welcomes him with handshake, then gives him seat to sit down. The host then orders his wife to bring water for washing of hands. Everybody present is expected to wash his hands as a sign of cleanliness and purity. Then he calls for kola nut. The wife then brings the kola nut to him. The host can present one kola nut or two to his visitors depending on the type of visitor. When the visitor is a titled man or an important visitor, two kola nuts can be presented. When kola nut arrives, the host then announces the presence of kola nut. From that moment, there should be silence. All attention is then focused on the process of breaking of kola nut. The host then presents kola nut to his guest. In parts of Njikoka, the host accompanies the kola nut with some money as a sign of purity and cleanliness of the kola nut. When the kola nut gets to the visitor, he thanks the host for giving him kola nut. He

is then asked to take the money beside the kola nut and one of the two kola nuts presented, so that when the kola nut reaches his house, people will then know where he went. Kola nut then gets back to the host to break for it is his responsibility. In some cases when the host presents the kola nut.

The host hands the kola nut to the most senior member of his family present. He then announces that the host has presented kola nut. He then hands the kola nut to a younger member of the family to take the kola nut and show the people. The younger person takes the kola nut and shows to each people present. When the kola nut gets to each person, he touches the plate showing he has seen it. It is important to point out here that women do not touch the kola nut. She only looks at it when it gets to her. When everyone has seen the kola nut, then the most senior member of the host family instructs the visitor to take one kola nut for (*oji ruo ulo, o kwuo ebe o si*) when kola nut reaches the visitors home, people will know where he went. Then kola nut returns to him. He then instructs the host to pray and break the kola nut for it is his responsibility. The host can then permit him to break the kola nut as a sign of respect. If this kola nut occurs to be the first in the morning, the head of the family or the host must break the kola nut but, if he had done so before, then any other senior member of the family whom he appoints can pray and break the kola nut. On a larger gathering like in kindred meeting or village meeting, the most senior person present or titled man present prays and breaks the kola nut. It is not customary to present three kola nuts to the people. One, two kola nuts can be presented. Four or multiple of four can be presented at a larger gathering such as the fixing of bride price or at *ozo* title taking. Five and six kola nuts are not presented. Seven kola nuts and other requisites in multiple of seven may be presented and served during important ceremony like 'igbu ewu nna' – killing of goat for the ancestors during marriage negotiations. Eight kola nuts are normal for marriages. That is when the bride is to leave her father's house for her husband's house. Kola nut offering is a precursor at any receptions, important meetings, customary ceremonies as well as ceremonial slaughter of cows, goats and cocks.

#### 4. BREAKING OF KOLA NUT

It is the privilege of the head of the family to break the kola nut in his house after he had offered prayers and thanksgiving to the ancestors and to the gods and the great Chukwu for the kola nut. In larger gathering, the eldest man in the gathering or the titled man prays and breaks the kola nut. In town meeting, the most senior from the senior village prays and breaks the kola nut. In some parts of Igbo land like Awka, Onitsha, Nnewi and surrounding towns, the incumbent or the most senior after offering prayers and thanksgiving for the kola nut, breaks the kola nut, then take one cotyledon as his privilege and asks the younger person to take the kola nut round for people to take. In other parts of Igbo land like parts of Imo State, Abia State and in some

parts of Udi Local Government of Enugu State, the most senior after offering prayers and thanksgiving for the kola nut, hands it over to a young boy to break. The child breaks the kola nut, then returns it to him to take one cotyledon as his privilege. When he has taken one cotyledon, the child breaks the kola nut in pieces in such a manner that everyone present will get a share.

Kola nut is presented to visitors at any time of the day. When the host has no kola nut, he apologizes for his inability to provide kola nut. He then can offer as a substitute the following items: biscuits, garden eggs, *gwo*, fish, wine etc. Kola nut is not presented at night. When the visitor comes at night, the host says "darkness has taken kola nut."

#### 5. SIGNIFICANCE OF COTYLEDONS FORMED BY A KOLA NUT

The Igbo people believe that the gods and ancestors reply to the people's prayer during the breaking of kola nut through the number of cotyledons in the kola nut when it is broken. That means that the ancestors, the gods' mind manifest through the number of cotyledons in the kola nut. Through the number of cotyledons in the nut, the people know whether the ancestors and the gods are happy with such gathering. For this reason, after prayer and thanksgiving the kola nut is broken and on breaking it is discovered that the kola nut has no cotyledon. It is called dumb kola nut *oji ogbi*. Our ancestors have not spoken and then the kola nut is thrown away. Then, another kola nut is brought and on breaking, it has two cotyledons. It is called *oji kuru aka* or *uru oji*. It is the privilege of the person that prayed and breaks the kola nut to take it. He then orders for another kola nut. On breaking the kola nut, it has three cotyledons, it is good. It is called *oji ikenga*. It represents valour and greatness. It is meant for men who had distinguished themselves in noble deeds. To those who partake in the eating has long life and prosperity. If a pregnant woman is in their midst, it is believed that she would give birth to a baby boy. Kola nut with four cotyledons is good. It represents four market days in Igbo land – Eke, Oye, Afọ, Nkwọ. It is symbolic of productivity, wealth and good health. Everybody present are happy for the promise and the expectations that comes from the kola nut. Kola nut with six cotyledons, shows bad omen. It is thrown away. Kola nut with seven or eight cotyledons is rare and so when kola nut has seven or eight cotyledons, it is a thing of great joy. It is accompanied with feasting and merriment. In some areas in Igbo land, head of the family buys back the favour that accompanied the kola nut. This money is used by the people present for merriment. The kola nut with seven or eight cotyledons brings long life, prosperity, productivity and sound health. For the merriment, goat or cock may be killed and used for the entertainment. Because kola nut is bitter especially the unripe ones, the Igbo people eat kola nut with alligator pepper or ground nut paste or *mmimi*. These act as stimulant and help to sharpen the appetite for the eating of kola nut.

## 6. KOLA NUT SHARING ORDER

The Igbo people have maintained clear order in sharing of broken kola nut. In a small gathering, when the person who prays for the kola nut has taken his share, the sharer maintaining the order of seniority in age shares the kola nut to people present. For the larger gathering, he distributes the kola nut starting from the right-hand side of the person that prays for the kola nut. To the Igbo, the right hand is always adored, it is their ikenga. It is therefore odd to find kola nut being distributed from left to right. When such is noticed the elders then calls and corrects the sharer.

## 7. RULES GUIDING KOLA NUT IN IGBO LAND

Because kola nut is revered, it is respected throughout Igbo land. There are certain rules surrounding kola nut tree and its fruit. These include:

1. Kola nut is the first thing to be presented before any social gathering begins. It is used to evoke the spirit of the ancestors, gods and the great Chukwu to attend and guide his children throughout their deliberations in the meeting.
2. Silence is maintained by all present at the meeting when it is announced that kola nut has arrived. Silence is maintained because Igbo adage has it that “anaghị ekwukpo oji okwu”. There should be no side talks or conversation when kola nut is presented. Everyone present focuses attention to the proceedings of breaking and eating the kola nut.
3. Oji tree can never be used as firewood.
4. Women do not climb the tree. They cannot even pluck the pod while standing on the ground with long stick.
5. The Igbo do not pray with oja in hand during funeral ceremony.
6. A man can never pray with oji or kola nut in hand in his in-law's house rather, it is the duty of his in-law to pray for him and his wife, the daughter of the man.
7. The daughter's son is not expected to pray with oji at his grandfather's compound.

Basden (1982:117) rightly observed that Igbo people hold profound belief in supernatural being and they are conscious of their relationship with the unseen. Ejiofo (1984:202) observes that the Igbo people attribute every event which they cannot understand to the handwork of God or the spirit of the ancestors. They offer sacrifice to gods and spirits because sacrifices has tempering effect on life of people and society. Ilogu (1985:39, 202) also affirms that the Ibos were religious and organized their cultural life around their religion. He further argues thus:

The relationship between man and the spirit world is maintained through many channels – obedience to the codes of behaviour and the customs (omenani)

approved by the ancestor, and enforced by the earth goddess through priests and titled men and elders and heads of various extended families, is the most important channels.

From the above quotations, one should not be surprised at how Igbo people honour kola nut and why it is used in both ritual and social purposes because kola nut was introduced to honour ancestors by Chukwu, the great God. Our ancestors introduced kola nut to us their children (oji) kola nut is therefore a link between the living and their ancestors. It is through kola nut that the link between the living and the ancestors in the spirit world is maintained.

As Igbo people are very religious, no Igbo man will like to be cut off from his ancestors and the gods. Through prayers with kola nut, the Igbo people consult the ancestors and bare their minds to the ancestors who readily respond to their requests. It is right for one to say that kola nut to the Igbo people is what Holy Bible and Koran is for Christians and Moslem respectively. With kola nut in hand one bares his mind to the gods and to the ancestors. The type of prayer or requests one puts across to the ancestors, gods and the great God depends on the situation one finds himself or what the group in which one is a member needs.

## 8. IGBO PEOPLE ARE CONFIDENT IN PRAYER

Early in the morning, the first thing the head of the family does is to offer prayers to God, the gods and his ancestors. He firstly calls on his wife or any of his children to bring water for his washing of hands. After washing his hands, he takes kola nut in his right hand, facing his ikenga prays thus:

*Chukwu bi n'igwe, bịa taa oji  
ndị ichie anyị ga, biana taa oji  
Unu na-ata oji n'otu n'otu  
Anyị bụ mmadụ na-ata n'ibe n'ibe  
Anyị na-enye unu ekele na anyị rahurū teta  
n'udo  
Ngozi gị dī ichieiche ka anyị na-arịọ n'ime  
mkpuru oji a  
Anyị na-arịọ ahụ ike, ihe akụ akụ  
na ihe enwe enwe, akụ na ụba  
n'ebe ezinaụlọ anyị dī  
Anyị na-arịọ, na-ekwu, na-ajọ ihe  
nọdụ n'ihu ka anyị nọdụ n'azu  
Ọ nọdụ n'azu, ka anyị nọdụ n'ihu  
Onye sị na anyị agaghị adị,  
Ya buru okuko ụzọ lakpuo ụra  
Ochụ nwa okuko o nweghị, ya na ada  
Nwa okuko e nwere mwemwe osọ*

*(God in heaven please accept this kola nut.  
Our ancestors, accept this kola nut  
You eat kola nut in whole  
We are happy that we survive the night*

*We are begging for your numerous blessings  
Good health, wealth and progress in our family  
Evil will never meet us  
We declare that when evil is in front, we will be at the rear  
And when evil is at the rear, we will be in front  
He who plans a confrontation with me  
Should go to bed for the chicks)*

As stated earlier, Igbo people are very religious and so they want to have close link with the supernatural forces. That is why the first thing he does in the morning is to commune with his ancestors, the gods, the spirits and the great Chukwu (God). In the above assertion, all the supernatural forces mentioned are addressed as one. This is because Ogbalu (n.d: 47) has it that between the divinities there is no conflict. Ogbalu says:

*The laws of God are the laws of the gods, and idols and visitation with punishment or blessing for their transgression or fulfillment could be equally apply to them singly or otherwise. In other words, the divinities are in concert, none opposing the other. It is therefore for man to find which divinity is responsible for what comes to him and offer his worship and sacrifice accordingly.*

It is the duty of fortune teller to tell his client which divinity is responsible for what comes to him. He also tells his client what to use for the sacrifice. Any of the gods can then answer the prayer of the client.

The Igbo people at the opening of any gathering, kola nut must first of all be presented and prayers will be said with the kola nut in hand so as to invite the ancestors and the deities and the gods for their presence.

## 9. FORMS OF PRAYER FOR KOLA NUT BREAKING

The type of prayer to be said over kola nut before it is broken depends on the occasion that attracts the gathering. Examples of such prayer are:

*Ndị ogo anyị nnoo nu – o  
Ojị abịalanu - o  
Anyị na-asị na ukwu unu jiri bịa  
Ka unu ga-eji laa  
Mgbe unu na-ala, ajo mmuo agaghị ahụ unu  
Ajo mmadu agaghị ahụ unu  
Ije unu ga-abụ ije udo  
Ije anyị na unu ga-abụ ije mmiri  
O gaghị abụ ije nkụ  
O ga-adịrị unu mma, dīkwara anyị mma  
Mmekorita anyị na unu ga-adị ka echi*

*Echi anaghị agwu agwu  
Anyị na-asị ka nwa mmuo ghara imegbu nwa mmadu  
Ka nwa mmadu ghara imegbu nwa mmuo  
Njideka na di ya,  
Unu ga-eme ihe nne na nna unu mere  
Unu ga-amu ozuzu Eke, muo ozuzu Orie  
muo ozuzu Nkwọ, muokwa ozuzu Afo  
Otu otu ulo eju  
Onwa itenaanị unu si ebe a naa,  
Unu akpokwaa anyi, anyi abia rie, nuria  
Anyi na-arịo Chukwu ka ihe unu ga-eji zuo umu ghara iko unu  
Njideka, chetakwa na aka na ikpere ala  
Ka nwa ewu ji anu nne ya ara,  
Ire oma ka ejula ji aga n'ogwu  
Mmekorita gi na di gi ga-abu uru nwa nkita, onye daara ibe ya, ibe ya adaara ya  
Ihe ewere gaara unu nke oma.*

*(Our in-laws welcome  
Here is kola nut  
All we say, is that as your coming is peaceful  
Your departure will also be peaceful  
Our relationship with you shall be Likened to way to stream and not like The way to bush for fire wood  
It will be well for you, it will be well for us,  
Our relationship with you will be like tomorrow  
Tomorrow never finishes  
We are saying that there should be reciprocity in your dealings with each other  
Njideka and her husband,  
You are doing what your parents did  
Your children shall correspond to the four Market days – Eke, Oye, Afo and Nkwo  
One after the other until your children fills your house  
In nine months time, if you invite us to come and rejoice with you, we shall honour it  
We are begging God to send wealth, health, progress so that you do not lack what your children will eat  
Njideka, remember that, before a lamb sucks its mother's breast, it must totally bend down. Snail passes through the thorns with tact, reciprocity will be Your watch ward, so that things will move well for your people).*

The above prayer exposes the bride's parents' expectation for their daughter's marriage. It should be a



happy affair. The relationship should be till death do us part. God will grant the couple children, wealth, good health. There will be humility and obedience to each other. The prayer during marriage ceremony is of two parts. The above prayer is said by the father of the bride but the last prayer before the departure of the bride to her husband's house is said by the oldest man in the bride's family. It is called *odenigwugwo*. With kola nut in his hand, he sits in front of the guests and prays for the success of the marriage, invokes the ancestor's blessings to their child who is going to marry. During this prayer, absolute silence is maintained by the people present. During the prayer forbidden words regarding sexual relationship is mentioned verbatim, for example, penis, buttocks, vagina and other sexual names will be called by their sexual names. The bride will be told that her husband will always be on top of her during their sexual relationship. She will always be submissive to her husband. He then evokes the spirits of the ancestors and Chukwu Abjama to remember their children and give them children and what the children will eat.

Another example of such prayer is this:

*Chukwu kere mmadu taa oji  
Kedu nu ebe unu no?  
O nweghi ka ijiji ga-erikata ihe  
o were ha ka ehi  
O biara be onye abjagbula ya  
o nakoo mkpumkpu apukwala ya  
Otukpokp; o ejighi ike ya atupu osisi  
Ofa ka ide ji awa ala  
Nwa mmuo emegbula nwa mmadu ma  
Nwa mmadu emegbuka nwa mmuo  
Ochu okuko new ada,  
Nwa okuko enwere mwemwe oso  
Onye si na nke m agaghị adiri m,  
nke ya agaghikwa adiri ya*

*(God the creator, accept the kola nut  
Our ancestors come and eat kola nut  
No amount of feeding will make the fly  
grow as big as cow  
Let any visitor not bring me ill luck  
And when he leaves me may he do so in  
peace  
The wood pecker does not peck wood  
because of his strength  
It is natural for the flood to cut its way  
May the spirits not offend men and  
may the men not offend the spirits  
He who runs after chicken should  
expect a fall  
He who says that what I have should not  
be mine  
What he has should not be his)*

The above form of prayer establishes innocence before God and man. It justifies revenge as it sees this as an effective means to maintain equilibrium in a society. This is quite in

keeping with the principle of reciprocity, a characteristic that balances relationships in the life system of the Igbo people. With kola nut in hand, he meditates, he negotiates and exposes his inner mind and his thought to God. God in his own part listens to him. Kola nut is not an export crop. Its importance is in Igbo land. Igbo people very much attach great importance to kola nut for their ritual and social activities because kola nut is the choice of God and ancestors. As Igbo people are very religious, they aspire to maintain a close link with the super natural forces. To be able to accomplish this duty, kola nut must be used because it is God's choice.

Kola nut is used for various purposes, when kola nut is presented, it is normally said that he who brings kola nuts brings life, and he who eats kola nuts eats life. People present during the prayer for kola nut breaking aspire to eat the kola nut in order to share in the blessing that accompanies the eating of the kola nut.

#### 10. USES OF KOLA NUT

Kola nut is used for oath taking: A group of people may plan to carry out one project or the other but to keep their action secret. To have confidence in themselves and to ensure that no one leaks the secret, they take the oath. In this oath taking, kola nut eating is involved depending on the nature of the oath taking. A man and a lady may promise to marry in future. To ensure that none of them violates this promise, oath taking is then proposed. Each of them extracts his blood. Mix it with his spouse blood. Then, kola nut is deep in the blood and each of them eats the kola nut. This oath taking is binding and violator of this oath suffers.

Kola nut is used for settling disputes. When there is dispute between two people or between two groups of people. Normally each of the party brings required number of kola nuts and wine to those to settle their dispute. At the end of the settlement, kola nut is brought. Prayer is said for kola nut breaking. In the prayer, the ancestors, gods and Chukwu are asked to grant the two parties peace and progress. They are assured of peace and progress between them. At the end, kola nut is eaten by all the people present including the two groups in dispute.

As stated earlier, kola nut is used in purification in ancestral worship. It is a medium through which man commune with his ancestors. Kola nut is to the Igbo people what holy bible and Koran is to Christians and Moslems respectively.

There is no social activities and ritual activities conducted in Igbo land without the presentation of kola nut. Kola nut represent long life, progress, wealth and cleanliness of mind one has towards fellow human being.

#### 11. THE POSITION OF KOLA NUT IN OUR PRESENT SOCIETY

Kola nut is one of the indispensable tools in our culture. The Igbo people at least still mention kola nut and use kola nut to entertain and welcome their guest. In the past, kola nut

appears in every ceremony in Igbo land. When kola nut is broken, every member of the gathering takes his own share in order to partake in the blessing that accompanies the kola nut. Anybody that fails to take the kola nut feels offended. But if one deliberately dodges eating the kola nut people will be having guilty conscience. Today the eating of kola nut by members in the gathering is diminishing. They prefer eating garden egg. It is disheartening to find that after breaking kola nut in a social gathering, when kola nut is being passed around people say "I don't eat kola nut" at the end only negligible number of kola nut is eaten. The remaining is bought back to the table.

Again, in a learned society, members of the group pray for the kola nut in English language. They do not care about the significance of the cotyledons. They do not know the established order of sharing the kola nut. They do not care to learn when an elder try to correct them.

The elites and the youths do not care to learn the rules guiding the use of kola nut in Igbo land. If this process is left unchecked, kola nut use will go into extinction.

## **12. SOLUTION:**

There should be seminars organized for the youths by the elders in the society during which the importance of kola nut will be discussed.

Parents should involve their children to come and watch the proceedings of sharing and prayers for kola nut when it is in progress in their family.

The government should increase the hours of teaching of kola nut in the school time table.

In traditional drama, the prayers for the breaking of kola nut should be involve in the drama for it is said that practice makes perfect. As the student prays in the drama for kola nut breaking, he soon learns the proceedings for kola nut breaking.

Kola nut is taught in the school curriculum. When they arrive home during the holidays, the parents have nonchalant attitude towards involving the children in the routine for sharing and praying with kola nut. This make them forget everything about the kola nut which they learn in the school.

## **13. CONCLUSION:**

Kola nut is a small heart-shaped content of a pod from a tree called kola nut tree. It is bitter in taste and has very low economic value when compared with the other type of kola nut-kola initida (gworu). In Igbo Land, kola nut-kola nut acuminate occupies a unique position. It is indispensable in all ritual and social activities. It is a link through which man commune with our ancestors and with it our ancestors and the gods send messages to man. Unfortunately, in the present society the attitude of Igbo people toward this rich cultural practice is dropping. The change of Igbo attitude towards kola nut should be checked.

There should be call for the revival of the use of kola nut. Parents should help by involving their children on the use of

kola nut at home. The children should watch the parents as they present kola nut, pray with kola nut and distributes the kola nut.

By involving the youths and elites in the process of using the kola nut, their interest can be revived.

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