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The Philosophical Investigation of the Symbolistic Imports of Kola-Nuts in Igbo-African World View

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Abstract:

Culture is defined as people's way of life. Every given society has a systematic way of doing specific things at any given time. These systematic ways of doing things are handed over from one generation to another generation of the people of that society, and the general notion is that culture is not written or contained in any document or code. The activities making up a given culture is learnt by observing how the elderly ones in the society, carry out such activities in any given circumstance. In Igbo-African society, these cultural tenets and practices also exist. In the Igbo-African society; there are objects which are of great value and symbolic to the people and their culture. The value ascribable to these objects implies that the objects should be handled and used in a respectful manner and condition. Amongst these objects which the Igbo-African society attach a great estimate of value to, is Kola-nut; thus, the essence of this paper. Kola-nut is an object that means different things to different cultures. The people of different cultural heritage treats kola-nut in accordance with the value and usage they think of it. However, in the Igbo-African society, kola-nut is treated with value due to the symbolic purposes it is meant to serve. In Igbo-African society, kola-nut is not just chewed or used as one pleases; there are rites and rituals involved in the usages. Its usages may be in the domestic settings or public functions, or traditional religious rites and rituals. This paper will make a philosophical investigation to analyze the symbolistic imports of kola-nuts in the Igbo-African world view.

Keywords: Kola-nut, rites, rituals, culture, Igbo-African society, symbolistic imports

1. Introduction

Kola nut has a different value across the various cultures in African societies. Whereas the Yoruba people in western Nigeria grow and harvest kola-nuts in large commercial quantity, the Hausa people in northern Nigeria eats kola-nut as food or edible fruits; the Igbo in the eastern part of Nigeria celebrate and use kola-nuts for rituals, rites and festivals. It implies that a particular object may mean different things to different people in different geographical locations at a time. In the Igbo-African society, kola-nut has a significant socio-cultural role and symbol and also portrays the identification, hospitality, unity and integration of the Igbo people (Obiefuna, 1978).

Historically, there are two types of kolanut which are consumed in Nigeria. They are (Umeogu, 2003):

- Cola Acuminate (Oji Igbo) And
- Cola Nitida (Gworo),

Cola acuminate is more valued in Igbo tradition. This is because the Igbos believe that it is attached to the origin and foundation of the Igbos. Therefore, the Igbos treat it with great value and a sense of sacredness. The Igbos believe that the Oji Igbo (cola acuminate) symbolizes a form of union or covenant which the ancestors or people in the spiritual realm have with the humans. From observations, it is evident that Oji Igbo is being used in almost any well-meaning occasion, ceremony or festival, whether social in nature, religious or traditional form of celebration; as the Igbos deem that such ceremony or occasion has not fully begun or is incomplete unless a kola-nut has been presented and blessed in accordance with the custom (Obiajulu, 2013).

The Igbo-African world view sees 'oji' as a substance that has ritual powers and embodying unity, prosperity, peace, and long life. In another dimension, kola nut helps in facilitating interaction between men and the gods. Although kola nut appears in petty sizes and nature, the Igbo-African has taken it as an indispensable aspect of their culture and lifestyle (Basden, 1983).

When one inquires about the origin of Kola nut and its usages and symbols in the Igbo-African society, there may be multiple stories which would be aching to be the choosing story as the origin. This is to say that the origin of the usage and symbol of the fruit, Oji is as controversial the origin of the Igbos themselves. Amidst the variant stories that are told as the origin of the usage and symbol of kola nut in the Igbo-African world view, there is one common phenomenon that cuts across any of the stories. This common phenomenon is as identified in Onwu-otuyelu (2009) where he posits that the origin of the usage and symbol of kolanut in the Igbo-African world view is found in the union that exists between humans and the spiritual beings that request this valuable object in exchange for any spiritual aid.

Notwithstanding the great value which the Igbo-African society attaches to kola-nut, the influx of western culture which tremendously affected the Igbo-African cultural system, practices and heritage, just like every other African culture, has also affected the usages and symbolic value. However, something about the kola-nut culture is that in the Igbo-African society where it is being used; utmost respect and dignity is given so as to desecrate the usages of kola-nut. It follows that modernization, acculturation and globalization have not completed the annihilation of the symbolic value and usage of kola nut as part of the culture, tradition and custom of the Igbo-African society.

2. Concept of Kola Nut

Kolanut (*Oji*) is an edible household object. Kola nut is grown as fruit from a tree known as 'cola acuminata'. Cola acuminata is a species of kola nut which is common amongst the Igbos, and that is why it got the name, *Oji Igbo*. Kola nut is seen by the Igbo-African as a useful object in ceremonies, which may be spiritual, social, religious, cultural, as the case may be. It is seen as being an object that serves a variant function in the Igbo cultural settings, and its relevance and utility cannot be underestimated. The Igbos believe that kola nut is capable of building a connection or an unseen conduit between the people and God during prayers. The efficacy of kola nut is seen in marital vows, sacrifices, sealing a contract or agreement, and hospitality (Uchendu, 2004).

The Kola nut tree grows in a large extent within the forest zone of West Africa. Its content is a nut of a pod interlaced in accordance with the sizes of the nuts. *Oji Igbo* is commonly held to be ontologically sacred to the extent that certain taboos are hedged around it. The kola nut tree known in the Igbo-African world view as 'Oshishi Oji' is not commonly seen as some other trees; it is treated as a sacred tree and not as any other regular tree within the vicinity. According to Umeogu (2003); the Igbos believe in 'Chi' (god), whom they pray unto for favour, protection, guidance and intervention in difficult times. There are certain situations that would befall an Igbo man. He would be advised to go and appease the gods and in the dealings to appease the gods. The demands are often something that was not common amongst men. This is because of the natural law that scarcity of an object makes it more valuable. The gods through the representatives, 'Dibia' (native doctors/diviners), would amongst other things demand that a kola nut be presented so as to unlock the heart of the gods. Since kola nuts do not grow within the residential areas of the Igbo-African society; it implied that anyone going to get the kola nut would have to travel to the thick forest to get one handy. It is the stress and risk involved in travelling into the forest amidst the scarcity of the Kola nut tree that hovers the kola nut with the value which it has today (Ezeugo, 1985).

Kolanut is a component of the Igbo-African cultural heritage that is often applied in the intermediate communion between heaven and earth, or between God and men. To the Igbos, kola nut is an object to appease God and beckon him to harken unto the people at any given time.

Umeogu (2003) asserts that it was the forefathers of the Igbos that adopted *Oji* as the pride of all the fruits (king); and that the symbolic imports of *Oji* is mainly to be used in prayers and communion with the ancestors and the gods, as a sign of hospitality and goodwill to visitors, and also as an object often used to seal a contract, bond or agreement. To further envisage the Igbo-African evaluation of Kola nut, the Igbos saying 'Onye wetara *Oji*, wetara ndu' which means he who brings kola nut, brings life, comes quite handy for that purpose.

Obiajulu (2013) postulated that *Oji Igbo* is distinguished from other forms of fruits. He averred that it is used for traditional rites and rituals and all sorts of traditional ceremonies which are rooted in the Igbo-African culture. Igbo-Africans understand the value, sanctity, and sacredness which are inherent in Kola nut; and that is why they accord it with such respect and value, as well as using it with charisma.

In the words of Okonkwo (1974), he asserted that 'Oburu na mmadu obu la choro inye ndi nna ya ha, ma obu ndi nna nna ya ha, ndi la goro muo zite n'onwu, ihe obula; onye ahu g'ebu uzo goo *Oji*, weputa Okpesi ma tupee cha *oji* ahu na kpirisi kpirisi n'elu ya, n'ekele ndi nna ya nan di nna nna ya ha'

This means that if anyone may at any time wishes to offer anything or sacrifices to his ancestors, the person will bring kola nut, bless it and will also bring an object known as Okpesi, upon which he will break the kola nut in pieces as he brings thanksgiving and eulogies to his ancestors. In Okonkwo's view, Kola nut is the requisite object for anyone who wishes to make any request from his ancestors, as it is deemed sacrosanct in such communion. Okonkwo's postulations carefully maintained the glorious status of Kolanut in the Igbo-African world view; as a result, kola nut is deemed as a pre-condition to any satisfying ceremony. It follows that a ceremony is voided if kola nut is not present and broken in accordance with customs and traditions, which the Igbos call 'Iwa *Oji*' (Obiajulu, 2013).

Obiajulu (2013) attested to the impeccable status which the Igbos have placed kola nut, wherein he stated that certain persons in the society are not allowed to participate in the 'Iwa *Oji*' (breaking kola nut), 'Igo *Oji*' (blessing kola nut) and 'Ita *Oji*' (Eating kola nut). There are persons in the Igbo-African society who are not deemed to be full-fledged citizens of the community as a result of one thing or the other. These persons may be 'Ofeke' (Stigmatized or excommunicated), 'efuleefu' (wastrels) or Osu (Outcast). They are not allowed in the Igbo tradition to participate in any form of communion with the kola nut unless they have undergone a purification process which will vindicate them and make them worthy to partake in the dealings with the high valued fruits, kola nut.

As pointed out earlier in this paper, there are variant forms of kola nuts, they are:

- *Oji Igbo*, Cola acuminata, or otherwise called Cola atrophora
- Kola Alba or kola nitida, *Oji Awusa* (Hausa) or Gworo,

Whereas *Oji Igbo* is deemed requisite in welcoming visitors in any Igbo home and it is connoted of having dual roles of spiritual and ceremonial (social) usages; other forms of *Oji* cannot serve dual functions as they can only be used for social usages and functions and not for spiritual rites and rituals. It follows that any other form of kola is just merely

edible, and consumable, and nothing more as to its spiritual implications and valuations to spiritual events or the impact it could have in a social setting. There have been other arguments as to why Oji Igbo remains at the peak for spiritual functions; which are that the spirits or gods do not accept any other form of Kola nut in communion with them. However, the kind of Oji Igbo that may be used for spiritual functions must be one which its cotyledons are more than two; else the spiritual exercise or ritual would be an effort in futility (Onwu Otuyelu, 2009).

It is understandable that Oji Igbo may be scarce to be used for social activities and functions, the Igbos indirectly exhibit a conscious value for other forms of a substitute to the kola nut which ought to have been used for the social functions, but for scarcity. In this vein, other substitutes which may be used in place of Oji Igbo include but not limited to, the following (Nkemakolam, 2002):

- *Anara, Afufa,-- Garden egg*
- *Aki ilu – Bitter Kola etc*

These may be used by direct permission from the gods or upon the assumed belief that since the gods are 'all-knowing', they would understand the reasons for the substitution. Note that the substitution is only bound for social functions and usages and cannot be implied in spiritual rites, sacrifices and rituals. This is because any form of substitution would render the activity impotent, invalid and futile (Nkemakolam, 2002).

The general belief amongst the Igbos is that even if the substitute forms of kolas possess one force or the other, they still do not meet up with the potency and vitality level which may be deemed necessary and sufficient to invoke the gods to harken unto prayers and supplications made. It is also important to state that even though the substitute forms of kola are not for any reason permissible for spiritual functions; the Oji Hausa may be used as a substitute in spiritual functions only when the consent of the gods have been sought and obtained in that regard. It can invariably be stated that Kola nut is an item that binds the Igbo people in common and communal union (Onyioha, 2013).

3. Typologies of Kola nut in Igbo-African World view

This paper has revealed that there is a form of kola nut, which is unique to the Igbo people referred to as Oji Igbo. This form of kola nut may be in various kind and shapes (Okodo, 2003). It could appear to be:

- Monocotyledonous,
- Dicotyledonous,
- Triplecotyledonous,
- Quatricotyledonous, Etc

It could also appear in distinct carpels, such as:

- Four Carpel
- Five Carpels;
- Six Carpels And
- Multi-Carpel.

Therefore, the significance to be attached to the kola nut depends largely on the number of lobes which the kola nut has. The Oji Igbo has a kind of species which the Igbos refer to as *Oji Ugo*; which literally means the Eagle's Kola but significantly mean champions Kola which is to be offered to persons who have achieved landmark accomplishments in the society or have distinguished himself in his endeavours as a dignitary. As the name suggests, it is given to achievers, persons who have a fundamental record of achievement. Oji Ugo symbolizes royalty and purity, and it is treated with the highest form of nobility amongst all other kinds of Oji Igbo (Nnabuife, 1999).

The relevance of any kola nut in the Igbo-African world view is dependable on the varies of cotyledons. It is the number of cotyledons that determines the suitability of a given kola nut for any ceremony or festival. As said earlier, for any *Oji Igbo* to be used for any social or spiritual usages and functions, the kola nut must have more than two cotyledons. Though it is rare to find any Oji Igbo with just two cotyledons, however, in any circumstance that it happens, such kola nuts are deemed useless, ineffective, and ought to be cast away. Since two cotyledons kola nut is deemed malformed; it is abominable for any titled man to partake in the eating of kola nut (Nnabuife, 1999).

An Igbo Kola that has three cotyledons is deemed to be a carrier of good omen and fortune. Such kola nut is deemed as *Ojilkenga*. Oji Ikenga is meant for persons who have carved a niche for themselves as men of valour. Oji Ikenga has masculine embodiments and ingredients. Thus, women are restricted from partaking in the eating of the kola. However, where a married woman is unable to deliver a male child, she may be advised to eat the Oji ikenga in combination with some prescribed herbs for fertility (Umeogu, 2003).

It is further illustrated that the three carpel, three lobes or three cotyledons kola nuts signify trinity, which is the shape of family structure: Father-Mother-Children. The three cotyledons kola nuts also serve as a symbol of the tripartite nature of human beings (Umeogu, 2003):

- Aru (Body);
- Mkpuru Obi / Uche (Soul /Mind) and
- Mmuo (Spirit)

This may further be conversely interpreted as the spirit being the father, the mother being the soul and the body being the children. It is the combination of the spirit and the soul that brings the body. The body is not useful without the soul and spirit. The union of the father and mother brings about the children (Ugbala, 2016).

Four cotyledon kolanut is rooted in the traditional four market days, which the Igbos uphold:

- Eke,
- Orie,

- Afo
- Nkwo

It symbolizes acceptance and approval of the gathering of the gods. One thing is discernible when one looks at the four cotyledons kola nut; that it has a human-shaped face with two carpels on each side. The two carpels on each side signify man and woman and the conjunction joining the two sides is to show the relevance of the union of a man and woman in building the Igbo society. In further adumbration, the manner at which the two sides face the other is not in violent or in a manner that depicts conflict; it is in a form or shape that depicts acceptance and harmonious union. This kola nut is often used to bless marriages or to illustrate the procreative functions of marriages or unions between a man and woman (Onyioha, 2013).

The four cotyledons Kola nut may also be a symbol of perfection as it shows the comprehensive cardinal points of the geographical territory of the Igbo land. The four cardinal points which are east, west, south and north, while the divisions in between symbolize the two polar regions in Igbo geography. It is also relative to the regulations of the Igbo calendar, which runs through the four Igbo market days aforementioned. Since the four market days run throughout the year, any prayer with which the four cotyledons kola nuts are offered is deemed to be a form of prayer that covers through the year (Onyioha, 2013).

According to Uchendu (2004), when the Igbos see any kolanut that has five cotyledons, five lobes or five carpels, it is a symbol of industriousness, productivity and wealth. The use of Oji gbara ise (Five cotyledons kola nut) calls for jubilation and celebration wherever it appears. In Igbo-African world view, such kola nuts in five carpels or five lobes *showomumu*, and *Aku na Uba*.

To the Igbos, the number six is associated with bad luck, bad omen, retardation, retrogression, failure. Therefore, the same belief is replicated with any kola nut that has six lobed cotyledons or six carpels. On this basis, the Igbos cannot eat the entire kola nut so as to avoid the condemnation and spells that may follow the eating of a six carpel kola nut. Therefore what is normally done is that a cotyledon in the six cotyledons kola nut is thrown and cast away after incantation and the prayers will be offered on the remaining five lobes. It is the remaining five lobes that will be edible in the Igbo-African cultural heritage (Ugbala, 2016).

Seven symbolizes completion, perfection, excellence, distinction. It is very rare to see or get a seven cotyledons kola nut. It implies that it is very scarce, which may substantiate as the rationale for the high value and dignity attached to it. Where a kola nut is found to be seven carpels, seven lobes or seven cotyledons; it is a sign of luck. Thus, people pay extra to get a seven carpel kola nut (Ugbala, 2016).

4. Functions and usages of kola nut in Igbo-African world view

Kola nut plays a set of versatile roles and is used for variant purposes in the Igbo-African societies. The usages of kolanut have in the Igbo communities have become over the years of a global mark, recognition and branding. Kola nut in the Igbo-African world view plays the following roles outlined below (Nnabuife, 1999):

- Ritual and spiritual roles and usages
- Medicinal and therapeutic purposes and usages
- Food and Drink Flavours
- Domestic and social usages

5. Breaking Kola nut and Kola nut Prayer

In the Igbo-African world view, there is a significant prayer which is often offered in respect to kola nut presented for any function. For a kola nut presented at any function to be broken, such prayer must be offered, else, it may be deemed as abominable to break and eat without prayers, it is after the prayers that the kola nut may be broken, shared accordingly and eaten. Once, a kola nut is presented, it is returned back to the host, thus 'Oji Eze di Eze n'aka', which means that the king's kola is in the hands of the king (Okodo, 2003). This is followed by a prayer from the eldest person from the host side; this prayer is called 'Igo Oji'. The belief that only the eldest person should pray for the kola nut is on the assumption that the eldest person is the custodian of truth and he is closer to the ancestors than all others. Though, contemporary, kola nut is offered one who is rooted in the Christian religion as a priest or high profiled member to offer kola nut prayer. That is not part of the Igbo-African society in any way. Even though the eldest person is meant to say the prayer, he can as well delegate the assignment to another person (Obiajulu, 2013).

'Oji anagh anu olu oyibo', is an Igbo statement which means that kola nut does not understand English language. The implication of that statement is that anyone who is to offer the kola nut prayer ought to pray in Igbo language and not in any other language. Also, it seemed more respectful when kola nut prayers are not offered in plain words but in proverbs (Onwu-Otuyelu, 2009).

In the Igbo-African world view, after the prayer had been offered, what follows is the breaking of kola nut. After the prayer and incantation by the eldest person, he hands over to the youngest person for him to break and share accordingly. In the sharing, he must observe seniority and clanship depending on the circumstances. However, some parts of Igbo land insist that it is the eldest person who offered a prayer that would still break the kola nut, start by eating and sharing accordingly (Nwosu 1983). Also, the eldest person can pray, break and give to the youngest to share.

6. Taboos Associated with Kola nut in Igbo-African World View

Kola nut is reverend in the Igbo tradition. Thus, its usage has rules and regulations. It is deemed a taboo or an abomination when and where any of the rules are broken. And the person who is at fault may incur the wrath of the gods

or maybe fined a penalty or punishment by the community. These rules are not restricted to the ones highlighted below (Nkemakolam, 2002):

- The person breaking the kola nut must break them in line with the lobes or cotyledons at the first instance.
- The person sharing ought to share in accordance with seniority.
- The tree of kola nut cannot be used as firewood
- A woman cannot plant nor climb a kola nut tree
- There are days in which kola nut cannot be plucked
- A woman cannot bless, break or share kola nut unless there is no man present.

7. Conclusion

Kolanut is a component of the Igbo-African cultural heritage that is often applied in the intermediate communion between heaven and earth, or between God and men. To the Igbos, kola nut is an object to appease God and beckon him to harken unto the people at any given time. The forefathers of the Igbos adopted Oji as the pride of all the fruits (king); and that the symbolic imports of Oji is mainly to be used in prayers and communion with the ancestors and the gods, as a sign of hospitality and goodwill to visitors, and also as an object often used to seal a contract, bond or agreement. To further envisage the Igbo-African evaluation of Kola nut, the Igbos saying 'Onye wetara Oji, wetara ndu' which means he who brings kola nut, brings life, comes quite handy for that purpose.

Notwithstanding the great value which the Igbo-African society attaches to kola-nut, the influx of western culture which tremendously affected the Igbo-African cultural system, practices and heritage, just like every other African culture, has also affected the usages and symbolic value. However, something about the kola-nut culture is that in the Igbo-African society where it is being used; utmost respect and dignity is given so as to desecrate the usages of kola-nut. It follows that modernization, acculturation and globalization have not completed the annihilation of the symbolic value and usage of kola nut as part of the culture, tradition and custom of the Igbo-African society.

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