

THE KOLA NUT IN IGBO-AFRICAN SYMBOLIC AND ARTISTIC UNIVERSE AND THE QUESTION PEACE-BUILDING

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Abstract

The African is a homo symbolicus, and one does not need to live long among them to discover that symbols occupy a very significant place in their life. As representational beings, they have a distinctive character of creating and using symbols to communicate evocative messages that represent aspects of their lives or those around them. The African is, therefore, not just a symbol making being but a symbolizing being. Among the Igbo of eastern Nigeria, several symbols are used to direct attention to significant realities; symbols like the Ofo, which symbolizes authority; Ogu, the symbol of innocence; Ikenga, a symbol of strength, uprightness, success, integrity and ancestry; Mbari, the symbol of culture and aesthetics; Mmanwu, the symbol of the ancestors; Udara, the symbol of fertility, procreation and abundance. All these symbols among the Igbo put together are not as important as the Igbo Kola Nut (Oji Igbo) cola acuminata. It is among the greatest, if not the greatest symbol among the Igbo. Of the many cultural symbols in Igboland, none has received attention like the kola nut. It is very important and central to the life and ceremonies of the Igbo. This paper has studied the different dimensions of the Igbo Kola nut with the particular interest or objective of drawing out its implications for conflict resolution. This piece discovered that in the settlement of disputes among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria that the Igbo Kola nut is an oracle of truth. For the purpose of this study, the phenomenological method of inquiry was adopted.

Keywords: Oji, Igbo, African, Nigeria, Arts, Symbols, Worldview, Conflict Resolution

Introduction

Symbols occupy a fundamental place in Igbo-African ontology. Thus, Kanu (2014a&b) describes the African as a *homo symbolicus*, as one does not need to live long among the African people to discover the significance of symbols to them. As representational beings, they have a distinctive character of creating and using symbols to communicate evocative messages that represent aspects of their lives or those around them. The African is, therefore, not just a symbol making being but a symbolizing being.

This notwithstanding, what are symbols? Fairchild (1965) describes symbols as that which stands for something else particularly a relatively concrete explicit representation of a more generalized, diffuse, intangible object or group of objects. He further observes that a very large part of social processes is caused on by use of symbols such as words, money, certificates and pictures. A true symbol excites reactions similar to, though perhaps not quite as intense as those created by the original object. (p. 314). Thus, Madu (2011) avers that symbolism implies the practice of using acts, sounds, objects or other means which are not of importance in themselves for directing attention to something that is considered important. Among the Igbo of eastern Nigeria, several symbols are used to direct attention to significant realities; symbols like the *Ofo*, which symbolizes authority; *Ogu*, the symbol of innocence; *Ikenga*, a symbol of strength, uprightness, success, integrity and ancestry; *Mbari*, the symbol of culture and aesthetics; *Mmanwu*, the symbol of the ancestors; *Udara*, the symbol of fertility, procreation and abundance.

Of all the symbols among the Igbo, none is as important as the Igbo Kola Nut (Oji Igbo) *cola acuminata*. It is among the greatest, if not the greatest symbol among the Igbo. Of the many cultural symbols in Igboland, none has received attention like the kola nut. It is very important and central to the life and ceremonies of the Igbo. This paper would focus on the contribution of the Igbo Kola nut to peace building. And by peace building, it is meant procedures aimed at resolving injustice in nonviolent ways and to transform the cultural and structural circumstances that generate conflicts. Peace building processes develop constructive personal, group and political relationships across several boundaries. This process includes violence prevention conflict management, resolution or transformation and post conflict reconciliation or trauma healing, even before any given case of violence. What then can the Igbo kola nut contribute in this process? This is the major question looming at the horizon of this paper.

The Igbo Kola Nut in Igbo-African Religion and Culture

For the Igbo, the kola nut goes beyond the red and yellow seed that you find in trays sold on the street and in kiosks. It is not just the biannual crop grown and stored in sacks and baskets (Kanu 2015a). It is a food that must be eaten with relish; it commands adoration and many accolades and must be attended to with deserving feast. It unites the living and dead, and symbolizes a feast of togetherness, love and trust. The Kola nut is a symbol of Life *ndu*, this is why the Igbo say: “He that brings kola brings life” (Kanu 2019).

Uchendu (1965) refers to the kola nut as “the greatest symbol of Igbo hospitality. It always comes first. ‘It is the king’” (p. 74). And because of the important place it occupies, presenting the kola is very ceremonial. The ceremony begins with the presentation of the kola nut to the guests through the next ranking male after which it is returned to the host. It is usually presented alongside with white chalk (*nzu*), alligator pepper, garden egg, bitter kola, groundnut butter (*Okwa ose*) in a wooden dish (*Okwa oji*). Inside the wooden dish is added a knife for the breaking of the kola. Even if the visitor is just a person, more than one kola nut is presented in case the visitor may need to one back home. Anything less than two must be presented with apologies before any other ritual commences. The presentation is followed by prayer, said by the host if he is the eldest, if not the prayer is said by the eldest person present. During the prayer, *Chukwu* is invoked with incantations garnished with proverbs and prayers for life, good health, prosperity, children, peace, justice, etc. After the prayer, the kola nut is broken into its various lobes; this is followed by distribution and chewing. It is expected that everyone present would partake in the kola nut to avoid the euphoria of suspicion.

As the heart beat of the Igbo culture and tradition, the Igbo Kola nut is used for several purposes, which include:

1. To welcome a visitor

To welcome a visitor with a kola is to receive the visitor into one’s life. It is also a sign that you wish the visitor life.

2. To open a prayer

It is used for prayers and sacred communion because of the special place it occupies among the gods.

3. For rites, rituals and ceremonies

It is what the gods, ancestors and men eat together during these ceremonies.

4. Food and nutrition

It is a food that contains caffeine, theobromine, tannins, potassium, magnesium, glycosides, etc.

5. Commerce

It is bought and sold just like any other goods and services.

6. Cleansing

It is used for ritual of cleansing of a person, property or place.

7. Flavoring

It is used for flavoring food, drinks and beverages. In 1886, Pendergrast (2000) observes that it was used to flavor coca cola.

8. Oath-taking, covenant and settlement of disputes

When used during these circumstances, it is employed to call on God to be a witness.

9. Divination and prophecy

Usually it is broken into lobes and cast on the ground, then the diviner makes an interpretation

10. Sacrifice and worship

This is very important as it is a sacred meal, the meal of the gods

11. Receiving a new day

It is used in the morning during invocational poems and prayers

12. Medical and mystical uses

Because of its nutritive value, it has health consequences. It helps strengthen the tooth enamel surface.

Every Kola can be broken into lobes, and these lobes signify numbers. And number is very important for the African. Some have 1 lobe, some 2 lobes, some 3, some 4, some 5, some 6 and some 7. One can also find kola nut with more than 7 lobes.



Plate 1: *One Lobed Kola*

The Kola nut with one lobe is a dumb kola (*Oji Ogbi*). It is also called the Kola nut of the spirits (*Oji Mmuo*), round kola nut (*Oji Ifilifi or nkpurukakpu*), kola nut of the mystical circle or zero (*Oji Akwu na Ogbi or Obi*); it is not eaten by human beings because it belongs to *Chukwu*, *Chukwu* is a spirit (*Chukwu bu mmuo*). One lobed kola nut is neither male or female, since *Chukwu* is one and indivisible in nature. See Plate 1.



Plate 2: *Two Lobed Kola*

When it has two lobes, it is called *Oji gworo*, symbolizing male and female. The image of *gworo* is presented in Plate 2 above. It is an elliptical gender shadow of *Oji Ogbi* and the first child of the one lobed kola nut. It is the *cola nitida*. Just like the one lobed kola nut, it belongs to the spirits and is not used for religious and cultural celebrations in Igbo land. However, it can be eaten after some prayers.



Plate 3: *Three Lobed Kola*

Three lobed kola nut is called *Oji Ikenga* (*Ike eji aga*, *Ikenga* is a spirit of power and achievement) or *Oji Dike* (the kola nut of the brave or valiant), or *Oji Echichi* (the kola nut of titled people). It is the masculine kola. As a matter of principle it

is eaten only by warriors, brave men, the consecrated or ordained. It is not eaten by women, except for those who may be seeking for a male child. See Plate 3.



Plate 4: *Four Lobed Kola*

Plate 4 is an image of four-lobed kola. Kola nut with four lobes (*Oji Aka ano*) is the Kola of Peace (*Oji Udo*) and Blessings (*Oji Ngozi*), the kola nut of the four market days (*Oji ahia na ano ubosi na ano: Afor, Nkwor, Eke and Orie*). It also symbolizes completeness (*izu zuru oke* referring to the four market days). It is the Kola nut for both male and female genders (*Oji nwoke na nwayi*), and thus considered the most gender sensitive kola. It is also called the kola nut of the family (*Oji ezinuno*) because it is believed to unite the family.



Plate 5: *Five Lobed Kola*

The Kola with five lobes, as represented in Plate 5 above, is the Kola of Procreation (*Oji omumu*), Protection, of Industry and Achievement (*Oji aka na okpa*), of Wealth (*Oji una or Oji ubalaka*), Progress and Good luck (*Oji sirili werere*). Whenever it is broken and shared, it is a sign that things will go well. It came

from the four lobed Kola, however, unlike the four lobed kola with two males and two females, the five lobed kola comes with three males and two females.



Plate 6: Six Lobed Kola

The Kola with six lobes is called the Kola nut of the ancestors (*Oji ndi chie*), or the kola that doubles the Ikenga kola (*Oji Ikenga abuo*). It is also called the covenant kola nut (*Oji Ogbugbandu*), the kola nut of communion (*Oji Oriko*) or the kola nut of blood and spirit ties (*Oji Umume na Umuite*). It is the Kola of blood and spirit, and thus, indicative of communion with the ancestors. No wonder the smallest part of it is not eaten but given to the ancestors. It is used to make peace, covenant ties, taking of oath and punishment of offenders.



Plate 7: Seven Lobed Kola

The last is the seven lobed Kola, which is known as the kola nut of perfection of man and spirit (*Oji asaa mmadu asaa mmuo*) consummations, fulfillment, and completeness (*Oji kpurugede*), the kola nut of the titled cow killer (*Oji ogbuefi*), the kola nut of Ozo title and prophecy (*Oji ozo na amuma*), the kola nut of celebration and festivities (*Oji emume na mmemme*), the kola nut of law and judgment (*Oji iwu na ikpe*). It is also the kola of endlessness or eternity. Thus, the Igbo would say: *Uwam uwa asaa; asaa ndu na anwuanwu; ikpa naasaa mmiri naasaa* (Kanu 2015b).

The Kola Nut and the Settlement of Disputes

The kola nut is a sacred tool for establishing lasting peace among the Igbo people. Its sacredness introduces a different face to the issue of conflict resolution as it ceases to be merely a temporal issue but a spiritual one. Conflict resolutions are usually sealed with the presentation, breaking, distribution and the eventual eating of the kola nut. It all begins with the calling for a reconciliatory meeting. After listening to the parties involved, and useful pieces of advice have been given by the elders, the kola nut is then brought, prayed over and broken into pieces by the person who is qualified to do so. The eating of the kola nut by the parties involved or the disputants, and those present is a strong sign of forgiveness, peace, solidarity and reconciliation.

It is, therefore, expected that the reconciled parties that ate the kola nut should in no way harbor hatred towards each other. If anyone does not keep to the agreement, he or she would incur the anger of the ancestors who were witnesses at the reconciliation meeting. During the reconciliation, if at any point it becomes very difficult to arrive at a consensus as a result of the difficulty of finding out the truth, a diviner is consulted to find out about the mind of the ancestors towards a particular conflict that is beyond their understanding or reconciliation. The particular concern here is on how to best end or manage such conflict. During this process, the Kola nut is employed, because the kola nut is the food of the ancestors alongside some hot drinks (Abah 2012 and 2016).

The five and six lobed kola nut are used during the settlement of disputes (*Ikpe ikpe*) to invite the gods and ancestors to be witnesses to the process and resolution that is made or oath that is taken or agreement reached during dispute settlement. If after the dispute is settled and the Kola nut is broken, shared and eaten, it is a sign that peace must reign between the persons involved. If afterwards, a mischief maker arises from among the persons, he would be in trouble. On many occasions, the kola nut is used alongside the ofo. Usually the

of which represents the spirit of the ancestors of the particular group of persons would be placed before those present for the case, curses would also be invoked upon any defaulter.

Conclusion

The Igbo kola nut symbolizes the unity and togetherness of the Igbo people. This understanding begins from the shape of the Kola nut itself: it has the shape of the human heart, and so it is regarded as the heart of the Igbo people. It is in this regard that it is said that 'the kola nut is the heart of the Igbo people' (*Oji bu mkpuru obi ndi Igbo*). It does not just symbolize the Igbo people in an abstract sense, it is also a culture that holds the Igbo people together. Wherever they meet, the Kola Nut carries the same meaning and power. It is within this context that the Igbo say that 'the kola nut is the culture that holds the Igbo together' (*Oji bu omenani jikotaru ndi Igbo*).

Thus, the kola nut is used to advance peace and resolve conflicts as a result of what it stands for: the Igbo philosophy of *Otu obi*. According to Uchendu (1964), "Kola nut ... is the symbol of Igbo hospitality. To be presented with a kola nut is to be made welcome; and one is most welcome when the kola nut turns out white, whether this is by accident or by design" (p. 448). The lobes of the kola point to the reality of complementarity in human relationships. When these lobes stay together they remain alive, but when they separate they die and dry off. Their togetherness is a symbol of life, and their separation, death. Life in Africa is about being in relation to the other. To be is to belong, and not to belong is to suffer alienation (Kanu 2017d and 2016d). The kola nut also symbolizes the African worldview, which is characterized by a common origin, common worldview, common language, shared culture, shared race, colour and habits, common historical experience and a common destiny. The communal-individuality of the African is expressed in the Igbo proverb which says 'If a lizard stays off from the foot of a tree, it would be in danger' (*Ngwere ghara ukwu osisi, aka akpara ya*) (Kanu 2014c). Mbiti (1970) classically proverbialized the community determining role of the individual when he writes, "I am because we are and since we are, therefore I am" (p. 108). The existence of others assures one of their solidarity and complementarity without which I cannot be. The Kola nut points to the fact that existence is not only meaningful, but also possible only in a community.

It is within this context of its being a unifying cosmic force that makes the kola nut not only capable of bringing about reconciliation between human beings but also between human beings and the spiritual forces that are part of his or her universe.

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