

The Philosophical, Cultural and Theological Symbolism of Kolanut (OJI IGBO)

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ABSTRACT

Many books, journal articles, periodicals have been written, expressing the Igbo life and being. Chief among them is the *Things Fall Apart* of Chinua Achebe, where he articulates the Igbo culture, the religion of the Igbo people and the Igbo general world view. The rites of the kolanut, which include the presentation, the breaking and eating of the kolanut stands central in the expression of its symbolism and the understanding of the Igbo man's perception of himself at the center of the universe. This paper titled the philosophical, cultural and theological symbolism of kolanut argues that through the message of the kolanut lobes, there is no disconnect between the Igbo man's and the Judeo-Christian understanding of the universe. Through the message of the kolanut the Judeo-Christian account of creation becomes clearer. Epistemologically, the message of the kolanut lays foundation for the understanding of the western social sciences including philosophy, cosmology, anthropology, metaphysics, astronomy and theology. This paper is anchored on the Ludwig Wittgenstein theory of meaning, which states that statements are meaningful if, and only if, they can be defined or pictured in the real world and that language also carries with it the thought reality of a people. The messages of the kolanut becomes real when symbolized in the universe. We therefore recommend, that Igbo man should be thought both Christian religion and science from the foundation already laid by the symbolic message of the kolanut.

***"We shall live. We pray for life, children, a good harvest and happiness. You will have what is good for you and I will have what is good for me. Let the kite perch, let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break"* (Achebe, 1994). –Prayer over the kolanut**

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I. Kolanut in Igbo Land: An Introduction

The Igbo speaking people have common understanding of the importance and the significance of kolanuts, but what varies is the traditional way of breaking them. Kolanut is a white, yellow, or red coloured nut or seed of the tree of the proximate genus, cola, with the special difference of Cola Acuminata, Cola Nitida and Cola Vera. For the purpose of our study we shall concentrate on the Cola Acuminata within whose typology is the Kolanut. Different from Cola Acuminata is Cola Nitida. Igbo people generally have no regard for this class; it is not valid for use in broaching any traditional ceremony or rite.

In its physical appearance, kolanut when taken out of the pod, more or less looks like a human heart. It is either lobed or lobeless, but when lobed, splits into lobes or cotyledons (ibe oji). When broken, the number of lobing or cotyledons is always very clear. And it is a tiny central lobe that is tongue-like (ire-oji) uniting all, that is believed to be the voice of the cola. Kolanut has the shape of a human heart. It is the heart of the Igbo people (*Oji bu mkpuruobi ndi Igbo*). Perhaps that is the reason we say that *Oji bu omenala jikotara ndi Igbo*, that is. Kolanut is the culture that unites the Igbos. It contains phytochemicals like Caffeine, theobromine, theophylline, polyphenols etc. (Umeogu, 2019)

In its universal and genetic origin is tree found by creation or evolution in the tropical and sub tropical rain forests in the heart of the world, with special reference to the heart of Africa. No wonder Abaka in Umeogu (2019) argues that kolanut is the seed of a tree of tropical Africa origin, grown especially in Western and Central African areas. It is good to mention that kolanut did not originate from Igbo land. It was adopted by the Igbos as a sacred phenomenon of Igbo culture and tradition. And because it took years of migration, counter migration and passage for kola nut to reach Igbo land, the origin of kola nut in Igbo land as Igbo Kola nut is shrouded in mystery, twilight and mythology. There are various accounts of the origin of kola nut in Ibo land. However, these mythological origins do not fall within the purview of this lecture.

Just like philosophy with special reference to its branch Metaphysics, tells the story of reality at the universal level, the kolanut with its symbol-nature, as a sacred symbolism, tells the story of Igbo reality. So, as an Igbo man with a good taste of Philosophy and Christian Theology, I have tried in this paper to tell the story of Igbo reality, that is to give Igbo reality a philosophical expression. It is within our discourse of the lobing of

the kolanut and the message therein that Igbo philosophy, theology, sociology (public administration) anthropology, cosmology, mathematics, physics and astronomy find their expression.

Uses of the Kola nut in Igbo world

Kolanut is the heart of Igbo culture and tradition. To be sure it is the microcosm of Igbo macrocosmic world. The kola nut is almost everything for the Igbo people. That is why Nzekwu (1963) said that, among the Igbo, kola nut is highly valued and indispensable product and commands our respect in way no other product has done. Below are some of the Igbo people basic uses of the kola nut.

- a) Welcome/Hospitality g) Opening Prayers/Sacred Communion
- b) Rites, Rituals and Ceremonies h) Food/Nutrition
- c) Commerce/Marketing i) Cleansing/Flavouring
- d) Oath taking, Covenants and Settlement of Disputes
- e) Divination and Prophecy j) Sacrifice/Worship k) Receiving the day
- f) Medical and Mystical Uses of the Kola nut.

In Igbo land, kola nut basically symbolizes **peace, unity, reconciliation, integrity, life, fraternity, hospitality, goodwill and kindness**. Presentation of the revered fruit however differs in Igbo communities as in some places; it is accompanied with money no matter how little or white chalk (nzu).

Kolanut in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart

In *Things Fall Apart*, the kola nut is depicted as a symbol of hospitality, friendship and respect. It is presented to guests at important meetings, social events such as weddings, funerals, and infant naming ceremonies throughout the novel. Despite its multiple purposes, the kola nut is broken and eaten when a host welcomes a guest into his home, and constitutes for that matter a powerful symbol of mutual respect in the community. Chinua Achebe presents the kola nut as a fruit which has great cultural value, and fulfills crucial socio-cultural functions though it is offered as a mark of hospitality, and considered as an important gesture of friendship and comradeship. In this work, for the true essence of kola as a cultural symbol to be appreciated, the simple act of its presenting, offering and breaking constitutes in itself a serious ritual enactment. Right from the beginning of the novel, the breaking of the kola nut is not only a solemn ritual, but it is also a piece of drama during which a whole community lights up, reflecting their spiritual and social realities, their morals as well as relationships. In Achebe's fictional works, it is presented to the reader as an important fruit: right from the first pages of the novel, it is a type of symbolism which attracts the attention of the reader as very significant in the Igbo culture for it is a seed that connotatively brings "real life" to the community or better a seed of life. The value of this fruit is presented throughout his novels so as to emphasize its quintessence towards the Igbo culture.

Kolanut: Philosophical, Cultural and Theological Symbolism in Igbo Land Oji Igbo: Cultural Symbolism in Igbo land

"He who brings kola, brings life"

Kola nut is an ordinary fruit but it serves as a great symbol in bringing a people closer or together and thereby foster unbroken relationships among the Igbo both within and outside Nigeria. Therefore, the kola nut is symbolic in the following ways:

i. Acceptance: The kola nut is an indispensable fruit among the Igbo because, the presentation and sharing of kola nut symbolizes unity, love, peace, kindness and gratitude. Obineche²⁵ asserts that kola nut is a symbol of friendship which any host can show among the Igbo even though the monetary value of kola nut is relatively cheap. The inability of a host to either present kola nut or to render an unalloyed apology for his inability to provide kola is interpreted as a sign of unacceptance. In some cases, a guest may not disclose his mission until after the kola nut has been presented to him. Thus, this acceptance is shown by the proverb among the Igbo that he who brings kola nut brings life. Similarly, the hospitality, the acceptance of kola nut offers is equally the same as the shame the rejection of kola nut brings. In Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, in chapter four, when Okonkwo beats his wife during the Peace Week, the priest of Ezeani refuses to share hospitality with him and boldly tells Okonkwo: "Take away your kola nut. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors" The shame of one's kola nut being rejected was enormous and anybody whose kola nut was rejected especially by the elders of the land must do everything possible to atone for his transgressions.

ii. Cooperation: The kola nut wherever it is presented is a sign that parties who have gathered are willing to cooperate among themselves for their common good. It is usually eulogized with the words: “*Egbe bere, Ugo bere*” (live and let live). Again, Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* comes in to show us how the Igbo maintain social cooperation via kola nut fruit. In chapter 3 of the novel, the importance of kola nut and how it enables the Igbo to conduct their affairs is observed, for Okonkwo had approached the wealthy Nwakibie to ask for yam seed to start his business, as he had inherited nothing from his father, Unoka. On his arrival, two elderly neighbours were sent for and the two sons of the old man were present with him in his *Obi (house)*.

Nwakibie presented “a kola nut and an alligator pepper, which were passed round for all to see and returned to him”. He broke the nut saying: We shall live. We pray for life, children, a good harvest and happiness. You will have what is good for you and I will have what is good for me. Let the kite perch, let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break. After the kola nut had been eaten, Okonkwo brought his palm wine. In an exchange with the wealthy farmer on the issue of borrowing yam seed, Okonkwo uses a proverb to sustain his love for hard work and promises to pay back. Nwakibie responded by saying that: “as our father said, you can tell a ripe corn by its look. I shall give you twice four hundred yams”

iii. Solidarity: Beyond acceptance, the kola nut further signifies a show of solidarity, communality and unity of purpose. As kola nut is broken, it fosters love, peace and openness among the group. Whenever the Igbo are gathered even in faraway distant lands of Europe, Asia and America, the truest symbol present is the *Oji Igbo*. It is both a cultural identity as well as cultural symbol.

iv. Recognition: Kola nut is used to trace seniority among constituting members of the family, village or community. In a gathering, when kola nut is presented by the host, it is passed round the guests in order of seniority and finally presented to the most senior person in the family, village or community as the case may be to bless the kola nut.

v. Unifying Agent: One of the significances of kola nut is unity. On the kola nut tree, a number of pods are held in a fruit stalk. Each pod contains a number of kola nuts and a number of lobes are unified together to form the kola nut. These are signs of unity.

For the want of time, we may skip detail discussion on the **Presentation, Blessing, Breaking and Distribution or Sharing** of kola nut in Igbo land in order to lay more emphasis on the Tongue, Lobing and the message of the kola nut.

Tongue, Lobing and the message of the kola nut

Ndi Igbo siri na ihe e jiri awara oji awa bu ka a mara ole o gbara, n’ihi na o karighi utara a na-elo otu ugboro

Ire Oji: Tongue of the kola nut.

Kola nut talks in Igbo land and with the kola nut reality is expressed. The kola nut lobes are united or tied around a knob called the kola nut tongue (*ire oji*), which normally belongs to the spirits. It is with the kola nut tongue that the kola nut lobes talk and through the lobes; the kola nut gives its message. We can now delve into the symbolismic modulations of the lobings of Igbo kolanut.

Oji Ogbi in Igbo Culture

When the kola nut is lobeless, or one lobed it is called *Oji Mmuo*, (spirit kola nut). *Oji Ifilifi* or *Oji kpurukakpu* (Roundy kola nut) or *Oji Igbo* (Dumb kola nut), *Oji Akwu na Ogbi* or *Obi* (Kola nut of the Mystical circle or Zero). Such a kola nut is not meant to be eaten by human beings. It is normally thrown behind the house to the spirit/gods. And if a host consecutively offers a visitor this type of kola nut three times, the host is no longer permitted to offer the visitor any kola nut and must sacrifice a cock to the gods/spirits. It is an abomination to break this type of kola. What then is the phenomenon of *Oji Ogbi* in Igbo land? *Oji Igbo* is a symbol of the universe in its unity, indivisibility, unrepeatability and communion. *Oji Igbo* is to be sure, not the universe alone but the manifestation of that One, without a second, who made it possible for the universe to be, and who is different from the universe as its creator. So apart from externally depicting the universe or the world, *Oji Igbo* symbolically depicts the being of God (*Chukwu*), who alone, in Himself, created the universe and everything in it.

Oji Okala naabo

The two lobed kola nut often is the Cola Nitida: Oji awusa or Oji Goro. In Igbo typology it is called Oji Okala naabo. Just like the lobeless kola nut, it belongs to the spirits and it is not used for cultural celebrations in Igbo land. As the name implies Oji Okala naabo signifies division. Just as Oji Ogbi is the manifest symbolism of the absolute reality of God, Oji naabo is the manifest representation of heaven and earth, light and darkness. The single word of God that came from the lobeless kola nut which is pure light divided into two the binary polar-charge thereof to establish heaven and earth, and to separate light from darkness. To be sure, any time man lifts the Oji Okala naabo up in prayer, man pronounces the binary voice of God that establishes heaven and earth and all in them. In Igbo kola nut therefore, there is the voice of God which man can voice. So at any rate, the two lobed kola nut establishes Igbo cosmogenesis as coming from the God-symbolism of the lobeless kola nut. Oji Okalanaabo is the reason why Igbo Cosmology is binary or dual, even though it has a unity. Igbo world came from God through creation (Chineke).

From the correct Igbo reading of gender functionality in kolanut, Oji Okalanaabo is neither male nor female. The two lobed kolanut is responsible for harmony as well as conflict and opposition in things. Because it is responsible for the conflict and opposition, the Igbo people do not eat it. For it has the power to generate conflicts and division among a united people. Yet only on special occasions, as in connection with people who have close relationship like brothers or sisters or even husband and wife, such kolanut is eaten to make for original unity and communion.

Oji Ikenga

The three lobed kola nut is called Oji Ikenga (Spirit of power and achievement) Oji Dike (kola nut of the brave or of the powerful or of the valiant, Oji echichi (kola nut of the titled people. Unlike the lobeless and two lobed kola nuts that cannot be distinguished into male or female genders, the three lobed kola nut are all males in the lobes. When the host's kola nut breaks into three lobes before the visitor, it is an indication that the kola nut wants to be eaten also that the visitor before the host is a powerful person. Oji Ikenga being all male shows that man was create before the woman, and that the woman came from man. It depicts masculinity, that is why woman not generally advised to eat this completely masculine kolanut; though in special cases women who cannot bear children are encouraged to it, together with certain fertility herbs. Oji Ikenga establishes Igbo anthropology; that the male gender is the first in creation. However, it has to be on record that it is the four lobed kola nut: Oji afia naano ubosi naano that totally made Igbo anthropology, Anthropogenesis and Gender science significant with the advent of its two males and two female lobes. So the male and female gender modifications of kola nut in Igbo land symbolismically reveal the biological and physiological characteristics of human beings and their behaviours and development in Igbo society and culture.

It is also the example of the nature of the Igbo family. The Igbo family revolves around the Igbo male elder; and even though the Oji Ikenga has no female member, the three lobed typify the three members of Igbo family: the father, the mother and the children. The body *ahu*, the mind *uche* and the spirit *mmuo* are also typified, the three components of man's psychology. Therefore, Igbo Sociology, Sociogenesis and public administration show that we all members of the society, part of the main. So Igbo society is made up of God/gods, the world and the human beings, signified by the lobeless kola nut and other lobbing of the kola nut respectively; and authority starts with the gods and ends with the people, especially the elders. So, the lobbing of the kola nut in Igbo land depicts the structure, relationships, organization and administration of the Community/Society with regard to God/gods, the world, and human beings.

Oji Ikenga is a symbol of light (fire), power and stability in Igbo life and being. The stability, light and power talked about are exemplified in the three legged oven, whose firewood centre gives a powerful light on which pot of all sizes sit to cook Igbo food. Oji Ikenga is always a symbol of unlimited power, good omen and prevailing power of achievement in Igbo world.

Oji Afia na Ubosi

The four lobed kola nut, Oji aka ano, is Oji Udo (that is kola nut of peace), Oji ngozi na amala (the kola nut of blessing and grace), Oji afia naano ubosi naano (kola nut of the market spirit), Oji nwoke na nwaanyi, kola nut of the male and female genders) Oji Ezi na Ulo (family kola nut). The four lobed kola nut unites the family and market traditions in Igbo land and culture. It is usually the kola nut used in marriage, economic and family celebrations with its multiples of eight, twelve, sixteen lobes. Among the lobes of the four lobes, two are masculine and two are feminine. Its lobes represent the four market days in Igbo calendar. It is also called Oji afia naano, ubosi naano. It is another kola nut with human face; and this time around, not just the human male face but also the human female face.

To be sure, it is expected that when the four lobes are thrown concerning each and any life event, the integration and the differentiation of the fallen or thrown lobes will be sure to reveal the whole meaning of life. For instance, depending on the throws, if lobes lie open on their backs, they show something positive. But if

they lie on their faces with their backs up, they show something negative. If in the throw the lobes form circle they reveal life, but if they form a cross, they reveal conflict or death.

Oji Aka na Okpa/ Ubala aka

The five lobed kolanut is Oji uba or Oji ubalaka (the kola nut of wealth or wealthy destiny) Oji omumu (fertility or procreation), Oji Aka na Okpa (the kola nut of industry and achievement), Oji Mmuba (the kola nut of increase and multiplication), Oji Siriri werere (kola nut of luck and prosperity) Anytime such a kola is broken it shows that things will go well both in the land of the spirit and in the land of human existence. In relation to gender modification and qualification, the five lobed kola nut will mostly have two males and three female lobes. With its two males and three female lobes, Oji Aka na Okpa once more establishes the male domination of females in Igbo land. No matter how few or “stupid” the men are, women in all their numerical strength and powers are dominated by them. To be sure, Igbo life and being revolves around the male elders.

Oji Aka na Okpa is very similar to seven lobed kolanut in its symbolism, for in its own right, it symbolizes “Ozuzu”, especially in reference to human beings. (Ozuzu mmadu). That is why it is called fertility kolanut. Whenever it is broken in marriage ceremony, it shows that the husband and wife will have many children and will be prosperous in their days. It is also used in the prayer of reconciliation, settlement and peace. It also shows that somebody will rise from the family or environment where the kola nut is broken, who will do a great thing for the good of the people.

Oji Mkpuru Ose Isii/ Oji Ogbugba Ndu in Igbo Culture

The six lobed kolanut, Oji Ogbugbandu mmuo na mmadu, is Oji Ogbugbandu (the covenant kolanut), Oji Oriko (the kolanut of communion), Oji ndi ichie (the kolanut of the ancestors), Oji Umummee na Umuite (the kolanut of blood and spirit ties). It is used to make for peace, to take oath, to create covenant ties, to punish offenders. Because it is used to expose culprits, offenders and punishing them, many think that six lobed kolanut is a kolanut of bad omen (especially in relation to the tradition of Ikpu Oji ana). But the six lobed kolanut has also a lot of good omen as described above. In terms of gender modification and qualification, it can have two male and four female lobes or three males and three female lobes. When it has three males and three females, one female is dropped to establish male supremacy; This is also because trinity is masculine and not feminine in Igbo life and being. Igbo culture can never accept equality of Gender. Female gender is only supplementary.

Oji Asaa Mmuo na Mmadu or Oji Asaa Mmadu Asaa Mmuo.

The seven lobed kola nut is Oji Asaa Mmadu Asaa Mmuo (the kolanut of perfection of Man and Spirit), Oji kpurugede (the complete and all rounded kolanut), Oji Ogbuefi (the kolanut of the cow killer), Oji Emume na Mmemme (the kolanut of celebration and festivals) Oji Iwu na Ikpe (the kolanut of Law and Judgement). The seven lobed kolanut is always a good visitor in Igbo land. It always calls for celebration, feasts and merriments, wherein a number of cocks, goats even cows are killed for celebration. Its advent always shows that something great, wonderful and marvelous must happen to bring joy, justice, life to the people. It has multiple gender modifications and qualifications.

It is always a good omen in Igbo thought and culture. Wherever it is broken, it is always a symbol of wisdom, power, prosperity, fertility and celebration. Among Umunri of Igbo land, the phenomenon of seven lobed kolanut is always a call for celebration, and in such a celebration, yam porridge is normally eaten with beef or goat or chicken pepper soup, and gallons of palm wine are normally emptied into stomachs. Its symbolism covers better days ahead, end of plagues. Wherever it is raised becomes the center of spirituality and humanity, the meeting point of heaven and earth, signifying great wisdom and great power, the human face and spiritual face.

Other Kolanut Lobings in Igbo Culture

It will be good at this juncture to note that there are kolanuts in Igbo land with eight lobes (Oji kpakpankpa Ndu) which indicates a closure of a foundation or cycle or generation, and a beginning of another foundation, cycle of generation. There kolanuts with eleven lobes which means judgment or conclusive decision. The sixteen lobed kolanut is the *Afa Ugili* kolanut. Some say they have seen up to twenty four lobes or more.

Igbo Theology and Igbo Theogenesis

The Igbo may have come to the idea of God through other means, but I am of the view that the Igbo idea of God, not as an article of faith, but as an article of knowledge, came from the symbolism of the lobeless kola nut: Oji-ifilifi is an undivided unity. Creation implies division in Igbo thought and culture. So the undivided unity in the lobeless kola nut both establishes the ‘uncreation’ of God and the fact God is one without a second.

Igbo Theogenesis does not mean that the lobeless kola nut is Igbo God or *Chukwu*. What I want to establish is that the Igbo discourse or science of God involves the concept of the substance or symbolism of the lobeless kolanut as undivided unity, genderless, mysterious, etc; so much so that when one brings up the ideas of creation/division (*Chineke*) or universe carriage (Oseburuwa or Olisa ebuluwa) in God, it must be established first that must exist as an undivided unity before engaging in any form of work or function whatsoever. So the undivided unity of *Oji ifilifi* symbolically establishes the nature of God in Igbo land, and functional beliefs about god.

Finally, the kolanut is multivalent symbol of Igbo thought and culture and correctly depicts multidimensional individuality and personality of the communalistic Homo symbolicus; Onye Igbo. The kolanut in its entirety reveals how God, the world, human existence, the society and knowledge came to the world through Igbo land and culture. From the discussion above on the modification and qualification of the kola nut lobes one could vividly see Igbo theology, Igbo cosmology, Igbo anthropology, Igbo sociology, Public Administration and Igbo Mathematics, Physics and Astronomy. Consequently, Igbo philosophy, Igbo Culture and Igbo theology are all reflected on the rites of Kolanut.

Religious dimension of Oji Igbo

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 (Uchendu, 1967). 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 (Akaenyi, 1998)

The importance of kolanut to the Igbo nation 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 (Akaenyi, 1998)

I therefore recommend that we transform our knowledge of reality by the authority and specialization of kolanut symbolism into the study of the Sciences and Arts involved especially for a better understanding of *Onye Igbo* as he sees himself and his environment.

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