

THE CONCEPT OF OJI-IGBO "COLA ACUMINATA" IN IGBO ONTOLOGY AND ITS FUNCTIONS AND USAGE AMONG IGBO COMMUNITIES OF SOUTH EAST NIGERIA

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Abstract

This article discusses Igbo worldview of kolanut, its usage and functions among the Igbo communities in South-East Nigeria. The importance of kolanut among these communities cannot be overstated. Traditionally, apart from the socio-cultural usage of kolanuts, there are other functions that kolanut performs in regards to peace building, reconciliation and conflict resolution among the Igbo communities of the Southeast Nigeria. Among all Igbo's objects and symbols of hospitality, none is as important as the kolanut. It is among the greatest, if not the greatest cultural symbolized entity that receives attention and central to the life as well as ceremonies of the Igbo people. The Igbo always say "Onye wetara Oji wetara ndu" that is to say, "He that brought kola brought life." Kolanut has been referred as the king of fruits in the Igbo worldview which signifies unity and togetherness among the Igbo people. This paper has studied the different dimensions of kolanut with keen interest or objective of drawing out its implications among the Igbo people as an omen of unity, hospitality and togetherness which signifies custom that binds the Igbo together. This study discovered that in the settlement of disputes among the Igbo communities of Southeast Nigeria that kolanut is an oracle of truth. For the purpose of this study, mixed method of inquiry was adopted.

Keywords: Ontology, Kolanut, Peace building, Cola acuminata and Worldview

INTRODUCTION

Igbo are people of Nigeria, who occupied mostly the Southeast geopolitical zone of Nigeria. They are socially and culturally diverse, consisting of many subgroups, though they live in dispersed group of villages, towns, communities etc, they all speak one language with different mother tongues which fall within the Niger-Congo kwa dialectic family. Kolanut occupies a fundamental place in Igbo ontology. It is among the greatest symbolic entity in the Igbo's worldview that represents their socio-cultural phenomenon of love and unity. Among the other cultural symbols of the Igbo, none has received attention like the kolanut. It is very important and central to the life and ceremonies of the Igbo people. Distinctively, Igbo people have created an evocative and figurative character of communicating messages that represent aspects of their lives or those around them with kolanut. The three alphabets of the Igbo word "Oji" (kola) is an acronym which is literally translated as: O–Omenala, J-Jikotara, I-Igbo (Custom that unites Igbo).

The Southern Nigeria was considered the center of occurrence of kolanut (*Cola acuminata*), with its original area of distribution stretching from Nigeria to Gabon (Opeke, 1992). West Africans took the seed with them when they traveled, even in the days of the slave trade. Kola has therefore been extensively cultivated in tropical South and Central America and the West Indies. Gordon & Oji (1997) reported that kolanut also occurred spontaneously in the mountainous areas of Angola, Zaïre and Cameroon, and it has long been in cultivation on the islands of Principe and São Tomé.

Objectives of the Study

Kolanut ritual of presentation, usage and worldview has been fundamental requirements in all Igbo gatherings and functions. Most times, poor knowledge of the Igbo's worldview on kolanut has posed a problematic scene in socio-cultural activities among the Igbo people. Therefore, in any of the traditional gatherings or events, if the rituals of kolanut presentation were not followed accordingly, it is assumed that such gathering has not begun and the unseen guests (ancestors) were not invited. The aim of this study is to probe deeply in the ontological dimensions of kolanut with particular interest in drawing out its implications for conflict resolutions and peace building within the traditional communities of the southeast Nigeria.

The specific objectives are:

- i. To ascertain if the kolanut is a sacred object of truth, unity and hospitality among Igbo communities of the Southeast Nigeria.
- ii. To identify the contributions of Kolanut to peace building among the Igbo communities of Southeast Nigeria.
- iii. To determine if the practices of kolanut aimed at resolving disputes in non-violent ways.

Research Questions

1. Is kolanut a sacred object of truth, unity and hospitality among Igbo communities of the Southeast Nigeria?
2. Would kolanut regulations significantly contribute to peace building among the Igbo communities of Southeast Nigeria?
3. Would the practices of kolanut aimed at resolving disputes in non-violent way among Igbo communities of Southeast Nigeria?

Methodology

The study is opinion research that investigates the ontology of kolanut in the Igbo worldview. Mixed method of inquiry was adopted. The research investigated the importance of kolanut with its relevance to the socio-cultural knowledge in peace and conflict resolution among Igbo communities of Southeast Nigeria. The population of the study comprises: Mbieri, Ndoki and Nsukka communities in Southeast Nigeria. Practical approaches associated with the presentation and rituals of kolanut were investigated and their significance to conflict resolution was viewed.

Concept of Kolanut

To understand the concept of kolanut in Igbo's worldview effectively, Afrocentric theory which is primarily associated and coined from the works of an African American scholar, Molefi Kete Asante in late 1980s was adopted. Afrocentrism as an academic philosophy was attributed to the works of these scholars Cheikh Anta Diop, John Henrik Clarke, Ivan Van Sertima and Molefi Kete Asante, (Chawane, 2021). Afrocentric theory explains the socio-religious and cultural activities of Africans within the context of African historical experiences. This seeks to mature relationship to other cultures, rather not imposing nor seeking to advance its own material advantages. Thus, this is in consonant with the Igbo socio-cultural tradition of kolanut presenting rituals in any of their gathering or events; to their visitors after a brief exchange of greetings. Symbolically it expresses their hospitality and fraternity to the guests (gods, ancestors and the living). In the kolanut rituals, prayer will be said by the one who is authorized to do so, to the chi (gods) of the land, the ancestors, whom is assumed to be the elders both the living and the dead and also the living thereby involving the tri-partial cosmological existential belief of Africa to join such event or gathering. If this ritual of kolanut was not adequately followed, it means and shows that the parties which ought to be in such gathering is inadequately presented, thus such kolanut will be rejected and the initiator (Ogo-oji) of the kolanut will be levied. And when the rites of kolanut presentation went the way it ought to be done, the authorized person, mostly among the host will split the kolanut and present it first to the gods and the ancestors, by giving or throwing a piece of the broken kolanut to the gods as well as ancestors and hierarchically the parts of the kolanut will be shared among every individual present in such gathering. This benevolence shows friendliness, open heartedness and love which are manifested in the splitting of the kolanut into fragment according to tradition for consumption by all (Nwosu, 2012).

The visitor at such point makes his mission known to the host. This act was assumed as spiritual communion or covenant between the host/guest and to the ancestors. The Igbo kolanut occupies a vital position within the cultural belief of the Igbo people and is regarded as the king among every other kola in the Igbo worldview. Functionally, in all socio-political, cultural and religious gatherings in Igbo communities, Igbo kolanut was seen as signatory to such gatherings, and without it, such functions or gathering lacks the assurances of welcome by the gods and ancestors. It was also the belief that Igbo kolanut do not understand any other language beside Igbo. This was why the kolanut rituals are made with the mother tongue of the host to the gods, ancestors and the living.

Conceptual Delineation

The theme of this discourse could bear divergent interpretations if effort was not made to clarify some terms as to come to terms with the objective of the work. Hence, the following terms are contextually clarified in order to provide a clear focus in this paper.

Ontology: The term 'ontology' (or ontologia) was coined in 1613, independently, by two

philosophers, Rudolf Göckel (Goclenius), in his *Lexicon philosophicum* and Jacob Lorhard (Lorhardus), in his *Theatrum philosophicum*. Its first occurrence in English as recorded by the OED appears in Bailey's Dictionary of 1721, which defines ontology as 'an account of being in the abstract'. Thus Ontology, as a branch of philosophy is the science of what is, of the kinds and structures of objects, properties, events, processes and relations in every area of reality. Ontology seeks to provide a definitive and exhaustive classification of entities in all spheres of being. Ontology in this work seeks to establish the phenomenal expression, worldview and concept as it regards to the understanding of an entity (kolanut) as a part that makes the whole cultural belief about custom that unites the Igbo in their worldview.

Kolanut (Oji): Kolanut is a foliage seed of the family of genus *Sterculia* and was widely used in West and Central Africa long before the arrival of European voyagers (Russell, 1955). The kolanut referred in this study is Oji-Igbo (*Cola acuminata*), commonly used for socio-cultural and religious activities among Igbo communities in Nigeria.

Peace building: This are non-violence methodological approaches or activities aimed at resolving conflicts in suitable ways thereby transforming the cultural and structural conditions that propels destructive conflicts from the grass root and ensure peaceful co-existence of conflicting parties.

Cola Acuminata: This is cotyledon specie of the genus *Sterculia* which is referred as the king of fruit among the Igbo communities of Southeast Nigeria.

Worldview: This is referred as a set of basic philosophical assumptions, values, stories and expectations which inform our everyday thought and action.

Theoretical Framework

For the analysis of this work, theory of symbolic interactionism was applied. The theory was propounded by Herbert Blumer in 1969. In general construct, symbolic interactionism theory states that human beings react towards things on the basis of the meaning they ascribe to it. That is, things do not have inherent or unvarying meanings, rather their meanings differ depending on how people define and respond to them, how people define or give meaning to things they encounter will shape their actions towards them (Edeogu & Nnaji, 2014). Therefore, to understand the ontology of kolanut in the overall worldview of the Igbo people, we must know how they define the concept of kolanut as a socio-religious object that unifies the living, ancestors and gods, thereby ensuring that the basic structures of the indigenous activities are maintained within the community. However, the overall worldview of the concept of kolanut is rather difficult to define and equally difficult to set within specific limits.

Symbolic interactionism is very pertinent here because kolanut is a symbolic object used by Igbo people in their socio-religious and cultural activities, the way Igbo people understand the symbolic presentations of kolanut and also how they handle it determine

their behavior towards this object. This is because this object (kolanut) shapes their behavior and how they interact with others. Gazala Qadri, (2017) argues that without symbolism "Words can be nothing more than arbitrary signs that human kind has created for the convenience of communicating with one another". The term "Symbolism" is a practice of representing things by means of symbols or by investing things with a symbolic meaning or character that describe any mode of expression which, instead of referring to anything directly, refers to it indirectly through the medium of something else, therefore we are surrounded by symbols that represent diverse meanings and notions in it.

The concept of Symbolic interactionism as a framework is applicable to the whole element of the society. Therefore, no human society exists in isolation because interaction is the basic fabric of living. The word "Kolanut" is the core epic of the discussion. Kolanut symbolically from the ontology of the Igbo's viewpoint represents the whole essence of hospitality, good omen and absolute welcoming from the host to the visitor. This act of benevolence within the Igbo's cosmology is seen and regarded as been divinely interaction between the Chi, ancestors and the living. It is on this note that symbolic presentations of kolanut are applicable to individuals, communities and organizational events within Igbo communities. In practice, the concept of kola presentation allows the benevolence culture of Igbo people to tangible, appealing, more meaningful and to be understood. It conveys hospitality as fun, adventurous and caring as it allows subconscious, informal and enjoyable learning through use of the imagination. One could say that the major stratum of kolanut presentation is that which we inherit from the world around us or from the past. It is the traditional element and is the culture which is probably going to have the longest lasting effect on young people and adults who stay in such society for any reasonable length of time.

Literature Review

There are many types of kola used in presenting to visitors in traditional Igboland such as garden egg, bitter kola, coconut, pepperfruit, groundnut, white chalk, dry meat, kolanut etc, (Ofomata, 2013). According to Uchendu (1965), kolanut is seen as the greatest symbol of Igbo hospitality which always comes first in any socio-cultural gatherings of the Igbo people. It is seen as the king among the Igbo welcoming fruits. And because of this importance it occupies, presenting the kolanut is very ceremonial. The ceremony begins with the presentation of the kolanut to the guests through the next ranking male after which it is returned to the host or broken in accordance with the laid principles and customs of the host community. It is usually said from the onset of the presentation of kola nut that "he who brings kola brings life" which brings blessings, free mindedness, love and honesty.

Literally, from the position of Ezeugo, (1985), which stipulates that the kolanut is the bread of Igbo sacramental communion and must therefore be specially presented, broken, shared and partaken by all the parties and families in every ceremony as the final

consummation and blessing. From Ezeugo's position referring kolanut as the sacramental Igbo bread of communion that has the final consummation and blessing, it becomes clear that presenting kolanut to an Igbo visitor shows a sense of hospitality, love, welcome and acceptance. Meanwhile in the same vein, denial of kolanut signifies not welcomed, unfriendliness, disagreement and disunity to the guest or visitor.

More so, there is no other symbol or object that represents Igbo communal spirit than the Igbo kolanut, therefore Igbo kolanut is highly respected and ritually presented in accordance to a trace of kinship relationship starting from the home of the host, to the visitors, back to the host according to the identity and seniority of people in the gathering.

Therefore, kolanut goes beyond the darkish red or pinkish yellow seed as the colour may be that you find in trays sold on the street, market and in kiosks. It is not just the biannual crop grown and stored in sacks and baskets (Kanu, 2015). It is a food that must be eaten with pleasure; it is an embodiment of adoration and must be attended to with deserving admiration. It unites the living and dead, and symbolizes a feast of togetherness, love and trust. Nwosu (1983), argues that the principle behind the kolanut culture is that the nut cannot be broken without saying of prayers or incantations by the eldest in the gathering through the native language of the host, that is to say: “oji adighi a no oyibo” and this gave rise to the proverb that says: “He that brings kola brings life” (Nwachukwu, 2012), and when kolanut is well shared thus, prosperity and long life is eminent to the people.

Functions and Usage of Kola Nuts

The Igbo worldview of kolanut is something mystical. The functions and usage of kolanuts in Igbo communities cannot be overemphasized, therefore some scholars have rigorously stated the usage of kolanuts and functions as follows. In the words of Idigo (2002), kolanut is used to entertain visitors, for prayers especially in the morning, asking for forgiveness and help, for oath taking/covenant, for worship of ancestors through libation, for ceremonies like marriage, child dedication, burials, new yam festivals and for financial as well as economic wealth rituals. Nzeako (1979) stresses that Kolanut is functionally used as an intermediary for settling of disputes and quarrels, as a medium for reconciliation and being faithful to others, as an object of kings' coronation and chieftaincy title taking and to appease the gods. Dike (2010) suggests the following as ways in which kolanut should be used: when one wants to ask for favor from God and man, when one wants to praise or thank God or man, when wants to obtain favor, to maintain or attract friendship, to unite or reach an accord with someone etc. Nzeako (1979) vehemently states that kolanut came directly from God, the creator of the universe; this is why the Igbo show it to Him, the giver before it is broken. Therefore, these formed the basis on which the Igbos attached socio-cultural, religious and economic values to kolanut.

Kolanut and Settlement of Disputes

In Igbo worldview, kolanut is a sacred tool for establishing lasting peace among the Igbo people. The summon of kola (edonye oji) among the conflicting parties introduces a

different face to the issue of conflict resolution in the traditional Igbo society. Traditionally, before a conflict/dispute is resolved, there must be a gathering of the disputant's party and the committee of elders in council which comprises the titled men, traditionalist and the congregation of the village folks (umunna, umuada, age grade) etc, in the village square, town hall, Eze's palace or a place set aside for such gathering. The first parties involve the individuals or groups that are having the conflict while the second parties include persons or people who are invited for the resolution. Both parties gather together on a scheduled date precisely on a market day as approved by their culture. The intermediaries will like to hear from the parties involved in the dispute to ascertain the origin and remote cause of the conflict and find out the truth, apportion blames to the defaulter and finally resolve the conflict between the two individuals, groups or parties.

As declared initially that kolanut "Oji" attaches much and great importance in anything concerning gathering together, it is noteworthy that in resolving a conflict, there must be presentation of kolanuts which were brought by the two individuals or groups that had the conflict. The eldest in the convention will pray, bless the kolanut and invite their ancestors and God the creator to be present and allow the truth to manifest and curse whoever that may pervert the truth.

Finally, when the truth prevails and judgment is passed, the most important of all in the resolution of conflict is uniting the two parties together through advices, pleadings, cautions and allow them to confess forgiveness to each other and this should be bound with oat taking by the two parties declaring that they will love each other, never to seek for any evil to befall each other's life, family or progress. Then the conflicting parties will chew each kola nut from his opponent's hand and the remaining kola nut at the hand of the opponent will be thrown to the ancestor as a witness to the peace agreement reached amongst these disputing parties in the presence of the convention. Thus, at this juncture, kolanut prevails its validity, sacredness, royalty, respect, and honour which it deserves in Igboland as the eldest among the elders in the gathering decrees over the conflicting parties that whoever will deviate from any of the agreements and pronouncements made in this resolution should have a curse. Everybody will answer "I seee" (so shall it be). The entire convention will have a hand shake with each other in commiseration for the peaceful resolution of the conflict. Everyone will rejoice and go home in peace because the conflict has been resolved peacefully and amicably.

More so, dispute resolutions in traditional Igbo communities is usually started with the calling for a reconciliatory meeting for the conflicting parties within the community they reside and at such meeting, kolanut is presented with its rites and rituals of presentation, breaking, distribution and eating of the kolanut by the living and their ancestors which is referred as "Igo-Ofo". The Igo-Ofo signifies an omen of hospitality and a sign of sincerity to the proceedings among the parties involved in the resolution. After listening to the parties involved and useful pieces of advice have been given by the elders and a

consensus has been reached, then the kolanut with five cotyledons is brought, prayed over and broken into pieces by the person who is qualified to do so. The parties involved in the dispute will be urged to bite and exchange the piece they have beaten. The act of exchanging piece of beaten kolanut and its eaten 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 kolanut 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 kolanut is employed, because the kolanut is the food of the ancestors alongside some hot drinks (Abah 2012 and 2016).

In most parts of Igbo communities (Ndoki, Mbieri and Nsukka regions), the five and six lobed kolanuts are used during the settlement of disputes 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 kolanut is broken, shared and eaten, it is a sign that peace must reign between the persons involved. If afterwards, an instigator arises from among the persons, he would be in trouble because such person is violating the verdict of the ancestors. On many occasions, the kolanut is used alongside the Ofo (staff of justice). Usually, the Ofo 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.

Discussion/Conclusion

There is no community void of problems and this point to the fact that people cannot exist without experiencing one conflict or engaging in dispute. Symbolically, the kolanut in the worldview of Igbos represent the acronym of unity, acceptance, hospitality and togetherness to Igbo people. This understanding begins from the shape of the kolanut 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 kolanut 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 Kolanut carries the same meaning and power. It is within this context that the Igbo say that 'the kolanut is the culture that holds the Igbos together' (Oji buomenanijikotarundi Igbo). On the other hand, conflict is as old as human society. It is mostly the human interactions in the society over needs and wants that breed conflicts. When the expectations over these needs and wants are unfairly met by social forces or powers, then the resultant outcome becomes strife over those scarce resources that will ensure equity in the society.

The concept of kolanut in Igbo ontology connotatively goes beyond the literal fruits

offered to entertain visitors or quest in social events or at home. Kolanut is the oracle of truth, peace and hospitality among the Igbo people and is regarded as the sacred bread of communion between the dead and the living that is the main reason that kolanut (Oji Igbo) has sacramental rites among the Igbo communities of eastern part of Nigeria.

More so, in every community, there exist fundamental relics, symbols and objects that stand as structural/religious fabrics to ensure that such society thrives amongst others. Thus, in Igbo communities, kolanut (Oji-Igbo) stands as that fundamental relic, object and symbol of sacredness that unites the living and the dead to God, that is the reason when kola is presented, in its rituals of breaking, the eldest of such community will first of all offer it to God the giver and the ancestors, the living dead and to the living. This praying ritual must certainly be in the mother tongue of the host, this is to say that kolanut (oji) does not understand any other language than that of the host. Thus, validating the cultural sacredness of Igbo kola and authenticating its efficacy among the living.

Finally, the Igbos socio-culturally believed that kolanut is a food from God, given to bind the people together and such belief prompted the Igbos to use an acronym "OJI" as a name to this God's gift of food. Symbolic presentation of kolanut (Oji) with five cotyledons in Igbo cultural setting known as "Oji Ikpe-ikpe" in any dispute resolution within any traditional institutions of justice in Igboland synchronizes the summon of the gods, ancestors and the living to a verdict for the disputing parties and through its sacred rites and rituals, such kola transcends to the sacred-bread of communion witnessed by the Chi (gods) of the disputing parties and among other witnesses invoked in the ritual prayers of the kolanut. Hence, as the disputing parties partook of this kola nut, whatever resolutions and agreement reached is bonded by eating of this kolanut as witnessed by the ancestors, the living and the chi of the disputing parties. Therefore, kolanut is seen as an object of peace making in the worldview of the Igbo people.

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