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**IGBO TRADITIONAL KOLANUT AS THE ULTIMATE  
SYMBOL OF HOSPITALITY AND FRIENDSHIP**

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**Abstract**

*‘Oji Igbo’ – the Igbo traditional kolanut occupies a central position in the sociocultural and traditional life of the Igbo, who are geographically located in the southeast areas of Nigeria. Among the people, the presentation of this nut stands out clearly as the number one item of welcome to one’s guests, visitors, and friends at any formal or informal occasions where two or more persons are gathered. In the traditional milieu of the Igbo, the arrival and consequential presentation of ‘Oji Igbo’ is indicative of the presenter’s expression of his utmost goodwill, love, and friendship to his revered guests. Its presentation is synonymous with the expression of the utmost form of affection to one’s guests or visitors. It is an expression of open-mindedness, unbiased hospitality, and heartfelt honesty and sincerity. Therefore, the arrival and formal presentation of this great traditional nut in any Igbo event is highly regarded and respected in the traditional milieu of the Igbo, which then heralds the invocation of prayers to God and the ancestors in the*

*people's language. It is the primary target of this paper to discuss the traditional significance of this ancient emblem of Igbo identity and uniqueness in the comity of Nigeria's multiplicity of cultures and traditions - and has consistently withstood the corroding influences of this digital era. Thus, among the Igbo therefore, the arrival and formal presentation of this ageless traditional nut is counted as the offer of the greatest gift which money can never procure at a price.*

**Keywords:** Oji, Igbo, Ultimate, Symbol, Hospitality.

### **Introduction**

The Igbo, located in the southeast area of Nigeria, is the third-largest ethnic group in Nigeria. Similarly, Igbo is the language spoken by the people who occupy this part of Nigeria, which is a dominantly Christian nation. As well, the acronym, Igbo, is used about the people who occupy this part of Nigeria. On the strength of these factors, Greenberg (1949), in Uchendu (1965), claims that the term "Igbo" is used in three senses: to refer to Igbo territory, to the domestic speakers of the language, and the language spoken by them.' According to this source, the Igbo language is one of the speech communities in the Kwa subfamily of the Niger-Congo family, which is marked by a complicated system of tones used to distinguish meaning and grammatical relationships.

In the midst of Nigeria's multiplicity of ethnic nations and language communities which have been estimated to be about 490 distinct groups, the Igbo stand out clearly. They share distinctly common cultures and value systems. They speak the same language which is made up of countless numbers of dialectal variations. Among the Igbo, cultures of hard work, responsibility, and dedication to duty are encouraged. For them, attitudes of indolence, laziness, and unnecessary dependence on the generosity of others, most especially the family members are discouraged with all amounts of impunity. Among the people however, the cultures of supporting one another are strongly encouraged. For them, it is almost a law

that it is one's responsibility to assist a relative, family member, or kin group member to 'rise' (Achebe, 1958; Uchendu, 1965; Iwunna, 2011).

In the traditional milieus of the people, the quintessential position occupied by this traditional tropical crop – Oji, is quite high. The respect and honour placed on this simple nut is next to none among the Igbo. As such, the simple arrival of this nut at any forum, event, or gathering evokes prayers, and incantations to God and the unseen ancestors of the land. To that end, no serious Igbo event can ever be concluded without the formal presentation of this traditional nut known as Oji Igbo. Its arrival at home, in the gathering of kinsmen and women for any range of events, is synonymous with the formal commencement of such an event, and is also indicative of the seriousness attached to such a gathering. Thus, it is usually said among the people that 'kolanut does not come out for any fun' (Uchendu, 1965; & Ogbalu, 1974).

The indication here is that the cultures of kolanutting are overwhelmingly crucial in the traditional life of the Igbo, and is conducted with great reverence and supplication. In the compendium of the people's cultures and traditional value systems therefore, kolanut (Oji) occupies a very high position. In the mental conceptions of the people, it is conceived as a sacred trans-generational item from the ancestors which is a symbolical manifestation of life itself (ndu). Based on this understanding therefore the Igbo proverb says that 'Onye wetere Oji wetere ndu' (He who brings kola brings life).

This simple proverb explains the unique symbolism and significance with which the Igbo associate this nut with. The great lesson is that kolanuts play significant functions in the traditions and cultural lives of the Igbo. For the people, Oji functions as the most iconic symbol of welcoming one's guests, as well as the most celebrated item of honour which heralds the formal commencement of any activities, functions, or visitations in Igbo land. Conceived as a special gift from the gods therefore, its presence and formal presentation are highly revered, respected, and celebrated (Osuagwu, 1978; Ukaegbu, 2010; Iwunna, 2011; Uchendu, 1965).

However, in any serious occasion, traditional or otherwise, when

it becomes impossible to present an Oji to one's guests or at the gathering of the kinsmen, formal apologies are usually made by the host. The language of the apology is just simple – and goes as follows: '*Oji ejula ulo. Biko gbaghara nu m*' (There is too much kolanut in my house. Kindly pardon me). It must be remarked however that its absence at such an event could be necessitated by the sudden nature of the visit, gathering, or occasion. Otherwise, tradition demands that every Igbo man usually has some quantity of kolanuts in his house at every moment in time, waiting for unannounced guests. At such moments however, such hosts could present whatever item of food or drink that is available in the house in place of this traditional item. This is also done with some form of apology to the unannounced visitors or guests (Uchendu, 1974; Ogbalu, 1974).

Thus, among the Igbo, no event or traditional ceremony could ever be claimed to be concluded without the formal presentation of kolanuts. At any such events when this ancient nut is absent and not formally presented to guests and persons in attendance, it could simply be concluded to an important scenario, a child's play, and an event of no significance. This is therefore indicative of the fact that events such as marriages, dispute settlements, land negotiations, burial ceremonies, new yam festivals, the birth of new babies into the family, child naming ceremonies, family meetings, community get-togethers, monthly age grade meetings, annual age grade celebrations, etc. At these events, and many others hosted by Igbo families wherever they are in the entire globe, kolanuts herald their formal commencement, while some other suitable items such as drinks, food, biscuits, garden egg, bitter kola, meat, fish, etc. could be presented as replacements, after due apologies have been rendered to the persons in attendance.

It is against this background that this paper therefore explores the fundamental traditional roles which Oji Igbo plays in the traditional and social life of the people. Putting these into context, it must be appreciated that no Igbo traditional ceremonies, social events, or festivals could ever be consummated without placing this traditional nut at the vantage position it occupies in the traditional milieus of the people. Literally speaking therefore, the

Igbo attachment to their kolanutting cultures could only be compared with the symbiotic relationship between a fish and its natural environment – water. By implication therefore, the Igbo attachment to their kolanut cultures can define who the people are, what they celebrate, and how they welcome and entertain guests at all events of any significance.

### **Oji Mythology and Etymology**

‘Oji Igbo’ is the fruit of a tropical plant that is native to the rain forests of West Africa. It is an evergreen tree whose fruits or nuts grow in pods. Usually, each pod contains several nuts, which are encased in soft succulent tissues. Science classifies the Igbo Kolanut (Oji Igbo) as *kola accuminata*. This plant produces its fruits almost all seasons of the year. This particular specie of kolanut, which is highly revered and celebrated by Igbo for its traditional significance, and sacredness is quite different from its local rival, ‘Oji gworo or Oji Awusa’ (Hausa kolanut) in the local parlance (Ugbala, 2010; Ukaegbu, 2010).

Science classifies this specie of kolanut as *kola nitida*, which never occupies the same traditional symbolism as *kola accuminata* (Oji Igbo) in the real traditional Igbo context and usage. Depending on situations however, *kola nitida* (Oji Awusa or Oji gworo) could be used as a replacement for the real kolanut. That is *kola accuminata* whenever it is unavailable.

Significantly, the Igbo mythology recognizes ‘Oji Igbo’ as the first tree and fruit on earth, whose sacredness is as ancient as the creation of humanity on earth. The indication is that Igbo legend claims that once upon a time, the founding fathers of Igboland were invited to the home of the ancestral gods. On arrival at the home of their hosts, the gods took the ancestors to an orchard full of countless trees - and asked them to choose a fruit from all the fruits in the orchard of the gods. After a careful search, the visiting ancestors chose ‘Oji’ as the king of all the fruits in the orchard. Because it originated from the gods, it became a symbolical object of communion and communication with the gods and Chukwu Ukpabi (God the Creator), with the effect that ‘Oji’ gained a sacred

status in the traditional milieu of the Igbo, which Western religion and colonial education was unable to expunge from the traditional value systems of the Igbo (Ukaegbu, 2010; Iwunna, 2011).

It needs to be observed that 'Oji' is a three-letter word – O-j-i. In recent times, several researches have been conducted on the traditional symbolism of this natural fruit, Oji, which forms the nucleus of the Igbo traditional identity and uniqueness. Following these dogged attempts to unravel and address properly the traditional symbolism embedded within the confines of the Igbo traditional life, authors and researchers recently developed an acronym for this sacred fruit which defines the true Igboness of the Igbo cultures and traditions. According to legend, the letter - 'O' stands for 'Omenala.' The letter 'J' stands for 'jikotara.' The letter 'I' stands for Igbo. Thus, in the context of the Igbo traditional values, the acronym, 'Oji' is translated as 'omenala jikotara Igbo.' That is: 'the custom that unites the entire Igbo nation' (Ukaegbu, 2010).

In support of the above position, Nwadike (2007) adds that 'the offer of kolanut is one of the cultural practices that remind the Igbo people of the covenant between them and others, irrespective of one's status. Kolanut serves as a material bond which brings people together and makes them live in love and harmony.' This leaves us with the understanding that kolanut does not in any way serve any food purposes. It does not quench hunger and is never eaten as a solution to a hungry stomach. It is its cultural and traditional symbolisms that buttress its significance among the Igbo. This source concludes then that the Igbo conceptualization is that kolanut is life-affirming principle.

With these in mind, it can only be added that Oji Igbo (Igbo traditional kolanut) is the most universal traditional currency which unites the Igbo wherever they are found all over the globe. The unique symbolism of this tropical crop in the traditional and social life of the Igbo cannot be exhausted with a mere count of the fingers. The fact remains that this simple tropical nut ranks highest among the different cultural identities for which the Igbo are known, with the effect that equal reverence is accorded this simple natural nut wherever and whenever it is presented at any Igbo gathering worldwide.

### **Igbo Kolanut Cotyledons and Meanings**

The great question now is: What interpretations do the Igbo attach to the different numbers of cotyledons contained in each kolanut? Answer to this question becomes quite crucial because Igbo tradition attaches enormous emphasis and traditional significance to the number of cotyledons (Ibe Oji) contained in an Oji Igbo. Among the people, the number of cotyledons embedded in a kolanut has different traditional interpretations. According to Osuagwu (1978), any Igbo traditional kolanut that has either no cotyledons or double cotyledons is considered as an abnormal kolanut, an 'Oji ogbu,' and must be thrown away.

Similarly then, whenever an Oji Igbo has no cotyledons at all, Igbo tradition concedes it as Oji ogbu (a dumb kolanut), and must never be eaten, and must be thrown away. Remarkably then, when an Oji Igbo is formed into three cotyledons, it is interpreted as a sign of good omen. Tradition accepts this rare development as 'Oji Ikenga' which is celebrated as a kolanut for 'men who have distinguished themselves in noble deeds' (Osuagwu, 1978; & Ugbala, 2010).

Among the Igbo too, a four cotyledoned Oji Igbo is most popular. According to Ugbala (2010), 'it is indicative of the importance and approval of the gathering by the gods of the four Igbo market days – Eke, Ori, Afo, Nkwo.' The source adds that this kolanut is known as Oji udo (Kolanut that is synonymous with peace). Osuagwu (1978) corroborates this phenomenon with the claim that such nuts are marks of prosperity, abundance of blessings, and favour. Both authors also agree in totality that an Oji Igbo that is constituted of five cotyledons is symbolical of good luck, productivity, fruitfulness, and abundance of wealth. Whenever this special kolanut is sighted at any Igbo event, gathered guests are sent into a frenzy of joy and happiness, in view of the numerous blessings which accompany it.

On the contrary, an Igbo kolanut that has six cotyledons is interpreted as a sign of bad omen. It is read as an indication of ill luck, and must never be eaten by guests, but rather thrown away. On the other hand, the arrival of an Igbo kolanut with seven or eight cotyledons is considered a sign of rare fortunes and a symbol of success and approval by the ancestors.

### **The Sacredness of Oji among the Igbo, Southeast Nigeria**

Without doubt, the cultures of kolanutting have been a common and trans-generational anthem among the Igbo, starting from the days of Adam and Eve. Owing to the symbolical significance arrogated to this sacred and ancient traditional nut, it has become a proverbial anthem among the Igbo that: ‘onye wetara Oji wetara ndu. Onye tara Oji tara ndu.’ That is: ‘he who brings kola brings life. He who eats kola eats life.’ In simplistic terms, this proverb symbolically attempts to explain the level of reverence which the Igbo accord the kolanut. As a sacred entity, it is the people’s traditional sacramental communion, which is an indication that everyone present at any occasion where ‘Oji Igbo’ arrives, necessarily partakes in this traditional meal of life. Based on this understanding, Ukaegbu (2010) strongly claims that ‘no other symbol represents Igbo communal spirit more than the kolanut.’

In Nigeria today, it is a popular slogan that while the Yoruba of the southwest plant and harvest the kolanuts, the Hausa in the northern parts of the country eat them, while the Igbo of the southeast revere and celebrate its traditional richness. It then goes without saying that among Nigeria’s multi-ethnic nations, it is only the Igbo who eat the kolanut with much reverence, to the extent that its arrival and humble presence at any Igbo events are celebrated and accorded deep respect. As an attestation of its sacredness among the people, there are a number of traditional rites which accompany it wherever it appears within the Igbo circle (Nzeako, 1999; & Nwadike, 2007). A few of them would be mentioned to buttress this fact.

Among the Igbo, kolanuts represent an object of communion, prayers, and esteemed point of contact with God and the ancestors of the land. On the strength of this understanding therefore special traditional protocols are necessarily observed in the course of its presentation, breaking, and sharing with one’s guests. To start with, special kolanut prayers are said the local dialects of the hosts. The prayers are usually said by the eldest man at the gathering, and could come in different forms, which include incantations, libations,



wishes of long life and good health, happiness and prosperity, and of course death to one's enemies. Among the people, it is matter of common knowledge that 'Oji Igbo' does not understand any other language other than the Igbo language. As a result, these traditional kolanut prayers are said in the local language.

Also, Igbo tradition exclusively accords men (males) the rights of kolanuts breaking. In some communities, it is the eldest male who conducts the kolanut prayers, as well as breaks them, while in some other areas, younger men are given the privilege of performing this rare task. Whatever be the case, Igbo tradition does not allow women to break kolanuts, except in some rare situations when there are no males within some reasonable distance.

Another attestation to the sacredness of the traditional kolanut is that it is always broken with a knife, and never with the bare fingers. Authors confirm that apart from the hygienic implications of this practice, the need to accord this traditional nut the respect it truly deserves forms the primary factor. The understanding is that breaking it with a knife is a mark of honour and respect, while also appreciating the fact that after all, 'it is not up to the size of a piece of yam which people bite and chew' without any ceremonies (Nwadike, 2007; & Ukaegbu, 2010). From the religious perspective then, it is the belief of the Igbo that breaking the kolanut with the bare hands could defile its sacredness, most especially as the duty of breaking it could fall into the wrong hands of persons who have shed human blood.

Again as the bread of the Igbo sacramental communion, Oji Igbo is the first essential item of welcome presented to guests at every social event, cultural ceremony, family meeting, community get-together, age grade ceremony, disputes settlements, burial ceremonies, marriage ceremonies, new yam festivals, child naming ceremonies, and all kin group events, to mention but a few. It is synonymous with sharing and eating together in love and oneness. Nwadike (2007) identifies this cultural phenomenon as 'idin'otu,' which according to the author stands for: 'we are in agreement with one another; we are brothers and sisters (unity).'

Owing to its sacred nature, its dry wood is highly revered, and never used as firewood in most Igbo communities. Above all, its

arrival at any Igbo occasion is usually accompanied by jars of palm wine, which is reflected in the Igbo proverb: 'onyenyereagbara Oji ga-enyeyammiri o ga-ejielofeya.' That is: 'one who offers a deity kolanuts has to give him some water with which to assist him swallow it' (Ogbalu, 1965; Uchendu, 1965; & Ukaegbu, 2010). Thus, these few illustrations bear testimony to the sacredness and reverence which the Igbo tradition accords to the dignity and symbolical personality of the Oji Igbo.

### **Oji Igbo as the Ultimate Emblem of Hospitality and Friendship**

One fact is glaringly obvious. The Igbo are a welcoming people. The Igbo are a people who welcome guests and visitors with very open arms, broad hearts, and clear minds without undue reservations. In the homes, place of work, cultural celebrations, and at social events, there is never a limit to the volume of generosity which an Igbo is capable of showering on their guests. Because of their high appetite to make their guests feel welcome, they could go several extra miles to lavish him or her with a kind and generous heart, and assorted items of entertainment. As a prelude to other forms of bogus reception and lavish entertainment to a bosom guest however, and in appreciation of the blessings which accompany its presence, it is the culture to say – 'nnoo' or 'i biala' (welcome) to one's guests with a kolanut at hand.

Tradition demands that the host says kolanut prayers before the nuts are then broken and shared among the guests. Such prayers and wishes could run as follows: *Nwannaa, Oji abiala. Onye wetara Oji wetara ndu. Egbe bere ugo bere, nke si ibe ya ebela, nku kwapu ya n'ike. Ochu nwa okuko new ada, ma nwa okuko new mwemwe oso. Ihe anyi na-ario bu ogologo ndu, ahuike, nka, na omumu. Eke kere uwa, Chukwu Abiama, Obasi bi n'elu, Nwoko oma enyi oha, anyi si gi goziere anyi Oji a. Anyi taa ya k'anyi tara ngozi na ima mma gi. Iseeeeeeee!*

Translated literally into English, this kolanut prayer is: 'My dear brother, kolanut has come. He who brings kola brings life. Let the hawk perch, and let the eagle perch. Anyone that does not let the

other perch and let his wings gets broken. He who attempts to hurt an innocent person unjustly will fall, while the just person walks away harmless. We pray for long life, good health, and plenty children. Creator of all humanity, Giver of all life, the God who lives on high, the Good man who is the friend of all, we beg you to bless this we present before you. When we eat it, may we eat your abundance of blessings, Amen and Amen'!

These prayers are symbolical expressions of the host's innermost wishes, deep love, sincere friendship, abundance of blessings, and prayers for one's best wishes for guests. It is an affirmation of his genuine and undiluted relationship, a great sign of good reception, and a heart free from malice. Among the Igbo, the arrival of a kolanut is conceded as a moment for God's blessings and prosperity. This leads Basden (1966) to confirm categorically that an 'Igbo welcome is not complete without the sharing of the kolanut.' Symbolically therefore, the offer of a kolanut is the epitome of the Igbo man's clear-minded welcome to his guests. It is a practical exemplification and manifestation of his utmost love, friendship, oneness, and utmost sense of hospitality.

### **The Way Forward**

Irrespective of whatever religious affiliations Nigeria's numerous ethno-linguistic communities may be associated with, each one of the nation's diverse nations should be encouraged to identify and sustain the key cultural and traditional activities that identify who they really are. They should be supported to celebrate those cultures and traditions which distinguish them from the rest of Nigerians. Accepted that the wealth of Nigeria lies in the richness of her cultures, the Nigerian government should be encouraged to mark out a specific day within the calendar year for the celebration and showcasing of the diverse cultures which make up the country. Specific cultures and traditional practices which are inimical to human life and capacity development of owners should be stamped out with impunity. Relevant re-orientation projects should be set in place to dissuade Nigerian communities from perceiving local cultures and traditions as pagan practices and idolatrous rituals.

By these, the rich heritages inherited from our ancestors shall continue to guide the conducts and activities of the present and future generations of Nigerians.

### **Conclusion**

The Igbo culture of kolanutting could be counted among the most iconic cultures and traditions which identify the Igbo wherever they are found in the globe, including those in the diaspora. The important traditional and social functions which the culture of kolanutting plays in the social and traditional life of the Igbo can never be overemphasized. With kolanuts at hand, the Igbo commence their day's activities, commune with the ancestors, pray for God's abundant favour, blessings, and protection, and also 'open the gate of their hearts to their visitors, according to Nwadike (2007). In the traditional eyes of the Igbo therefore, the offer of a kolanut marks the formal commencement of an event, which is also indicative of the seriousness attached to such activity. Without the offer of a kolanut, its substitution, or a commensurate apology, affected guests never feel welcome. Such guests count themselves as persons of ill luck, and regard the ill-fated occasion as very insignificant. Thus, it can only be concluded that the world of the Igbo is quite incomplete without the traditional rites of kolanutting. Similarly, their numerous cultural and traditional activities celebrated and revered by the Igbo could be categorized as culturally dehydrated and traditionally impotent. It is really the kolanut rituals that make huge difference. Thus, among the Igbo then, the cultures and traditional rituals associated with kolanut presentations count among those indigenous values which Western education and Christian evangelization could not drive away from Igboland.

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