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COLA ACUMINATA (QJÌ IGBO) AS A SACRAMENT OF UNITY AMONG THE IGBOS

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Abstract

Human beings naturally live in community which engenders intersubjective relationship that makes for mutual learning and healthy cohabitation among human beings. This is punctuated in a special by their use of reason that marks them out among other animals. Every society worthy of the name nourishes this coexistence to maximum fruition through communication and other forms of interaction. The Igbo people of Nigeria enjoy and cherish this communal life. This is evident particularly in their spirit of hospitality. This welcoming spirit is usually initiated by invoking the gods in prayer through the use of kola nut. Kola nut is a sacred nut which is accorded recognition in every occasion and as such used to call on the gods through prayer. Hidden in its sacredness is the underlining bond of unity (*vinculum unitatis*) that it signifies. Just as the lobes are naturally but neatly tied together every prayer offered with kola nut, and every celebration in which it is used implicitly evokes that unity upon those being prayed for. To that effect, this research aims at exposing the inner logic of this sacrament of unity which is enveloped in this sacred nut. The research will adopt a descriptive methodology geared towards delineating its unifying aspect. To realize that, the researcher will use the analytic approach to unveil the symbolic unifying force of this sacred nut. Finally, the researcher will recommend that Igbo people should have to concretely demonstrate this unity in every community where they live.

Key words: kola nut, cola acuminata, sacrament, unity

Introduction

By nature, man, says Aristotle, is both a political and a social animal. This is unmistakably foreshown in his gregarious nature and the use of language. It is man's being-with-others

which engenders communication and interaction with his hand. Reason is the vehicle for proper realization of this interaction.

Specifically, the Igbo people are characteristically communitarian. There is always a bilateral or even a multi-lateral relationship. This is summed up in the proverb “agwo ofu onye fulu na-aghọ eke” (A snake seen by one person is taken to be a python). Taken a bit wider, “the idea of togetherness and communality is the essence of the African’s view of humanity. This idea is emphasized by two proverbs of the Tumbuka of Malawi: “A man is a man because of others” and “life is when you are together; alone you are an animal.” René Descartes would say “cogito ergo sum” (I think, therefore, I am). Gathogo (2001:21) would rather contend that for the African it is “I am because we are,” or “I am related, therefore, I am”(cognatus ergo sum or an existential *cognatus sum, ergo sumus*, meaning *I am related, therefore we are*)” (p.21). For the African, even the ability to think is irrelevant outside the context of other human beings. This unmitigated and natural zeal of other-orientedness is epitomised in the aphorism “live and let live”. As Mbiti (1990) has it, “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore, I am” (p.108). This community-oriented mentality makes solitary existence or exclusivity as a punishment for an abominable crime. It is community-orientedness that has a tie of consanguinity which cannot be deleted under any pretext. This is expressed by the Akan of Ghana thus: “I belong by blood relationship; therefore I am” (Healey et al., 1996:62). There is therefore an underlying intersubjective relationship in which my existence also gives meaning to the other’s existence. Samkange (1980) reflected it in the Zulu axiom *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* meaning a person is a person through other people. Tutu (1989) corroborates that in these words,

I would not know how to be a human being at all except (that) I learned this from other human beings. We are made for a delicate network of relationships, of interdependence. We are meant to complement each other. All kinds of things go horribly wrong when we break that fundamental Law of our being. Not even the most powerful nation can be completely self-sufficient (p.71).

So secluded existence for an Igbo person smacks of a social leper, an outcast; and such is not desired by any person. It is an improper existence that has nothing to be desired. Therefore, unitary relationship which may eventually culminate in atomic individualism typified in the Western lifestyle is boldly abhorred. For, life is lived in being-with-others.

Howbeit, this community consciousness has unconsciously left a seemingly indelible mark of unity which is poorly rendered in the dictum “Igwebuiké”, (Unity is strength). Poor because there could be a unity with a vitiated undertone in which people can pull themselves together

for evil purposes or to unleash malevolent and violent actions against other people. This unity when properly construed as unity of pure intention and purpose is variously demonstrated in the way the Igbo people help themselves in times of need. Such unity has carved a conspicuous niche in the life of the Igbos. They cannot not uphold it as a social standard.

This unity is ritualised in the kola nut. But does kola nut effect the unity which is symbolizes? Can two enemies share of the same kola nut? In the joint participation (*koinonia*) in breaking and eating of kola nut, what should be the supposed disposition? Nonetheless, unity covertly implies love. It is in this symbolic love that its sacramental unity is traceable. It is then our task here to unearth this unity aspect of the kola nut.

Kola nut: its varieties

Kola nut has prominently two types namely the Hausa Kola nut (*oji awusa* or *gwo*) botanically called *cola nitida* or *cola alba* and Igbo kola nut (*oji Igbo*) botanically known as *cola acuminata* or *atrophora*. They are predominantly distinguishable by the number of cotyledons and colour they have. *Cola nitida* is majorly found and used more in the Northern Nigeria which is an area dominated by the Hausa tribe hence the name Hausa kola (*oji awusa*). It has a yellowish white colour. It naturally does not have more than two cotyledons and has no particular significance or mythical meaning attached to it among the Igbo people. It is usually not officially presented in occasions. Apart from *Oji Igbo* (*cola acuminata*), “Other species of kola is not regarded in Igbo world because their lobes are insignificant in Igbo socio-cultural world” (Ezebuilo and Nwankwo, 2021:3).

On the other hand, the Igbo kola nut (*cola acuminata*) occupies an enviable position among other fruits among the Igbos of South-Eastern Nigeria. It has two colours – one has reddish colour and other white. The former is the most commonly available. According to Mulumba (2017) “*Oji Igbo* appears to be monocotyledonous, dicotyledonous, triplecotyledonous, quatricotyledonous and so on and so forth. It is also a design of nature that certain kolanuts are five carpelled; some six carpelled and others are multicarpelled. The number of lobes each has determines its significance” (p.88). More so, meaning is attached to the number of lobes of Igbo kola nut. In the same vein, Nwadior (2021) has this to say: “*Oji Igbo* is held in high esteem among the Igbo for reasons of traditional importance, which contributes to the attachment of meanings to its varying cotyledons ranging from one to seven or even more” (p.81). The respect and high esteem accorded to *Oji Igbo* is based on the fact that it is regarded as a sacred fruit and plays a prominent role in the cultural, social, religious settings of the gatherings of the Igbo people. Although generally the Igbo kola nut is highly placed

among other fruits, but all the same those with two lobes and above and assumed to have more enriching meaning. Usually, those ones are more common. Occasionally one can see an *Oji Igbo* without segments.

Consequently, Duru (2005) maintains that, “If the kola nut does not have lobes but is just one whole, Igbos do not use a knife to cut it, it is seen as a bad sign, and the whole nut is thrown away. This type of nut is called *Oji Ogbi* (a “dumb kola” nut)” (p.206). For Kanu and Kanu (2020) it is regarded “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” (p.53). Obineche (2017:99) insists that such kola nut without cotyledon also referred to as *Oji mmuo* or *Oji Agbara* is an abnormal and as such an abomination.

A further distinction presents *Oji ugo* (white kola nut) which is not very common. In a heap of many pods each containing five to seven *cola acuminata*, the *oji ugo* is scarcely found. Whenever it is found, it is carefully preserved and the price is usually higher. It is not offered to every Tom, Dick and Harry; rather it appears when very special guests are to be received. For Uchendu (1964), *Oji ugo* symbolizes luck, social distinction and potential prosperity...it is a man’s luck, his good face, as Igbo say, which gives him *Oji ugo*. (p.48) Nwadiolor (2021a) reflecting on *Oji ugo* opined that, *Oji ugo* is considered to be a Champion Kola which is not offered to everyone but to special dignitaries.

It is symbolic of royalty and purity. It is regarded as the most noble of *Oji Igbo* and this is why it is named after the bird, Eagle which is known for flying so high. *Oji ugo* is presented to the people with track record of achievements. So it is regarded as the achievers’ kola. This justifies Igbo saying *Oji ugo a na echere nwa Eze* - the princely kola which is offered to a prince. (p.82).

The rareness of *Oji ugo* goes to say that meritorious achievements are not so common; but wherever and whenever it happens, it has to be celebrated.

Igbo Kola nut: the inner logic of its ritualization

In this research, we are more concerned with the “*oji Igbo*” (*cola acuminata*). Kola nut is the first thing offered a visitor by an Igbo man. The offering of kola nut is not discriminatory neither is it tribalistic. Otherwise, the inner logic of its presentation which is unity and love will be vitiated. When such happens, it then serves as a mere masticatory item for ordinary entertainment which actually goes to defeat what it stands for.

Oji Igbo has a pride of place among Igbo people and their culture. It is used as a symbol of hospitality and more so used to invoke the gods in the commencement of any ceremony. To that effect, Unya (2021) avers that, “Kola nut is often presented to guests and is viewed as an unavoidable gesture expected from a host. No matter the extent of cordiality shown by a host and no matter the type of delicious meal served to a visitor, he will feel unwelcome if he is not presented with kola nut” (p.292). However, in some areas, it is served with co-hise chalk (nzu) indicating the purity of intention of the presenter.

The first act a free born Igbo man would undertake upon waking up was to thank his personal god (*chi*) for keeping him alive with a kola nut and white chalk (nzu). He prayed to his *Chi* with the kola, broke it (noting the number of lobes), threw a lobe to Ani (the earth goddess), threw a piece before his personal shrine, gave a piece to his ancestors, drew symbolic lines with the white chalk (*ika nzu*) in front of his personal shrine, and then ate a piece of the nut. The visitor then draws lines on the ground with the chalk according to his social status. (p.205)

The latter also demonstrates the purity of intention of the visitor. Mostly, the co-hise chalk is not given hand-to-hand to the visitor; rather, it is dropped on the ground or placed on a saucer, so that the visitor by picking it the visitor invariably declares his purity of intention freely without any imposition. In some places, in the absence of co-hise chalk the host touches the kola nut with his tongue. According to Umeasiegbu (1977:3), “the object of ‘kissing’ the kola nut is to prove to those present that he has given the kola nut in good faith and that if the nut does contain poison, the host will be the first to die. If he does not touch the kola nut with his lips, it will be rejected.”

Kola nut is usually blessed and broken by the eldest. But in some cultural set-ups, it is done by the youngest. In some other areas, the host breaks the kola nut even if the visitor is older than him because it is normally said that “*oji eze di eze n’aka*” (The chief’s kola nut is with him). In any official ceremony, it is either the *Igwe* of the town or the eldest who performs the ritual of breaking the kola nut. The breaking of kola nut is not simply done for its sake. Since it is a sacred nut it is used to commune with the gods and invariably to show good will. Hence, its dual function – spiritual and social are manifested. It is a notorious fact that “without the breaking of kola nut no formal discussions ... ceremonies and various functions can be regarded as formal or serious in Igboland. Traditional practices and customs are associated with the breaking of kola” (Okigbo 1980:31). This breaking Ogbalu (1979) enthused, is accompanied “by prayer to God, gods and idols, ancestors etc., for their blessing, guidance, protection and long life for those present and other well-wishers” (p.72).

The person that is honoured to break the kola nut normally takes the “aka-oji” (one cotyledon) and the rest are divided according to the number present. At times, there is reserve for the late-comers; thereby, symbolically extending the unity to those not present. More so, the number of cotyledons of a kola nut depicts a symbolic representation. “Two cotyledons for “*oji-Igbo*” is regarded as malformed. Three shows good omen. Four is approval by the gods of the four market days. Five is symbolic of productivity. Six shows bad omen. Seven is rare but highly valued” (Statesman 9/10/92). Extraordinarily, a kola nut without any cotyledon is regarded as dumb. Ogomaka (2005) puts it thus:

When a kola nut is broken by a person, the number of cotyledons the kola nut has portends the god/goddess that has or rather is associated with the kola nut. The number of cotyledons a kola nut has may also point to the character/ mood of the presenter, the person it is presented to or the occasion.

Be it as it may, the logistic of the distribution of the kola nut in some areas obeys the principle of “seniority-juniority”, at another it takes its course from the right irrespective of age arrangement. Nobody that is male and has reached the age of reason is to be counted out in the sharing of kola nut. Szewczyk (2014) rightly brings to mind that, “if a visitor did not partake of the kola nut, a truthful conversation between this person and the artist could not unfold.” In a greater part of Igboland, women do not break the kola nut. Kola nut is a status symbol and male preserve; it symbolizes peace, good will, trust and friendship” (p.124).

At this juncture, one may ask, can a woman break the kola nut? “In a greater part of Igboland, women do not break the kola nut. Kola nut is a status symbol and male preserve; it symbolizes peace, good will, trust and friendship.” (p.671n.4) In fact, “a woman should never break kola when a male was present, be it only a little boy.” (p.113) In the gathering of only women, they can break the kola nut for themselves. But if by the grace of God a man happens to be there, he does it for them.

With regard to the posture to be assumed while breaking it, it is normally a sitting position; since kola nut is multilingual the language of any culture where it is served is used. It is quite ecumenical in adapting to any culture it happens to arrive into without any revolt. Such is the peace-loving symbol of kola nut.

***Cola acuminata* (Igbo Kola nut) as a visible sign of unity**

This section is to be treated analogously to the Catholic teaching on the sacramental unity of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is a sacrament of love and unity. This is encapsulated in 1Cor. 10,17 – “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the

one bread.” So *sacramentum* as encapsulated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* “emphasizes the visible sign of the hidden reality of salvation...” (CCC.774). The inner meaning goes beyond what is seen. In that sense, the unity that is signified in the Igbo kola nut and the Eucharistic bread is not a tangible reality. So just like every Eucharistic sacrifice carries with it the spiritual unity of those present and the entire Church, so also every Igbo kola nut is pointer to the unity embedded in it. According to John Paul II (2000:n.4) the mysterious union with the divine in the Eucharist must be made visible in a fraternal love towards others. In fact, the "vertical" communion-*koinonia* that makes us one with the divine mystery produces at the same time a communion-*koinonia* we could call "horizontal", or ecclesial, fraternal, capable of uniting all who partake of the same table in a bond of love.” (John Paul II, 2000 n.4) No wonder then St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas described the Eucharist as “a sign of unity” and “the sacrament of Church unity” respectively. In the same vein, Bernard Haring (1976) opined that “the unity of the people of God is ... the chief grace indicated by the sheer significance (*res et sacramentum*) of the Eucharist” (p.14). The Catholic Bishops of Nigeria (1992) clearly stated that this “unity is twofold – vertical and horizontal each implying and presupposing the other vertically, the Eucharist is an efficacious sign of unity between God and man, while horizontally it unites man to his fellow men” (p.1). In a similar vein, Apakama (2012) opined that:

The kola nut has various lobes or pieces fused together without physical force binding them together. The nut remains like that until an external force dismantles the lobe into pieces. The Igbo world is exactly manifested in like manner as the kola nut. The Igbo people believe in living together and they enjoy harmonious life. They are their brother’s keeper and this notwithstanding, there could be disagreement among them if an external force, for instance back biting, and gossips, envy from enemies of progress; anger and hatred are noticed. If these external forces are not controlled and contained the Igbo world would scatter.... The kola nut example must be a focal point.

Without mincing words Kanu and Kanu (2020) maintain that “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” (p.57). The same spirit of togetherness and fraternal unity is expected to exist among those who partake in the communion of kola nut. This oneness with others is equally symbolically represented in the communal meal (*koinonia*) of the Eucharist. This unity should then be translated into reality in our everyday interaction with others.

Otherwise, the reality which this sacrament signifies be it in the Eucharist or in the kola nut will not realized.

Among the Igbos, communal meals abound. For instance, after a successful peace treaty has been effected between two parties, it is usually sealed by communal meal in which the parties partake from the same pot. Just as they dip their hands into one pot, so have they been symbolically reunited and sloughed off of all inimical tendencies. More so, such ceremony cannot even be initiated without the breaking of the kola nut with its accompanying prayers. In the words of Kanu and Kanu (2020b), conflict resolutions are initiated and usually “sealed with the presentation, breaking, distribution and the eventual eating of the kola nut” (p.56). This is also typified in the kola nut communion. In fact, in the words of Duru (2005),

to the Igbos, the kola nut is always received and consumed in sacred communion, and it enjoys respect from all social strata of the society. The presentation of the kola nut is a social and spiritual ritual. The kola nut communion is a very important item on the agenda of every gathering. Communion is not too strong a term; indeed, prayers invariably accompany the reception of the kola nut, indicating its spiritual status. Thus, in any gathering, drinking, eating, and dancing are usually secondary and complementary to the kola nut rites.... The kola nut communion is at the forefront of pan Igbo cultural affinity. It plays a unifying role among the Igbos more than anything else... (p.205)

But all said and done, kola nut is a means of daily re-enactment of unity both with gods and with our neighbours. It is in this re-enactment that its sacramental unity resides.

The presentation and celebration of the kola nut remain one major part of Igbo culture left for us by our ancestors that has not been distorted by the passage of time. It stands as a symbol of unity of the entire Igbo race... it should, therefore, be of great concern to every Igbo elder when this important aspect of our culture is abused... (Vanguard, 6 Sept. 2001).

In a similar vein, Ilogu (1974) opined that “the kola nut ceremony is an elaborate introductory covenant enactment between a host and his guests, when kola nuts, ordinary edible fruit having cotyledons are served, broken with prayers by the eldest person serving as a priest, and eaten as a sacrament shared among all present,(p.134) it shows unity. This practice of breaking and sharing kola nuts symbolises and evokes many realities that are reminiscent of the Eucharist; in the words of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria (1992), such include “welcome, hospitality, friendship, unity, mutual concern, common interests, fellowship and communion with God and the ancestors, and the like”(p.30). This is why kola

nut has a high regard among the Igbos, so much so that even if you treat your visitor to a very sumptuous meal without presenting him with the kola nut he says that you have given him nothing. One regards oneself as not welcomed if he is not offered any kola nut.

The analogy between the Eucharist and the kola nut becomes more pronounced in the fact of the one bread and one kola nut used in both occasions. Just as Christians share from the one consecrated bread as a sign of their unity, so do the Igbos share from one kola nut as a sign of their unity as well. St. Augustine (1991) reflecting on this bond of unity draws from the First Letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians (10:17) and stressed the fact that just as many share in the one bread, so are many symbolically made one. By this very fact, diversity is symbolically unified.

O mystery of piety! O sign of unity! O bond of charity! He that would live has where to live, has whence to live.... Let him not shrink from the compact of members; let him not be a rotten member that deserves to be cut off; let him not be a deformed member whereof to be ashamed; let him be a fair, fit, and sound member; let him cleave to the body, live for God by God: now let him labor on earth, that hereafter he may reign in heaven. (26,13)

The ritual ceremonies are meticulously observed in order not to defile the kola nut. Everyone shares from this one kola nut. “The pieces of kola”, says Umeasiegbu (1977), “are passed around by the youngest...everyone partakes of it” (p.3). More importantly, “even where a host is able to afford hundred kola nuts, and the guests may take away as many as they care, it is still essential that one out of the hundred will be broken and everyone present would get a bite of it – provided, of course, that the number of people is not so large that a single kola nut cannot go round all of them.” (Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, p.31) It is here that the unity is more or less ritualised and exposed. For, as stated in *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* 9,4, “even as this broken bread was scattered over the hills, and was gathered together and became one, so let your church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom. To you is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever.” It is this oneness of heart that reflects in communion that is also evident in sharing in kola nut. Unya (2021) believes and rightly so that “the presentation of kola nut is an evidence of social harmony, love and happiness for one another. Thus, he compares the presentation and breaking of the kola nut to the Catholic sacramental communion, and calls the kola nut the ‘bread’ of Igbo sacramental communion which must be carefully and specially presented, blessed, shared and partaken by all the parties and families in every ceremony” (p.300). “Kola nut is a sacred communion for Igbo Africans. It is used in the celebration of common

wealth. Aspects of communalism are celebrated with Kola nut which is both a spiritual and physical symbol of unity” (p.86).

Making the visible sign of unity of *cola acuminata* a concrete reality

There is no doubting the fact that Igbo kola nut is indicative of unity. This unity is reflected in the communal way of life that ought to exist among the Igbo people. Unfortunately, consequent upon the unpredictability of man, this unity has now and again not drawn down from the pinnacle of symbolism to the grassroots of our daily co-existence with others. Now people may partake of the kola nut of oneness and harmony, next they are waging war among themselves. Now somebody will be calling down peace and brotherly love with the kola nut, next he is demanding your head on a platter of gold. Now one freely enjoys the kola nut with a friend, next he is admitted for being poisoned through that same symbol of unity. Now an elder dedicates his energy praying for a successful marriage of two newly married parties, next they are chasing each other with pestles. The list is endless. It is disunity all the way. The unity of kola nut has been enormously caricatured. Most often there is this apparent contradiction as two enemies dip their unfriendly anger-charged hands into the same kola nut saucer. For them it is not a re-enactment of unity but a renewal and perpetuation of their enmity. The piece of kola nut indicates for them an addition of another piece of anger to the already accumulated hatred.

Having observed these aberrations, one can then ask, can kola nut fully assume practically the unity it signifies? The unity which it signifies certainly remains but the living out of that unity is at times found wanting. Certainly, Obiajulu et al. (2017) added that, “the communitarian import of *cola acuminata* is a reflection of Christ action in breaking bread at the last supper which suggests that we, though many in number, can become one body because we eat the bread of life from one pot. *Cola Acuminata* is simply the bread of life for its partakers and it is highly recommended for humanity to embrace” (p.99). When this underlining message is properly assimilated by the Igbo people, the bitterness and rancour, hatred etc evident in many families and communities will be a thing of the past. The evident polarization noticeable among Igbo people will gradually fizzle away. In this regard Obiajulu et al. (2017b) strongly maintains that,

as the polarization of the lobes of kolanut does not tear them apart, unless when deliberately done for a purpose, so does nature demand that even though tribes and

tongues, culture and religion may differ, nations of the world should stand in brotherhood. In fact the polar reticulation of the carpels in the kolanut is seen to be the source of its strength, because its ontological interpretation is dependent on its lobing formula, so should expectation of unity become so high when nations of the world are seen to have diverse peculiarities which apparently seem to portend divisiveness but connaturally should be the vital source of the strength of unity. (p.99)

That type of brotherhood devoid of divisive tendencies is what is expected of the Igbo people.

Conclusion

The Igbo people are highly symbolic. This is manifested in their *modus vivendi*. Almost every object has an underlying interpretation which is quite meaningful. But this is not in the line of imposing non-existent interpretation whose meanings are far-fetched from the reality. It is rather an interpretation drawn from life experience.

Very significant among symbolic fruits is the kola nut. This has a powerful sign of unity. It appears common but it is remarkably outstanding in its moral force. It is a semblance of the sacrament of the Eucharist for the Igbos both in its communion nature of sharing and the unity it signifies. For Ukaegbu (2003), “kola nut is the 'bread' of Igbo Sacramental communion, and must therefore be specially presented, broken, shared and partaken by all the parties...” Consequently, it overrules every inclination towards dissension. How wonderful it would be if this unity is upheld and not hopelessly gotten rid of or trampled underfoot in the everydayness of our interactive existence.

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