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Beyond the Broken Kola: *Iwa Oji*, Westernization, and the Philosophical Crisis of Igbo Identity

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Abstract

This study critically examines *Iwa Oji* – the Igbo kola nut ritual – as both a living cultural heritage and a sophisticated system of Indigenous philosophy within Igbo society. Far from a mere ceremonial formality, *Iwa Oji* embodies the metaphysical, ethical, and cosmological foundations of Igbo worldview: it mediates communion between the living, the ancestors, and the gods; it enacts principles of hospitality, hierarchy, and collective identity; and it functions as a site of orature, symbolism, and customary law. Drawing on oral interviews, ethnographic observation, and secondary sources analyzed through a descriptive-interpretive framework, this study reveals the multidimensional role of *Iwa Oji* across the socio-cultural, philosophical, economic, and political spheres of Igbo life. However, the paper confronts a sobering reality: the sustained onslaught of Westernization and Christian evangelism has severely eroded the practice, stripping it of its sacral depth and reducing it in many contexts to a hollow, performed relic. This paper argues that the survival of *Iwa Oji* demands urgent and deliberate intervention. It proposes a tripartite strategy of revitalization: the institutionalization of the practice through continuous community performance, the formal integration of *Iwa Oji* into school curricula as a pillar of Indigenous knowledge systems, and the establishment of competitive *Iwa Oji* festivals among Igbo communities to foster pride, transmission, and innovation. Without such measures, the paper warns, Igbo society risks not merely the loss of a ritual, but the severance of a philosophical thread that binds its people to their ancestors, their land, and their way of being in the world.

Keywords: *Iwa oji*, Kola nuts, Cultural heritage, Philosophy, Igbo, Nigeria

Introduction

Iwa Oji Igbo (breaking of Igbo kola nut) in this context refers to the act of traditional presentation, consecration, breaking, and sharing of kola nuts in any gathering of Igbo people. There are many species of kola nut, namely *Cola nitida*, *Cola attiensis*, *Cola anomala*, *Cola verticillata*, *Cola octoloboides*, and *Cola reticulata*, but this paper is interested in *Cola acuminata* (*Oji* Igbo), used widely in Igboland to perform various socio-cultural, political, philosophical, religious, and economic functions. Kola nut *oji* Igbo is a reddish coloured nut with between one and eight cotyledons. However, there is a special type known as *Oji-Ugo*, which is creamy in colour, highly valued, and usually reserved for the nobles, hence the Igbo saying, *ohi ugo ka nwafo na-ata* (kola reserved for the nobles). Kola nut is valued greatly in Igboland, and this accounts for its general acceptance as something that symbolizes life (Nwadike, 2007). Thus, it is said that he who brings *oji* Igbo brings life-*onye wetara oji wetara ndu* (Achebe, 1958). The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (2022) states that Nigeria accounted for 55% of the world's kola nut production in 2020. These nuts, according to Kanu (2021), are mainly grown in western, eastern, and some parts of northern Nigeria in commercial quantities. However, they are mostly traded in large quantities and consumed by the Hausa, while the Igbo people place a much greater premium in its ritual use. In essence, Ekwunife (2003) and Uchendu (1965)

noted that the kola nut is taken as an item of national unity because of general acceptance as a symbol of peace, love, and hospitality by different ethnic groups in Nigeria. Consequently, these groups have peculiar names for the kola nut: *oji Igbo* in Igbo, *Gworo* in Hausa; *Gwolo* in Gwari; *Obi* in Yoruba; *Ebi* in Nupe; *Euehe* in Urhobo; *Euche* in Edo; *Buun* in Ogoni, and *Ibong* in Efik.

In Igbo culture, *oji Igbo* has spiritual and philosophical connotations; hence, Basden (1966) averred that it is not the biggest or the sweetest fruit but that it has huge cultural value among the people. This explains why Kanu (2021) opined that *Oji Igbo* is ritualized, especially by the men in Igbo land. However, the advent of Christianity and westernization encouraged the usurpation of some aspects of Igbo culture. *Iwa Oji Igbo* became one of the casualties as this affects the way kola nut is presented, broken, and shared in gatherings of Igbo people. Before this era, in parts of Igbo land, young boys without blemish, titled men, some elders, and chief priests had the right of *iwa oji*. But with the coming of Christianity and western influence on Igbo culture and tradition, this function, especially in social gatherings, like weddings, political meetings, and naming ceremonies, is performed by persons who are traditionally not expected to do so. Similarly, the mode of consecration of *Oji Igbo*, where *Chukwu Abiama* is invoked with incantations, proverbs, and prayers of long life, good health, peace, prosperity, and healthy children, has changed, with reference now made to Jesus Christ instead of *Chukwu Abiama* (Almighty God) through gods and ancestors, while the people affirm the prayers by saying amen instead of *iseee*. Contemporarily, the issue of having a red cap on or off while praying with *Oji Igbo* has become controversial, just as *Iwa Oji* has acquired a euphemism for bribery, corruption, and is regarded metaphorically as a substitute for items like wine, money, and gifts.

This paper, therefore, seeks to examine the changes that have occurred in the ontological essence of *Iwa oji Igbo* while proffering useful suggestions for its rejuvenation and sustenance among the Igbo people.

Research Method

The study was carried out through a documentary research approach and personal interviews. Documentary approach involves the use of reports on journals, books, monographs, newspapers, magazines, and internet sources. The essence of using this approach is to have a wider knowledge of the subject matter. The interview was to enable those knowledgeable about *Iwa Oji Igbo* to give all the information they have on the subject matter. The key respondents included titled men, elders, chief priests, and keepers of the tradition of the people who were selected randomly from the study area. A descriptive analysis of the data was made to reflect the essence of the study.

The Study Area

Igboland is situated in the southeastern zone of Nigeria, and it constitutes one of the three main ethnic nationalities of the country. The area is found between latitude 5° and 7° north of the equator and longitude 6° and 8° east of the Greenwich (Ilogu, 1974). Igboland stretches over three vegetation zones, namely the mangrove swamp forest, the rain forest, and the derived savannah (Nwaezeigwe, 2007; Onwubiko, 1973). The Igbo people are presently found in the following states in Nigeria: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, parts of Delta, Cross Rivers, Kogi, and Rivers (see figure 1). They are believed to have settled in this area earlier than the 9th Century A.D. (Shaw, 1975). Igbo people, by nature,

are egalitarian, and they have a strong dislike for autocratic rule. Presently, most Igbo communities have Eze and Igwe who superintend over the autonomous groups. However, political power is vested in the village council, made up of heads of families. By nature, they are very industrious and enterprising people who like to travel to different parts of the world in search of business.

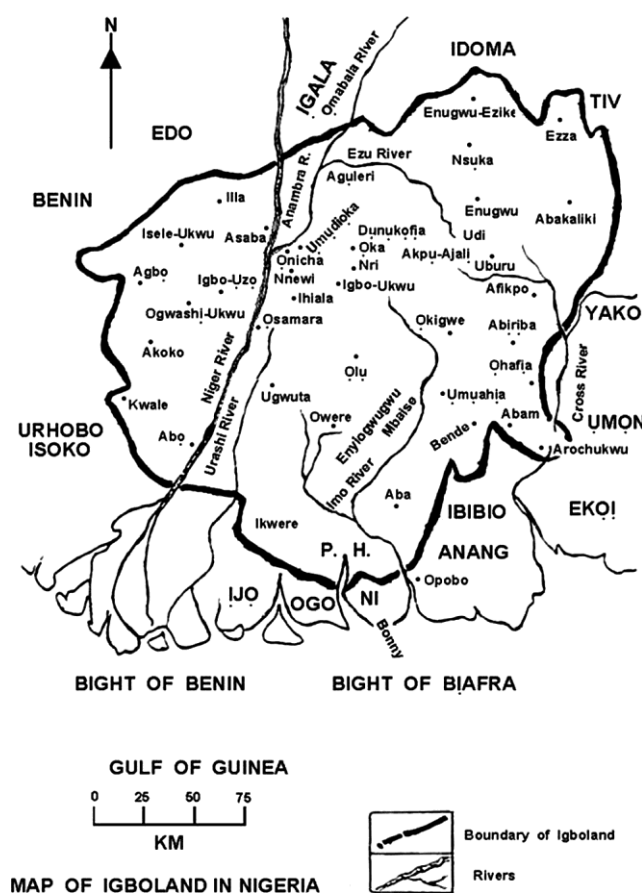


Figure 1: Map of Igboland in Nigeria.
 Source: <http://igbology.igbonet.net/docs/igboworld/detailedmap.html>

Presentation of Data

As earlier noted, *Iwa Oji Igbo*, as used in this context, refers to the rituals involved in the presentation, consecration, breaking, and sharing of *oji Igbo* in any gathering of Igbo people in order to commune with their ancestors and gods. Therefore, the data will be presented in the sequence enunciated above.

The presentation of *Oji Igbo cola acuminata* in traditional Igbo gatherings follows a set of patterns depending on the area in question. Thus, Nwadike (2007) and Ene (2006) observed that there are slight variations in how the kola nuts are presented, broken, and distributed, depending on the clan, but there is also verisimilitude of norms. The above statement shows that, since there are slight differences in the procedure, there is also a generally accepted mode of presenting kola nuts in Igbo land. There are different modes of presenting *Oji Igbo* in Igbo land. One is where the host, usually the (male) head of the family, presents a kola nut to his guest as a sign of welcome. The other is where the guest

or visitor presents a kola nut to his host. The latter occurs when the visitor is seeking favour from the host. In this situation, such a kola nut cannot be shared until the prayer that it facilitates is disclosed (Anigbo, 1987). At the home front, a wife presents *oji Igbo* to her husband every morning for prayers to *Chukwu Abiama*, requesting good health, protection, and prosperity for the family. Also, the chief priest offers *oji Igbo* to *Chukwu Abiama* through the gods and ancestors during prayers.

Most often in Igbo land, guests are first served with kola nuts by the host before any other type of food and drinks are served. According to Kanu and Kanu (2020), traditionally, at least four kola nuts, which represent the four Igbo market days of *Eke*, *Oye*, *Afor*, and *Nkwo*, are presented to the guests in a saucer, *Okwa oji*. This may be served alongside bitter kola, garden eggs, peanut butter, mixture of oil and pepper. The host does not wash the kola nuts with water in front of his guests; rather, he uses his fingers to peel off any remnant of dried foliage around the nuts. In larger gatherings like marriage, naming, and title-taking ceremonies, the presentation is done by the host after consultation with his kinsmen or his clan's men. This gesture is a mark of oneness on their part. The visitors are encouraged to take one or more nuts home as a testimonial of how they were received and entertained by their hosts. This, according to Anigbo (1987), reflects the Igbo proverb that "*Oji rue uno okwuo ebe osi bia*" (when the kola nut reaches home, it will say well of its host).

In the traditional setting, when visitors are not served *oji Igbo* by the host, they (visitors) usually would not feel satisfied, even if they are served all kinds of food and drinks (Uzuegbu, 2012). This explains why a host would implore a guest for his understanding in a situation where *Oji Igbo* could not be offered. Thus, he would say "*oji adighi n'ulom, biko kam jide gi ugwo oji*," meaning there is no kolanut in my house; may I owe you the debt of a kola nut. Often, when a host fails to apologize to a guest who was not offered *oji Igbo*, it may project him as being unwelcoming (Uzuegbu, 2012). It is instructive at this moment to add that traditionally, men do not present *oji Igbo* to women in a formal gathering. In like manner, a woman does not present *oji Igbo* to a man, especially when her husband is still alive or when her close male relative is present. It is the belief in Igbo land that men are the heads of the families and, as such, should perform such functions that are required of people who occupy such positions, like presentation of *oji Igbo* (Agbo, C, 2024, per.com).

When a host presents *oji Igbo* to his guest, the nuts are passed around the guests in order of seniority for their individual acceptance before it is returned to the host. According to Aruah (2024, per.com.), when the nut gets back to the host, there is a saying that *oji Eze di Eze n'aka* (the king's kola has returned to the king). However, Unya (2021) likened it to a headcount of persons in the gathering who must be identified before the commencement of formal discussion. This type of exercise is done with caution because if an error is made by not adhering to the order of seniority, it attracts a warning from the elders, and in some cases, the offender is fined a token (Obineche, 2017).

Consecration of the kola nut, *igo oji*, is another important formality observed before it is eaten. Though the nuts are small, what they represent is unquantifiable. Thus, it is blessed with prayer in order to attract favour upon the people from the gods and ancestors. Consecration is done in the Igbo language because it is generally believed that *Oji Igbo* does not "understand" any other language except the Igbo language (Ozioko 2023, per.com). The eldest man, titled men, chief priests, consecrate *oji Igbo* depending on the nature of the people gathered. In some instances where there are no persons from the Nri and Arochukwu dynasties, an indigene of the host community is allowed to consecrate the

kola nuts as a right of being the host, while others who represent various communities will go home with theirs as a mark of hospitality. Nri and Arochukwu are regarded as centres of early Igbo civilization. Consecration of *oji Igbo* is not done hastily; likewise, in some parts of Igbo land that *oji Igbo* must be done while standing up as a sign of respect to *Chukwu Abiama*, while in others, the consecration is done sitting down on a seat. In the traditional Igbo tradition, titled men like the *ozo*, *ichie*, *nze*, chief priests, and traditional rulers do not remove their caps while consecrating and praying with the kola nut. They believe that the cap, as part of the regalia for the office, should be worn to perform any function assigned to them as custodians of the people. However, if such titled men are not in their official capacity and wearing their traditional regalia, and the need to break *oji Igbo* arises, they can remove any cap on their heads.

Breaking of the kola nut, *iwa oji Igbo*, is done in accordance with the prevailing norms and customs of the area. In the Nsukka area, *Oji Igbo* is first broken into lobes before prayers are said. This, according to Opata (2022), is to ascertain that it had no bacterial infestation and to show its wholesomeness because they believe that *Ezechitoke* God and ancestors will only accept wholesome ones. However, some people in the area believe that this is to pick out the male lobe, which is efficacious for prayers. The male is distinguished from the female lobe by the single horizontal line against the divergent lines of the female lobe. (See figures 2 and 3). Generally, there are two procedures of kola nut breaking in the Igbo land. In the first instance, the eldest is by custom bestowed with the right to break kola nut in towns like Onitsha, Nnewi, Njikaoka, Awka, Nsukka, and Asaba. It is the right of the eldest male descendants of a given kin group to break kola. The belief in such places is that because of their age, the elders are closer to the ancestors and therefore they perform some priestly functions (Nwaezeigwe, 2007; Nzeako, 1972). In a family gathering, the first son who may not be the eldest is allowed to break kola nut because he holds the family *ofò* and is seen as the representative of the ancestors.

In the second instance, in towns like Umuahia, Ngwa, Orlu, Abakiliki, and Nsukka, it is a young male who is allowed to break kola after an elder has consecrated it. They believe that the youngest are presumed innocent whose hands are not polluted by bloodshed or other evil (Ukaegbu, 2003). In any gathering comprising different people from various towns, including people from Nri and Arochukwu towns, kola nut is given to a person from any of the two mentioned towns to break, irrespective of the person's age. This is because both towns are regarded as the cradle of Igbo civilization. However, according to Nwaezeigwe (2007), this claim has been contested by other Igbo sub-groups, which trace their origin outside of Nri and Arochukwu. In situations where there are no persons from Nri and Arochukwu, an indigene of the community where the function is taking place is allowed to consecrate and break *oji Igbo*.

In Igbo towns, Nsukka, Nike, and Orlu, *oji Igbo* may be broken with the aid of a knife and not with bare hands as a sign of respect. To them, *Oji Igbo* is life; thus must not be split with bare hands. In contrast, people from Umuahia do so, with bare hands, as they believe that it is inconsiderate to use a knife because doing so is akin to killing a being with a knife. Once the kola nut is split, the cotyledon *anya oji* is given to the spirit by throwing it to the ground, while the lobes are shared among the people in the meeting. Achuzie (2023 per.com) noted that in the course of sharing *oji Igbo*, anyone who wishes not to eat must touch the *okwa oji* as a sign of accepting what the kola and the prayers offered during its consecration represent. In recent times, this tradition has not been adhered to by some people, mainly because of their ignorance of what it represents.

Also, Igbo tradition forbids one from *iwa oji* in the in-laws' house or maternal house, unless the person is given permission to do so. Generally, women are not permitted to break *oji Igbo*, except in such towns as Isele ukwu and Obulu ukwu, where they attain such a title as *omu* (Nzeako, 1972). Women who attain a certain age and accomplishment in society are regarded as men, and thus are allowed to break *oji Igbo*, especially in the absence of a male. Ene (2006) further emphasized that not allowing women to break kola nut has nothing to do with gender inequality, rather that kola nut represents headship in Igbo culture. Thus, it requires that a man who by nature is the head of the family should break it. Furthermore, in an exclusive women's gathering, only the titled person or the eldest woman in their midst can break *oji Igbo*. A priestess of a shrine, female native doctor-*nwanyi dibia*, and female sorcerer-*nwanyi afa* can offer *oji Igbo* to her goddess after blessing and breaking it. A female who is the head of a masquerade cult, *Nne muo*, can consecrate and break *oji Igbo* before the outing of the masquerade. Such a woman carries the charm for the masquerade, reactivates all spiritual needs, and incantation for the masquerade.

The successful blessing and breaking of the kola nut- *iwa oji* present another important task in *Iwa oji*, which is the acceptance of the kola nuts. A critical look at how many lobes it bears determines its status before the gathering. Certain kola nuts are not to be eaten in traditional gatherings because of the number of lobes they bear. A kola nut-*oji Igbo* with one lobe is referred to as a dumb kola *oji ogbu* or *oji mmuo* (Spirit kola nut). This nut must not be eaten by ordinary people except the chief priest and titled men. A two-lobed *oji Igbo* is regarded as an aberration that is not to be accepted traditionally. *Oji Igbo*, with three lobes, is known as *oji lkenga*, which is a symbol of achievement. It must only be eaten by persons with great accomplishment, especially warriors and persons of great valor. Four-lobed kola represents the four Igbo market days of Eke, Orie, Afor, and Nkwo. It symbolizes peace and blessing, *Oji Udo na ngozi*, as it bestows blessings to one who eats it. The five-lobed kola symbolizes procreation, *oji omumu*, as it is believed to bestow the blessing of procreation on anyone who eats it. There is the six-lobed kola, which symbolizes the communion of the living and the ancestors- *oji mmuo na mmadu ji gbaa ndu*. Seven-lobed kola-*oji asaa* is believed to bestow double blessings of fertility, prosperity, and great achievement. See figure 3. In contemporary times, the meanings and implications of the number of lobes a kola nut bears are mostly lost among the people due largely to ignorance. This attitude stems from the detachment of most of the people from their cultures and the imbibing of other foreign philosophies.



Figure 2: Male and female lobes



Figure 3: Different lobes of kola nuts

Sharing of Kola Nuts

In an Igbo traditional gathering, sharing of *oji Igbo* requires good knowledge of the age brackets and the order of seniority of all the persons and communities gathered. It is so because kola nuts are shared based on age. Any error made in this process is promptly pointed out, and necessary corrections are made. The sharing is done by the youngest, who is guided by a knowledgeable elder. This helps to reinforce hierarchy and social order even beyond the gathering, as people are made to be aware of the age groups or persons in the community. Ultimately, it would reduce the disrespect arising from age conflict. Anigbo (1987) corroborated this when he opined that "before kola nuts can be shared, the host will ask for the names of the visitors, the names of their ancestors and the territory of their origin." This, according to him, is to ensure that kola nuts are shared first to the eldest before getting down to the youngest. If this is not strictly followed, it must be pointed out promptly, and necessary corrections and apologies rendered. Also, this process goes further to clarify how items such as lands, houses, and other properties are to be shared, without resorting to unnecessary disputes.

In situations where a titled man breaks a kola nut, he takes a lobe, especially the one whose cotyledon-*anya oji* points towards his direction, before the kola nut is shared among the people at the meeting. Also, he plucks the *anya oji* and throws it to the ground, inviting the *Chukwu Abiama*, ancestors, and other gods to partake in eating the kola nut.

Kola Nut and Society

Discussion in this section is divided into two parts, with the first part focusing on the ontological relationships enhanced by *Oji Igbo*, while the second part examines the concept of *Iwa Oji* in the contemporary Igbo society. Issues about the kola nut cannot be discussed effectively without making reference to it in the social milieu. As a fruit that is widely used religiously, philosophically, politically, and economically by various ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, it becomes a symbol of unity among the groups. Therefore, Usman & Hambolu (2010) and Cohen (1966) noted that its production, distribution, and sale bring people of different cultures and languages together, thus promoting unity, peace, and economic advancement. The kola nut trade dates back to the pre-colonial era, where it played a leading role in boosting the economies of local people, as it was a major income earner for individuals and the government. Large-scale kola nut farmers and traders were wealthy people who wielded a lot of influence in their immediate environment, especially during the Trans-Saharan trade. The abundance of kola nut in commercial quantities, especially in the south-western region of Nigeria, encouraged the industrialization of the region with

the establishment of several beverages, chemical, and pharmaceutical companies that use kola nut as a component of their raw materials (Unya, 2021). Apart from the nuts, other parts of the tree, such as the pod husk, are ground and used in preparing a medicinal concoction to reduce pain. The roots are prepared and used as chewing sticks, while the hard trunks are used for carving, furniture making, and house posts (Usman & Hambolu, 2010).

It is pertinent to note the metaphoric essence of the kola nut, not just in Igbo land but in Nigeria generally. Despite its positive uses, kola also has negative, pejorative, nuisance in the socio-political sphere. In the past few years ago, the giving and acceptance of a bribe was referred to as *kola*. This is likened to the perception that the kola nut is a tool for brokering and facilitating understanding between two or more parties. Thus, any other thing that could perform this role as kola assumed the nomenclature (Ikwuemesi, 1991). Money, drink, car, and other objects could be referred to as kola when they are deployed as assuasive agents. Although African businessmen and politicians no longer deal in chickens and kola nuts (which could be used as bribery items in the past), the millions of naira or dollars that often change hands in high places in contemporary Nigeria to lobby or influence public policy or win contracts are, metaphorically, variants of kola (Ikwuemesi, 1991).

In Igbo land, the acceptance and usage of *oji Igbo* does not lie in its size but in its acceptance as a symbol of virtue (Idigo 2002). This explains why its presentation marks the official commencement of an occasion like festivals, marriages, title taking, burials, housewarming, and launching important projects. At such gatherings, the Igbo language is used for the consecration of kola nuts, which invariably encourages the speaking of the language in public functions. A typical traditional marriage in Igbo land is secured when a prospective husband, in the company of his kinsmen, presents the first kola nut *Oji ajuju* to his would-be in-laws. The host would respond by asking the motive behind the kola nut (*kedu ije ojia*). Thus, the aim of the visit would be made known. The acceptance (eating) of the kola nut signifies agreement. In like manner, in conflict situations, a party seeking reconciliation must go with some kola nuts to their opponent. After discussions, if the kola nuts are shared and eaten, it stands as a sign of agreement and reconciliation. Furthermore, kola nut is vital in securing ritual pact and covenant, *Igba ndu*, which involves the dipping of kola nut in wine mixed with the collective blood of the representative of the parties, which is taken by all those involved, after the necessary pronouncements (Nwaezeigwe, 2007). In Igbo traditional religion, the kola nut is used to communicate with the gods. Prayers and supplications are offered to the gods using kola nuts. The belief is that since the kola nut gives life, it serves as a medium to commune with the gods. Thus, Ene (2006) and Nwadike (2007) likened the use of kola nut in traditional Igbo religion to communion in Catholicism. He observed that there seems to be some kind of transudation involved in the kola nut ceremony, similar to the communion wafer in the Catholic ritual of mass.

It is also used as a symbol of showing hospitality. One of the virtues the Igbo people are known for is to accord hospitality to their guests and visitors. An Igbo man or woman would literally go out of his or her way to please and take care of his or her guests and visitors. Guests are first presented with kola nuts as a sign of welcome before food and drinks are served. Prayers of blessing and protection would be offered by the host for his guest and himself. Also, as a sign of love, the guest is expected to return home with some kola nuts to his people to show how nice he was treated. In situations where kola nuts are

not available, the host would apologetically inform his guests. In essence, it is to genuinely show that he harbors no ill feelings. Since kola nut signifies love, Nwaezeigwe (2007) opines that those who are on oath over a dispute are forbidden to partake of the same kola. This simply means that since there is no love between such persons, there should be no pretence in partaking of the kola nut because of the risk involved.

Kola nut also serves as a means of conveying strong messages in the community. Just like tender palm fronds, *Omu nkwu* is used to convey messages like death, danger, and childbirth, and *Oji Igbo* is used for excommunicating undesirable elements in the community. In Asaba, once the clan engages in the process of *Igopulu mmadu oji*, that person essentially would have been served notice of a possible ostracism. Also, the process of rescinding the sanction requires using lots of kola nuts (Ene, 2006). As a means of reinvigorating oneself, kola nut is chewed because it contains caffeine, which acts as a stimulant, anti-depressant, and in the production of some beverages (Adebayo & Oladele, 2012). Students studying at night, police men on night patrols, commercial cab drivers, and others who would not want to sleep on duty, consume kola nuts to stay awake. This explains why it is ubiquitous and is hawked in buses, street corners, markets, in front of churches and mosques, and even around government and private offices.

Iwa Oji Igbo in Contemporary Times

Colonialism and Christianity ushered in new ways of life for the Igbo people, particularly in their philosophy and worldview. Nwadiolor (2018:1) notes that “ever since Christianity made its attempt to be established in African soil, there have been varieties of indigenous responses ranging from resistance at the early stages, acceptance through colonial imposition and the recent emergence of neo-Pentecostal Christianity”. Kola nut is a major casualty as there are far-reaching changes that effect the way it is valued the contemporary times (Unya, 2021). Emeh (2019) derided the situation where *Iwa Oji* in Igbo has been adulterated by some persons whose worldview has been affected by Christianity and Western civilization. He noted that such persons “often invoke the name of Jesus Christ when kola nut is offered to God, the gods and the ancestors”. Kanu (2019) and Nwadike (2007) further observed that in some instances, *Oji Igbo* nuts are compared with the ritual of the Eucharist in the Christian religion, as it is believed to bind the living and the living dead. Presently, the mode of the consecration has changed; instead of referring to the *Chukwu Abiama* and ancestors, it is now made to God Almighty through Jesus Christ, and the gathering responds with a loud chorus of amen. Consecration of *Oji Igbo* can be performed by any adult in the gathering, irrespective of their moral background. Before this era, the elders with a good moral background and chief priests had the right to consecrate kola nuts.

There is an apparent lack of understanding of the rituals and values attached to *Iwa Oji* among the young people and some elderly persons in contemporary Igboland. Traditionally, a titled man, a traditional herbalist and chief priest, is not expected to remove his red cap while praying with the kola, as the cap is part of his attire, just as a bishop is not expected to remove his cap inside the church during prayers. However, Christianity mandates that its male followers must remove their caps in the presence of God, especially while praying. This teaching has rubbed off on Igbo culture as some titled men and elders remove their caps before praying with *oji Igbo*.

The ideology that *Oji Igbo* does not understand any other language apart from Igbo language is gradually waning among the educated elites and the younger generations of Igbo people. In gatherings where such people are requested to say prayers in *Igbo*, they make such prayers in a mixture of Igbo and English, partly because they lack the capacity to do so fluently in Igbo, and some of them lack the understanding that doing so in Igbo is part of their cultural heritage. The opprobrium and disdain from the crowd that usually greet such an uncommon act discourage some people from carrying out the exercise. It is also not uncommon for an adult to decline the request to pray and consecrate *oji Igbo* in a social gathering because of a lack of understanding of the rituals associated with such an exercise.

The perception in some quarters that people may be poisoned during *Iwa Oji* is another recurring factor that negatively impacts the people. There are instances where people claimed that they were poisoned after eating *oji Igbo*, especially in a family meeting, *Umunna*. This arises from the perception that some persons who are saddled with the responsibility of breaking kola nuts, *iwa oji*, infuse some poisonous substances in their finger grafts with the intention of poisoning a particular person who has attended the ceremony. This perception has continued to reverberate in the minds of some of the Igbo people, to the extent that they do not feel safe to eat *oji Igbo* shared in such gatherings.

In the contemporary Igbo society, kola is used metaphorically to include all those items like garden egg, biscuits, money, wine, and gift items which can be used as substitutes for the real *oji Igbo*. These items are used especially when *oji Igbo* is not readily available, and also where the persons involved may not want to eat *oji Igbo*. In this case, the idea of using *Oji Igbo* to show hospitality and love is not lost, because the above-mentioned items are used in the true essence of the kola nut. Kola nut-*oji Igbo* is also used negatively as a euphemism for bribery and corruption, where it is seen as any item that can influence, facilitate, and advance one's request. People seeking favor often make a presentation of gift items, such as kola (bribe), in order to be favored. This is aptly described by (Mazrui, 1986) as "prior appreciation," which is an extension of thanks in advance of a favor. Also, Ikwuemesi (1991) described "prior appreciation" as another form of bribery and corruption, because when one gives, one expects a return of equivalent value, especially in kind. The perception of kola as a bribe has changed the psyche and mentality of some people negatively, and thus has resulted in widespread bribery and corruption in almost all spheres of society. For instance, police men demand kola (bribe) from drivers whose vehicle particulars are not complete. Equally, some government contractors set aside 10% of the contract sum as "kola" in order to "settle" those who helped them secure the contracts.

The Future of *Iwa Oji Igbo*

The future of *Iwa Oji* in Igboland will continue to wane if certain steps are not taken by stakeholders to revive it.

- A. Igbo stakeholders, including the apex Igbo socio-cultural organization known as Ohaneze Ndi Igbo and traditional institutions such as the town unions, age grades, titled men, royal fathers, and their cabinets, must come up with a deliberate plan to sustain the tradition of *Iwa Oji* as a heritage in every gathering of Igbo people. This will be achieved by allowing those knowledgeable about *Iwa Oji* to constantly demonstrate

and highlight in every gathering of Igbo people the importance of *Iwa Oji* as a heritage resource.

- B. Since culture is dynamic, the essence of *Iwa Oji* Igbo should not be lost in the face of the threat that people could be poisoned during the process. Those who are alleged to engage in such evil acts should be handled within the ambit of the law as a way of restoring the confidence of the people.
- C. *Iwa Oji* Igbo should be included in the Social Studies and Igbo language curriculum of primary and secondary schools within Igboland. At a tender age, children will be made to understand the importance of *Iwa Oji* as a cultural heritage of the Igbo people so that by the time they become adults, they will have properly assimilated it.
- D. Periodic organization of *Iwa Oji* Igbo contest among age grades and groups within the communities is another viable option that can sustain the tradition among the people.

Conclusion

This study, which examines the cultural importance of the kola nut in the philosophy and worldview of the Igbo people of Nigeria, has tried to throw some light on the socio-cultural, political, and economic values which Igbo people have for the kola nut. Though widely cultivated in southern Nigeria, traded widely by the Hausa people in the north, the kola nut is mostly revered and accorded great importance in the daily activities of the Igbo people. Kola nut is not like any other fruit that can be eaten ordinarily. Thus, it is observed that there are some norms, customs, and beliefs guiding the handling and usage of *oji Igbo*. However, when these norms and customs are misapplied, such an offender is required to tender a public apology and, in some cases, is made to pay a certain fine depending on the customs of such an area. In all, the kola nut is generally accepted as an important item that has natural, supernatural, and ontological influence in Igboland. In spite of its other generic connotations, especially the metaphoric relation to bribery, its social and economic significance has changed very little over the years.

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