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Kola Nut as a Symbol of Welcome Among the Igede of Benue State

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Abstract

The concepts hospitality and welcome are closely related if not synonymous. Both concepts connote friendly behaviours to guests or a person who has just arrived one's place on a short or long term visit. Thus, if a host is happy with a visit, he/she is normally glad and expresses his/her gladness by the manner the guest is treated. As such, someone who is welcome is gladly accepted in a place. The fact that Africans are hospitable and welcome guests in their midst and abode is uncontested. Various ethnic nationalities in Africa have different ways of saying welcome to their guests/visitors. For the Tiv of Central Nigeria, any of a piece of roasted yam, groundnuts, ginger, garden eggs, water and smoking pipe (for smokers) symbolises welcome. To the Idoma and Igala of Central Nigeria, it is Kunu (gruel) and water respectively. The paper established that for the Igede of Oju and Obi Local Government Areas of Benue State, Kola nut symbolises welcome. Therefore, the Igede way of expressing greetings to guests and showing that such guests are accepted is to offer them kola nut. This clearly depicts that the Igede are glad that such a visitor has come. Also, the Igede gives kola nuts in odd numbers to their guest because even numbers are reserved for royalties (kings/chiefs). The paper also established that palm wine, soft drinks and any other form of alcoholic drinks accompany the kola to "wash" it down

the throat. This paves the way for fruitful discussions and cross-fertilization of ideas. The Igede belief that only the elders can break kola nut hence they are the only ones by virtue of the wisdom, who understand the language of kola nut and the spirits. Thus, Kola nut has both social and religious implications. The paper calls for the preservation of African cultural values on hospitality for the maintenance of peace, growth and developing of African societies.

Key Words: symbol, kola nut, Igede

Introduction

To welcome a person entails receiving the person as a guest and the conferment of all the rights and privileges that goes with welcome i.e. merriment, accommodation, peace, unity and friendship security of the person (s) who by implication of his/her/their 'visitorship' are under the protection of the host. In the same perspective, Hornby sees the act of welcome as being pleased that somebody (visitor) or a person who has travelled has come and to receive or accept the person happily (1670).

The act of welcome is very symbolic in African societies as it confers on a person peace and friendship of the host; thus not to be welcome in any African home is an unimaginable calamity -a curse. This translates to the unwelcomed guest being homeless, friendless, without security; a destitute. This is a tragedy or fate that no one African would dream of ever experiencing: Not to be welcomed amongst his/her own relations, peers and friends for whatever reasons.

Sequel from the above, it is worthy to note that there are various ways in which a guest is welcomed in an African home. For instance, among the Igala of Kogi State the foremost sign of welcome is to offer the guest water to drink. In some parts of Idoma land in Benue State gruel (*kunu*) is offered to a guest as a sign of welcome which clearly demonstrates that the person has been received by his/her host. If a guest is not offered the above (i.e water/*kunu*); it therefore translates to an open sign of unwelcome and an intending guest who is wise could as soon as he/she notices the unwelcome gesture signify his/her intention to continue with his/her journey.

Among the Tiv of Nigeria, there are several signs of welcome and these could largely depend on the kind of food that is being eaten/cultivated and the season. The most common sign of welcome in any Tiv home is roasted yam and drinking water. If it is during the wet season maize and groundnuts could be roasted or garden eggs offered the guest. Where these cannot be obtained; *seta* (ginger) could be offered the guest to enable him/her drink water. The fact is that the Tiv do not drink water or offer same to guests on an empty stomach. This they belief causes *iyav mbu ndughur* (Stomach ache). Among the Kunav of Vandeikya Local Government Area of Benue State, Kola nuts and alligator pepper are offered guest complimented with water or

palm wine. The elaborate sign of welcome is pounded yam, chicken soup spiced in beniseed/melon (Ayati 93).

The paper is however concerned with kola nuts as a symbol of welcome among the Igede of Oju and Obi Local Government Areas of Benue State. To achieve this objective, the paper is divided into sub-themes for ease of ambiguity and clear comprehension. This would lead to the exploration of sub themes including an introduction and the examination of key words. Thereafter, kola nut as a symbol of welcome among the Igede will be examined. Some viable suggestions will be offered and these would culminate into a conclusion.

Examination of Key Words

The following words, terms and concepts which appear in this paper refer to:

Symbol: A symbol is a representation of something else; that is a thing/object which signifies or represents something other than the one that is seen. Deflem could probably have had the same idea as demonstrated above when he noted that: symbols in themselves are carriers of meaning. He further maintained that the meanings of symbols are multiple, giving unity to the morality of the social order and the emotional needs of the individual (6). To Mercier and Fageant signs and symbols are very powerful ways of conveying or expressing meaning (61). On the other hand, Ogugua explained that symbols are agents which are impregnated with messages and with invitation they conform and to act when decoded in their social and cultural context, they are found to have both cognitive and emotional meaning (50).

In a nut shell, it would not be out of place to state that a symbol is something which is associated with something else that it signifies or represents. In this perspective, Anyacho identifies five modes for symbolic expressions as follows:

- i. Diagrammatic and emblematic symbolism
- ii. Pictorial symbolism
- iii. Physical movement's gestural symbolism
- iv. Verbal symbolism
- v. Musical symbolism (22)

These Anyacho maintained when combined in Religion expresses the Religious faith and enhance worship. Symbols are used to direct people's reactions toward the real meaning of the whole structure of the belief system (Adega, 57).

Kola Nut: The kola nut tree is one of the many trees which God created for the benefit of man. The tree pollinates flowers and produces pods containing fresh fruits that are eaten and also used for other religious and social functions. According to Smith,

kola nuts are the edible, fleshy seeds of tropical trees of cola genus. He explained that the most important species, *Kola acumimata*, is native to rain forests of tropical West Africa (107).

For the Wikipedia, kola nut is the fruit of the kola nut tree, a genus (*kola*) of trees that are native to the tropical rainforests of Africa. The edible nuts are contained in the kola nut pod (with seeds inside their white *testa*), and seeds (whole without *testa* and split into cotyledons) (1 of 5). Njini classifies kola nuts (also spelt cola nuts) into two i.e. the family of *malyvaceae* which is a sub family of *sterculiodeae* and the South American genus *theobroma*. According to him, the kola nut is an ever green tree that grows up to 20 metres (about 60 feet) tall with glossy ovoid leaves up to 30cm long. The kola nut pods are star shaped (1)

It is estimated that there are over 125 species of kola nut trees with the commonly edible ones being *bitter kola*, *garcina kola* or *kola nut nitida* or kola nut acuminate and monkey kola (*kola suboppositifolia*) these three species serve as stimulants. Though kola nut trees are native to central and Western Africa, they are also now found in the West Indies, and Brazil having been introduced thereby African slaves (<http://science.jrank.org/pages/3770/kolahtml...>).

Social Uses of Kola Nut

The Wikipedia affirms that the kola nut has several usages, for instance, it states that the caffeine-containing fruit of the tree is used as a flavoring ingredient in beverages, and is the origin of the term cola. The nuts aroma it maintains is sweet and rose like. The first taste is bitter, but sweetens upon chewing. The kola nut can be boiled to extract the kola.

Furthermore, the kola nut is chewed in many West African cultures, individually or in a group setting. It is often used ceremonially, presented to chiefs or presented to guests. Also, the kola nut is a preference of the African Muslims who are forbidden to take alcohol. Another social use of kola nut is that it is chewed to ease the pangs of hunger and to alleviate fatigue (Smith 107). For instance, among the Tiv particularly the Kunav of Vandeikya local government Area of Benue State; a person just back from the farm could chew kola nuts flavoured by *inyata* (pounded groundnuts spiced with alligator peppers) to energise him/her while waiting for food to be prepared. An exhausted visitor/traveller could also be treated to this recipe to temporarily arrest his/he hunger.

It is also reported that in the 1800s, a Pharmacist in Georgia, the USA, John Pemberton experimented with the extracts of the kola and coca which he mixed with sugar, carbonated water and other such related ingredients to produce the first cola soft drink. This was tasted by his assistant who named the combination “*Coca-Cola*”. It is to be noted that cocaine which is not the other extracts from the Peruvian coca leaf was

prohibited from soft drinks in the USA after 1904. As a result of the above prohibition coca-cola no longer uses neither kola nor cocaine in its products.

Medicinal uses of kola nut

The medicinal uses of kola nut are numerous. It is used in the treatment of whooping cough and asthma. Towards this the caffeine present in the nuts acts as a bronchodilator which expands the bronchial air passages. Further exemplifying on the medicinal uses of the Kola nut, Njini maintained that it is used in body maintenance as in weight loss properties. Thus, the chewing of the Kola nut has more advantages compared to its disadvantages. A good example of the Kola serving as a body regulator can be seen in most Hausa-Fulani who are slim owing to the intake of Kola nut which they regularly chew (5).

Commercial Uses of Kola Nut

Kola nuts are found to be of industrial uses. As a result of this, in most parts of the African continent where it is grown and chewed; the reddish starch liquid from the fruit is used by cultural fashion designers in embroidering traditional dresses. Similarly, kola nuts have a growing market in the alternative medicines and foods supplements markets. This mean that Njini was not out of place when he posited that: kola nuts have been an income earner in most parts of Africa, especially the West African sub-region. It is therefore, not uncommon to see petty traders and hawkers selling kola nuts (3). As it is common with the informal economy, most families who own kola tree plantations earn their income from the sale of kola nuts as traders buy from farmers in large quantities for onward supply to retailers with each of these making a reasonable profit (3).

The Kola Nut as a Symbol of Welcome among the Igede of Benue State

The African continent is made up of different social and ethnic groups with diverse cultures which are however closely related both in symbolic meanings. This means that some of the cultural traits of these African ethnicities are closely related and may also convey the same ideas. Despite the apparent similarities in African culture, some aspects are diametrically opposed to each other. The preceding line of thought is correct when reference to the issue of welcome and hospitality is mentioned in most Africa societies. Thus, while in some parts of Africa, the most notable sign of welcome could be the presentation of water to the visitor; some African ethnic nationalities would provide the guest with roasted yams or gruel (*kunu*) as a sign of welcome.

Among the Igede who occupy Oju and Obi Local Government Areas of Benue State, the most notable symbol and sign of welcome is the presentation of Kola nuts to the visitor. Commenting on the kola nut as a symbol of welcome among the Igede of Benue State Chief John Igabo explained that indeed the kola nut is a sign of peace and welcome among the Igede; stressing that it is broken and shared at social, political and

religious gatherings before the commencement of any meaningful discussion (oral interview).

This implies that, if a person is welcome in an Igede home, he/she is presented with Kola nuts as a sign of peace and welcome. On the other hand, if the visitor is not welcomed he/she is not presented with any piece or pieces of kola nuts. Re-iterating the religio-cultural significance of the Kola nuts among the Igede, Hon. Ocho Godwin postulated that Kola nuts are symbolic and significant because it is used to welcome guest in Igede homes, thereby signifying hospitality. According to him, all visitors to Igede homes/land are presented with kola nuts to show that they are welcome in such homes/the land. Thus, if a person is not welcome, he/she is not presented with the kola nuts (oral interview).

In the presentation of the Kola nuts to guests/visitors or before the commencement of communal and religio-cultural functions the Igede do not present kola nuts in even numbers but in odd numbers. This implies that the kola nuts can only be given in the numbers of 1, 3, 5,7,11 15, 21 or 53 etc. pieces to visitors and not even numbers like 2,4,6,8, 10 or 20 pieces providing an insight into this phenomenon, Ogbudu Samuel explained that in Igede religio-cultural world-view even numbers are reserved for slaves; while kings have odd numbers as their exclusive reserve (oral interview).



Plate 1: Presentation of kola nuts in odd numbers accompanied by grind alligator pepper/groundnut to staff and students of the Department of Religion and Philosophy, Benue State University, Makurdi on study tour of Oju LGA, Benue State on the 30th Jan.2014.

The above information was collaborated by Chief Felix Arubi (the Ada Oko-Adikwu Council ward of Ito Kingdom) who stated that in the presentation of the kola nuts to guests/visitors, if it were discovered that the pieces of the kola nuts presented are even i.e. 6 or 8 then it meant that something was wrong somewhere; an omen so to speak (oral interview). Furthermore, the Igede in their sense of hospitality and magnanimity know that when a person chews kola nuts it is bound to be stuck in between the person's teeth as such water i.e. palm wine is offered the guest to aid in washing the kola nuts from the teeth down the throat. In contemporary times, the water could be anything from palm wine, beer, hot drinks/other form of spirits to soft drinks (oral interview).



Plate 2: A keg of palm wine offered to staff and students of the Department of Religion and Philosophy, Benue State University, Makurdi on study tour of Ado LGA, Benue State by the *Olonge Nwe Ufia* HRH. Chief Matthew Ogbu Egede in his palace at Utonkon (Ufia) on the 22nd Oct., 2014.

Similarly, the Igede recognise and respect age and seniority, as a result of this fact, young men and women and or children do not break the kola nuts in familial, communal, religious and other social or political gatherings but the eldest person –man performs this onerous task. When the kola nut is thus broken, the elder speaks to the kola nut in the language of the ancestors which the kola nuts only understands and invokes the presence of the ancestors and guidance spirits to partake in the meal and thereby attract their blessings on all those present for a successful deliberation or outline of the meeting, visit, endeavour etc. the breaking of the kola nut by the most eldest person is followed by the ritual pouring of libation to the ancestor to make the occasion “wet” i.e. fruitful.

Commenting on the significance of pouring libation by the Igede after the breaking of kola to commence discussions, the Ada Oju, Chief (Amb.) Dr. Augustine Egbere Ogbu intimated that the Igede belief that everything comes from the soil/land; as such whatever the Igede do they give a part in recognition to the soil/land/ground via the pouring of libation (oral interview). When the libation is thus poured, the gods and ancestors attention and blessings is sought and they are implored to protect and fight the just cause of the Igede, incapacitate their enemies and prevent any untoward happenings (oral interview).



Plate 3: An elder pours libation at the palace of the Och' Otukpo HRH. Dr. John Onumiyang Eimonye (OON) to pave way for fruitful discussion when staff and students of the Department of Religion and Philosophy, Benue State University, Makurdi on study tour of Otukpo LGA paid him a courtesy call at his palace at Otukpo Icho on 10th Oct., 2014

To further demonstrate the necessity of the pouring of libation to the ancestors and their role in communal affairs, Odoh A. Dickson pointed out that: if the ancestors are not recognized in the sharing of kola and pouring of libation, they demonstrate their anger and annoyance by causing the pieces of kola/food items to drop or fall off from the partakers hands onto the ground. Likewise, there could be spillage of drinks, palm wine etc. (oral interview). In demonstrating their sincerity of purpose when kola nuts are broken and shared by the Igede and their guests, the host is usually given a piece of the kola nut to chew first before the guest/other persons present. According to Hon. Ocho Godwin the above is demonstrative of the host's good intentions and also to signify that the kola nut is not poisoned (oral interview).

Similarly, the kola nut is significant and symbolic in some communities of Idoma land especially in the Ogbadibo and Otukpo Local Government Areas of Benue

State. In this respect HRH. Chief Sunday Ekele explained that kola nut is symbolic and significant among the three districts/clans of Ogbadibo namely: Otukpa, Orokam and Owukpa. Thus, if a person is welcomed in any Ogbadibo home, he/she is first offered kola nuts and when not offered; it means the person is not welcome and therefore, not received (oral interview).



Plate 4: Kola nuts in a tray offered to staff and students of the Department of Religion and Philosophy, Benue State University, Makurdi on study tour of Otukpo LGA by the Och' Otukpo HRH. Dr. John Onumiyen Eimonye (OON) on 10th Oct., 2014.

Among the Idoma of Ogbadibo, it is disrespectful for a young person to break the kola nut before the elders. Also, the composition of the kola nut i.e the clasping of the cotyledons signifies unity, love and strength. As Chief John Ohemo observed, the absence of unity entails division. Therefore, the Ogbadibo break, share and eat the kola nuts a sign of love and brotherliness, and unity (oral interview). Furthermore, Chief Nelson Onuh mentions others uses of the kola-nuts among the Idoma of Ogbadibo to include: performance of sacrifices, offerings to the deities to determines a person's fate, marriage ceremonies and offered to the ancestors during the *Alekwu* (ancestral spirits) festival (oral interview). When elders break the kola nuts, they offer prayers, say incantations thanking the gods and ancestors for protection, provision and solicit a successful outcome of a visit, mission, planned event, peace and unity.

Kola Nuts and African Religion

Kola nuts have a pride of place not only in foreign religious traditions like Islam but also in African religion. As a result of this fact, Kola nuts are an important element in the traditional spiritual practice of culture and religion in West Africa, particularly Nigeria. Njini therefore posits that:

Kola nuts are used as a religious object and sacred offering during prayers, ancestral veneration, and significant life events such as: naming ceremonies, weddings, and funerals. They are also used in divination for which only kola nuts that are divided into four lobes/cotyledons are suitable. The kola nuts are cast upon a special wooden board and the resulting patterns are read by a trained diviner (2).

Generally, the use of kola nuts for divination purposes is aimed at seeking for and obtaining information concerning:

- Contacts with other people, before setting upon a meetings journey.
- Family welfare and what the future holds.
- Group activities and whether a person should belong to a particular group.
- The sources of sickness of family/community members.
- The sources of death of family/community members.
- Happenings in the community be they good/bad omen practices.
- Perpetrators of bad deeds of witchcraft etc.
- Well-being of family and community etc. (Njini 5).

In some communities in Nigeria such as the Igbo, Kola nuts are so much valued that it marks the break of day in the morning rituals performed by the heads of each family. Kola nuts are also used in the mediation of conflicts between individuals and communities where it is taken as an appeal for cease fire, reconciliation or declaration of war.

Conclusion

The chapter has examined kola nuts as a symbol of welcome amongst most African ethnic nationalities especially the Igede of Benue State, Nigeria. The uses of kola nut for social, religious, cultural and political purposes thus, appears to have ancient origins. Similarly, Kola nuts are chewed in most West African cultures especially Nigeria either individually or in social settings to restore vitality and ease the pangs of hunger and fatigue.

Kola nuts also have a pride of place in African Religion as it plays an important part in the trado-spiritual practices of culture in Nigeria. This explains why the African will not engage in any endeavour without first verifying their pathways to ascertain whether they are clear and free of enemies or hazards and above all whether a planned

endeavour will be fruitful. This privy information can be obtained using kola nuts as a medium of divination.

Owing to its symbolism amongst the Igede of Benue state, the presentation of kola nuts to a guest/visitor signifies that such a guest is welcome and when not presented it connotes the fact that the person is not welcome or that his/her presence is not acknowledged or approved. It is to be noted that before the advent of Information Communication Technologies (ICT), through which instant communication with distant acquaintances is possible, divinity information services had and is still serving kola nut practicing communities.

We therefore, call on the Igede particularly, and other African ethnic nationalities that cultivate and use the kola nuts to preserve and promote these indigenous knowledge systems of the African people. In view of this also, farmers of the kola tree should be assisted in enhancing their farms. This is because the kola weevil (*Balanogastriis cola*) attacks the nuts. While the seeds are liable to worm attack, the wood/tree is subject to borer attacks. This literally translates into poor yields, harvest and poor income.

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