

A STUDY OF THE LANGUAGE OF KOLA NUT IN TRADITIONAL IGBO SETTING

By

GERALDINE I. NNAMDI-ERUCHALU

*Department of English Language and Literature,
Nnamdi Azikiwe University,
Awka,*

Abstract

The Igbos place an immeasurable value on kola nuts (especially cola acuminata). It is a very essential nut, without which most formal and informal gatherings among them can hardly take place unless an apology is tendered for its unavailability. Kola nut fosters unity among those who partake of its blessing, breaking and eating. Each time it is presented, it is blessed before being consumed. This paper seeks to highlight the principal features of the language used in blessing kola nut among the Igbos of South-East Nigeria.

The kola tree is an evergreen tree whose origin is tropical Africa. It produces woody fruits, in the form of pods, inside which are the nuts. The genus cola, among which we are interested in *cola acuminata*, belongs to the sterculiaceae family. Cola acuminata could be dark red or cream-coloured. The cream coloured specie is exotic and commonly called champion cola ('Oji Ugo'). It is highly valued among the Igbos, hence the saying *oji ugo a na-echelu nwafo* (a grade of kola nut preserved for the nobles). Kola nuts have high caffeine content. They are used in the production of soft drinks. In West Africa, generally, the nuts of some special species have economic value, as many people trade on them. They are also eaten as part of diet. Although kola is neither the biggest nor the sweetest fruit in Igbo land, the nuts have tremendous cultural significance. In fact, kola nut is ritualized among the Igbo people of Nigeria.

Kola Nut and the Igbo Culture

The culture of a people is their way of life. It encompasses their beliefs, music, art, and social organization. The kola nut is engraved in the culture of the Igbos. There is no part of Igbo land that kola nut is not held in high esteem. In fact, breaking the kola nut is a ritual as old as the Igbo tribe. There is hardly any event that takes place without the kola nut. Supporting this claim, Ogbukagu (2008) noted that:

There is no function or ceremony performed in any part of the Igbo land that presentation of kola nuts does not take precedence. Kola nut is to Igbo people what the prayer book stands for in the Christian world. (251)

Kola nut is often served with sauce (prepared mainly with pepper, groundnut, and palm oil) and alligator pepper. Among the elders, white chalk 'nzu' accompanies it. With the 'nzu', they make marks on the floor and rub it on their big toes, and sometimes around their eyes.

The Importance of Kola Nut in Igbo land

Some of the numerous purposes the kola nut serves in Igbo land are:

- (a) **Ushering in a New Day:** In the traditional Igbo society the eldest man in the family welcomes a new day by breaking kola nut early in the morning. He does this early in the morning after he has washed his hands, face and mouth. The elder thanks the ancestors of the family, as well as the gods and goddesses of the land for keeping watch over them throughout the night. He also offers prayers to them for guidance, protection, favour, success, etc in the day ahead. This normally takes place in the presence of the male members of the family and elderly women. Parrinder (1962:38) affirmed that '...a family head may put some kola nuts on the ground in the early morning and ask God to watch over him and his children'.
- (b) **Welcoming Guests:** Igbos welcome their guests, first and foremost, with kola nuts. In fact, even if an Igbo man welcomes you with the most expensive French wine or hot drink without first of all presenting kola, or apologizing for its unavailability, he has not welcomed you. After apologizing, he may then present snuff, palm wine, hot drink, meat, dried or stock fish to his visitor as an alternative. But the ideal thing is kola nut. Achebe (1958) captured it in the text below:

He immediately rose and shook hands with Okoye, who then unrolled his goatskin which he carried under his arm, and sat down. Unoka went into an inner room and soon returned with a small wooden disk containing a kola nut, some alligator pepper, and a lump of white chalk. 'I have kola,' he announced when he sat down, and passed the disc to the guest. (4-5)

It is the tradition in Igbo land that after presenting the kola nut to the visitor(s), it is returned to the presenter or whoever he has appointed to bless it. This gives rise to the common saying: *oji eze di eze n'aka*, meaning 'the person who presented kola nut should see to its blessing'. Most often, special visitors are given kola nut to go home with. In some cases it is the tradition that distinguished persons should go home with

kola nuts in such occasions, he picks a kola nut from the saucer when it is given to him and returns the rest to the host. The reason behind this is that when 'the kola reaches the persons house, it tells were it came from'. So the Igbos say *oji rue uno o kwuo ebe o si*.

- (c) **During Meetings /Public Gatherings:** In most public gatherings, kola nut is presented quite early. In fact, until it is presented, blessed, and eaten together, it seems something significant is left out. It is a mark of welcome and symbolizes unity, as eating it together establishes a bond of oneness. Kola nut is for spiritual communion. It does among the Igbos what the Holy Communion does among the Christians.
- (d) **Divination:** In traditional Igbo society, a man or an elderly woman often has a cause to visit a diviner so as to inquire something of importance to him from the oracles and the ancestors. When somebody is critically ill, died mysteriously, problems abound, strange things are seen in the compound, somebody is seeking somebody's hand in marriage, etc the oracle (*afa*) is consulted. The person that has come to consult the *afa* presents a big kola nut amidst other things, to the gods. Amadi (1966) mirrored it vividly in this extract:

Let me have some kola nuts and gin, 'Anyika said. They were brought. Anyika broke the nuts, cut them into pieces and threw them outside. He poured out some gin as libation and muttered as each drop reached the ground....then he brought out his divination cowries that made name resound from the waterside village of Omokachi to the far, far lands of the Wakanchis.... (6-7)

- (e) **Sacrifices:** Every religion acknowledges the importance of sacrifice. Meanwhile, the Guinness Encyclopedia points out that 'sacrifice is the summit of Igbo traditional religion'. It is the highest activity of worship which the traditional Igbo man offers to the spiritual beings. Ugwu and Ugwuene (2004:77) observed that '...in African traditional religion, it is man's best way of establishing or maintaining cordial relationship between himself and the supersensitive cosmic reality'. Kola nut is often used to make sacrifice. Parrinder (1962:88) noted that 'when kola nuts are thrown before the shrine 'the way in which they fall shows whether the offering is acceptable or not'.
- (e) **Oath Taking:** Kola nuts are used in oath taking. In Igboland, when somebody is accused of or even suspected to be responsible for the plight of a fellow townsman, there is often a need for the accused to take an oath before the public so as to clear himself from such allegation. One of the major ways of doing it is by dropping a cotyledon of kola nut on the ground and making the accused bend down to pick it with his mouth. The belief is that if the person is guilty, the earth goddess would automatically strike him or her dead.

- (e) **Idol Worshipping:** An Igbo man going to worship his personal idol or chief priest going to worship the oracle must, first of all, give the god kola nut, wine, blood, or any other gift. Amadi (1966) recorded as follows:
The shrine was at the foot of a massive cotton tree. It was fenced off with a ring of tender palm shoots and their yellow colour blazed like a flame against the dark background. Nwokekoro went into the temple and placed some kola nuts in front of the two carved figures clothed in blood and feathers. (16-17)
These men regard the idols as supernatural beings that must be saluted with the presentation of kola. It is only when the beings have been saluted that requests, appeals, and prayers can be made to them.
- (f) **During Marriages:** In the traditional Igbo society, Kola nut is one of the major items used in contracting marriages. It is presented by both parties to the marriage. A man coming to ask a girl's hand in marriage comes with a specified number of kola nuts. Meanwhile, before the groom's family brings their kola nut out, the bride's family would have welcomed them with theirs.

Presentation of Kola Nut

In Igbo culture, it is essentially the duty of men to present kola nut unless the gathering is purely that of women and there is no male including a small boy around. In fact, kola nut is specifically a men's affair in Igbo land. In traditional Igbo setting where the man lives in his *obi* while the wives (and the children) live in their huts, kola nut is served at the *obi*. Now that many couples live under the same roof the woman assembles kola nuts, and hand the saucer over to the husband to present to their guest. Where the woman is a widow, she may invite any male relation of her late husband to come and present kola nut to her guest.

Kola Nut and the Significance of Number

Nature bequeathed kola nut with clearly distinct cotyledons which separates from one another the moment a little pressure is exerted on it. Kola nut with only one cotyledon is seen as a bad omen. Such is neither eaten by the gods nor man, but thrown away. Those with two cotyledons have no cultural value in Igbo land. Therefore, they are not acceptable in Igbo culture. They are eaten by elders. This explains why *Cola nitida* (*Oji Awusa*), which naturally has only two cotyledons, is not acceptable in Igbo contexts. Kola nut with three cotyledons is good though deficient because the four market days (Eke, Oye, Afo, Nkwo) in Igbo land are not represented in it. The Igbos call it *Oji Ikenga*. Whenever it is presented to a person, that person is seen as someone who will achieve great things in his or her lifetime. In some parts of Igbo land, when such kola nut is presented to a guest, the guest is expected to give some money to his host. Kola nuts with four cotyledons are complete in themselves, as they are acceptable

to the gods of the four market days. Igbo people see such kola nuts as being complete. Those with five cotyledons signify wealth, abundance and productivity. A kola nut with six cotyledons is seen as a bad omen, and thrown away. It is rare to come across kola nuts with seven and eight cotyledons, but when seen, they signify great wealth and abundance.

Analysis of the Language Used in Blessing Kola Nut

In some parts of Igbo land, children break kola nuts, while in some it is the business of elderly men. But blessing of kola nut is exclusively done by elders. There is no limit to what is prayed for during the blessing of kola nuts. A mastery of oratory is an added advantage, as that makes it quite interesting and fun to partake of. The language used in blessing kola nut has the following unique features.

Acknowledgement of the Gift of Life

Blessing of Kola nut in most parts of Igbo land starts with the metaphorical expression:

'Onye wetara oji wetara ndu.....isee!'

This is translated as

'He who brings kola brings life.....Amen!'

The prayer usually offered whenever kola nut is presented is a prayer of life and the good things that go with it. Kola nut, when presented, symbolizes unity, friendship, love, and acceptance, and all these make life worth living. Partaking of it is like sharing in a communion of the living. Consequently, its presentation is likened to the gift of life.

Acknowledgement of the Supremacy of God over all other Beings:

Olisa kere uwa na ihe nile di n'ime ya. Onye zara mbara igwe, ahinia adighi etochi ya ,onye nwere anya na-ahuzu ihe nile, ma nke putara ihe ma nke di nzuzo, eze kachasi eze nile, onye nwe ndi nwe mmadu, anyi ewetara oji. Nara anyi oji gozie, ka anyi jiri obi ocha na afo ofufo taa ya.... isee! (Nzeako 9)

God the creator of the earth and every thing therein. He who swept the surface of heaven, and grass does not grow upon it, He who has the eye that sees every thing, He who knows everything, both visible and invisible, the king that is above every other king, He who owns the owners of man, we have brought kola nut. Accept from us kola nut and bless, so that we may chew it with happiness and satisfaction.....Amen!

It is the belief of the Igbo man that there is a supreme God who lives in heaven. This supreme God is 'all knowing', 'all seeing', and 'all powerful'. He is the creator and keeper of man and other creatures. This explains why the Igbo's address God as '*Chukwu Okike*', '*Olisa bi n'Igwe* ,' '*Chukwu wee ike nile*', '*Eze chita Oke* ,' '*Chukwu*

Obioma’, ‘*Obi n’Igwe*,’ in their different dialects to portray His supremacy . Man calls upon him to use his supreme power to bless the kola nut and to do good things for him. This supreme God is beyond the reach of man. He is reached through the lesser gods who are His representatives on earth. So, to worship him, they take their objects of worship to the lesser gods whom they believe are benevolent and easier to approach.

Hierarchy of gods/goddesses and the Ancestors

There is a hierarchical invitation of the gods/goddesses, usually from the most powerful and most revered, to the least in the land. Accuracy is maintained here as it an offence against the gods to invite a weaker god before its stronger counterpart.

Uto Nsude taa oji ofoo o o!
Anugwu nna anyi taa oji ofoo!
Ani Umuezani taa oji ofoo!
Ani Amagu taa oji ofoo!
Ani Okpuno taa oji ofoo!
Isi Ani Ugwuakulu taa oji ... ofoo!
Ngwu Odakolo taa oji ofoo!
Ndi nna nna anyi ha bia taa oji... ofoo!
Ani Ude Ugwu Ude Onyia, nwoke ji aka dogbuo agu,
bia taa oji... ofoo!
Onye obuna bia were oke nke ya o o o...ofoo o o!
Let every one of you come and take his own o o...Amen.

This prayer was taken from Udi dialect of Igbo. The person called on the different deities of the town (Nsude) to come and take kola nut, starting from the highest and most powerful deity, ‘*Uto*’ to the lesser gods and then the ancestors. Their ‘*Uto*’ was the greatest warrior of the town and even beyond, and it was he who wrought them victories from the surrounding towns during the era of inter- town wars. At his death he was deified. Also, invitation to come and partake of the kola nut was extended to the powerful gods/goddesses of different villages and markets around the town. Note that ‘ise’, ‘ofo’, ‘ami’ and others are used as response in different dialects of Igbo and they all mean ‘Amen’!

Humility:

Anyi bu umuaka na-asa ahu n’ afo n’ afo.
Onweghikwa nke anyi ma. O na abukwa nwata
jehie uzo, a kuziere ya. Biko, gbaziere anyi uzo
anyi ka o nwere diri anyi na mma. Bia taa oji nkea
n’ogbe, ka anyi taa n’ ibe-o oisee o!

We are small children that bath only our stomach.
We do not know anything. When a child misbehaves, he is corrected'. Please, make our path straight for us so that it would be well with us.
Come and eat this kola nut in whole while we eat in pieces o o.....Amen o!

The Igbo man, no matter his age, acknowledges the weakness and ignorance of man before God. He prays for God's guidance and direction. God, being the all powerful is invited to eat the gift which man presents to him in whole while man eats in bits.

Portrayal of the Igbo World View

The Igbo man brings in his world view when he blesses kola nut. Some of these are:

(a) Belief in Divine Providence:

Ka anyi bie ogologo ndu dika nna nna anyi ha si bie... isee!
Wepuru anyi ihe ojoo ... isee!
Nye anyi ezigbo ndi anyi maka na ezigbo anyi ka ajo
nwanne mma isee!
Nye anyi ihe akuaku na ihe enweenwe..... isee!
Nye anyi omumu, nye kwa anyi ihe anyi ga eji zuo umuaka. Anyi zucha ha, ka
ha zuo anyi o isee!
Wepuru anyi nriaria , onwu ike na onwu nwuchu... isee!
Emekwana anyi ahuru n'anya ma erighi n' onu.. isee!

May we live long as our fathers did..... Amen!
Remove evil from us
Amen! Give us good friends, for good friend
is better than bad
brother Amen!
Give us wealth... .. Amen!
Give us possession... .. Amen!
Give us children and what we shall use to train them..isee!
After training them may they take care of us... Amen!
Remove sickness sudden death and premature death from
our midst..... Amen!
May we not behold what would be useful to us today
and tomorrow they are no more o o... Amen !!

The Igbo man depends solely on God for every good thing of life. In essence, God gives life, children, wealth, good harvest, and He alone has the power to ward off evil from man.

(b) Belief in Retributive Justice: He believes in following the righteous path for fear of incurring the wrath of the gods. Whatever his enemy wishes him shall befall the enemy.

*Ndi be anyi, anyi ga adi nu. Onye si na ibe ya agaghi adi, ya
buru okuko uzo nabaa ula..... isee!
Maka na egbe bere ugo bere nke si ibe ya ebele nku
kwa ya isee!
Obiara egbu anyi gbuokwa onwe ya o o ... isee o o!*

Our people, we shall live. Whoever that says his brother shall not live, let him go to sleep before the fowl Amen!
Let the kite perch and the eagle perch. Whichever says no to the other, may its wing break..... Amen!
Whoever that wants to kill us shall kill himself..... Amen!!

(c) Peaceful Coexistence: The Igbo man believes in maintaining peaceful coexistence among his neighbours. This is why we hear things like the following in kola nut blessing:

*Obiara be onye abia gbula ya ma O naba,
mkpumpku akwunayan'azu..... ofoo!!
Ukwu iji bia ka I ga eji laa. Ajo muoo agaghi ahu gi.
Ajo mmadu agaghikwa ahu gi..... ofoo!*

Let one's guest not bring trouble on one, and when he would be going back may he not have problem on the way..... Amen!

The leg with which you came, that you will go with.
Evil spirits will not see you. Evil men will not also see you..... Amen!

(d) Belief in Hard Work: The Igbo man believes that for him to have comfort, he has to toil for it .He has to work hard to supply his needs.

*Aluo n'awu e rie n' ndo. Aka aja aja na-ebute onu
mmanu mmanu. Olisa biko gbasie anyi okpukpuike ka
anyi soro ibe anyi chuta ihe anyi ga- eri na nke anyi
ga -edobe....isee*

It is when we toil under the sun that we eat under the
comfort of our house. We work so that we can eat.
God, please give us the strength to get what we shall
eat and what we shall save....
Amen!!

This explains why a youth who has striven to be successful in life is recognized in Igbo land. Thus the saying:

Nwata kwocha aka o soro ogaraya rie nri.
When a child washes his hand he dines with elders.

(e) Occupation: The traditional Igbo man is a farmer, trader, fisherman, hunter, black smith or even craft man. The person breaking the kola nut highlights the one that is common among the people that have gathered, as he asks the gods for success in it. Here is an instance of kola nut blessing in a predominantly farming community.

Ka ihe anyi na- aku n'ala na- ami mkpulu oma.
Anyi konye ji n' ala ya rue ihe di ukwu. Anyi kuo
oka ya mia ogbe buru ibu.....
.isee! Anu ulo anyi nwere, ma ewu, ehi, aturu, na
okuko, Ihe kere mmadu biko gbochiere ha onwu
ike... .isee!

May the things we plant in the soil produce good fruits.
When we plant yam in the soil, let it produce big tubers.
When we plant corn, let it produce big cobs... Amen!
Our domestic animals, including goats, cow, sheep, and
chicken, the creator of man please protect them from
sudden death"..... Amen!

Blessing of Kola Nut as a Chant

Blessing of kola nut belongs to the group of poems called invocational poems. Such poems in the words of Umeh (1991)

...are addressed to God, to other guardian spirits and deities, and to the ancestors, to come to the aid of the living. The effort is always to please these forces with praises and flattery so that they would listen to whatever the invoker wants them to hear whether it is a complaint or gratitude for past favours. In the tradition, these invocational poems are recited or chanted as morning prayers, or as prayers before breaking kola nut.(37)

Blessing of kola nut involves the invitation of the spirits to share in a communion with the humans who have gathered to partake of the kola nut .The spirit world is addressed with chants.

Use of Proverbs

The Igbo language is filled with proverbs and Igbos when he described them as the ‘palm oil with which words are eaten’. In the traditional Igbo society, a man hardly makes a short speech without making use of proverbs. In fact, the Igbos

say:

onye atulu ilu okwu kowara ya , I mara na ego ejiri luo nne ya lara n’iyi

meaning

Whoever that expects the explanation of the proverb spoken to him makes a mess of the bride price paid for his mother.

Since kola nut is part of Igbo culture, its blessing goes with series of proverbs. For example:

Let the eagle peach, and let the kite peach. Whichever one that says no to the other ,let its wing break.

Use of Apostrophe

This figure of speech addresses an abstract concept or person as if they were present. During the blessing of kola nut, spirits are addressed as if they were part of the gathering .

Ndi nna nna anyi ha oji abia.
Eze Ikeji, Eze Okoli, Eze Idu, bianu taa oji.
Onye mara nke O chiri , ya zelu....isee!

Our fore fathers, kola nut has come.
Eze Ikeji, Eze Okoli, Eze Idu, come and eat Kola nut
Each of you come and answer to your title....Amen!

Use of Conversation

Sometimes, conversation is employed during the blessing of kola nut. This is the case in the extract that follows:

*Ma nke kachasi ihe nile, nye anyi ihe oriri, ihe anyi ga-eji zuo
Umu anyi n’ihi na onye mutara umu, ma o hughi ihe o ga- eji zuo
ha no n’okwu. Ndi ulo anyi , O bughhi ihe mere eme?’.....
‘ Ezi okwu ka I kwuru.’*

But above all, give us food, what we shall use to train our children, for he who has children, but has nothing with which to train them is in trouble .Our people is it not true?'
'You have spoken the truth'

Repetition

This is another important attribute of the language of kola nut. For instance, there is the constant repetition of '*bia taa oji* ,' (come and eat kola nut) when the person blessing the kola nut calls on the spirits and ancestors to come and partake in the communion of kola nut.

Conclusion

In traditional Igbo society, kola nut is esteemed highly. It is used in virtually all the activities of the Igbo man. He uses it to offer prayers to the gods, welcome a new day, welcome guests, offer rituals to his gods, take oaths, and to do many other things. Through kola nuts, he communes with the spirit world which he believes has the ultimate control over every sphere of his life. Since kola nut is deeply rooted in Igbo

culture, and language and culture are inseparable, blessing of kola nut among the Igbos is done exclusively in the Igbo language no matter how official the gathering is. No wonder the saying:

‘ Oji anaghi anu oyibo’

meaning

‘Kola nut does not understand the English language.’

Blessing of kola nut requires proficiency in the Igbo language, as it involves oratory which projects the seriousness of it.

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