



## MATERIAL LORE AS AN APPENDAGE OF FOLKLORE: THE KOLA NUT EXAMPLE

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**ABSTRACT:** *Kolanut is an indispensable aspect of the Igbo tradition. As an integral part of the Igbo tradition, kolanut is present in every traditional and customary festival in all parts of the Igbo society. It is held in high esteem in Igbo as no festival would take place without the presence of kola. According to the tradition, kola nuts must be prayed with, broken and eaten by the people present before any occasion can progress. In the same vein, any visitor to an Igbo person, not offered a kola nut by the guest is simply understood to mean that he is not welcomed by the guest. Despite the role of kolanut in the Igbo society, many Igbo people are ignorant of the significance of kolanut and the right way to use kola nuts for an occasion. The researchers are aware that many people have written on kola nuts but the writers concentrated solely on the importance of kola nuts. In this paper, the researchers have decided to take a different part by vividly analysing the significance of kolanut in the Igbo society, with emphasis on the symbolic implications of each type of the Igbo kola nuts. As the research bothers on culture, the researchers see New Historicism as the most appropriate theoretical framework for the study.*

**KEYWORDS:** Kolanut, Cotyledon, Folklore, Tradition, Culture.



## FOLKLORE

Folklore of any society is very indispensable as it aids in preservation of culture and tradition. Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, postulates that he who did not know when rain started beating him would not know when his body dries. The Igbo has a saying that in any society where there are no elders to teach the young ones the dos and don'ts of the society, the youths of the society tend to commit taboos on a regular basis. Folklore of any society helps the young ones to understand the way of life of their people in order not to deviate from the tradition. The term "Folklore" is a compound word, taken from the words "folk" which means a people living together as one and "lore" which entails stories of wisdom shared among the folk. Folklore, therefore, means the totality of stories, norms and traditions of a people which bind the people together as one. According to M. H. Abrams, since the mid-nineteenth century, folklore has been the collective name applied to sayings, verbal compositions, and social rituals that have been handed down solely, or at least primarily, by word of mouth and example rather than in written form (104). To Chris Baldick in *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, folklore is a modern term for the body of traditional customs, superstitions, stories, dances, and songs that have been adopted and maintained within a given community by processes of repetition not reliant on the written word (99). According to X. J. Kennedy, Dana Gioia and Mark Bauerlein, folklore is the body of traditional wisdom and customs of a people as collected and continued through oral tradition. It includes songs, stories, myths, proverbs, and any rituals, customs, medicines, etc., that have a putative origin in the mythic past of the "folk" (66).

Vivifying the concept, Polley *et al.*, in their *American Folklore and Legend*, believe folklore to be the body of traditional customs, beliefs, tales, songs, and the like that are transmitted by word of mouth from one generation of a small society to the next. Such precision of definition, of course, is necessary to every academic discipline. In fact some folklorists deplore what one of them, Richard Dorson, has termed "fakelore" – that is, stories and characters popularly believed to be folklore, which are actually the product of a single writer or of the media (6).

Polley vivifies that for anything to qualify as folklore, it has to emanate from the folk, seen as a property of the folk and not a personal property. They use Richard Dorson's concept "fakelore" to corroborate his assertion. If it is an individual rendition, it is fakelore and if it is a communal affair, without emanating from an individual as the author, it is folklore. In their view, folklore is transmitted verbally. This is not always the case. There are aspects of folklore that are documented not orally. Uche Nnyagu argued that material folklore is rather visible and tangible. Knowledge of the material lore is not based on verbalisation; they are seen and touched. In his *Folklore and the Oral Tradition of the Nigerian People*, Nnyagu writes that "Folklore is a compound word of *folk* and *lore*, coined by an Englishman William Thoms in 1846. It is the belief of a given society – folk which includes tales, myths, ballads and many others communally owned and which govern the folk. Folklore encompasses traditions peculiar to a particular group of people and would be alien to another folk (68).

In Igbo society, Folklore enables the younger generation to understand that in truth, the Igbos were not atheists before the advent of colonialism; they used kolanut to ask for favour from their gods. According to Adiele Afigbo in *Ropes of Sand: Studies in Igbo History of Culture*, "the Igbo believe in a Supreme Being, what he calls 'one Creature' or what the Igbo call *Chukwu*, a contraction of *Chi Ukwu* – the Great *Chi* or Creator (178).



## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research focuses on the culture and tradition of the Igbo as it concerns kola nut as an aspect of material culture. As the research is based on the way of life of a folk, the researchers believe that new historicism is an appropriate theoretical framework for the study. New historicism is a movement in literary criticism that began in the 1980s. New historicism is an offshoot of cultural studies. This theoretical framework is interested in the relationship between a literary work and the society represented by the author. According to M. H. Abrams, “New Historicism, since 1980s, has been the accepted name for a mode of literary study that its proponents oppose the *formalism* and they attribute both to the *New Criticism* and to the critical deconstruction that follows it. In place of dealing with a text in isolation from its historical context, new historicists attend primarily to the historical and cultural conditions of its production, its meanings, its effects, and also of its later critical interpretations and evaluations (190). Affirming that New Historicism is interested in how a work of art represents the culture of a society, Ann B. Dobie in *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to Literary Criticism* writes that the new historicists do not claim to have the “truth” about a text or historical event: rather, they assert that the truth, if such a thing could even exist, would be narratologically and culturally contingent (178).

### Material Lore

According to Nnyagu, material folklore consists of the tangible objects that comprise the folk culture of a group, including folk crafts, arts, architecture, and foods. Folk communities may also be characterised by ethnic and geographic factors. G. T. Basden, in his *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, in the same vein, considers material lore to be the tangible objects considered as part of the culture of a folk. To him, material folklore is found everywhere among people who share similar lore. A family, though an appendage of a larger society, is already a folk as it comprises people who share the same ideology. Basden believes that objects of material lore are found in people’s homes. According to him, “The arts and crafts of the Ibo manifest themselves first in his home. The ideas and tastes of both husband and wife are indicated by the care bestowed in the building and decoration of the house. The styles are many; the materials are practically alike for all. (165). By the offering above, Basden makes it vivid that even building is part of material lore since it is a tangible object and according to him, the architectural design of buildings are peculiar to a particular society. In his own words, “Every man can be (and usually is) his own architect and builder, and, with the aid of relatives suitable or as circumstances permit. The walls are always composed of clay or terra-cotta colour... (165). As material lore denotes that aspect of the folklore that is tangible and not abstract, kolanut is a good example of the material lore.

### Kola nut or kola nut as Material Lore

According to Dike Ugbaja in his *Igo Ofo*, kola nut basically symbolises peace, unity, reconciliation, integrity, life, fraternity, hospitality, goodwill and kindness. Presentation of the revered fruit however differs in Igbo communities as in some places, it is accompanied with money no matter how little or white chalk (nzu). Kola nut is a material culture hence it can be seen and touched. It is a natural gift from God as it comes from a plant which grows as a very big tree especially in a tropical forest. Kola is very indispensable in Igbo as it is present in every customary and traditional festival in Igbo. In Igbo, kola nut symbolises peace, unity, reconciliation, integrity, life, fraternity, hospitality, goodwill and kindness. This is why kola



nut is so venerated in Igbo. It is used to welcome visitors so when one presents a kola nut to his guest, it shows that the guest is welcomed. Chinua Achebe vivifies this in *Things Fall Apart* as Unoka, Okonkwo's father welcomes his guest by first presenting kolanut to him. As Achebe presents it,

One day a neighbour called Okoye came in to see him. He was reclining on a mud bed in his hut playing on the flute. He immediately rose and shook hands with Okoye, who then unrolled the goatskin which he carried under his arm, and sat down. Unoka went into an inner room and soon returned with a small wooden disc 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 his guest.

“Thank you. He who brings kola brings life. But I think you ought to break it,” replied Okoye, passing back the disc (5).

Not minding that Okoye has come to ask Unoka to pay him the money he owes him, and Unoka has no plan to pay him any soon, he still presents kola nuts to him as according to the tradition, to prove to him that he welcomes him well.

The fact that Okoye touches the plate of the kola nut and returns the plate of the kola nut to Unoka to perform the ritual of kola nut breaking corroborates the Igbo tradition and belief of the right of the host to perform the kola nut ritual. In addition, Okoye's response to Unoka that he who brings kola brings life vividly illustrates the elevated status of kola nut in Igbo tradition.

From Achebe's illustration, it is understood that kola nuts do not come alone. Unoka understands the tradition, hence he accompanies the kolanut with alligator pepper and a lump of white chalk.

According to Bawa Kamoompoal, in *Kola Nut: Its Symbolic Significance in Things Fall Apart*, the kola nut is articulated as a foodstuff of primary importance in the life of his people. Therefore, the whole livelihood of his Igbo community revolves around it; for it offers to play a role of unity, harmony and solidarity. Among the multiple roles it plays in society, it has social, spiritual, ideological and economic functions. He goes further to emphasise the importance of kola nut in Igbo tradition when he writes that Achebe depicts in the novel, the Igbo people using kola nuts to fulfil different societal functions, thereby testifying that his own social background is the sum total of his history, culture, philosophy and religion.

Kola nut is present in marriage and any other ceremony with the eldest male from a particular village prays with kola nut and breaks the kola nut for the people to eat. Not until the kola nut ritual is performed, the occasion cannot commence officially. In the Igbo society, kola nut is regarded as a king of any occasion because it comes first before any occasion begins. The importance of kola nuts and the mystery about kola nuts being rooted in ritual is the reason why it is believed in Igbo cosmology that he who brings kola nuts has brought life. In Nigeria as a whole, kola nuts are a very popular fruit. The Yoruba people cultivate kola nuts in their large quantity while the Hausa people consume it and the Igbo people value it more as they use it for all occasions and ceremonies. The Yoruba people call it *obi*, Hausa people call it *gwooro* and the Igbo people call it *oji*. As seen in Chinua Achebe's ethnographic novels, kola nut is revered as it is regarded as a sacred fruit which plays important roles in Igbo culture. Writers



of literature incorporate this aspect of folklore in their works, using fictional characters to vivify.

Literary critics who study those works aim to parse the works to see how effectively the authors of those works have used the aspect of folklore as used in a typical Igbo society. In real life, among the Igbo people, it is the responsibility of the eldest man, in a customary or traditional ceremony to pray with the kola nut. It is therefore not proper for a kid or a woman to pray with kola nuts when there is an elder that is a man. However, if a man visits another person he is older than in his house and the younger person presents kola nut, the onus is on the younger person to bless the kola nut because the Igbo man believes that one can never be a kid when it comes to the sharing of a game that he killed.

### **Women and the Kola Nut Ritual**

The notion that women do not break kola nuts in Igbo society is erroneous. Igbo is not as patriarchal as it is portrayed. The right thing to say is that women do not break kola nuts when there is a man around. No matter the age of a male in the midst of older women, if there is the need for the kola nut to be broken, it has to be the male's responsibility. However, where there is no male in the midst of women, a woman can break the kola nut but the kola nut is not to be eaten by a man. Women do not plant kola nuts and they do not climb kola nut trees or pluck kola nuts as well.

### **Presentation of Kolanut to a Visitor**

In some parts of Igbo land, when a kola nut is presented, the person presenting the kola nut accompanies the kola nut with any amount of money. This money would be taken by the visitor and the plate of kola nuts is returned to the host whose responsibility it is to bless the kola nut. The host under normal circumstances, presents two kola nuts on a plate with the money. One of the kola nuts with the money has to be taken home by the visitor as *oji rue ulo*.

### **Varieties of Kolanut**

There are two varieties of kola nut: *Ojiugo Igbo* and *Oji Hausa (Gworo)*. *Oji Hausa (Gworo)* is not used in any customary or traditional festival in Igbo. For any ritual, customary festival and traditional activity, *Oji Igbo* is used. *Oji Hausa* is big but only two cotyledons whereas *Oji Igbo* contains from two to seven cotyledons.

### **Types of Kola nuts**

There are different types of kola nuts. Each type has its significant implications in Igbo folklore. Types of kolanut are ascertained based on the number of cotyledons each kola nut contains. Apart from the sex of kolanut, the emphasis of this paper is on the significant meanings of the number of cotyledons each kola nut contains. It is pertinent too, to state at this point that kolanut is also categorised according to sexes. For instance, there is the male cotyledon and there is the female cotyledon. The male cotyledon has its ridge extend all the way from the apex to the tail of the lobe while the female has its ridge like the shape of a triangle and not as flat as that of the female. As earlier stated, kola nuts are categorised according to the number of cotyledons they contain. The researchers' interest in this paper is on the number of cotyledons of each kola nut and not on their sexes. Each kola nut has some ritual meanings attached to it.



## **Analysis of the Kola Nuts According to the Number of Cotyledons**

**Kola Nut with One Cotyledon:** Kola nut with one cotyledon is called dumb kola. It is *oji mmuo* and not meant to be eaten or used for ritual or in any traditional or cultural festival.

**Kola Nut with Two Cotyledons:** Like the one with one cotyledon, kola nut with two cotyledons is equally not meant to be eaten or used for any traditional or ritual festival as it is believed to portend bad omen. It is also called dumb kola nut (*Oji Ogbii*). The Hausa variety of kola nut contains two cotyledons and it is not used at all for any ritual and traditional activity.

**Kola Nut with Three Cotyledons:** This is called *Oji Ikenga* or *Oji Ike*, denoting kola of the valiant. It is not an ordinary kola nut to be eaten by all. As a kola nut of the valiant, only great warriors or a special group of priests are allowed to eat this kola nut. When the kola nut of the valiant is broken and the special people permitted to eat the kola nut are not there, the three cotyledons are thrown out to be consumed by the gods.

**Kola Nut with Four Cotyledons:** It is a sacred kola nut, cherished in Igbo as each cotyledon represents each market day in Igbo – *Eke*, *Oye (Orie)*, *Afo* and *Nkwo*. This is a normal kola nut called kola of peace and blessing. The kola nut portends blessing and can be eaten by anybody.

**Kola Nut with Five Cotyledons:** This is the kola nut of prosperity – *Oji Uba*. When a kola nut is broken and it contains five cotyledons, it denotes increase in everything positive so it portends good omen.

**Kola Nut with Six Cotyledons:** Kola nut with six cotyledons is not ordinary albeit it does not symbolise anything bad. The kola nut portends the communion with the ancestors. When used during any ritual, it stands for the covenant between the visible and the invisible beings. When this kola nut is broken, the smallest lobe or cotyledon is not eaten by any mortal, rather it is thrown away for the ancestors to eat to consolidate the covenant between the mortal and the spirits. This type of kola nut is not broken in certain ceremonies in Igbo because, like the kola nut with one cotyledon, it belongs to the ancestors. The one with one cotyledon is not broken and the one with six cotyledons, when broken, the smallest part is thrown to the ancestors.

**Kola Nut with Seven Cotyledons:** When a kola nut is broken and it contains seven cotyledons, it is a sign of good omen, symbolising prosperity in all angles. This kola nut is rare and the cotyledons are not eaten. They are wrapped in a paper or put in a container, another kola nut would be broken for the people around to eat. The person who broke the kola nut that contained seven cotyledons would fix a day when merriment would be made so that the blessings following the special kola nut would manifest. The day of the merriment, those who were present when the kola nut with seven cotyledons was broken would partake in the merriment.



## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The importance of kola nut in Igbo society can never be over emphasised. A school of thought believed that the Igbo meaning of kolanut, *Oji*, is simply an abbreviation which simply means *Omenala jikoro Igbo* – literally translated as *the tradition that binds the entire Igbo*. This paper has graciously appraised the significance of each type of kolanut stating the symbolic implications of each type of kola nut. The significance of the paper is obvious as it serves as a manual to those who are interested in understanding the aspect of the Igbo folklore. Many people ignorantly break and eat kola nut without the real implications of their actions. This paper will be of immense importance to them. The researchers recommend that further researchers carry out more research on other aspects of kola nut.

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