

APPRAISAL OF *ỌJỊ* AS THE EPICENTER OF HOSPITALITY IN IGBO COSMOLOGY

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to make an appraisal of *ọjị* which is the Igbo kola nut as the epicenter of hospitality in Igbo cosmology. Using analytic method of research, this paper makes a critical assessment of the implications of *ọjị* as an apical agent of hospitality among the Igbo people of Nigeria. In the attempt to achieve the stated aim, this paper studies both the concept, nature, uses, and spiritualities of *ọjị* as expressed in the presentation (*iche ọjị*), ritual blessings (*igọ ọjị*), breaking (*ịwa ọjị*) and eating (*ita ọjị*). *Cola accuminata* is the botanical name of *ọjị* in Igbo translation and kola nut in English. It is a fruit plant that occupies a central position in Igbo socio-cultural and traditional milieu. From the analysis of its concept, uses and spirituality; it is obvious that *ọjị* is the quintessential gesture of welcome in both formal and informal gathering in the Igbo cosmology. The official presentation of *ọjị* with the accompanying rituals is the utmost expression of heartfelt hospitality, goodwill, open-mindedness, honesty/sincerity, love, welcome and friendship to a guest(s). This paper makes a clarion call to all Igbos not to allow the wave of westernization and devaluation of cultures to bastardize the rich symbolism of kola nut among the Igbo people. This can be achieved by conscientization, formal and informal education, workshops and seminars on the concept, values and spirituality of *ọjị* as the epicenter of Igbo hospitality.

Keywords: Igbo, *ọjị*, kola nut, hospitality, etc.

Introduction

The word Igbo is a concept with several senses of use. For the sake of this paper, about three different senses/perspectives are put into consideration. The first is the word Igbo as referring to a group of people who inhabit the southeastern part of Nigeria though there are minor extracts in other regions of Nigeria. It is the third-largest ethnic group in Nigeria after Hausa and Yoruba. The second sense of use of the word Igbo refers to the region occupied by the Igbo people which is the southeastern borders of Nigeria; Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states. Notably, this region bounded/surrounded by some neighboring states such as; Benue, Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Rivers and Delta states. There are still small areas occupied by the Igbo people in Delta, Rivers and Cross River states. The third sense of use of the word Igbo refers to the language spoken by the Igbo people which belongs to the *Kwa* sub-family of the Niger-Congo family of language. Worthy of note is that the Igbo language has lots of variations or dialect across the Igbo land.

The origin of the people is typically based on myths (Onwuatiegwu 2023, 1) and sometimes these myths might be conflicting. Historical scholars like Elizabeth Isichei are of the opinion that the Igbo people have always lived all their lives as a people in the east of the River Niger (Isichei 2004). Other scholars such as J. B Danquah and Jacob Egharevba trace the Igbo origin along with other ethnic groups in Zimbabwe as being descendants from the Jewish stock (Ikeanyibe 2001). This narrative is as a result of similarities in customs, religion, and rituals of the Igbo people with the Hebrews such as the rites of purification, circumcision, marriage, apprenticeship, etc (Onwuatiegwu 2023). The Igbo people are typically known for the culture of hard work, dedication to duty, support to one another which is manifest in some common sayings such as; *onye aghana nwanne ya, ibuanya ndanda*, etc (Iwunna, 2011).

Igbo people have a rich culture of kola nut (referred as *oji* in Igbo language, hence this paper makes use of the Igbo translation as *oji*). The Igbo people attach remarkable and irreplaceable values to *oji*. They hold it in high honor and respect such that no serious

gathering of the Igbo people is without a formal presentation and the rituals of *oji* (Ogbalu, 1974). It is a bond of unity amongst human beings and the spirits. It is believed that even the ancestors are invited when the rituals are well performed in the customary rites. For the Igbo people, *oji* is highly celebrated, respected and honored in every gathering as an iconic symbol of hospitality to guests (Ukaegbu, 2010; Iwunna, 2011). Ogbalu (1974) recognizes that the absence of *oji* in any gathering must be followed up with heartfelt apologies both in formal and informal gatherings. However, it is much more an anomaly not to make a presentation of *oji* in a formal gathering as much less in an informal gathering. It is a necessity in gatherings such as; new yam festival, marriage ceremony, land dispute settlement, burial ceremony, land negotiation, new year ceremony, child naming ceremony, kindred meeting, routine visits, etc.

Seeing the value placed on *oji* by Igbo people and using the method of analysis, this paper tries to make an appraisal of the concept of *oji* as an epicenter of hospitality and friendship amongst the people and their visitors/guests.

On the Concept and Historical Origin of *Oji*

Oji has its botanical name as *cola accuminata*. It belongs to the family of fruit plants that thrives most in the rain forest of West Africa. It is a specie of Cola, which requires sun exposure and survives even in drought. It is a medium-sized tree of about 13-20m height with low branches and always green leafed. Its seed are very aromatic with about 2.5% caffeine content, theobromine and tannins which are very medicinal. Also, according to Schott (2019, 3), *cola accuminata* (*oji*) is used medically to cure diarrhea, dysentery, vomiting, high fever, piles, stomach ulcer, piles, etc. The plant produces soft tissue pods which encase several nuts in each pod. The seeds are harvested when fully ripe and dried under the sun. Also, *oji* is chewed or grounded into powder which is added to carbonated drinks.

Etymologically, the name *oji* can be said to be a mere acronym derived minding the place of *oji* in Igbo land and among the people. Thus the alphabets “o” means *omenala* (culture/custom), “j” means *jikotara* (binding force of communion/unity) and “i” means Igbo, hence *oji* means “customs that unites the Igbo”. *Oji* is not just simply a tree but a culture of love, communion and hospitality among the Igbo people. *Oji* or *cola accuminata* is highly revered and proudly celebrated by Igbo people. Worthy of note is that *oji* in Igbo land is also referred as *Oji* Igbo. It has some traditional significance and sacredness as different from other Nigerian tribes. A very close ally to *cola accuminata* is the *cola nitida* (*oji Awusa* or *oji gworo* which is typically known as the Hausa cola). According to Ugbala (2010), both *oji* Igbo and *oji Awusa* do not occupy the same traditional significance. It is fondly said that other tribes merely eat their kola nut (just like other fruits) while the Igbos revere it.

In the Igbo mythology, *oji* is highly revered as the first fruit tree which is as ancient as human creation. Worthy of note is that most regions of Africa depended on oral traditions till the 20th century when documentary reconstruction of their history began. No doubt that oral tradition offers insights into cultural values, there are nuances that are sometimes irreconcilable. This is a case of the history of kola nut in Igbo oral tradition. Nevertheless, all myths of origin have the same basic elements of kola nut being a communion between the gods/spirits and humanity. Though there are lots of myths on the origin of kola nut and its sacredness among the Igbo people, this paper considers two most ancient and prominent myths of origin as following:

1. That once upon a time when the Igbo founding fathers visited the gods, they were taken into an orchard and were requested to choose from among the many trees in the orchard. Whichever plant/tree to be chosen was to be a sacrament of union among the human beings and between human beings and the spirits. Upon careful assessment and divine enlightenment, they chose *oji*, hence till date *oji* gained prominence amongst all other fruits as a sacrament of union and hospitality (Ogbunkwu 2021).

2. That in the olden days, there was a usual festival of wrestling between human beings and the spirits. It was during the earliest wrestling competition that one spirit named Aji Ike proved unconquerable by all human wrestlers, hence became a hero. Just as women would always fall in love with heroes so did Ugo Onobo who eloped with Aji Ike Ugburuoba to the spirit world. The disappearance of Ugo made her two brothers- Agala and Ogbu to go in search of her even to the ridicule of villagers. Upon the instruction of a diviner (dibia), they went to the bank of the river –Okwuruike during the ebb-tide about 4pm and called her name 7 times as instructed and followed the echo of her voice to meet her with Aji Ike. On entering the house, they found their sister pregnant for Aji Ike who welcomed them with native chalk (Nzu), coconut and kola nut. Aji Ike instructed them to smear the white chalk on their left wrist as a sign of welcome and take the kola nut as dowry for Ugo. He instructed them to do the same to their guests upon return to the world of humans. Also, he instructed them to plant the kola nut. Upon harvest, they should break it and offer Aji Ike a lobe with incantations then throw it out while others share the remaining lobes. Though Aji Ike released their sister but caused her to miscarry the pregnancy while crossing the river to the world of humans because he did not want her to bring his son to the world of human beings (Onwu-Otuyelu, 2009).

Lobes/Cotyledons of *Oji* and Igbo Interpretations

Oji is popularly known for its many parts coming to be one referred as *ibe oji* or lobes/cotyledons. These lobes/cotyledons appear like different layers which are joined together as one kola nut. Very symbolic is that upon breaking the kola nut, these layers do not have any obvious adhesive or gum binding them together to one another, yet they are well bounded. Quite unlike the Hausa kola nut, *Oji* Igbo with just one lobe or two is considered as an abomination or bad omen Osuagwu (1978). Such *oji* is referred as *oji ogbi* (dumb kola), *oji agbara* or *oji mmuo* (kola nut of the spirit). This

is because such kola nut is said to have been made only for the gods as they (gods) do not desire that it be shared with the human beings. Thus a kola nut to be partaken by human beings should have parts both for the gods, hosts, and visitors/guests. Since one lobed kola nut is for the gods, human beings ought not to eat such kola nuts; rather it is to be thrown away and to be eaten by the gods/spirits. Kola nuts with two lobes are not seen as good omen because the number two is an imperfect/unbalanced number in the Igbo cosmology. More so such kola nut is incomplete, hence cannot be shared among the spirits, guests and hosts.

Similarly, when *oji* has about three lobes referred as *oji ibe ato* or *oji ikenga* or *oji ike* (kola nut of the valiant or majesty). It is interpreted as a good omen, strength, determination and success. This is derived from the Igbo symbol of *ikenga*. *Ikenga* is depicted in arts as a wooden carved image with horns that symbolizes strength and vigor. The right hand shows a sword or machete while the left hand holds an elephant tusk as a symbol of triumph/victory. Also, *Oji ikenga* typifies the Igbo family arrangement where the father, mother and child represent the fullness, continuity and victory of the human race. Thus a positive interpretation of *oji* Igbo begins with *oji ikenga* such that when it is presented in a ceremony, it shows good omen and most importantly the hope of success in the gathering where it is presented.

In the same vein, *oji* Igbo with four lobes is referred as *oji udo na ngozi* (kola nut of peace and blessing). The number four in Igbo cosmology symbolizes the four traditional market days of *eke*, *orie*, *afo* and *nkwo*. This is equivalent to Igbo week days, four market days refer to one full week in Igbo cosmology. For the Igbo people, a whole week is counted from an economic perspective such that every community is supposed to have their market day when their products are exposed for other communities to access, hence making the economic life of the people very progressive. Thus a completion of a full week is a completion of economic cycle amongst the people. Comparatively, *oji udo* with four lobes or cotyledons refers to prosperity, favor and abundance. Each market day is dedicated to a particular god such that every

community on their own market day would certainly appropriate the market god for their community. This appropriation in the ancient times implied that the community constructed a shrine or temple of the god in the market place where sacrifices were offered to the god in order to prosper the economic life of the community. Also, a kola nut with four lobes represents the four poles of the earth; north, south, east and west, hence it's a sign of wholeness and perfection. This implies an invitation of all humanities everywhere to partake in the communion of *oji*. Also, ritual blessings with such *oji* means a sanctification of the world and the whole of creation everywhere as represented by the four poles; north, south, east and west.

Furthermore, when the kola nut has five lobes or *oji ibe ise*, it is referred as *oji omumu* (kola nut of procreation). Procreation here refers to child bearing, wealth, prosperity, protection, favor, good luck, etc. Thus newly married couples, expectant mothers or farmers who just planted their seeds like partaking of this type of kola nut such that the ritual prayers will grant them increase/success in their expectations such as; fruit of the womb for newly married couples, bountiful harvest for farmers, successful child delivery for expectant parents, etc. According to Obineche (2021), very remarkable is that this type of kola nut is not very often seen in ceremonies, hence whenever it is seen, the whole ceremony bursts into hilarious moments and frenzy.

A very unique kola nut is of six lobes which is referred as *oji ogbugbandu* (kola nut of covenant). It is a very-rare- to-see kola nut which symbolizes a bond or covenant with the ancestors or communion with the gods of the land. Since it's a very hard to find specie or lobe of kola nut, it symbolizes a special invitation of the gods on the man who performs the *oji* rituals/rites. This is a rare occasion which calls down super abundant blessings upon the man performing the rites of *oji*. The man in turn appreciates the gods for this favor by bringing a life animal such as chicken or goat which will be killed and eaten by the people present in the ceremony in appreciation of the gods.

Kola nut with seven lobes or *oji ibe asa* refers to progress and outstanding blessings, joy and happiness. This is the same category with eight lobes or *oji ibe asato* which is a kola nut of fullness and it is considered as a positive sign signifying greatness, completeness, unity, abundance fullness of life, etc. Here eight lobes or *oji ibe asato* doubles the Igbo four market days, hence promising double blessings and wholesomeness upon all who partake of the kola nut.

Presentation, Rituals and Spiritualities of *Oji*

Oji remains a strong point of communion, prayers and contact with human beings, gods and ancestors of the land. The sacredness of kola nut among the Igbo people cannot be overemphasized. This is couched in the Igbo adage which states that, *onye wetara oji wetara ndu* (whoever brings kola nut brings life) and *onye tara oji tatara ndu* (one who eats kola nut, gains life). Ukaegbu (2010) proudly asserts that there can be no better symbol of communion among the Igbo people than *oji*. This sacredness is attested by the popular adage that, ‘the Yoruba people cultivate kola nut, Hausa people merely eat kola nut but the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria revere and highly celebrate kola nut’. Little wonder according to Ukaegbu (2019), *Oji* Igbo (*cola accuminata*) is the acceptable kola nut for the Igbo people not *oji Awusa* or *gworu* (*cola nitida*).

Worthy of note is that the sacredness of *oji* is so sacrosanct so much so that the degree of reverence does not allow people to use the kola nut tree as fire wood in the ancient society. The kola nut is considered so sacred that Obineche (2017) asserts that the kola nut has ritual powers for peace, long life, prosperity, and unity, hence fit for sacrifices and facilitator of communication between men and the gods. According to Nwadike (2007), the practice of *oji* is a priceless culture of the Igbo people which serves as a material bond of love, communion, harmony and hospitality. According to Basden (1966), kola nut is neither the biggest nor sweetest fruit in Igbo land yet it

enjoys a pride of place because of its cultural significance among the Igbo people. Nzeako (1999) adds that for the reason of this sacredness of *oji*, its goes with lots of rituals.

Minding the sacredness of *oji* among the Igbo people, it is not just eaten in Igbo land as it is eaten among the Hausa people; rather there are rites that accompany the presentation (*iche oji*), acceptance of kola nut (*i nabata oji*), statutory recognition/movement (*oji iga ije*), blessings (*igo oji*), breaking (*iwa oji*) and sharing (*ike oji*). Usually, *oji* is presented by the host to a guest and if it is in a family setting, then it is presented by the father of the house or the eldest son who is the direct heir of the father. Traditionally, before the presentation of *oji*, there is always the rite of hand washing for purification which is beyond mere washing away of dirt but ritual hand washing. The presentation is made in a locally customized kola nut tray referred as the kola nut bowl or *okwa oji* with phrases like; *oji abia* or *leenu oji* (kola nut has arrived or see kola nut).

The sacredness of *oji* is highly observed such that *okwa oji* cannot be used for anything else except the presentation of kola nut. It cannot be used for eating any food, fruits, etc. The presentation is accompanied with some jars of palm wine depending on the degree of the occasion or audience (Ogbalu, 1965; Uchendu, 1965; & Ukaegbu 2010). *Okwa oji* is carved with hard wood and is well decorated. Also, it must not be kept in common places with other bowls or dishes in the kitchen because it is a sacred object which does not belong to the kitchen department. Its presentation is accompanied with *ose oji* (kola nut pepper). *Ose oji* is mostly prepared with alligator pepper or in a debased form, groundnut source with pepper can be an alternative.

After the presentation of kola nut comes the acceptance of kola nut (*i nabata oji*). Like formal law of contract where offer and acceptance makes a contract valid, the ritual of kola nut cannot continue if the kola nut is rejected by the guests. It brings to a halt every further protocol in the gathering, hence it is a sign of bad will, lack of trust and enmity. An acceptance of kola nut is a sign that there is a mutual trust between the

host and the guest. The eldest person receives the kola nut and shows it to everyone who may welcome *oji* by touching it or words of mouth. Sometimes, the kola nut in a platter or the wooden bowl goes round and everyone touches it as a sign of goodwill, sincerity, unity and good fate, hence in the end, it returns to the eldest. At the return of *oji* to the eldest person, it is said, *oji eze di eze n'aka* (the king's kola nut is back to the hands of the king).

The third stage in the ritual of kola nut is the statutory recognition/movement (*oji iga ije*). After the presentation and reception of the kola nut, there is a statutory recognition of some major groups such as; family, kindred, village or community elders depending on the nature of the gathering and the number of kola nuts presented. In an official and large gatherings where a good number of kola nuts are presented, each family, kindred, village or community is recognized by giving them a kola nut. This is received by the most elderly man from the group present in the gathering. In gatherings such as marriage ceremony, burial and the likes; where the eldest member of the group is represented by some younger ones, they collect the kola nut and send it home to the eldest man whom they represent. This act of taking home the kola nut to the eldest man in the group is referred as *oji ruo ulo* (taking home the kola nut as a memento of the ceremony). This act is a sign that the group was well represented. Worthy of note is that it is upon the presentation of such kola nut that the younger ones give feedback on the details of the message from the gathering to the eldest man whom they represented.

The eldest takes up the ritual blessing of kola nut (*igo oji*) which is always done in Igbo language because it is a common assumption that *oji* does not hear any other language but Igbo. It is important to note that even though kola nut is seen in other places outside Igbo land, the sacredness is not the same in all places. Thus *oji* ritual is very peculiar to Igbo people such that it is completely domiciled in Igbo language.

Also, the language is very important because it is assumed that the ancestors who join and receive the *oji* do not hear any other languages but Igbo, hence it becomes an insult to them engaging in kola nut ritual in other languages.

Igo oji refers to rituals of prayer done with the kola nut. The eldest takes one kola nut from the wooden platter in his right hand and prays for happiness, good health, children, good harvest, prosperity, success for the mission for which the kola is brought/purpose of the gathering, etc. After the prayer, he breaks the one used for the prayers, throws a lobe to the ancestors and eats the remaining. However, he has the leverage of eating the kola nut alone or share the remaining lobes with his friends as he desires. Nevertheless, this is allowed in cases where there are many kola nuts. If the kola nut is limited in number then he breaks it into pieces to accommodate others. If it is a large gathering where many families, kindreds, villages or communities are represented depending on the order of importance and minding the nature of the ceremony, other ritual blessings can be allowed by one or two more elders from other groups.

After the ritual blessings (*igo oji*), the kola nut is broken into pieces according to the number of available kola nuts and the number of persons. If in a large gathering/ceremony, the *onye oke* or *onye oje ozi* (one in charge of sharing common goods/services/labour, etc) does the sharing. Nwadike (2007) remarks that *oji* is not broken with bare hands but with a knife not because it is so hard or for the reason of hygiene but as a sign of respect for the sacredness of *oji*. More so, it is not allowable because one may defile the sacredness of *oji* if the person had engaged in unknown taboos (*iru ala*) such as murder, stealing, etc. Thus for the reason of unknown possible taboos leading to defilement, the breaking of kola nut is done with a knife.

Also, after the breaking of kola nut (*iwa oji*), the broken pieces is shared among the people by taking round the platter while each person dips his hands and collects his

share by himself. Worthy of note is that traditionally, the sharing of *oji* is a movement from the right to the left among those present in the gathering. This is because the eldest persons have been well recognized during the statutory recognition ritual of kola nut (*oji iga ije*). Also notable is that women are not supposed to collect *oji* by themselves but men collect and hand over to them (Ekwueme, S.C. *et al*, 2020). Nevertheless, widows who are very old or titled women who are very old and are done with child bearing share privileges like men because the society does not see them as women any more. Such women can in some cases be allowed to collect kola nut by themselves. Also, such women are even allowed to see masquerades which is forbidden for younger women. Also, according to Okenye (2025), during the sharing of kola nut, children below the age of ten years are not allowed to dip their hands to collect kola nut. However, upon reception of kola nut, a father may decide to give a little share of his to his son(s) who joined him to the ceremony.

***Oji* as Epicenter of Hospitality in Igbo Cosmology**

It is undoubtable that Igbos are very warmly welcoming people just as they are also sojourners to many other places. It is not doubtful that the Igbo people have high appetite towards welcoming their guests lavishly. The first welcome gesture among the Igbo people is done with some kind words of welcome such as; *i biala* (as used in Imo and Abia States) or *nno* (as used in Anambra and some parts of Ebonyi and Enugu states) or *alanu/alonu* (as used in some parts of Nsukka in Enugu and Igbo esa in Ebonyi states), etc. This is immediately followed with the offer of seats to guests. Upon seating down, the welcome gesture is very remarkably symbolized with the presentation of kola nut which is the highest manifestation of hospitality to visitors. Scholars like Basden (1996) remark that the ritual prayer of blessings which are done in Igbo language impacts deepest wishes of love, sincerity, friendship, abundant blessings both for the host and the guest. Thus he states that “Igbo welcome is not complete without the sharing of kola nut”(Basden 1996:15). It epitomizes the Igbo’s

clear-mindedness and warm welcome to guests in utmost love, friendship, oneness, etc. Little wonder, Nwadike (2007) proudly states that in Igbo land, kola nut mutually opens the gates of host's heart to the guests.

The degree of hospitality expressed by the kola nut is so much so that a guest does not disclose his mission not until the rituals of kola nut and the actual eating of kola nut is performed. After this ritual, a guest feels highly welcomed and the environment is said to be physically, psychologically and spiritually safe for both parties; guests and hosts. This singular element assuages the fears of barbarism in the primitive society where conquest was the major means of expansionism and land acquisition. In the times of land acquisition by conquest and barbarism, people disguised themselves as visitors in order to gain the attention of unsuspecting host-victims then launch heinous attacks to conquer their territory and take possession of their land. Thus the offer and acceptance of kola nut and the corresponding rituals reassure both parties of their safety, mutuality, sincerity, unity of purpose, friendship, solidarity, etc.

Logically, this degree of hospitality is proportionally negated when there is no offer or acceptance of kola nut. Noteworthy is that in minor gatherings, an apology for the absence of kola nut suffices but it is shameful and a mark of discourtesy that there is no apology in this regard. In this case, both parties already know that there can be no meaningful dialogue or engagement, hence there is mutual suspicion amongst the parties. In situations like this, there is mutual distrust, disrespect, il-fate, rejection, enmity, inhospitality, etc. Typical of this analysis is in the work of Achebe (1958), when the priest of Ezeani said to Okonkwo, "take away your kola nut. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors" (37). This rejection was because Okonkwo beat the wife during a peace talk which the priest saw as a great disrespect and discourtesy, hence reciprocated Okonkwo's inhospitality.

Kola nut portrays a strong point of hospitality, cooperation and solidarity. Umeogu *et al* (2019) remark that the peace, openness, cooperation and solidarity suggested by the presentation and acceptance of kola nut strengthens the confidence and hospitality in both parties; host and guest. Thus whenever and wherever the Igbo people gather both home and abroad, their cultural identity and symbol of hospitality is typified in the rituals of kola nut- *oji* (Kammampoal, B. and Laaar, S. 2019).

Unfortunately, there are lots of challenges to the culture of kola nut in our time; such as devaluation of cultures, replacement with western drinks, snacks as kola, scarcity of kola nut, etc. No doubt that one great challenge wrought by westernization/civilization and colonialism is the devaluation of cultures. Most unfortunately, *oji* Igbo cultural heritage is one of the major victims of this wave of devaluation of cultural heritages. Typical to this devaluation or bastardization of *oji* Igbo tradition is seen in the common adage concerning a Professor who was handed over a kola nut for the ritual blessings. He rather decided to do the rituals in English language and when queried for this act he said; “no doubt that kola nut belongs to the traditional society but any kola nut that enters the university is already going to school, hence should understand and speak English”. According to Ndagi. I. *et al*, (2012), the sacredness of *oji* begins by planting, nurturing, plucking, breaking, etc. Women were not allowed to spearhead this process in the traditional society but the modern society does otherwise. In the society today, women climb kola nut trees and use it for firewood which was highly forbidden in the traditional society. Similarly, during the ritual prayer, it is stated that like the lobes of kola nut are together so it ought to bind the partakers so much so that one who has evil intention cannot partake of it without repercussions. Today this beautiful practice is becoming highly devalued such that partakers afterwards cheat, maim, kidnap, rob and even kill each other.

In spite of these challenges imposed upon the *oji* spirituality and rituals of hospitality, it remains a central factor to hospitality, communion, unity, friendship and blessings

among the Igbo people. There can be no other known object, fruit, food or rite superior to *oji* as a symbol of hospitality and friendship.

Conclusion

This paper has established that *cola accuminata* which is translated as kola nut in English and *oji* in Igbo language is a rich, unique and highly symbolic cultural heritage of the Igbo people both home and abroad. *Cola accuminata* or *oji* Igbo is different from *cola nitida*; that is, Hausa Kola nut (*oji* Awusa or gworo) which is seen as a mere fruit to be eaten by the Hausa people. By Igbo here, this paper refers to both the language of the people, the people themselves and the geographical location of Igbo land in the five eastern states of Nigeria; Abia, Anambra, Imo, Ebonyi and Enugu. Both the people, the land and the language affirm the remarkable and irreplaceable values of *oji*. It is sacrosanct that no serious gathering of Igbo people is without a formal presentation and the rituals of *oji* (Ogbalu, 1974). The people believe that *oji* is a bond of unity amongst human beings and the spirits as typified in the ritual of blessings.

Amongst the Igbo people, *oji* is highly celebrated in every gathering as an icon and irreplaceable symbol of hospitality to guests (Ukaegbu, 2010; Iwunna, 2011). It is popularly known for its lobes/cotyledons or *ibe oji* ranging from one to eight lobes while each has peculiar interpretations. For the reason that the sacredness of kola nut among the Igbo people cannot be overemphasized, it goes with some rituals of

presentation (iche oji), acceptance of kola nut (i nabata oji), statutory recognition/movement (oji iga ije), blessings (igo oji), breaking (iwa oji) and sharing (ike oji). No doubt, the Igbo people have a very high appetite for welcoming guest and even lavishly. This gesture is very remarkably symbolized with the presentation of kola nut. Little wonder did Basden (1996) remark that Igbo welcome is not complete without the sharing of kola nut. The degree of hospitality expressed by the kola nut is so much so that after performing the ritual, a guest feels highly welcomed and the environment is said to be safe for both parties; guests and hosts. This ritual inspires the feeling of being at home with each other, hospitality, safety, mutuality, sincerity, unity of purpose, friendship, solidarity, etc.

This paper makes a clarion call on all Igbo extractions to work hard towards preserving the rich cultural heritage regarding *oji* especially in the world today where cultural heritages are getting devalued and grossly bastardized. In the same vein, this paper makes a clarion call to all Igbos to live by what *oji* symbolizes: hospitality, love, respect, unity, mutuality, acceptance, friendship, etc. There is urgent need for Igbos to develop interest in planting kola nut trees as it is gradually going into extinction, hence making it a scarce commodity (Unya, 2021). This is to ensure its availability and affordability. Also, there is need to take advantage of both formal and informal education, workshops or seminar to teach and restore the values of this beautiful heritage concerning *oji* Igbo as the epicenter and hot spot of hospitality.

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