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## Symbolic Representations of Kola Nut and Palm-Wine in Igbo Traditional Society in Two Selected Nigerian Novels

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### Abstract

The lack of understanding of each object used by Africans is one of the cornerstones of Westerners' discredits on Africans and their cultures. Not only does object use in African cultural gatherings and ceremonies have denotative meaning, it also has connotative and contextual meanings. This paper, using symbol theory, examines symbolic representations of kola nut and palm-wine in Igbo traditional society and in their marriage ceremonies in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966). The findings show that kola nut plays very important social and ritual roles in Igbo culture. It is a symbol of hospitality, friendship, communion, unity, sharing, making requests and showing gratitude. Just like kola nut, palm-wine is used as a symbol of joy, acceptance of request, reconciliation and atonement.

**Key Words:** Kola nut, palm-wine, symbolism, Igbo traditional society, ceremonies

### Introduction

Culture has been viewed in several ways by different scholars. It is referred to as the way of life of a people which encompasses their beliefs, music, art, and social organization (Anidobe & Uzoalor, 2010 cited in Oladumiye, 2018, p.17). Every culture has symbols that are unique to them commonly referred to as cultural symbols. The lack of understanding of each object used by Africans is one of the cornerstones of Westerners' discredits on Africans and their cultures. Not only does an object used in African gatherings and ceremonies have denotative meaning,

it also has connotative and contextual meanings. Kolanut and palm-wine symbolize a lot in African traditional societies, especially in the Igbo society of Nigeria. These are used in great ceremonies such as marriages, births, prayers, naming, rituals to mention but a few. This paper examines symbolic representations of kolanut and palm-wine in Igbo traditional society as replicated in Chinua's Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966). Through symbol theory, it highlights the symbolic meanings of kolanut and palm-wine in Igbo traditional society and marriage ceremonies.

### Theoretical Framework

This study draws its theoretical underpinning from Symbol Theory. Symbols mean more than it can be found at first sight (Jung 1983 as cited by Settineri et al, 2017, p. 9). Symbols are representative concepts, objects, ideas or images, which express and signify something else, other than that which is perceived or observed in reality (Ekeke, 2012, p.5). Radcliffe-Brown (1969) argued that "whatever has a meaning is a symbol and the meaning is what is expressed by the symbol" (p.142).

Indeed, a symbol may draw its meaning(s) from socio-cultural context and value from one culture to another. Man is at the centre of connotative and contextual representations of symbols through his/her cultural identity. Oladumiye (2018) argued that "[...] man is able to make representations of his cultural identity through symbols in the form of arts, language, myth, rituals, names, to mention but a few" (pp. 17-18). The above has helped us to understand the symbolic representations of kola nut and palm-wine in two selected Nigerian novels.

### Symbolic Representations of Kola Nut and Palm-Wine in Two Selected Nigerian Novels

#### 1- Kola Nut

Kola nut is paramount in traditional African societies, especially in the Igbo society. It has many connotations depending on the social gathering and ceremony. It is considered as a symbol of hospitality. It is one of the items used to welcome a visitor or visitors during official and unofficial meetings in the traditional Igbo society. For instance, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, despite Unoka being a prototype of an abject person who lives in poverty, he presents a kola to his friend, Okoye when he pays him a visit. The narrator informs the reader that "Unoka went into an inner room and soon returned with a small wooden disc containing a kola nut [...] 'I have kola,' he announced when he sat down, and passed the disc to his guest" (Achebe, 1958, pp.4-5). Furthermore, kola nut is used in marriage negotiations. For instance, in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, when a young man's parents called Adizua pays an official visit to pay Efuru's bride price, they are offered kolanut by Efuru's parents after greeting them. The narrator informs the reader that "Kola was brought and, afterwards, Adizua's uncle stood up to tell them the object of their visit" (Nwapa, 1966, p. 22). The above attitude of Efuru's parents towards Adizua's parents confirms Chidume's affirmation that "Before any kind of discussion is carried out in any Igbo gathering, there must be a formal kolanut presentation, hence, in an ideal social life, kolanut comes first. Kolanut presentation is a precursor at receptions, important meetings, and customary ceremonies" (2014, p.548).

It thus appears that whenever kola nut appears in an Igbo gathering the matter to be discussed at that particular time is regarded as very vital. Kola nuts are brought out and handed to the eldest person when important guests visit the Igbo community. In fact, there are three steps to follow in offering kolanuts and anyone who fails the steps is reproached by the elders: the first step is the presentation of kola nuts, the second step is the breaking of the kola and the third step is the distribution of the kola nuts. The above way of presenting kola

nut creates acquaintance and caring among the Igbos. As Chidume (2014) confirms, “the presentation of kolanut has an important dimension that many people fail to recognize” (p. 549).

It is noteworthy that offering kola nut to visitors is more important in the Igbo culture than any other drinkable and edible food. For instance, in *Things Fall Apart*, there is a tale about tortoise that is being invited to a great feast by the birds in the sky when there is a famine on the earth. The narrator thus points out that:

after kola nuts had been presented and eaten, the people of the sky set before their guests the most delectable dishes Tortoise had ever seen or dreamt of. The soup was brought out hot from the fire and in every pot in which it had been cooked. It was full of meat and fish. Tortoise began to sniff aloud. There was pounded yam and yam pottage cooked with palm-oil and fresh fish... When everything had been set before the guests, one of the people of the sky came forward and tasted a little from the pot. He then invited the birds to eat. But Tortoise jumped to his feet and asked: “For whom have you prepared this feast?” (Achebe, 1958, p. 69).

One may think the above tale from the novel is a fruit of imagination of Achebe but it is not different from the social ideology of the Igbos. This is because in the tale the narratee is informed that kola nuts are being presented and eaten before the presentation of other meals in the feast. The tale confirms through kolanut offered to Tortoise, as a guest of the birds, that kola nut is a symbol of friendship and acceptance. As Obineche (2017) confirms

Kolanut is a symbol of friendship as its presentation to one’s guest surpasses any other symbol of hospitality which any host can show among the Igbos even though the monetary value of kolanut is relatively cheap. The inability of a host to either present kolanut or to render an unalloyed apology for his inability to guests is interpreted as a sign of unacceptance as the guest will express disgust in terms such as ‘my host did not even offer me kola’ (p.101).

It is observed that the Igbo people welcome is not complete without the presentation and sharing of kolanut (Obineche, 2017, p.103). Notably, the kolanut of a host may be rejected if he does not show respect to the customary laws of his society. This is done to Okonkwo by Ezeani, the priest of the earth goddess for violating the week of peace by beating his wife, Ojiugo in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. The reader is informed that Ezeani pays Okonkwo a visit and Okonkwo places kola nut before him but the priest refuses and orders him in the following: “Take away your kola nut. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors” (Achebe, 1958, p. 21). The above attitude of the priest towards Okonkwo is to make him feel ashamed of himself and bring him to understand that the laws of the society must be respected. Also, it is to make him understand that the laws established by the gods and the ancestors should not be underrated due to differences among one another.

Not only does presentation of kola nut symbolize hospitality, friendship and acceptance, it is also used among other food items to make request and show gratitude. In this case, it is the person who wants to make a request or show gratitude that offers kolanut. This is because he/she is the host. In Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo works for the rich and prosperous farmer called Nwakibie to earn his first seed yams in starting his first farming in the domain of yam plantation. When Okonkwo rotates the yam seeds, he becomes prosperous and decides to go and show his gratitude to his benefactor. Among the food items he carries to his patron is kolanut. The narrator says “He presented a kola and an alligator pepper, which was passed

round for all to see and then to him...[and] he said ‘I have brought you this little kola. As our people say, a man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness. I have come to pay you respects and also to ask you a favour’ (Achebe, 1958, p.14).

The above action of Okonkwo towards Nwakibie confirms kola nut as a symbol of reverence. On this score, Nnenne (2013) and Chidume et al. (2015) stipulate “Kolanuts symbolize solemnity, reverence, communion, hospitality and tradition” (cited in Oladumiye, 2018, p.19). Notably, the presentation of kola nuts is a privilege reserved for men. As common in a patriarchal setting, the privilege is denied to women for cultural reasons which this piece of scholar work does not tackle but they have the privilege to do that when they are among their pairs. As Obineche (2017) argues “[...] women break and share Igbo kolanut when they gather in their usual cultural groupings of *umuada* or *umumgboto* independent of men” (p. 106). There are steps to follow before breaking a kolanut by a host.

So, when kola nut is presented to a guest, it travels round until it finally comes back to the host. For instance, as we have shown before when Okonkwo is present in Nwakibie’s house to show his gratitude, he presents kolanut among other food items to him, his family and two elderly neighbours (Achebe, 1958, p. 14). The narrator informs the reader that “He presented a kola nut [...] which was passed round for all to see and then returned to him. He broke it, saying: We shall all live. We pray for life, children, a good harvest and happiness. You will have what is good for you and I will have what is good for me” (p. 14).

The right to offer a prayer whenever kola nut is presented in an Igbo gathering is either reserved to elderly person or can be delegated to younger person. As Chidume (2014) stipulates “In all Igboland, the elder reserves the right to break or delegate. In some communities, elders break the kolanut into small pieces, where the services of the youth are not needed. An elder may point out mistakes as a means of imparting knowledge to younger ones” (pp. 549-50). The above affirmation of Chidume coincides with the role of breaking and praying played by Okonkwo after presenting the kola nut. Again, the attitude of the elders by allowing Okonkwo to carry out the action of breaking and praying, during the presentation of the kolanut, shows that competency-based approach is not something new to Igbo society.

The competency-based approach is a technique used in teaching students in modern schools. It emphasizes the fact that students should be put at the centre of knowledge while the teacher is a facilitator or supervisor. The above approach used by Igbo elders in bringing up their youths makes the Igbo youths develop self-confidence and in so doing the youths are prepared to face the challenges of life. Also, the fact that the Igbo young adults are associated in the actions carried out by elders shows how democratic and transparent the Igbo society is.

Finally, kolanut serves as a symbol of communion between humans and gods. This is because whenever there is presentation of kola nuts, a prayer is said by the person who holds and breaks the kola nut to the gods and ancestors for the wellbeing of the humans, the guests, host and friends. The living and the dead share or partake of kola nut. The ancestors, deities and malingering spirits are requested to share from the kola nut and allow the living unmolested (Obineche, 2017, p.101). After the prayers, the kolanuts are shared. Although kola is highly important in the Igbo society and marriage ceremonies, palm-wine is not to be ignored.

## 2. Palm-Wine

Palm-wine and also known as wine is very important in African traditional societies, especially in the Igbo society. Just like kolanut, it represents a lot in the Igbo society. Great events or ceremonies are usually accompanied with wine in African societies, especially in the Igbo society. It is used during weddings, thanksgivings, rituals, outdoor ceremonies to mention a

few. It is used as symbol of requests and gratitude. For instance, in *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo goes to the compound of Nwakibie to thank him and ask for a favour with a pot of palm-wine and a cock (Achebe, 1958, p. 14). The above action of Okonkwo shows that before any important issue takes place, in African societies, particularly in the Igbo society, palm-wine must be presented at an introductory part. Like in Achebe's novel, wine is used as a symbol of accepting a wedding request in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*. Indeed, in the novel, wine is presented to Efuru's father by Adizua's parents as a way of officially asking Efuru's hand in marriage. The narrator informs the reader that one of the parents of Efuru asks her the following question: "My daughter, this is the wine your husband's people have brought. Should we drink or should we not drink?" (Nwapa, 1966, p. 23). Indeed, the acceptance of the wine by the bride (Efuru) and her family shows that the proposal of the groom (Adizua) has been accepted but the contrary would mean rejection.

Wine is also used as symbol of reconciliation and atonement. In traditional African societies, especially in the Igbo traditional society, a man or woman who is guilty of the customary law may be fined and sometimes among fines there is palm-wine. For instance, in *Things Fall Apart*, a man called Uzowulu maltreats his wife. He has been reproached by his in-laws several times to stop abusing his wife. Because he refuses to repent his in-laws come and pick his wife and children away. To settle the matter, Uzowulu and his in-laws go to a customary court held by traditional Igbo council of elders. After the examination of the problem, Uzowulu is found guilty and is asked to make reparation by going to his in-laws with a pot of wine and beg his wife to return to him (Achebe, 1958, p. 66).

Interestingly, wine is considered as an element of calming the anger of the gods and ancestors so as to have their blessings. In Achebe's novel under study, Okonkwo breaks the peace week by ill-treating one of his young wives called Ojiugo. To appease the gods and ancestors, Okonkwo is fined by the priest, Ezeani, to bring some items for atonement. Among the items the narrator says "Okonkwo did as the priest said. He also took with him a pot of wine" (Achebe, 1958, p.22). It is not only used for atonement but it is also medicinal to the Igbos.

As a matter of fact, wine is used as a medicinal drink to young married men. The dregs of palm-wine are good for young men who have just married. It is believed that it helps young married men to be sexually potent whenever they have to play their sexual role in their marital home(s). Whenever there is palm-wine in Igbo ceremony, the thick dregs are served to young married men. This is shown in Achebe's novel concerning a young married man called Igwelo. The narrator points out "[...] Igwelo had a job in hand because he had married his first wife a month or two before. The thick dregs of palm-wine were supposed to be good for men who were going in to their wives" (Achebe, 1958, p. 15). It is worth mentioning that there is order and respect of elders when it comes to serving palm-wine in African societies, especially in the Igbo society. Indeed, there is respect of seniority when it comes to drinking and sharing palm-wine in African societies, particularly in the Igbo society in a gathering. When there is a get-together that implicates the youths and elders in Igbo society and wine is to be drunk, it is the younger and mature person that pours wine to those in the ceremony. It is not expected of the young adult to drink the wine when rendering the service, if not, he will be punished. So, he is expected to serve himself after serving others. In Achebe's novel, this is done to Igwelo, the eldest son of Nwakibie when Okonkwo goes to Nwakibie's home with a pot of palm-wine to show his gratitude to him. The narrator informs the reader that

the younger of his sons, who was also the youngest man in the group, moved to the centre, raised the pot on his left knee and began to pour out the wine. The first went to Okonkwo, who must taste his wine before anyone else. Then the group

drank, beginning with the eldest man. When everyone had drunk two or three horns, Nwakibie sent for his wives... Anasi was the first wife and the others could not drink before her, and so they stood waiting... At last the young man who was pouring out the wine held up half a horn of the thick, white dregs and said, 'What we are eating is finished,' 'We have seen it,' the others replied (Achebe, 1958, pp. 14-15).

Through the above way of sharing palm-wine, it has been seen that Africans, especially the Igbos are not confused but organized in their social relationship with one another. The role attributed to the younger man is to make him develop the sense of service to humanity. Also, the young man indirectly learns how to care for and share with others. Since he serves others before serving himself, he is obliged to abandon his attitude of egoism and glutton.

### Conclusion

This paper has examined symbolic representations of kola nut and palm-wine in Igbo traditional society and marriage ceremonies in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966). Through symbol theory, it has highlighted the symbolic meanings of kola nut and palm-wine in Igbo traditional society and marriage ceremonies. The findings have shown that kola nut plays very important social and ritual roles in Igbo culture. It is used as symbol of hospitality, friendship, communion, unity, sharing, making request and showing gratitude. Just like kola nut, palm-wine is used as symbol of joy, acceptance of request, reconciliation and atonement. In a nutshell, through the symbolic representations of kola nut and palm-wine in two fictional texts of Achebe and Nwapa, it has been revealed to Westerners that Africans have cultures and traditions before their advent in Africa.

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