

KOLANUT IN IGBO CULTURE AS THE SUSTAINING FLAME OF COMMUNITY CONSCIOUSNESS OF AFRICAN COMMUNALISM IN THE 21st CENTURY.

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Abstract:

Community consciousness is one of the distinctive characteristics of African cosmology. Africa is considered communalistic as opposed to the individualistic orientation of the West. This is because in Africa, while there is recognition of individual identity or personality, the community interests and identity supersede that of the individual. This community consciousness is what is largely known as African communalism. However, with the eclipse of the precolonial era and the dawn of the 21st century, the community consciousness typical of African communalism has drastically waned. It is in light of this that the paper argues that this community consciousness is still largely kept alive by the Igbo through the Kolanut and the ritual of its breaking. The kolanut is a belly button that connects the two worlds of the Igbo, the physical and the spiritual. This explains its esteemed place among the people: an embodiment of communitarian spirit, core values and beliefs of the people. It is the lifeline of community consciousness among the Igbo. Therefore, adopting a critical analytical method, this paper asks the following questions: What is African Communalism? How has African communalism fared in the 21st century? How does Kolanut and the ritual of its breaking in Igbo land keep aflame the fire of community consciousness in African communalism? This study relies on secondary literature such as books, online journal articles and the internet to answer the above questions.

Keywords: Community Consciousness, African Communalism, Igbo, Kolanut, Ritual of Kolanut Breaking.

Introduction:

Communalism is generally conceived as a philosophical orientation that privileges the collective well-being of the community over the autonomy of the individual (Oguejiofor, 2006). It functions as an ideological, organisational, and relational framework that enables the community to shape the identity and destiny of the individual in all dimensions of existence (Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011). African communalism, in particular, represents a comprehensive worldview—an integrative system of thought that permeates every facet of human action and social interaction within African societies. It prescribes normative guidelines for interpersonal relations, insisting that such relations must align with the ethical and cultural imperatives established by the community.

This framework implies that both in the formation of intentions and in their actualization, the African individual operates within a communal moral horizon. Actions are not conceived in isolation but are evaluated in terms of their adherence to communal expectations (Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011). At the metaphysical level, this orientation is grounded in an ontological conception of the person as fundamentally constituted by the community (Odimegwu, 2008). The African individual derives personhood not merely from biological existence, but from the quality and depth of social relations maintained within the communal structure. Hence, African communalism is best understood as being anchored in a deep-seated community consciousness (Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011).

However, the erosion of traditional African communal values in the postcolonial and contemporary globalised era signals a paradigmatic shift. The robust community consciousness that once characterised African communalism has significantly diminished under the pressures of globalisation, modernity, and

competitive national interests. As nations strive for relevance and influence in the global arena, communal values are increasingly subordinated to individualistic and capitalist imperatives.

Nevertheless, this paper contends that vestiges of community consciousness persist, particularly within Igbo society, where cultural practices surrounding the kola nut continue to serve as a living embodiment of communal ideals. The kola nut, in Igbo cosmology and social ritual, exemplifies the spirit of African communalism. Beyond its biological identity as a caffeine-bearing fruit indigenous to Central and West Africa, the kola nut assumes a deeply symbolic and spiritual role in Igbo culture. Oral traditions among the Igbo hold that the kola tree was the first tree created on earth, rendering its fruit the primordial gift to humanity (Unya, 2012). This belief may inform Basden's (1966) assertion cited in Unya (2012) that although the kola nut is neither the largest nor the sweetest of fruits, it occupies an unrivalled position of cultural reverence among the Igbo.

Within the framework of Igbo sociocultural life, the kola nut occupies a position of profound symbolic and ritual significance, particularly within male-dominated ceremonial contexts. Its presentation, invocation, and ritual breaking constitute an indispensable part of virtually all important communal gatherings, functioning as both a spiritual emblem and a social adhesive. Far from being regarded merely as a botanical object, the kola nut emerges as a potent symbol of unity, reverence, and communal identity within the Igbo worldview. An enduring Igbo maxim succinctly encapsulates this reverence: "Kola nut is cultivated in large quantities in Western Nigeria, consumed greatly in the North, and valued and respected among the Igbo of the Southeast" (Unya, 2012, p. 292). This adage not only emphasizes the geographical and cultural particularity of kola nut veneration among the Igbo, but also illustrates the deep symbolic weight it carries in their social imaginary. One rationale for this cultural esteem is linked to the physical form of the kola nut, whose lobed structure is often likened to the human heart. This resemblance forms the basis of another widely cited proverb: "The kola nut is the heart of the Igbo people" (*Oji bu mkpuru obi ndi Igbo*) (Kanu, 2015, p. 52), capturing the emotional, spiritual, and cultural resonance the fruit holds for the Igbo.

Beyond its emblematic function, the kola nut serves as a unifying cultural artifact that transcends geographical boundaries and regional differences among the Igbo. Irrespective of the setting in which they gather, the meaning and ritual implications of the kola nut remain constant and universally recognized. Upon its presentation, every Igbo individual is aware of the symbolic actions and customary protocols it enjoins. This cultural uniformity is encapsulated in the maxim: "The kola nut is the culture that binds the Igbo together" (*Oji bu omenani jikotaru ndi Igbo*) (Kanu, 2015, p. 52). The communal philosophy of *Otu Obi*—literally, "oneness of heart"—is vividly manifested in the ceremonial offering of the kola nut, especially when it is extended to guests as a mark of welcome, peace, and solidarity. Such an act is deeply symbolic: it is not merely a form of reception, but a metaphysical gesture of goodwill and vitality. This is most memorably expressed in the proverb, "He who brings kola brings life" (*Onye wetara oji wetara ndu*) (Kanu, 2015), underscoring the kola nut's role as a life-affirming and peace-sustaining ritual object within Igbo cosmology.

The lobes of the kola nut symbolise the principle of complementarity in human relationships. When united, they signify life and harmony; when separated, they represent death and disintegration (Kanu, 2015). This symbolism aligns with the core values of African communalism, which emphasises community consciousness, mutual recognition, and fraternal solidarity. Therefore, adopting a critical analytical method, this paper asks the following questions: What is African Communalism? How has African communalism fared in the 21st century? How does Kolanut and the ritual of its breaking in Igbo land keep aflame the fire of community consciousness in African communalism? To achieve this objective, the paper is structured into three sections. The first section extensively examines African communalism to reveal its community outlook. The second section explores the place of African communalism in the 21st century. The third section explores in depth the kola nut and the ritual of its

breaking, its uses and functions, thereby revealing its place as a sustaining force of community consciousness of African communalism in the 21st century.

Towards an Understanding of African Communalism and its inherent spirit of community Consciousness.

Communalism refers to the prioritisation of communal interests over individual pursuits. In the African context, the individual's identity and well-being are inextricably linked to the community to which they belong (Emedo, 2013). It is broadly defined as a socio-ideological, organisational, and relational system that grants the community significant influence over the formation and development of the individual (Oguejiofor, 2006). As a foundational principle in traditional African societies, communalism underscores the importance of harmonious human relations and collective responsibility. It also reflects core African values such as identity, human dignity, mutual respect, and interdependence (Emedo, 2013). This ethos is succinctly captured in Mbiti's (1970) well-known assertion: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (p. 97).

In defining the mindset that pervades African communalism, Gbadegesin (1998) quotes Busia, who offered insight based on African communalism as practised by the Akan of Ghana:

...there is everywhere, the heavy accent on family, on blood relatives, the group of kinsfolk held together by common origin and a common obligation to its members, to those who are living and those who are dead.... The individual is brought up to think of himself in relation to this group and to behave always in such a way as to bring honour and not disgrace to its members. The ideal set before him [or her] is that of mutual helpfulness and cooperation within the group of kinsfolk (p.296)

The communalism characteristic of traditional African societies functioned as an integrated system encompassing social, political, economic, and religious structures. Rooted in moral values, this system was sustained by principles of cooperation, fraternity, mutual support, and shared responsibility among community members (Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011). As an ideological and philosophical framework, African communalism governs the totality of human action, demanding that individual behavior aligns with communal norms and values. Both the formation of intentions and their execution are measured against the moral expectations set by the community.

At its core, this worldview is grounded in a metaphysical understanding of the person as inherently community-structured (Odimegwu, 2008). The African individual is not defined in isolation but through a network of relationships that shape and affirm personhood. Communing, or relational interconnectedness, is thus central to this ontological conception of self. According to Odimegwu (2008), this relational existence begins at the most intimate level, the conjugal union of an individual's parents, and extends outward to encompass the broader community.

From the moment of conception, the creation and emergence of a previously non-existent being is understood in African thought as the result of conjugal union, an act of communing. The individual is thus perceived as a product of relational existence. This view marks a significant departure from Menkiti's position, which denies personhood to the African child by referring to them as an "it" due to their lack of developed ethical capacities (Menkiti, 1984, in Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011). However, the equal gravity of sanctions attached to the killing of a child and an adult in many African societies indicates that personhood is not denied to the child. Oyeshile (2006) critiques Menkiti's stance, arguing that it fails to acknowledge the inherent potentialities of the child and mistakenly assumes that African societies assign the neuter term "it" to infants in the same way English linguistic conventions do.

Menkiti (1984) and Wiredu (2009, in Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011) offer compelling insights in arguing that personhood in African thought is not automatically conferred by birth or by the mere possession of rationality, a body, or a soul, as emphasised in Western philosophy. Rather, personhood is attained, and

can be diminished based on one's ethical conduct as sanctioned by the community. This community, in the African worldview, extends beyond the living to include the ancestors, the unborn, deities, and natural elements such as the earth, mountains, and sky (Higgs & Smith, 2000, p. 55). Wiredu (2009, in Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011) underscores the ethical dimensions of this relational framework through which the African individual becomes a person. Personhood, therefore, emerges within a moral order governed by a network of laws, customs, and traditions. The stability of this metaphysical order depends on the community's collective and reverent adherence to these normative structures.

In guiding the conduct of the individual, the African community plays a crucial regulatory role, cautioning against actions that may yield harmful consequences not only for the individual but also for the collective. This guidance extends beyond the avoidance of negative behaviors to the active engagement in morally and culturally affirming practices. It entails participation in communal life, sharing in the language, values, worldview, and cultural ethos of the community. According to Odimegwu (2008), such participation constitutes reasonableness. This form of reasonableness is dialogical, involving deliberation with others, mutual understanding, and a continuous process of joining and rejoining in communal existence.

Senghor (1965, in Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011) articulates the notion of communal integration by describing African communalism as "people conspiring together, conspiring in the basic Latin sense, united among themselves even to the very centre of their being." This idea reflects the depth of intersubjective connectedness foundational to African thought. The very possibility of community is contingent upon reasonableness among its members. As Odimegwu (2008, p. 42) asserts, "reasonableness makes community and communion with other persons possible, and communion with others is the ground of the possibility for both self-realisation and community-realisation." This highlights the principle of reciprocity in the individual-community relationship: each mutually constitutes, sustains, or potentially undermines the other. One who lives by communal expectations is recognised as a person; one who does not is regarded as a non-person. Yet this framework is not rigid, failure is not final. As Menkiti (1984, in Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011) suggests, personhood can be regained through moral reformation and reintegration into the community.

At the heart of this framework lies the necessity for individuals to retrace their steps and amend their conduct following communal expectations. The process of child socialisation in African societies is designed to instill in children an awareness of the benefits of communal living and the consequences of deviating from its moral path (Odimegwu & Omazu). The gravity with which this responsibility is undertaken reflects the significant implications for parents. Not only does the failure to properly guide a child risk the child's inability to attain personhood, but it also endangers the parents' standing within the community. This communal responsibility underscores the fact that the upbringing and moral formation of a child is not viewed as a matter of private discretion but as a collective duty. As such, the African community actively participates in shaping the child's ethical and social identity. This cultural philosophy is aptly captured in the well-known African proverb: "It takes a village to raise a child" (Ikuenobe, 2006, p. 1).

Critics frequently highlight the tension between the individual and the community within the framework of African communalism. From this perspective, African communalism is often seen as restrictive, suppressing individuality and fostering one-dimensional personalities through its perceived authoritarian structure (Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011). In response to such concerns, Gyekye criticizes the version of communalism advanced by Menkiti (1984, in Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011), labeling it a form of "radical communitarianism" that undermines individual autonomy and rights (Matolino, 2009, p. 160). However, Ikuenobe (2006) challenges this critique, arguing that it stems from a misreading of the communal structure in African thought. He contends that the African community, as a normative, epistemic, and conceptual framework, does not eliminate individual agency. Rather, it defines the scope of relevant

alternatives, offers a context for interpreting evidence, and provides the foundation for rationality, imagination, and creativity (p. 84).

Existing literature on African communalism has predominantly emphasised its influence across three key dimensions: the social, political, and economic (Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011). However, we contend that a crucial fourth dimension, the religious, has been largely overlooked by African scholars. Neglecting this spiritual aspect risks presenting an incomplete and potentially misleading picture of African society, one that reduces it to a materialistic framework concerned solely with organising society for material well-being (Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011). A comprehensive understanding of African communalism must therefore account for its deeply embedded religious and metaphysical foundations.

Social Dimension: The social dimension serves as the foundational sphere of African communalism, where communal principles regulate human relationships. Central to this is the Igbo aphorism *njiko ka*, “unity is strength”, which encapsulates the social philosophy underpinning communal life (Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011). This sphere is particularly significant in defining the boundaries of the community to which individuals owe allegiance and by whose traditions they are bound. Unlike abstract or interest-based communities—such as religious groups, professional associations, or social classes—the African communal structure is rooted in kinship. It consists of blood-related individuals who trace their lineage to a common ancestor (Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011). Blood ties, therefore, demarcate the limits of communal belonging, with stronger ties indicating deeper integration. Those not bound by kinship are often regarded as outsiders. This kinship-based conception of community extends its influence into other spheres of African life. In politics, it determines who falls under the jurisdiction of communal authority; in economics, it determines who may participate in the collective economic life; and in religion, it determines who is permitted to engage in communal worship at the community shrine (Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011).

Political Dimension: Julius Nyerere (1968, in Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011) offers valuable insight into the political dimension of African communalism. He portrays traditional African societies as fundamentally egalitarian, lacking rigid class distinctions, and organised around principles of equality and fraternity. Within this framework, political authority is exercised not through coercion, but through consensus and the voluntary cooperation of community members. Concerns about the potential shortcomings of communal decision-making, particularly the assumption that the majority may not always reason correctly (Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011), are addressed by Odera Oruka’s concept of sage philosophy. Oruka argues that African communities often rely on the wisdom of revered individuals, whose thoughtful guidance serves as a stabilising influence in communal deliberations. These sages are recognised by their communities as sources of moral and intellectual authority, thereby ensuring that decisions reflect not only collective will but also reflective insight.

Economic Dimension: At the economic level, African communalism emphasises the collective welfare and egalitarian support of all members. Land, regarded as the most vital economic asset in traditional African societies, is communally owned to ensure equitable access based on individual needs and capabilities (Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011). This system reflects the agrarian orientation of precolonial African societies, where land served not only as a means of sustenance but also as a symbol of shared prosperity (Nyerere, 1967, in Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011). Within this framework, poverty was not treated as a private burden but as a communal concern. Individuals facing economic hardship were supported by the community, often through shared resources and collective assistance. For instance, if a young man lacked the seedlings required for farming, other members would contribute to help him succeed. This ethic of communal responsibility is encapsulated in the Igbo term for the poor, *ogbenye*—literally, “let the community give”—which signifies the expectation that the community bears responsibility for the well-being of its vulnerable members (Ekei, 2001, in Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011). As Odimegwu and Omazu (2011) further elaborate, this relational economic structure reinforces the

communal commitment to solidarity, ensuring that no member is left behind in the pursuit of collective survival and flourishing.

We see the dramatisation of this in the hero of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo, the protagonist of that novel, suffered the misfortune of being born into poverty on account of what the community reckoned as his father's laziness. The community members who had noticed the industry of the young Okonkwo provided him with seedlings to plant his farm in keeping with the communalistic spirit that prevailed in the society. What obtained here was more a case of sharing and fulfilment of one's responsibility to the community. It is certainly not an act of charity. The same attitude was not extended to the lazy. Indeed, laziness was abhorred, and the Igbo refer to the lazy individual as *efulefu*, a nonentity (pp.208-209)

Building on this, Odimegwu and Omazu(2011) observe that Nyerere's assertion that traditional African society lacked class divisions finds its strongest justification in the communal attitude toward the poor. This collective ethos prevented the emergence of the economic polarisation characteristic of Western capitalist societies. Traditional African communities operated on the principle of mutual support and shared responsibility, fostering a social order in which economic disparity did not translate into social conflict. It was a society defined not by material accumulation, but by the communal moderation of economic desires in service of the collective well-being.

Religious Dimension: Religion represents another vital sphere shaped by African communalism. In traditional African societies, religious practices are inherently communal, excluding outsiders from participation. Deities and gods are perceived as locative—they possess power and relevance only within the specific communities that venerate them. Religion thus becomes a space for direct engagement not only with the divine but also with ancestors and spiritual forces, who are regarded as invisible members of the community. This religious communalism offers further insight into the structure of traditional African society, which is fundamentally community-centered. While not without its limitations, this model fostered a strong sense of fraternity and collective identity, suggesting its effectiveness in sustaining social cohesion.

With this foundation established, the next section of this paper will examine how African communalism has evolved within 21st-century African societies.

The 21st Century and African Communalism

A significant shift distinguishes the outlook of contemporary Africa from that of traditional African society. Nyerere (1968, in Odimegwu & Omazu) attributes this transformation to the colonial incursion, which resulted in the wholesale importation of Western values and practices that disrupted indigenous cultural frameworks. However, Oguejiofor (2006) argues that this divergence extends beyond colonialism. He identifies global developments, particularly in technology, communication, information systems, and urbanisation, as major forces contributing to the erosion of communal values and practices in modern African life. Given these observations, particularly the insights of thinkers like Oguejiofor, one must ask: Do contemporary realities render African communalism impracticable, and the ideals it promotes obsolete? This question serves as a critical entry point for assessing the viability of communalism in the 21st century and its potential relevance in addressing the sociocultural challenges of modern Africa.

In addressing the question of communalism's relevance in the modern era, it is important to first acknowledge that communalism is not without its challenges. Numerous African philosophers, including Gyekye, Oguejiofor, and Nyerere, have critically examined its limitations. Nyerere, for example, argues that traditional African societies, shaped by communal values, were inherently patriarchal and thus reinforced gender inequality (Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011). He also attributes the prevalence of ignorance

in such societies to material scarcity. However, this causal link is debatable. Rather than scarcity alone, the epistemic limitations of traditional African societies may be better explained by their insularity. As Odimegwu and Omazu (2011) contend, the closed nature of communal societies marked by resistance to external influences, limited their ability to adopt new knowledge and integrate diverse perspectives.

The widespread ignorance observed in traditional African societies can thus be more convincingly attributed to the lack of intercommunal collaboration, which hindered the exchange of vital knowledge that might have enhanced collective survival. This raises critical questions: Do these inherent limitations undermine the viability of communalism as a meaningful philosophical framework for contemporary Africa? More pointedly, in an era where sustainable development has become the benchmark for evaluating the relevance of any discourse, can African communalism still offer constructive value? If so, should its contributions be regarded as universally applicable, or are they best understood as context-specific solutions tailored to Africa's unique sociocultural and developmental challenges? (Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011).

Kwame Nkrumah offers a crucial caution in approaching these questions: it is essential not to conflate African society with communalism itself (Odimegwu & Omazu, 2011). While Nkrumah maintains that a return to traditional African society is not "worthy of the ingenuity and efforts of our people," he affirms that the underlying spirit of communalism remains worthy of emulation (Oguejiofor, 2006, p. 10). Building on this insight, Odimegwu and Omazu (2011) argue that dismissing the potential contributions of African communalism in the twenty-first century would amount to a failure of human interpretive imagination. Eco (2013) underscores this point by invoking Rorty's notion of interpretative flexibility. Using the example of a screwdriver, Eco illustrates that its use is not limited by its design but by human creativity—it can tighten screws, scratch an ear, open a package, or even commit a crime. Likewise, the relevance of communalism today depends not on the limitations of the concept itself, but on our ability to reimagine and reinterpret its principles for contemporary use. As Odimegwu and Omazu (2011) observe, the challenge lies not in communalism's obsolescence but in our unwillingness to activate its interpretive possibilities.

Thus, the starting point of any interpretative articulation of the uses of communalism in the 21st century must focus on the community consciousness inspired by communalism. Despite the narrowness of traditional Africa's sense of community, we can attempt a projection of the consciousness which that sense of community generated in traditional Africa into the modern world. This is at the root of what both Nkrumah and Nyerere attempted to do, even though the proposals were not followed up by subsequent African thinkers. Nyerere himself made the mistake of recreating traditional African societies in Tanzania when the spirit of communalism that regulated those societies had yet to percolate into the consciousness of Tanzanians. To avoid Nyerere's error, in articulating new uses of communalism in the contemporary world, African philosophers should place emphasis on the expansion of feeling of community that will accommodate all humanity. This is more urgent in the face of new forms of relations that are receiving impetus from interactions engendered by globalisation (pp. 211-212).

African communalism, when reinterpreted through the lens of a renewed humanism, holds significant potential for moderating the intense competition and rivalry spurred by this new interpretation would emphasise the universal brotherhood of humanity, thus extending the communal spirit beyond kinship boundaries to encompass all people. Odimegwu and Omazu(2011) argue that the Western critique of communalism stems from its traditional exclusivity. However, if communalism is reimagined to presuppose a shared human ancestry, it can promote openness rather than exclusion. Such an inclusive framework would not only foster healthier global interactions but also mitigate the ethnic tensions that persist in contemporary Africa by turning diversity into an asset rather than a fault line. Moreover, the

ethic of equitable sharing that underpins communalism offers a powerful corrective to the extreme disparities of wealth and poverty characterising modern societies. Communism's emphasis on redistributive justice can provide a model for economic solidarity. Similarly, the deep-rooted communal loyalty to tradition and law can be harnessed to cultivate a culture of civic responsibility and fidelity to the rule of law within modern nation-states.

HERMENEUTICS OF KOLANUT SYMBOLISM IN IGBOLAND

The significance of the kola nut in Igbo culture is profoundly rooted in its ceremonial presentation and rich symbolic meaning. Uchendu (1965) describes it as “the greatest symbol of Igbo hospitality,” underscoring its preeminence by declaring, “It always comes first. It is the king” (p. 74).

In Igbo cosmology and philosophy, the kola nut is seen and described as a king. This is because it always comes first in every social gathering. It is used to welcome guests during meetings or public gatherings, used for marriage ceremonies, title-taking, oath-taking, sacrifices and others. Kola nut is often presented to guests and is viewed as an unavoidable gesture expected from a host. No matter the extent of cordiality shown by a host and no matter the type of delicious meal served to a visitor, he will feel unwelcome if he is not presented with a kola nut (Unya, 2021, p.292)

Owing to its revered status, the presentation of the kola nut in Igbo culture is accompanied by a detailed ceremonial ritual. The process typically begins with the kola nut being offered to guests through the next-ranking male, after which it is returned to the host. The kola nut is traditionally presented with symbolic accompaniments such as white chalk (*nzu*), alligator pepper, garden eggs, bitter kola, and groundnut butter (*okwa ose*), all arranged in a wooden tray known as *okwa oji*. A knife is also included for breaking the nut (Kanu, 2015).

Even when only one visitor is present, multiple kola nuts are offered, enabling the guest to take some home if desired. Presenting fewer than two kola nuts necessitates an apology before the ceremony can proceed. Following the presentation, a prayer is offered, typically by the eldest person present if the host is not the eldest, invoking *Chukwu* through incantations and proverbs. The prayer seeks blessings for life, health, prosperity, offspring, peace, and justice. The kola nut is then broken into its lobes and shared among all present to ensure inclusivity and foster communal trust (Kanu, 2015).

The kola nut occupies a deeply symbolic and multifaceted role in Igbo culture, transcending its ordinary botanical status to embody significant philosophical and psychological dimensions central to Igbo cosmology. Its cultural importance reflects the elevated value accorded to human beings within Igbo thought, distinguishing them from other creatures in the natural order. As noted by Chidume et al. (2015), the kola nut contributes to shaping the Igbo worldview, particularly through the symbolic interpretations of its lobes. A single kola nut may contain varying numbers of lobes—ranging from one to as many as seven or more (Kanu, 2015). Regardless of the number, the lobes remain unified within a single nut, serving as a powerful metaphor for continuity, cohesion, and the ideal of communal unity. These layered meanings, revealed through ritual engagement with the kola nut, reinforce communal bonds and affirm the shared identity of the Igbo people (Isidienu).

In Igbo cosmology, a clear distinction must be made between *Oji Igbo* (*Cola acuminata*) and *Gworo* (*Cola nitida*). While both are consumed by the Igbo, particularly during social interactions alongside other edibles such as garden eggs and bitter kola, it is *Oji Igbo* that holds recognised cultural and ritual significance. *Gworo*, by contrast, serves primarily a social function and does not carry the symbolic weight embedded in *Oji Igbo* practices. The cultural prominence of *Oji Igbo* lies in its unique morphology: its multiple cotyledons or lobes are imbued with symbolic meanings, each lobe representing distinct

metaphysical or communal values (Unya, 2012). These symbolic interpretations are reflected in the following classifications:

1. **One-lobed Kola Nut:** A kola nut with a single lobe is referred to as *Oji Ogbi*, commonly translated as the "dumb kola." Within Igbo cosmology, such a kola nut is regarded as a profound sacrilege, symbolising a significant taboo or abomination (Unya, 2012). It is also known by several other appellations, including the "kola nut of the spirits" (*Oji Mmuo*), the "round kola nut" (*Oji Ifilifi* or *Nkpurukakpu*), and the "mystical circle kola nut" (*Oji Akwu na Ogbi* or *Obi*). Importantly, this form of kola nut is never consumed by humans, as it is believed to be the exclusive possession of *Chukwu*, the supreme spirit in Igbo metaphysics (*Chukwu bu mmuo*). Its solitary lobe renders it neither male nor female, thereby reflecting the indivisible, transcendent, and non-dual nature of *Chukwu* (Kanu, 2015).
2. **Two-lobed Kola Nut:** A kola nut with two lobes is referred to as *Oji Gworo* and is symbolically associated with the duality of male and female. Despite this symbolic representation, it is generally not used in religious or cultural ceremonies within Igbo tradition due to its perceived spiritual ambiguity. Like the one-lobed variety, the two-lobed kola nut is linked to the spirit realm and is typically avoided, although it may be consumed after the offering of appropriate prayers (Kanu, 2015). Unya (2012) notes that this type is also known as *Oji Agbara*. In Igbo cosmology, the number two is traditionally viewed as lacking harmony and stability. This perception contributed historically to the now-abandoned practice of twin infanticide in pre-colonial Igbo society. As such, the two-lobed kola nut is frequently regarded as a harbinger of misfortune and is thus excluded from significant ritual contexts.
3. **Three-lobed Kola Nut:** Within Igbo culture, the three-lobed kola nut is regarded as a favourable omen and carries deep symbolic significance. It is closely associated with the traditional Igbo family structure, which is typically centered on the male elder. While the symbolic figure *Oji Ikenga*—representing strength and achievement—excludes explicit reference to the female, the three lobes are understood to reflect the fundamental familial units: father, mother, and children. Moreover, the three-lobed kola nut conveys insights into Igbo psychological and metaphysical thought, representing the tripartite nature of human existence: the body (*ahu*), the soul or mind (*nkpuru obi* or *uche*), and the spirit (*mmuo*), unified within a single being (Chidume et al., 2015). This kola nut is variously referred to as *Oji Ikenga* (symbolising strength and achievement), *Oji Dike* (the kola of the brave), and *Oji Echichi* (the kola of titled men). It is predominantly considered a masculine symbol and is traditionally reserved for consumption by warriors, distinguished individuals, or those ritually consecrated. Women do not generally partake in it, except in specific instances such as ritual appeals for male offspring (Kanu, 2015).
4. **Four-lobed Kola Nut:** The four-lobed kola nut, known as *Oji Aka Anọ*, is emblematic of peace (*Oji Udo*) and blessings (*Oji Ngozi*) in Igbo cosmology. It holds particular significance through its association with the four market days of the traditional Igbo calendar, *Afor*, *Nkwor*, *Eke*, and *Orie*, thus symbolising completeness or wholeness (*izu zuru oke*). This variety is considered the most inclusive and gender-sensitive, often referred to as *Oji nwoke na nwaanyi*, the kola nut of both men and women. It is also known as *Oji ezinulo*, the kola nut of the family, reflecting its symbolic role in promoting familial harmony and unity (Kanu, 2015).
5. **Five-lobed Kola Nut:** The five-lobed kola nut is widely regarded within Igbo culture as an auspicious sign, symbolising fertility (*Oji omumu*), protection, industriousness, and personal achievement (*Oji aka na okpu*), as well as progress and good fortune (*Oji sirili werere*) (Kanu, 2015). It also represents material productivity and wealth, often referred to as *Oji una* or *Oji ubalaka*. Uniquely, the five lobes are metaphorically understood to embody the completeness of the human form, corresponding to the fingers and toes, thus signifying a whole and capable individual. In ritual and divinatory contexts, the discovery of a five-lobed kola nut is interpreted as a potent sign of impending success and positive outcomes in one's pursuits or journey (Chidume et al., 2015).

6. **Six-lobed Kola Nut:** The six-lobed kola nut, commonly referred to as *Oji ndi ichie* (kola of the ancestors) or *Oji Ikenga abuo* (double Ikenga kola), carries profound spiritual and cultural significance in Igbo cosmology. It is also known by other appellations such as *Oji Ogbugbandu* (covenant kola nut), *Oji Oriko* (kola of communion), and *Oji Umume na Umuite* (kola of blood and spirit ties). This variety symbolises communion with the ancestors and is typically reserved for sacred rituals involving reconciliation, covenant-making, oath-taking, and the dispensation of justice (Kanu, 2015). Traditionally, the smallest segment of the six-lobed kola nut is not consumed but offered to the ancestors, underscoring its sacrosanct nature. Its appearance is also interpreted as a harbinger of prosperity for the individual who breaks it. In certain parts of Igboland, the discovery of a six-lobed kola nut prompts a distinct form of ritual celebration, which may include the ceremonial sacrifice of a chicken or goat (Chidume et al., 2015).
7. **Seven-lobed Kola Nut:** The seven-lobed kola nut is exceptionally rare and revered in Igbo culture, regarded as a potent symbol of spiritual and existential perfection. Known as *Oji asaa mmadu asaa mmuo*—the kola of human and spiritual consummation—it signifies completeness, fulfilment, and wholeness (*Oji kpurugede*). This kola nut is also referred to as *Oji ogbuefi* (the kola of the titled cow killer), *Oji ozo na amuma* (kola of Ozo title holders and prophecy), *Oji emume na mmemme* (kola of celebration and festivity), and *Oji iwu na ikpe* (kola of law and judgment). In addition to its ritual and symbolic functions, the seven-lobed kola nut embodies metaphysical ideals of eternity and the infinite nature of being. This is echoed in the Igbo aphorism: *Uwam uwa asaa; asaa ndu na anwuanwu; ikpa naasaa mmiri naasaa*—suggesting that existence comprises seven realms, seven cycles of life and death, and seven layers of spiritual and physical reality (Kanu, 2015b, as cited in Kanu, 2015).

Cultural Symbolism of Kolanut in Igbo Land

Symbol of Cooperation: The kola nut serves as a vital symbol of cooperation and mutual commitment within Igbo society, representing the willingness of participants to engage in collective action for shared benefit (Unya, 2012). This symbolic function is powerfully illustrated in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where the kola nut ritual is depicted as foundational to fostering social cohesion. In Chapter Three, the centrality of the kola nut in establishing communal ties is exemplified when Okonkwo, lacking inheritance from his father Unoka, visits the wealthy Nwakibie to request yam seedlings. Upon Okonkwo's arrival, Nwakibie convenes two elderly neighbours along with his sons, signaling the importance of a communal witness to the request (Achebe, 1958). The ceremonial presentation of the kola nut in this context sets the tone for dialogue, trust, and mutual obligation, thereby reinforcing its function as a ritual medium for fostering cooperation and solidarity within Igbo cultural life.

Nwakibie presented “a kola nut and an alligator pepper, which were passed round for all to see and returned to him.” He then broke the nut and offered a prayer: “We shall 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. Let the kite perch, let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break.” This prayer underscores the communal values of harmony, mutual well-being, and peaceful coexistence. After the kola nut was eaten, Okonkwo produced his palm wine, further signifying hospitality and reinforcing communal bonds. In the ensuing discussion about borrowing yam seeds, Okonkwo employs a proverb to affirm his commitment to hard work and his intention to repay the loan. Responding with trust, Nwakibie echoes a traditional saying: “As our father said, you can tell a ripe corn by its look. I shall give you twice four hundred yams.” This exchange illustrates how the kola nut ritual in Igbo society not only sanctifies the act of gathering but also facilitates trust, cooperation, and the reinforcement of social values.

Symbol of Unity: The kola nut functions as a potent emblem of unity in Igbo cultural thought. The structural configuration of the kola nut tree—where multiple pods are joined by a single fruit stalk, and each pod contains several kola nuts made up of interconnected lobes—visually and symbolically reflects the foundational Igbo principle of communal cohesion. This botanical unity serves as a metaphor for the

interdependence of individuals within the community. Apakama (2012) articulates this concept succinctly, describing the kola nut as a symbol of interconnectedness and social harmony, emblematic of the collective identity that undergirds Igbo communal life.

The kola nut has various lobes or pieces fused without physical force binding them together. The nut remains like that until an external force dismantles the lobe into pieces. The Igbo world is exactly manifested in like manner as the kola nut. The Igbo people believe in living together, and they enjoy a harmonious life. They are their brother's keeper, and this notwithstanding, there could be disagreement among them if an external force, for instance, backbiting, gossip, envy from enemies of progress, anger and hatred are noticed. If these external forces are not controlled and contained, the Igbo world would scatter.... The kola nut example must be a focal point (39)

Ekwunife (1990) observes that “the tiny central lobe symbolises the presence of the invisible world and its beings amidst the visible world. It is this presence that compels the Igbo to perceive reality as a constant interaction between these two realms” (p. 51). In this cosmological framework, the unseen becomes the cohesive force that binds the physical and metaphysical dimensions of existence. This ontological duality—where the visible and invisible worlds are interwoven—elevates the ritual practices surrounding the kola nut to a position of profound cultural and spiritual significance. Igbo (2012) reinforces this interpretation, maintaining that:

As one of the ritual elements in Igbo culture, the Igbo kola nut expresses, communicates, and unites the people's ideas of fraternity, acceptance, achievement, productivity, wealth, joy and sorrows of every family, village and clan, also the unity and diversity of the Igbo world; hierarchy, authority, royalty and purity, wholeness of human beings, the fullness of life and the perpetual presence of the spirits among men (p. 51)

Therefore, unity is re-enacted each time the kola nut is celebrated or presented on different occasions in Igbo land.

Symbol of Solidarity: The kola nut functions as a profound symbol of solidarity in Igbo culture, encapsulating communal unity and a collective sense of purpose. The ritual of breaking the kola nut transcends mere ceremony; it serves to reaffirm values of love, peace, and mutual transparency within the group. Even among Igbo diasporic communities in Europe, Asia, or the Americas, the presence of *Oji Igbo* remains the most potent cultural signifier, evoking both identity and ancestral continuity. As Umeogu (2015) affirms, the kola nut embodies the enduring essence of Igbo heritage, regardless of geographical displacement.

Symbol of Acceptance: The kola nut occupies a central and revered position in Igbo cultural life, symbolising unity, love, peace, kindness, and gratitude (Unya, 2012). As Obineche (2015) notes, despite its limited economic value, the kola nut serves as a potent emblem of friendship and hospitality. Its presentation is a deeply embedded cultural expectation, and failure to offer it, without a proper and respectful apology, is often perceived as a gesture of rejection or social exclusion. In some cases, visitors may even withhold the purpose of their visit until the kola nut is formally presented, underscoring its function as a ritual of mutual respect and recognition. This symbolic role is aptly captured in the Igbo proverb: “He who brings kola nut brings life” (Kanu, 2015, p. 53), which highlights the kola nut's association with vitality, goodwill, and communal acceptance.

The act of accepting the kola nut is emblematic of mutual recognition and social harmony, whereas its rejection, especially by respected elders, carries profound cultural implications. Such a refusal is not taken lightly; it constitutes a serious violation of communal norms and expectations, often interpreted as a symbolic repudiation of the individual or group offering it. As Unya (2012) explains, the rejection of the

kola nut necessitates significant acts of atonement, underscoring the depth of its ritual and symbolic weight within Igbo society.

Symbol of Recognition: The kola nut also serves as an important instrument for affirming social hierarchy within the familial, village, or broader communal context. In traditional gatherings, the ritual presentation of the kola nut by the host is followed by its circulation among attendees following established social rankings. This sequence culminates with the most senior or highly regarded individual, who is granted the privilege and responsibility of pronouncing the blessing over the kola nut. As Ekwueme (2000) notes, this practice reinforces the communal values of respect, order, and seniority that are foundational to Igbo sociocultural life.

Symbolic functions and uses of the Kolanut in Igboland

The symbolic functions and uses of the kola nut in Igbo society are multifaceted. This paper identifies and examines four principal dimensions of its significance: spiritual, social, political, and economic.

Spiritual Function: Within Igbo cosmology, the kola nut occupies a central spiritual role, functioning as a vital conduit for communication between the living and the spiritual realm. It is traditionally employed in ritual contexts to offer prayers on behalf of individuals or the community, often invoking divine guidance, protection, and favour (Isidienu, 2008). The sacredness ascribed to the kola nut is rooted in the belief that its ritual breaking facilitates the presence of supernatural entities, who are thereby invited to bear witness to communal or personal events (Unya, 2012).. Obineche (2015) reinforces this understanding, noting that the kola nut is symbolically shared by both the living and the dead ancestors, deities, and spiritual forces who are called upon to accept the offering and bestow peace upon the living. This underscores the kola nut's esteemed position as a sacred object, revered as a spiritual mediator and honoured by elders as the "king of all seeds."

In the context of ritual prayers, a segment of the kola nut is often symbolically passed over the head of an individual, representing the substitution of the kola nut for life itself, before being ritually cast aside as an offering to the spirits and ancestors. Among diviners, the kola nut plays a crucial role in mediating communication with invisible spiritual forces. It is routinely offered as a means of appeasing these entities and soliciting their cooperation in divinatory practices. When there is a perceived delay or reluctance in the spirits' responsiveness, the diviner may present additional kola nuts to "awaken" them, drawing upon the belief that the kola nut dispels sleep both in the metaphysical and physical realms. In certain cases, the diviner may chew the kola nut and spit it upon the sacred objects within the shrine as a further act of spiritual provocation and engagement (Unya, 2012).

Social Function: The kola nut occupies a pivotal position within the social structure of Igbo society, playing a vital role in virtually all communal gatherings and ceremonial events that celebrate shared cultural values. Its presentation customarily inaugurates any occasion, signifying the formal commencement of proceedings. Beyond its ceremonial function, the kola nut also serves as a social instrument for mediation and accountability. In instances where an individual wishes to complain about a perceived offender, the presentation of a kola nut to family or community elders becomes a formal method of raising the issue. The nut is broken and consumed before the complaint is articulated, symbolising the gravity of the situation and the commitment to communal deliberation and resolution.

Furthermore, the ceremonial presentation of the kola nut to a guest—accompanied by the essential rite of *Igo Oji* (kola nut invocation) and its ritual breaking and sharing—is perceived in Igbo culture as the establishment of a sacred covenant (*Igba ndu*) (Unya, 2012).. Within this framework, the shared consumption of the kola nut symbolises a solemn pact of mutual trust and goodwill. The kola nut, believed to possess a supernatural origin, functions not only as a gesture of hospitality but as a spiritual bond that deters malicious intent. Any breach of this covenant is traditionally viewed as a grave

transgression, with the belief that divine punishment—often in the form of death—awaits the violator (Chigbo, 1997).

Political Function: In the political sphere of Igbo society, the kola nut serves as a powerful emblem of equity, fairness, and communal governance. Upon its presentation, the kola nut is customarily passed around for all to inspect, after which designated representatives from each village, clan, town, division, or state are expected to take a portion for their respective constituencies. This practice ensures inclusive representation and prevents any group from being overlooked, marginalised, or intimidated—thus embodying the core Igbo principle of equity (Isidienu, 2008). The subsequent distribution of the kola nut according to seniority reinforces the hierarchical structure and traditional authority system embedded in Igbo culture. As Opata (1998) notes, “The first remarkable thing about the sharing of kola nut is that it brings about the pattern, and if one inquires, the logic of traditional power-sharing of a community... kola sharing practices in Igbo land depict the list of seniority of members present” (p. 115).

This ritual distribution not only mirrors the broader political structures of leadership, inheritance, and land allocation but also reflects the Igbo man’s enduring sense of communal responsibility—a consciousness that transcends material accumulation and is rooted in familial, ancestral, and territorial loyalty (Isidienu, 2008). Every communal gathering necessitates the invocation and sharing of the kola nut, serving to reaffirm collective values of unity, peace, and patriotism. How the kola nut is circulated and apportioned further illustrates the Igbo emphasis on consensus as a vital mechanism for governance and decision-making (Isidienu, 2008).

Economic Function: Economically, the kola nut constitutes a vital commodity within Igbo society. It is actively cultivated, traded, and utilised in various contexts, including as a natural dye for clothing and as a traditional remedy for ailments such as sleeping sickness. Beyond its symbolic and ritual uses, the kola nut is a major income-generating product, contributing significantly to the subsistence and economic well-being of many individuals across Igbo communities. Its central role in virtually all social events ensures a steady demand, thus sustaining its relevance within the informal market economy (Isidienu, 2008).

From this hermeneutic standpoint, it becomes evident how the kola nut continues to uphold and sustain the diminishing flame of community consciousness and fraternity, which lie at the heart of African communalism. The kola nut, as a symbol of reception and hospitality, embodies a profound ethic of inclusion and mutual recognition. Its presentation signals complete acceptance of the other without discrimination, reflecting a deep cultural affirmation of the other’s dignity. This gesture moves beyond mere formality—it constitutes an encounter at the level of a subject-to-subject relationship.

In line with Igbo philosophical thought, particularly the principle of *otu obi* (oneness of heart), the ritual of presenting kola nut to a guest—while offering a seat and performing the prayer—is a symbolic act of recognition and communion. It reflects a relational ethos wherein the guest is encountered not as an outsider, but as a valued participant in a shared reality. The act of sitting together to break and share the kola nut dissolves boundaries, fostering unity and reinforcing collective identity. Much like Martin Buber’s “I-Thou” relationship, this encounter does not objectify the other but embraces their subjectivity. In this way, the kola nut becomes a tangible expression of Igbo communal values and continues to serve as a vital medium through which community consciousness is renewed and reaffirmed in every gathering.

Conclusion

Communalism in traditional African societies was deeply rooted in moral principles and guided by the enduring values of cooperation, fraternity, mutual responsibility, and collective sharing. As a system that permeated the social, political, economic, and religious spheres, it fostered a cohesive community in which individual well-being was inseparable from communal life. However, with the encroachment of modernity and the complexities of the 21st century, this fraternal dimension of African communalism has

suffered significant decline. This paper has argued that one of the enduring cultural expressions of that fraternal spirit is preserved in the symbolism and ritual surrounding the kola nut within Igbo culture. The kola nut, revered as a traditional emblem of unity and hospitality, functions not merely as a ceremonial item but as a living metaphor for the values that once anchored African communal life. Its physical form, said to resemble the human heart, encapsulates its symbolic role in Igbo cosmology, as the “heart of the Igbo people” (*Oji bu mkpuru obi ndi Igbo*).

Beyond symbolic abstraction, the kola nut functions as a cultural anchor that continues to bind the Igbo across spatial and generational divides. It is therefore not merely a relic of the past but a cultural continuum, one that embodies and transmits communal values across time and space. This is the basis for the Igbo saying that “the kola nut is the culture that holds the Igbo together” (*Oji bu omenala jikotara ndi Igbo*). In this light, the exalted place of the kola nut and the rich ritual practice surrounding its breaking serve as a profound force in sustaining community consciousness in the 21st century. In the kola nut, we find a resilient embodiment of African communalism—one that invites reinterpretation and renewal amid the challenges of modernity.

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