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Oji: *The Sacred Seed of Trade and Tradition in Igbo Land*

By Chukwunwike Ossai

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FEATURE
IMAGE

The number of cotyledons in a Kolanuts determines its significance and use in Igboland.

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For Igbo people, kola nuts are not just an ordinary commodity – they are a serious cultural and spiritual item that drives their economy. It is called Ojo, and it plays a big role in the pre-colonial and early colonial times. Kola nuts are used in rituals, for hospitality, and even serve as a form of currency in the market. It connects the Igbo people with other tribes and advances trade.

In Igbo land, Kolanut means Unity, peace, and a better heart. Any big gathering, wedding, business talk, or village meeting is never completed without breaking a kolanut. To bring kolanut means life.

1. **Ritual Use:** Kola nuts are used in blessing ceremonies, the breaking of kola nuts (iwa oji), and for spiritual agreements like oath-taking (igba ndu). Elders call on ancestors and gods to bless their events. The lobes inside one kolanut have spiritual meaning.

2. **Sign of Welcome:** Offering a kolanut to visitors is a sign of great respect. The Igbo proverb that says “who brings kola, brings life” is a true saying

3. **Wealth and Respect:** Bringing a kolanut to any event means the person has status and wealth. Not everyone can afford it.

Regarding the Igbos’ respect for the kolanut, it has made the item a hot commodity in the market. People don’t just eat it; it’s used for many things.

Before the colonial masters came, kolanut was a major market product in Igbo land. People value it because it gives energy, it can last a long

time, and it holds significant meaning in culture.

1. Farming: people grow kola nut in fertile areas like Owerri, Umuahia, and Onitsha. Men take care of the kola trees, while women sell them in the market. They normally plant it with yams and other crops.
2. Barter Trade: Before money was introduced, kolanuts were like money itself. People can use it to buy yams, pots, or even clothes. One kolanut could be exchanged for one basket of food on market days, such as Eke, Orie, Afo, and Nkwo.
3. Market Life: Kolanut is a regular item in Igbo markets, such as Otu Nkwo (Onitsha) and Eke Oha (Aba). Women who seek kola nuts are called Onye ahia. Kola nuts are very easy to carry and last on journeys.

The kola nut trade didn't stop in Igbo land. Igbo traders sell to other tribes, and the trade is used to build good business relationships.

1. North Side Trade: Igbo people sell kola to Hausa and Fulani people who chew it. In return, they will collect cow, leather and salt. The Aro people help the trade move forward due to their wide network and spiritual influence.
2. River And Coastal Trade: kolanut goes to coastal areas through rivers like Niger and Imo. They sell to the Ijaw, and sometimes to Europeans. Bonny Port was one big export point during colonial times.
3. Shared Culture: The Yoruba, Edo, and other tribes also respect the kola nut in their rituals. This common ground helped Igbo traders do better deals.

Aro traders who know market strategies helped kolanut reach far places. Their settlements across different lands made trade easier.

As the British people arrived, they made changes. They brought in

foreign goods and coins, such as cowries. This then made the kolanut no longer serve as money. The British people also promoted palm oil, so people began to focus less on kola nut farming. But even with that, Igbo people still kept the kola nut for cultural and little market use.

Even today, kolanuts still exist in Igbo events, such as marriages, naming ceremonies, and village meetings. Though it doesn't reign in the market like it used to. It is still a sacred item. Modern traders brought kolanut back with style – maybe through good packaging, conducting tours, or promoting it as an organic product.

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An enthusiast in tech with deep passion for studying and showcasing the vibrant cultural heritage of southern Nigeria . Combining my skill with my obsession towards African history and traditions to create contributions that impacts the digital space.



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