

THE SANCTITY OF THE KOLA NUT RITUAL AS A SYMBOL OF COMMUNION OF SAINTS IN IGBO TRADITION

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Abstract

At the heart of every religion and tradition in the world lies the recourse to using ordinary materials common to the people and conventionally accepted as a viable means to convey profound spiritual realities. This underscores that religion is inherent to human nature and must develop within the context of human relations with the physical and natural world. The sanctity and dignity of the kola nut in Igbo traditional society merit its recognition as a sacred symbol that transcends Igbo communities and through which the indigenous people commune with the ancestral world in a reciprocal relationship, among other spiritual significances. Although this unique phenomenon has attracted the attention of researchers and scholars across various disciplines, further exploration is needed, particularly in light of the doctrine of the Communion of Saints in Christianity, to deepen its sanctity and dignity. Communion of Saints in Christianity is the belief in the perpetual union of all the faithful, the living and the dead, as one body under Christ the head, through the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist. This is no less true in the Igbo African version, where the Kola nut ritual, like the sacraments, unites the living and ancestral worlds of Igbo and African society. A conscious effort to preserve the rich heritage of the Igbo-speaking people is therefore recommended to perpetuate their customs and traditions.

Keywords: Kola nut, Communion of Saints, Ancestors, Igbo Tradition, Sacrament, Eucharist, Igbo cosmology, Sacredness

INTRODUCTION

All religions commonly use matter as symbols to express unseen or invisible realities. In religion, articles, objects, and even animals are examined as sacred vehicles that convey spiritual effects. Although it may be difficult to trace the origin of the use of matter as religious symbols, it is valid to assert that the use of materials as religious symbols is as old as the religion itself, on the premise that religion is a relationship between man and the Supreme Being, and many scholars have seen it as a distinguishing

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part of the nature of man; the former being composed of matter, while the latter is divine. Hence, for the part composed of matter to glimpse the divine, there must be the use of materials to which man, limited by his humanness, can relate. These sacred materials, however, are not capable of independent existence to attain religious significance; they are objects of intention and adhesion, and the choice of these materials is conventional and historical.¹ This buttresses Obiefuna's point that in the traditional Igbo setting, there is no distinction made between the sacred and the profane, fact and fiction, history and poetry; all these, according to him, have been present over time to assume equal height and the same purpose in a world where it is crystal clear that the natural and the supernatural exchange hands.²

The dignity of the kola nut in Igbo traditional society aligns with the above description. The kola nut holds a prominent place in Igbo tradition as the king of all seeds and fruits. It holds immense value for the Igbo people and is featured in nearly all their affairs. For this reason, it is revered by the Igbo people as a sacred seed that defines their identity and, above all, helps them maintain a cordial relationship with their world of spirits. There is a wealth of research and scholarship on the origin, benefits, significance, and cultural importance of the kola nut in Igbo land and across Africa, which this paper does not intend to restate. However, it is the objective of this work to appraise the sanctity of the kola nut and its numerous significance in the Igbo tradition, with particular attention on the spiritual importance of maintaining a relationship with the ancestral world in comparison with the doctrine of Communion of Saint in Christianity; thereby raising this African phenomenon to the dignity of the Igbo Africans significant means of communion between the living and the dead.

THE IGBO-SPEAKING PEOPLE OF NIGERIA

In identifying the areas of Igbo domicile, Oguagha and Okpokpo illustrated that the Igbo people inhabit a stretch of territory between latitudes 5° and 7° north and longitudes 6° and 8° east. The area is bound on the north by the Igala, Idoma, and Ogoja people, on the east by the Ibibio and Efik people, on the south by the Ijo of the Delta region, and on the west by the Edo-speaking people.³ It covers an area of 40,922 square kilometers, with a total population of approximately 9,246,413 in 1963, and currently stands at between 35 and 37 million.⁴ Most Igbo people reside in the present-day Southeast geopolitical zone, with many Igbo-speaking people also found in the contiguous states of Rivers, Delta, Benue, Kogi, Edo, Bayelsa, Akwa Ibom, and Cross River States.⁵ The Igbo people are predominant in the forest belt of the savannah south of Nigeria. The archaeological excavation

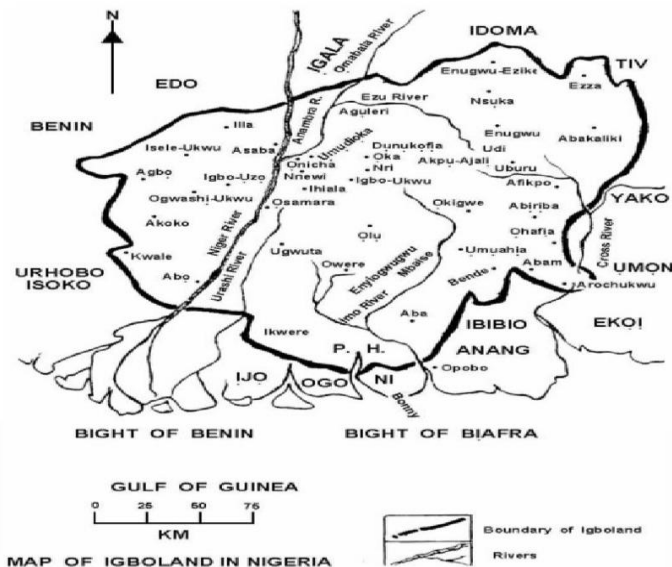
at Igbo-Ukwu, 25 miles southeast of Onitsha, led to the discovery of the Igbo-Ukwu bronze, which demonstrated that the Igbo people had been living there since the 9th century AD.⁶

It should be noted that Igbo-speaking people residing on the western bank of the Niger have been referred to by various names, including Western Niger Igbo, Midwest Igbo, Bendel Igbo, later Delta Igbo, and most recently, the Anioma People. The Anioma people are found in the areas of Aniocha, Ika, Ndokwa, Oshimili, and Ukwuani.⁷ Also, Elizabeth Isichei, Don Ohadike, Okoro Ijomah, and Herbert Igboanusi equally located the Anioma people within the Igbo-speaking family tree.⁸

The homeland of the Igbo-speaking people is located in the South-eastern part of Nigeria. The Igbo homeland covers present-day Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, and parts of Rivers, Delta, Cross River, Akwa Ibom, Edo, Kogi, and Benue States. For instance, the Igbo-speaking people are found in four local government areas in Benue State: Ado, Oju, Obi, and Okpoku. The Igbo are the third-largest ethnic group in Nigeria, after the Hausa and the Yoruba.⁹

Linguistically, Igbo is one of the languages designated as "kwa," a subgroup of the Niger-Congo group of Negro languages. Nonetheless, other Kwa groups, such as the Yoruba, Edo, Igala, and Idoma, dominate the south. R.G. Armstrong believed that glottochronological evidence had demonstrated that languages in the "Kwa" subgroup must have started diverging into distinct forms at least 6000 years ago.¹⁰ Based on this assertion, it could also be suggested that the Igbo emerged as a distinct people in southern Nigeria approximately 6,000 years ago.

An early study by G.I. Jones suggested that Awka and Orlu are Igbo core centers of dispersion, from which the Igbo people dispersed mainly to the South, the Benue Valley, and the East.¹¹ He further indicated that one could assume an early dispersion from this centre to the Nsukka-Udi highland in the East and an early drift southward towards the coast. The descendants of the latter are known as the Oratta (Owerri), Ikwerre, Etche, Asa, and Ndoki Clans. Like the communities of the centre, they have lost any traditions they had of migration from elsewhere.¹² Jones further elaborated that there was massive dispersal, mainly southeastward from the Igbo centre into the Eastern Isuama area. From this subsidiary dispersion area, there was one movement south-southeast into the Aba Division to form the Ngwa group, and another movement east into the Umuahia area, thence to the Ohafia-Arochukwu ridge, with an offshoot that struck north to become isolated in the heart of the eastern plains and to develop into the Northeastern Igbo.¹³ For this study, the sanctity of the kola nut in the Igbo-speaking areas of present-day southeastern Nigeria will be our primary focus, but it will not be limited to that.



Source: *Groundwork of Nigerian History*, edited by Obaro Ikime, (Ibadan: HEB, 2012).

DEFINITION OF THE CONCEPT: KOLA NUT

Kola nut is the seed or kernel of a large African tree cultivated in commercial quantities in tropical areas like Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Brazil, and some parts of South America. The common species of kola nut is said to have originated in tropical West Africa but is now found worldwide.¹⁴

Botanically, the Kola nut, as a fruit, is the bitter caffeine-containing chestnut-sized seed of a kola tree used primarily as a masticator and in beverages. In the context of Igbo cosmology, the Kola nut can be conceptualized as the agent or ritual symbol through which Igbo-speaking people transmit and receive prayers, and commune with their ancestors and the supernatural, ultimately connecting with God. In a traditional Igbo society, no prayers are offered to God without the kola nut.¹⁵ According to Adibe, the Oji (kola nut) is a uniting force of the living, the dead, and the supernatural forces, and it is the easiest and most handy object for daily, seasonal, ceremonial, religious, social, and political rituals, for spiritual, mystical unification between the Igbo traditionalists and the supernatural.¹⁶ D. N. Opatá posits that not only is the instrument of prayer used as an offering, but it is also a factor for forging a continuing link between the dead and the living, as well as an avenue of invoking abstract forces, deities, and divinities.¹⁷ Additionally, Oji (kola nut) is used in ritual prayers to consecrate the day. It is also used at the beginning of kinship gatherings, communal meetings, and other ritual purposes.¹⁸ The implication is

that offering kola nuts at all indicates the presenter's willingness to pray to God in Igbo tradition, without compulsion.

SIGNIFICANCE OF KOLA NUT LOBES OR COTYLEDONS IN OJI IGBO

The number of lobes in each Oji Igbo (*cola acuminata* or *cola nitida*) has significant meaning and interpretation in Igbo land. Cola acuminata (Oji Igbo) usually has one lobe, two lobes, three lobes, four lobes, five lobes, six lobes, seven lobes, and more than seven lobes. As Onyesoh outlined, the following are major significances of Oji Igbo:

- (a) Kola nut with One Lobe: a kola nut that is round with no lobe or cotyledon or has no breakable mark, known as Oji filifili, cannot be eaten or used for any ritual. It signifies social and ritual anomalies. Breaking such a kola is taboo; therefore, it is thrown away.
- (b) Two lobes of a Kola nut: a type of Igbo kola nut called *Oji okala nabuo*. It is considered ominous and thrown away. If it must be eaten, women and titled men do not. The *dibia* (traditional medicine man) may use it to prepare his medicine (*ogwu*).
- (c) Three lobes Kola nut: this type of Igbo kola nut is called *Oji Ikenga*. It is regarded as a symbol of good fortune, strength, and self-reliance. It is believed that *Oji Ikenga* brings success to those who pray and consume it. *Oji Ikenga* is carefully handled to expose the smooth side when the Kola nut is broken. If it has a line that runs from the head of the lobe to the tail, it is regarded as the male lobe or cotyledon. If it has two lines parallel to the lobes, it is viewed as the female and signifies celebration and is called *akwukwa nato* (a tripod for cooking). It means a reliable balance of strength. If it contains two males and a female, it signifies a balanced family. However, if it includes two females and a male, it means a polygamous balance. However, variants of this interpretation occur in other parts of Igbo land, despite the Nri version.
- (d) Four lobes Kola nut: the four cotyledons of the Kola nut have two males and two females; it represents the four market days in Igbo land (*Eke, Orie/Oye, Afo, and Nkwo*). This is generally regarded as a robust blessing for the occasion and a sign of the ancestors' approval. Also, it is believed that the message or prayer to Chukwu (God) through the ancestors and *Arushi/Alusi* has been received and fulfilled. Hence, the four-cotyledon Kola nut is a good omen in Igbo land. Additionally, the lobe is used by those knowledgeable in mysticism for divination (*igba afa*).

- (e) Five lobes Kola nut: When an Igbo Kola nut lobe appears five in number, it is a good sign because it contains two males and three females.
- (f) Six-lobed Kola nut: this Igbo Kola nut with six cotyledons is not commonly seen. Nevertheless, when found, it is generally regarded as a bad omen. If it contains three males and three females, one female lobe is thrown away, and the others are used. However, if it includes four males and two females, it is considered a good omen and is eaten. The implication is that the latter one, with more males, has obeyed the law of male domination and, hence, is acceptable to the Igbo mind.
- (g) Seven lobes Kola nut: this is common with a Kola nut with four females and three males; it signifies a large family (*omumu*) and prosperity (*uba*). In this case, everyone celebrates, and a small feast of yams, fowl, and drink is held. The four female lobes signify family increase, and the three males are regarded as *Oji Ikenga*.
- (h) Igbo Kola nut with more than seven lobes: The phenomenon always generates curiosity when the Kola nut lobes are more than seven. In this scenario, efforts are made to find out its meaning from the outside world of human beings through divination.¹⁹

A SURVEY OF THE DENOTATION OF KOLA NUT IN IGBO TRADITION

Kola nut means more than just a seed to the Igbo communities across Nigeria. It is the most dignified gift of God, after human life, to the Igbo; this is true because other things, such as animals, totems, and physical features, may exist and are highly revered in some Igbo societies. Still, the kola nut stands out on this list for its widespread acceptance and use across all Igbo communities. This, therefore, explains why it is referred to as the source of life and a mark of unity. There are approximately 25 species of kola nuts in Nigeria, but only one species, *Cola acuminata*, is significant to the Igbo ethnic group. However, two major species are commonly used or eaten in Southern Nigeria. Therefore, it is essential for the Igbo always to make a distinction between the two basic kinds of kola nut, *Oji Igbo* with the botanical name *Cola Acuminata* or *Atrophora*, and 'Oji Awusa' or 'Gworo' called *Cola nitida*.²⁰ They are different in appearance, as the Oji Igbo has multiple cotyledons. In contrast, 'Oji Awusa' has only two cotyledons and cannot be used instead of the Oji Igbo without due ritual observance. There is also a type of Kola nut known as *Oji ugo*, which is bright (white) in color and used in some rituals, such as the ritual cleansing of an individual believed to be suffering from an *Ogbanje* (Abiku in Yoruba land) spirit.

The kola nut, by its nature, has distinguished itself in a unique way in the case of Nigeria by having national recognition, especially among the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria; it is cultivated in good commercial quantity by the Yoruba, eaten most by the Hausa and some others in Northern Nigeria, and most estimably revered by the Igbo.²¹ The value of the kola nut to the Igbo people is inestimable; it is the trademark of a typical Igbo ceremony of any magnitude, which is evident in the fact that the four cotyledons of the "Oji Igbo" represent the four traditional market days of the Igbo people.²² Kola nut has several uses as the central element of traditional events in Igbo society, but some basic occasions are worth noting here. The Kola nut is regarded as the first fruit of the earth from the infinitely merciful creator; hence, the Igbo fondly refer to it as the source of life, "*onye wetara Oji, wetara ndu*," and this means "he who brings kola nut brings life." To this effect, kola nuts are used in the typical gathering of the Igbo people to express gratitude to the benevolent creator of the universe for the gift of life. This celebration radiates genuine merriment and joy among the people. This is reflected in the fact that people usually accompany the breaking and sharing of the kola nut with palm wine, which is then consumed with relish. The respect accorded to the kola nut is further observed because it is taboo in the Igbo land to use the dry kola nut tree as firewood.²³

Due to its dignity as the first and king of fruits, the kola nut symbolizes charity, hospitality, and love. In traditional Igbo society, whenever a wayfarer or sojourner comes to any community, they are first welcomed with a kola nut to demonstrate the people's spirit of hospitality and acceptance of the person; with this act of charity, the sojourner begins to feel at home.²⁴ This gesture is extended to every guest and even those from the close kindred such that in events where there is an absence of kola nut, the head of the home visited will always refer to whatever is presented to the guest as kola nut, and also accompany such gift with the common line "*akonam onu oji*" meaning "do not spite me for the absence of kola nut." It is also observed that the guest will reserve at least a piece of the kola nut offered to them as evidence of acceptance, which is somewhat akin to immunity from harm or attack. One pious Igbo traditional myth has it that the reason women do not pray over or break kola nut is to forestall adultery, on the ground that when the man who is the head of the house is not around, another man cannot visit his home and remain there with his wife, because without being offered kola nut he is not welcome in the house. However, it is now common knowledge that in some parts of Igbo-speaking areas, such as the Igbo on the Niger, women of some classes do break kola nuts for their fellow women. What should be noted here is that this preference for women in this area is not anchored in general privilege or rights for women, but in the specificity of women, such as the Omu in

Okpanam (Oshimili South) in present-day Delta State. The *Omu* (Queen Mother of Anioma-Delta State), *Eze Nwanyi*, a traditional woman leader in charge of women and children, breaks a kola nut without interference or contravening any customary law.²⁵

Similarly, the kola nut ritual is central to and the rallying point of all ceremonies in the Igbo society. Just as the opening, praise, and worship are essential to commencing a Christian gathering, nothing serious can be done on any occasion in many parts of Igboland without observing and performing the kola nut rite. Besides, the Ohafia area of Igboland emphasizes libation at gatherings of relatives before breaking the kola nut.²⁶ While in many other parts of Igboland, pouring libation follows immediately after breaking the kola nut. Breaking the kola nut with prayer is ideally the exclusive duty of the oldest man or a male from the eldest community in the gathering. Before this prayer is made, the pieces of the kola nut are first shared with some male adults, following the directives of the one to pray over the kola nut. It must be noted that the prayer over the kola nut must take the tone of adoration, thanksgiving, and petitions to the creator and must be made in the indigenous language. On this point of language, the Igbo usually say, "*Oji anaghi anu bekee*," meaning "kola nut does not understand a foreign language." This explains why, at events such as traditional marriage ceremonies, village assemblies, and festivals, among others, the kola nut is first presented before any discussion can commence.

Following the unique nature of the kola nut discussed thus far, of particular significance is the use of the kola nut as a symbol of acceptance (in the form of a welcome), togetherness, communal integration, reconciliation of communal differences, and strong instrument of interaction with the ancestral world; this qualifies the kola nut to be seen as communion by some scholars. Kola nut is used for peaceful events, as identified above, as well as in situations of conflict. When people intend to reconcile or pacify an aggrieved party, they take kola nut to the event, "*ha chigara h'oji*," meaning "they took kola nut to them." The communal integration and peaceful coexistence of the people are values that the Igbo society holds in high esteem and is proactive in addressing any situation that threatens them. Another remarkable benefit of the kola nut in the Igbo tradition is its role in maintaining relations with the ancestral world, which is the primary focus of this work.

KOLA NUT RITUAL AS A COMMUNION WITH ANCESTORS

Ancestral veneration is a common feature of most African societies. African people firmly believe that the dead are still part of their society in an invincible form; hence, they often have recourse to their good spirits in

times of need. This is a glimpse of communion with ancestors in the indigenous Igbo society. Mbiti refers to this category of beings as the "Living Dead."²⁷ In the Igbo religious worldview, ancestors are referred to as "Nd'ichie" or "Ndibunze," and the dead are accepted into the ancestral world based on the lives they led in the physical world and the impact they had on others.²⁸ The "living dead" are still active embodiments of the people's affairs in the physical world and the fold of the ancestors or the spirit world. Mbiti describes them as speaking two languages: the language of men to whom they belonged a short time past, and the language of the spirits and God to whom they continue to move closer in spirituality.²⁹

These "living dead" are believed to constantly intervene in the affairs of their families and communities, especially when invoked, because people think nothing happens or befalls the community by chance without the spirit world's knowledge. With this African ontology, Igbo cosmology, and the recognition of the place of the "living dead," the Igbo explores the kola nut ritual, established earlier as the crux of the people's ceremony for maintaining a cordial relationship with the ancestral world. Whenever the kola nut is to be eaten, due acknowledgment is given to the ancestors. An individual performing the kola nut ritual or blessing must remember to drop on the ground the nut's *radicle* (the embryonic root of the kola nut seedling) and, in most cases, with some bits for the ancestors to partake in the communion.³⁰

In a core Igbo traditional setting, the veneration of the ancestors and the spirit world mark the beginning of the day for the people, often done with the use of the kola nut, which is the people's most esteemed gift to the spirits. Typical poetry proudly recited by the people to break kola nut for the day is as follows:

'Eze kere elu, kee ala, taa oji-		king and creator of heaven and earth,
eat kola nut		
Ndi Ichie bia ta oji-	ancestors, come and eat kola nut	
Amadioha bia taa oji -	Amadioha, come and eat kola nut	
Ala Ezuhu taa oji -	Ezuhu land, come and eat kola nuts	
Ndi nwe ezi bia taa oji -	founders of the habitat, come and eat	
kola nuts		
Agwuisi bia taa oji-	Agwuisi, come and eat kola nut. ³¹	

This reflects the kind of link the physical and spiritual worlds share in the Igbo tradition. This veneration is performed at public ceremonies, especially during events of pestilence and other afflictions. The African people believe that when due honour is not accorded to the ancestors, it may mar the relationship and sever the link between the living and the dead.

In the Owerri area, the Kola nut is not just a fruit but a sacred one. In every gathering of *Umunna* (relatives), whether small or large, for that gathering to appear real and acceptable to the relatives, the convener must present the Kola nut. In this way, the assembly of kinsmen has been legitimised and consolidated. For instance, on the day of the New Yam Festival in Umuoma Nekede, there is a compulsory and unavoidable ritual known as *Ipu Oji*. The Obilobi (head of every family) performs with Kola nuts by reciting some incantations in the form of prayers with the clay saucer (kola nut bowl) in which the Kola nuts are placed. To demonstrate the significance of *Ipu Oji*, on the day of the new yam (Odu) festival, the ceremony begins with the *Ipu Oji* ritual, performed by every head of the family, known as the Obilobi. The ritual of *Ipu Oji* ushers in the Nkwa Dance, and then the eating of the new yams begins. At the beginning, the family members qualified to perform the *Ipu Oji* ceremony usually form a circle in a seated position. On the proper ritual day, the early hour of New Yam Festival Day, the Obilobi begin the ritual by forming a circle in a seated position.

The clay saucer where the Kola nuts are placed is never lifted when passed to the next person; instead, it is pushed anticlockwise on the ground. It is believed that if any participant commits an error by misquoting any parts of his incantations or oblations or pushing the clay saucer clockwise, he may not live to witness the next Odu Festival³².

At the high point of the ritual, each Obilobi recites some incantations at will and does this without any time limit, offering prayers for the benefit of his family members, kindred, and well-wishers for the remaining year. At the turn of any Obilobi, he will not be interrupted until he exhausts his incantations and oblations. The story of two elders who committed an error during the *Ipu Oji* ritual and, as a result, did not witness the next new yam festival is well known among the locals. Their deaths before the next New Year's festival were attributed to a lack of spiritual purification, which would have been carried out immediately after the errors had been committed. Also, before the day of the ritual proper, those whose turn it is in their family to perform *Ipu Oji* for any particular year are usually advised to re-examine themselves spiritually before the performance of *Ipu Oji* and recitation of the incantations and oblations.³³

THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF COMMUNION OF SAINTS

One of the rich traditions and teachings of the Christian faith is the Communion of Saints. In Latin, the Communion of Saints is called "Commune Sanctorum," meaning "fellowship with the saints."³⁴ This teaching is evi-

dent in the epistles of Peter and Paul in the New Testament, as well as in the teachings of the church fathers. The Christian teaching of the communion of saints follows from the very meaning of the church as the assembly of saints. This doctrine of the Communion of Saints is proudly articulated in the latter part of the ninth article of the Apostles' (Nicene) Creed, "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints." The earliest recorded origin of the belief in the Communion of Saints in Christianity dates back to the era of persecution faced by the early church. Early Christian believers took refuge in the catacombs due to fear of hostility from Roman authorities. There, in the catacombs, they used the graves of the martyrs as altars and worshipped around them. Several signs and wonders were recounted, gradually introducing the tradition of relics to the church.³⁵

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches the following:

Since all the faithful form one body, the good of each is communicated to the other. We must, therefore, believe that there exists a communion of good in the church, but the most important member is Christ since he is the head. Therefore, the riches of Christ are communicated to all the members through the sacraments.³⁶

As noted, the faithful of the church are categorized into three broad levels: the church triumphant (all in heaven), the church militant (the pilgrims on earth), and the church suffering (those in purgatory). Purgatory refers to the place where souls are purged of sins before being admitted into heaven; it is a dogma of the Catholic Church.³⁷ The sacraments sustain the link between these three categories of church faithful. The church's life is a sacrament in itself, in that it is the mystical body of Christ; as St. Paul puts it in his epistle, the faithful, though many, are one body in Christ.³⁸ Sacrament, a visible expression of the communion the faithful share with Christ, the head, is also how the faithful obtain graces and assurance of paradise. The Roman Catechism describes it thus,

All the sacraments are sacred links uniting the faithful with one another and binding them to Christ, and above all, Baptism, the gate we enter into the church...The name communion can be applied to all the sacraments, for they unite us to God...but it is better suited for the Eucharist because it is primarily the Eucharist that brings this communion about³⁹.

The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, also known as Holy Communion, is the Church's source and summit. It is considered the sacrament of sacraments, as other sacraments are mostly celebrated. It is commonly defined as

the actual body and blood of Jesus Christ, together with his soul and divinity, under the appearance of bread and wine.⁴⁰ This, as ordained by Christ, forms the center of the Christian act of worship. Celebrated within the Holy Mass, which is offered for both the living and the dead, the Holy Eucharist is regarded as the food of angels and saints, as well as communion with the triumphant Church. Therefore, when the community of believers celebrates the Holy Eucharist at mass, it is done in union with the host of heaven, and to all who worthily receive the Holy Eucharist, the communion of the saints is made manifest in that singular act. The relation of different levels of the faithful of the church in the communion of saints is further concretized by the chain of intercession; the triumphant church intercedes for the pilgrim church; the church venerates the triumphant and, at the same time, offers up prayers and good works for the sweet repose of the suffering church in the kingdom of God.

KOLA NUT RITUAL IN RELATION TO COMMUNION OF SAINTS

It is granted from the discussion thus far that the dignity accorded to the kola nut ritual and the whole aura attached to the celebration of the kola nut in the Igbo tradition is no less than what obtains in Christianity in celebration of the Communion of Saints. Both practices are rooted in rich traditions and heritage, which adherents take pride in as sacred traditions integral to the core of their religion's creed. As noted earlier, the kola nut celebration (ritual) is not merely a social event where people make merry; it has profound spiritual implications for the people, especially in their relationship with the ancestral world. The significance of the kola nut ritual lies in its relation to the theological importance of the communion of saints in Christianity, which represents spiritual solidarity that binds together the earth, heaven, and the souls in purgatory as an organic, mystical body, with Christ as its head, and in a constant interchange of supernatural offices.⁴¹ For example, in a typical Igbo ceremony or in the kola nut poetry that breaks the day, one observes a communion of solidarity between the living and the dead. Nwafor presents a form of veneration of saints evident in the kola nut ritual in the Igbo traditional society as follows:

<i>Chukwu biko bia taa oji-</i>	God, please come and eat kola nut
<i>Chineke biko bia taa oji-</i>	Creator, please come and eat kola nut
<i>Ala biko taa oji-</i>	Earth deity, please come and eat kola nut
<i>Nnaanyi ha biko bia taanu oji-</i>	Our forefathers, please come and eat kola nut
<i>Ndimbundi egede bia taanu oji-</i>	Those who were at the beginning of time come and eat kola nut ⁴²

Similarly, as noted in the tradition of the church, the communion of saints dates back to the era of great persecution of the believers under the Roman Empire, when the people resorted to the catacombs to commune with the heroes of the faith and several wonders recorded; the kola nut ritual is also an avenue of petition to the ancestral world, who are believed to be active members of the society. In his epistle to the Ephesians, St. Paul refers to the church as one body, animated by the virtue of love, comprising saints in this world and in the life to come, with Christ as its head.⁴³ This spiritual solidarity in both traditions is somewhat mutually beneficial. Through the interrelation in the communion of saints, there is a mutual exchange of examples, prayers, merits, and satisfaction between the Churches on earth and those in purgatory and heaven, accompanied by suffrages, invocations, intercession, and veneration.⁴⁴ Although it may be argued that belief in the communion of saints is well-established in Christianity and is held to be the same in the universal church, this is not so stated in Igbo or African tradition. However, the Igbo tradition cannot be stripped of the belief and acknowledgment of the communion of saints, also known as ancestral veneration, which is an integral part of the people's religious tradition.

CONCLUSION

Generally, in Igboland, breaking a Kola nut during a burial ceremony does not involve any ritual, as the common belief among the Igbo-speaking people is that the ancestors are present to receive the spirit of the deceased. This is regarded as *Oji Okwukwu*. As a result, the atmosphere and mood of the mourners do not require such elaborate rituals. Again, it is a widely held belief that women neither pluck fruits nor climb trees, such as coconuts, kola nuts, or palm trees, for any purpose. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this is not an attempt to discriminate against women; rather, it is a matter of respect and preservation of dignity for womanhood. The study reveals that the generally held position that women are not supposed to be shown or presented with the Kola nut in the presence of men is not entirely correct in every Igbo-speaking area. For instance, in the Igbo-speaking regions on the Niger River, the Omu (Queen Mother) and *Eze Nwanyi* (chief priestess) do break Kola nuts in the presence of both men and women. It has been commonly observed that after the traditional prayer/blessing of the Kola nut has been carried out, the eldest man usually mandates the youngest man in the gathering to break the Kola nut. However, when the Kola nut is broken for a deity in a shrine, the priest of that shrine does the breaking. Thereafter, libation follows.

To show the importance of Kola nut rituals, it must be distributed appropriately while sharing the revered fruit at any gathering (excluding a burial ceremony). For example, it causes annoyances and quarrels whenever

er the seniority of lineages and individuals with titles or age grades is not observed while sharing Kola nuts. For this reason, the Kola nut must be shared according to the prescribed rules to avoid unnecessary squabbles. In Igbo society, kola nuts are used in prayer to God, as a means of communion between the living and the living-dead (ancestors), for oath-taking, to establish alliances and treaties, during social gatherings, for sacrifices and offerings, in divination and prediction, and as a symbol of hospitality and appreciation.

The dignity accorded to the kola nut by the Igbo people of Nigeria is rooted in their shared worldview and value system, as well as in the sense of divinity and sacredness they have held for time immemorial. That the kola nut is not disregarded stems from the heart of gratitude of the people to the benevolent God, who, in his wisdom, has deemed it fit to make the kola nut the first fruit of the earth. This point replicates the dignity of the species (bread and wine or wafer and chalice) used in the Eucharistic celebration. One of the pre-consecration prayers in the Sacramentary of the Catholic Church gives thanks to God for offering the fruit of the earth through the work of human hands as bread and wine. The dignity of these phenomena of the kola nut and the Eucharist as means of the communion of saints is further made sacred by the fact that, despite the formidable wave of dynamism in religion, they appear to have remained unchanged and, at the same time, are increasing in acceptance and significance in the two religious traditions.

ENDNOTES

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