

## The Socio - Religious Significance of *Obi* (Kola Nut) among the Igala People of Kogi State

### LA SIGNIFICATION SOCIO-RELIGIEUSE DE L'OBII (LA NOIX DE KOLA) PARMII LES GENS IGALAS DANS L'ÉTAT DE KOGI

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the socio- religious significance of obi ( kola nut) among the Igala people of Kogi State, Nigeria. Obi is a significant item that is often eaten in socio-religious gatherings. Without it no traditional marriage can be celebrated in Igala-land. Its breaking and eating symbolize unity, peace, love and acceptance under the protective eyes of Ojochamachala (God) and Ibegwu (Ancestors). Suggestions are therefore made to make its socio-religious and socio-cultural importance global.

**Key words:** Socio – Religious; Kola nut; Igala

**Resum é** Ce document se concentre sur la signification socio-religieuse de l'obi (la noix de kola) parmi les gens Igala dans l' état de Kogi, au Nig éria. L'obi est un é ément important qui est souvent consomm é lors des rassemblements socio-religieux. Aucun mariage traditionnel ne peut étre c é lébr é dans la r égion d'Igala sans ce fruit. Le briser et le manger symbolisent l'unit é, la paix, l'amour et l'acceptation sous les yeux protecteurs des Ojochamachala (Dieu) et Ibegwu (anc êtres). Des suggestions sont donc faites pour lui rendre son importance socio-religieuse et socio-culturelle globale.

**Mots-cl és:** Socio – Religieux; la noix de kola; Igala

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## INTRODUCTION

Human beings are said to be the most intelligent beings on earth. They are very much capable of putting into concrete terms their socio – religious, socio – cultural and socio – political experiences into symbols. No religion can do without symbols. In African Traditional Religion symbols are lavishly used in ritual ceremonies. These religious symbols were condemned by early missionaries. They called them many derogatory names like “pagan”, “fetish”, “barbaric” and so on. Yet these missionaries expected our people to respect the cross as a salvation symbol. In fact, “Nowhere did early missionaries and Western writers misunderstand African cultures and societies as in the rituals and symbolism”(Omijeh, 1998 as cited in Adegbola, 1998, p.195).

*Obi* is one of the ritual symbols that is widely used in Nigeria Traditional Religion and is one of the fruits created by *Ojochamachala* (God Almighty) for mankind to use. It is thus used today by various cultures in Nigeria for economic, social, medicinal and religious purposes. *Oli obi* (kola nut tree) has a straight trunk and when it is fully matured it can reach a height of eighteen (18) metres. It is mainly found in tropical West Africa and it is well cultivated in the western, eastern and southern parts of Nigeria. Interestingly, one can also find *oli obi* in Brazil, India, Jamaica, Sudan and other

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parts of Asia (Kruschndl, 2006, p.1). The local varieties of this tree can yield from eight to ten years, while the hybrids ones may yield much earlier. Each *obi* pod contains between six to twelve nuts that can be broken into two, three, four, five, six lobes (Oduobuk, 2008, p.1).

*Obi(Cola Acumilata or Cola Nitida)* is believed to contain some caffeine, Alkaloids and Tannin (Adodo, 2000, p.159; Baker, 1970, p.105). Consumers of *obi* chew it either directly or after grinding it to powder form. When one chews *obi* it leaves a sweet taste behind in the month like bitter leaves. As Oduobuk (2008) rightly observes:

Kola is eaten by every branch of Nigeria's cultural diverse population, while virtually all Nigerians, to some extent, appreciate the fruit peace-making role... , the nut has varying degrees of importance to the three major Nigerian ethnic groups, the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba (p. 2).

Reacting to an interview on exhibition of local stimulants to be held in Abuja, Nigeria from July 12<sup>th</sup> to July 13<sup>th</sup> 2011 the representative of the Cocoa Research Institute, Ibadan states:

Kola nut is one of our mandate crops. Green tea has also been produced by us. Kola nut is so important economically that it formed part of the trans-Saharan trade in those days. Today, we celebrate it in Nigeria as an important aspect of our tradition (Udeze, 2011, p. 49).

There is a popular saying that the Yorubas cultivate kola nuts, the Hausas eat them in quantum, and the Igbo people laboriously celebrate them. The cultivation of kola nuts in Igalaland is on a small scale. Much of the kola nuts Igala people use come from the South. Among the Igala people of Kogi State, like many other tribes in Nigeria, *obi* is accorded a befitting religious status. This is why *obi* is always found in the homes of Igala traditional chiefs, elders and priests. Not to have *obi*, especially *obi-Igala* (Igala kola nut) in the homes of the said traditional personalities would be regarded by many people as " abject cultural and spiritual poverty" according to I. Okakwu ( personal communication, March 12, 2009). Such poverty is regarded by Igala people as *obata-okpakoko* (abject poverty). This is why there is a popular saying among Igala traditional rulers that states *Ajofe kimali obi duñwu ononojo n chi ajofe enale de* (A traditional chief who cannot offer kola nut to a visitor is a very poor traditional ruler).

The objectives of this research paper are:

- i. To bring out some of the socio - religious roles *obi* plays in the religious lives of the traditional Igala people;
- ii. And to recommend some ways these roles can be preserved for future generations.

For logical discussion of the research topic these themes are treated: Type of *obi* and uses; those qualified to break *obi*; Presentation of *obi* to a visitor; *Obi* as a symbol of reconciliation; *Obi* as an item of sacrifice and *Obi* in contemporary society.

Other themes are, presentation of *obi* at traditional marriage; *Obi* as an item for divination and *obi* as an item for oath taking. Oral interview of randomly selected persons, review of related literature and personal observations as a registered Traditional Medicine Practitioner in Igalaland are the research methods employed in this paper.

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

Attempt is made here to define some terms or phrases as used in this study. The definitions are not exhaustive, but they give insight into their meaning.

***Obi-Igala (Igala kola nut)***. It refers to a type of "kola nut that has one or more cotyledons" (Okwoli, 1996, p. 37). The only language *obi-Igala* understands is Igala language according to Igala traditional belief.

***Obi-Akechi (Hausa kola nut)***. This type of kola nut has only two cotyledons. The Igala people call it this name because it is mainly consumed by the Hausa people. U. Ataguba observed that "the traditional Igala priests hardly use this type of *obi* for ritual ceremonies because it does not understand the language of *Ibegwu* (Ancestral Spirits)" (personal communication, October 16, 2009).

***Ibegwu (Ancestral Spirits)***. Ancestral spirits are believed by Igala people to be in daily communion with the living. They are the "Living-dead". They are, therefore, invoked for the protection and well being of family members (Onuche, 2007, p. 68). *Ibegwu* festival is celebrated annually by Igala traditional religion practitioners (Okwoli, 1996, p. 67).

***Atama- Ebo (Igala traditional priest)***. He or She is specially ordained to take charge of religious rituals. He or She communicates with *Ibegwu* on behalf of clients who go to him/her for various purposes. Igala women who are *Atama-Ebo* are very few in Igalaland.

***Ifa-Ebo (Ifa divination)***. *Ifa* is regarded as the spirit of divination and diviners (*Amabifa*) are seen as *Ifa* priests (Okwoli, 1996, p.14; Abimbola, 1975, p.1-25).

Igala traditional communities have various types of *obi* (Kola nuts). However, Igala Kola nuts (*obi Igala*) are the popular ones. I have briefly discussed them in the table below:

**Table 1: Igala Kola Nut and Their Uses**

Types	Uses
Kola nut with no cotyledon ( <i>Obi-odokulu – inepa n</i> ) It is very rare to find. It is popularly called <i>Obi-anyi (the kola nut that brings joy to one when used ritually)</i> .	It is eaten by one person. It is not shared. It is used to wade off one's enemies. Seven broken pieces of broom sticks are stocked to it and put at cross-roads after some special incantations.
Kola nut with two cotyledons. ( <i>Obi-epameji</i> ). Sometimes one cotyledon is yellowish, the other reddish. It is very rare to get. It is sometime called <i>Danjaki</i> .	For good luck and purification of oneself. ( <i>Obi – ọla efe</i> ).
Kola nut with three cotyledons. It is called <i>Obi-Ogwu/ (Obi-epameta)</i> . It is the chief of all kola nuts ( <i>onu obi</i> ).	For good luck, happiness, love and peace. It is eaten with seven alligator pepper ( <i>Eyo-Ata mebie</i> ). It can be used to make a wife leave her husband or for a man to deeply fall in love with a woman. It is also used for oath-taking.
Kola nut with four cotyledons ( <i>obi- ẹ epamẹlẹ</i> ). It is very common. It is sometimes called <i>Obi-Ibegwu</i> i.e. Ancestors' kola nut.	For various traditional rituals. It is commonly presented at traditional weddings. It is used by diviners ( <i>Amabifa</i> ).
Kola nut with five to seven cotyledons ( <i>Obi-epamẹlu, ẹfa, ebie</i> ). They are not common. Not broken for eating at traditional gatherings.	They bring about quarrel when eaten in a gathering. They are used to fight one's enemies by offering them ritually at a grave-yard.

U. Gowon and U. Laiyi (personal communication, March 11, 2010).

## THOSE QUALIFIED TO BREAK *Obi*

In Igala tradition the privilege of praying over and breaking of *obi (obi-Igala)* is given to the oldest man in a group. However, the oldest man may delegate this privilege to a younger person (male) to perform the rite of praying over and breaking of the given *obi*. According to J. Egwemi this *obi* ritual is taken seriously by Igala elders “who have not been contaminated by western cultures”. He further maintained that “wherever Igala people are gathered for an important occasion their *Ibegwu*(Ancestors) are there with them”. In this respect, he said, “the praying over and breaking of *obi* should be taken seriously so as not to attract the wrath of *Ibegwu*” (personal communication, November, 28, 2009).

V. Agbenyo indicated that “a woman has no right to pray over and break *obi* in any gathering of Igala people” (personal communication March 5, 2010). It is, therefore, a taboo (*Elifo*) for an Igala woman to do so in the presence of an Igala man. Y. Chenemi however, told me that “where Igala women are gathered for an occasion and an Igala man is in their midst the breaking of *obi* is done by him. The eating of the blessed *obi* can be done by women” (personal communication, March 5, 2010). J. Ebeh observed that the exception to this tradition of *obi* breaking is that “*Iye-ebọ* (A female traditional priest) can pray over *obi*, break it and offer some to her *Ibegwu* for consumption. She does this alone within her shrine” (personal communication, March 6, 2010). P. Arome (personal communication, March 10, 2010) collaborated with the above views. However, this tradition of not allowing a woman to break kola nut is not limited to Igala people alone. The Igbo, Benin, Yoruba, Uweppa-Uwano people and many others in Nigeria also prevent women from breaking kola nut traditionally in the midst of men. We are in a culture where women are seen as inferior to men. It is a universal problem that cannot be solved on a single day.

## PRESENTATION OF *Obi* TO A VISITOR.

In the culture of Igala people the presentation of *obi* to a visitor is very significant (<http://www.kogigraphics.com/art-culture.htm>,2010). It shows that the visitor is welcome to the place. The prayer over the *obi*, the breaking and consumption of it symbolize hospitality, friendship, unity, love and peace. In fact, in Igala culture or tradition if a visitor is not offered *omi* (water) or *obi* (kola nut) it simply means that such a visitor is not accepted in the house or place. This Igala custom of offering *obi* to a visitor is also done by the Igbo people . Oduobuk (2008) affirms this point when he says:

For the traditional Igbo man, no visitor who is truly Welcome can be received without the formal presentation and breaking of kola. The breaking of kola is very important to the Igbo... traditionally only the oldest male

present performs this role. To an Igbo person, kola is the ultimate sign of benevolence or the absence of hostility. The presence of kola also represents love and community of purpose (p.1).

As alluded to earlier the traditional Igala people believe that the only language that *obi-Igala* (Igala kola nut) understands is Igala language. This is why when I visited the chief of Anyigba (Ọgọhi) Abu Okolo in 2009, and he officially presented *obi-Igala* to me, I prayed over it in Igala language thus:

Ojọ chamachala, Ami-Ibegwu wa, obi mę kadu mę dę. Imaję kojulogbo ki dọmọ ńu onu wa. Imaję kunyogba ki dọmọ ńu ọchakawa ọkpanachi onu wa. Adewa kpai-ebili kite. Adewa kpai ẹnwa kite efu ewo-i. Ojọ kpai ibegwu kideju tewa. Irah ńu ajode, kirah ńu ilona.

Translation:

God almighty, our ancestors here is kola nut presented. May the reign of our chief be long; may his reign be full of progress for all. May evil spirits never near us and may misdeeds be far away from this town. May God and our ancestors guide us. May good luck behold the hunter and the passer-by.

After the prayers, I broke the *obi* (*obi-Igala* - with three cotyledons) into pieces. I offered finger bits of the *obi* to *Ibegwu* by throwing them on the floor saying, “*Ibegwu obi emę de*” (Our ancestors here is your kola nut). There is an adage in Igala that shows the importance of presenting a visitor with *obi*. It states, “*ononojo kuma ma du omi ńu mọ n abę ko obi n, ikineju ujeńu n.*” (A visitor who is not offered water or kola nut should not expect food). The presentation of *obi* by our traditional rulers to the august visitors are often not reported by our journalists. It is not given the Agenda setting it deserves as a unique traditional symbol of hospitality (Oji, 2006, p. 124).

## **OBI AS A SYMBOL OF RECONCILIATION**

Like some tribes in Nigeria, the Igala people see *obi* as a symbol of reconciliation when used during a peace meeting. If there is a dispute between persons a reconciliatory meeting would be called. After listening to the parties involved and useful pieces of advice have been given by the elders *obi* is then brought. The *obi* is prayed over and broken to pieces by the person who is qualified to do so. The eating of the *obi* by the parties involved in the dispute and those present is a strong sign of forgiveness, peace, solidarity and reconciliation. S. Okakwu (personal communication, October 12, 2009) pointed out that it is, therefore, expected that “the reconciled parties that ate the *obi* should in no way harbour hatred towards each other. If one does, one would incur the anger of *Ibegwu* who witnessed the reconciliation meeting”. In my interview (U. Atama, personal communication, October 20, 2010) the significant roles *Ibegwu* play in the daily lives of the Igala people was emphasized. The *Ibegwu* are, therefore part and parcel of every Igala family.

Oduobuk (2008) talking about *obi* as harbinger of peace carefully states how it (*obi*) was used to seal a reconciliatory ceremony in one of our Universities in Nigeria:

After years of intra – campus strife including legal battles over wrongful dismissal, arson and grievous assault, a new Vice Chancellor gets appointed to oversee the day-to-day affairs of a Nigerian University. To ensure a smooth administration of the institution, the Vice Chancellor’s first act is to convene a reconciliation parley where all parties are invited to air their grievances. After hours of deliberations, a small saucer containing kola nuts is presented to the oldest professor present. To seal the process of reconciliation, the professor offered prayers and broke the kola nuts into several pieces. These are passed around and eaten by all. Everyone is aware of the significance of this event; kola has been given as a peace offering, thus hostilities must cease (p. 1).

Furthermore, it is a strong belief in Igala traditional circle that enemies do not participate in the eating of ceremonial *obi* until they reconcile. If they do, they will be visited by the wrath of *Ibegwu* which can result to serious sickness or death. In 2008 when I attended our Traditional Medicine Practitioners’ meeting at Anyigba, a member refused to eat the *obi* prayed over and broken by our chairman. I noticed this behaviour and told the chairman who asked him why he refused to eat the *obi-ina* (blessed kola nut). He told us that he was annoyed with many of us because he was sick and did not come to see him. He maintained that those of us who did not visit him wished him dead and as such he would not eat (*koje*) the *obi-ina* with his enemies. After some deliberations on the matter, it was resolved that those who heard of his sickness and did not visit or send message should tender unreserved apologies to him. This was done before he agreed to eat the *obi-ina*.

## OBİ AS AN ITEM OF SACRIFICE

Worship in African Traditional Religions is incomplete without sacrifice (*Ichebo*). And it is important to know that sacrificial rite is not peculiar to African Traditional Religions, for it is carried out in most religions of the world. This assertion is affirmed by Ringgren (1962):

All over the world throughout history, whenever mankind has worshipped divine being, we encounter the practice of sacrifice. The Babylonian sufferer who gives a lamb to the gods to ransom himself from the sin he supposed to be the cause of his suffering; the Mexican Aztec who kills a young man and offers his heart to the sun-god in order to secure the vital forces of the sun for his land; the Moabite Mesha who offers his son to his national god in order to win victory over the attacking Israel (2 Kings 3, 27); all these and thousands of others, are examples of the world wide religious practice we refer as sacrifice (p.136).

Sacrifice in the views of Abimbola (1975) is:

... a means to placate the malevolent powers which he believe exist side by side with the divinities who are regarded as benevolent... It is also a means to provide the divinities and ancestors with food, for it is the duty of an individual to feed his ancestors and divinities he worships (pp. 25-26).

Onuche (2007) referring to Noss (n.d) sees sacrifice as:

The giving up or destruction of something, animate or inanimate, human, animal or vegetable, in order to cause it to pass from human possession to that of the spirit-powers or gods (p. 18).

We accept the above views about sacrifice which are related to the topic of our discussion. Sacrifice is therefore, an indispensable part of Igala traditional religious worship, and *obi* is one of the valuable items. The *obi* that is mostly used in sacrificial offerings by Igala traditional religion practitioners is the one with five cotyledons. U. Laiyi (personal communication, March 2, 2010) indicated "that this *obi* is broken into pieces before usage or used as a whole". Some of the places one can find *obi-ina* in Igala traditional *Ichebo* (sacrifice) are:

• Personal god's symbol	-	ojo-ene
• Family Shrine	-	Ere-ane olopu
• Public Shrine	-	Ere-ane abo-oja
• Burial ground	-	Unyi oloja
• Family grave	-	Ere achekwu
• Village square	-	Ugweta efewo
• Traditional market	-	Aja ogwuchekwo
• River bank	-	Eti oja(aji)
• `Cave	-	Ef-Uwo/Akpolokuta
• Mountain/hill top	-	Oji- uwo
• At the foot of an Iroko tree	-	Ere (oli) uloko
• Cross-roads	-	Amunameta/Ugweta

Achebe (1980) commenting on the significance of *obi* in Igbo traditional sacrifice says:

Near the barn was a small house, the medicine house or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and his ancestral spirits. He worshipped them with sacrifices of kola nut, food and palm wine, and offered prayers to them on behalf of himself, his three wives and eight children (p. 10).

The above views of Achebe are the same with those of Igala traditional religion practitioners. According to U. Laiyi (personal communication, March 2, 2010), Chairman of African Traditional Medicine Practitioners Anyigba branch, the common *obi* that *Atama-ebọ* (Traditional Priest) uses during ritual ceremonies at shrines is *obi epa mele* (Igala kola nut with four cotyledons). He maintained that the said type of *obi* is the one *Ibegwu* like most among other kola nuts. Furthermore, it is the *Atama-ebọ* who has the prerogative of praying over and breaking the *obi* meant for *Ibegwu*. He does not delegate this responsibility to any person. U. Gowoni (personal communication, March 13, 2010) supported the above stated views.

## PRESENTATION OF *Obi* AT TRADITIONAL MARRIAGE

### A. Introductory Stage (Alekago)

In Igala traditional marriage *obi* is an indispensable item. The parents of a man who wants to marry an Igala girl have to present two bowls of Igala kola nut (*Ugba obi-Igala meji*) to the parents of the girl. One bowl of the *obi* is for the father of the girl and his relations, the second is for the girl's mother and her relations. The acceptance of the *obi* by the girl's parents at this introductory stage shows that they are prepared, all things being equal, to give their daughter to the man. This introductory stage is also called *Efu-iku nyago* (The tying of rope around the waist of the girl). This means that the girl is traditionally engaged to the man. Any other man coming for the girl's hand in marriage would be told that the girl is engaged.

The *obi* that the would-be bridegroom's parents present to the parents of the would-be bride are the ones with four cotyledons (*obi epamele*). The traditional breaking and eating of the *obi* presented at this introductory stage signify acceptance, love, unity and hope. Moreover, the offering of parts of the *obi* to *Ibegwu* of the parents of the would-be couple is to involve them in the marriage affair from the onset. The *Ibegwu* are called upon to direct the whole marriage affair to its fruition. S. Akwu (personal communication, March 6, 2009) affirmed that if the *Ibegwu* are not involved in the marriage ceremonies the marriage would face difficult problems in no distant future.

### B. Wedding Stage (ɔya-enɛ/ɔkɔ-enɛ)

On the day of the traditional wedding the parents of the bridegroom will present two bowls of Igala kola nuts (*Ugba obi-Igala meji*) to the parents of the bride. One bowl of the kola nuts (*Ugba obi*) will be given to the bride's father and relations and the other bowl of kola nuts goes to the bride's mother and her relations. After the bride has traditionally presented *obi* (from the presented kola nuts) to her father's representative presiding over the occasion, signifying that she is prepared to marry the man she brought, it is traditionally broken. The rest kola nuts are cut into pieces and shared to those present for consumption. S. Akwu (personal communication, March 6, 2009) presents a sample of Igala traditional prayers during the breaking of kola nut at a wedding:

Obi kedu wai kulɔi, uchugbede wɛ nana kemajɛ ki anyɔ kimuwa ni. Anyɔ ya mɛ n. Ebɔ ɛbɔ kilebɛ kpai ɔkɔ wɛ. E bo ɛbɔ lɛ kilewa ofe igbeli wa kpai ei ɔkɔ wɛ. Ebo ɛbo ki ŋɔ dugbo abo kumademi. Mɛbi uchu mɛbi ɔka. Mɛbi ɔkɔ mɛbi ole. Anɛ kihi ebutu, kihi kpapala n. Atogwo kijiji rumɛ. Iyara ŋu mɛ kpɔɔ. Ami Ibegwu wa obi mɛ dɛ. Mɛlo kpai ɛbɔ ɛbɔ. Ira ŋu ajodɛ k'ira ŋu ilɔna.

Translation:

This kola nut you brought to me to eat I am grateful to you. Since you have not brought shame on us. You will not experience shame. May peace be on you and your husband. May the same peace be upon our families. And those of your husband. Peace also be on those who are here. May you give birth to children Male and female children. May you be prosperous. May you have abundant progress. Our ancestors here is your kola nut. Eat the kola nut in peace. Good luck to the hunter. Good luck to the passer-by.

The giving out of the girl's hand in marriage cannot take place without the traditional presentation, acceptance, breaking and sharing of *obi* to all present to eat. All these in essence show the unique socio - religious position *obi* occupies in Igala traditional society.

## *Obi* AS AN ITEM FOR DIVINATION

In African Traditional Religions the place of *Ifa* divination is unique. Most traditional sacrifices are done after *Ifa* oracle is duly consulted through divination. *Ifa-ebɔ* (Divination) is thus widely practiced among Igala Traditional Religion Practitioners. Commenting on divination practices in Africa. Turaki (2001) has this to say:

Divination is widespread in traditional Africa and even seems to appear as a common everyday practice. Anything that happens to man must have invariably a definite spiritual cause. And this belief takes divination seriously (pp. 165-166).

Turaki (2001) further gives us reasons why some people embrace the act of divination. Some of the reasons are:

- To find out and know about their future, destiny, well-being and what may possibly happen to them, their family, clan, tribe or general;
- To gain access, to communicate and to be in touch and contact with the source of mystical and spiritual powers that can be tapped to meet their needs;
- To gain power, confidence, assurance and boldness to the challenges of life and triumph over them through esoteric and mystical;
- To overcome human limitations, finitude, importance, dependence, contingency by knowing how they function and affect... (p. 166).

There are various methods that *Abifa* (Diviner) uses for divination. Some of them are:

- a) *Ifa anwa* (Divination with pods)
- b) *Ifa ebutu* (Divination with sand)
- c) *Ifa obi* (Divination with four kola cotyledons)
- d) *Ifa eyo-okò* (Divination with cowrie shells)
- e) *Ifa omi- ego* (Water gazing)
- f) *Ifa egigo-ego* (Mirror gazing) (Okwoli, 1996, p. 41).

Our main concern here is *Ifa obi* which some of our Igala diviners employ so as to know the position of the spirit world about a given problem or situation. The *obi* with four cotyledons is dried and kept by a diviner for divination. According to Okwoli (1996):

During the divination, he cast the four cotyledons on the ground. The falling of the convex side and concave side is read, interpreted in the same way as the *Ifa anwa* divination system (p. 42).

In one chain of *Ifa anwa* divination there are sixteen patterns that could be produced, and the sixteen patterns also have different names. The names are (Okwoli, 1996, pp. 41-42):

- |                         |                   |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. <i>Oyèku</i>         | 9. <i>Ebi</i>     |
| 2. <i>Atunukpa</i>      | 10. <i>Egali</i>  |
| 3. <i>Ofu</i>           | 11. <i>Ogoli</i>  |
| 4. <i>Qra</i>           | 12. <i>Qche</i>   |
| 5. <i>Okono (Qkala)</i> | 13. <i>Olete</i>  |
| 6. <i>Qlòrun</i>        | 14. <i>Eka</i>    |
| 7. <i>Oji</i>           | 15. <i>Otula</i>  |
| 8. <i>Qbala</i>         | 16. <i>Ogwuto</i> |

It is interesting to know that during the process of divination the *Abifa* (Diviner) often chews some seeds (three, seven or fourteen) of *ata* (alligator pepper). He spit

the chewed *ata* (alligator pepper) on the dried kola cotyledons he uses for divination. This is to energize the spirit of *Ifa* for effective communication. It also spiritually empowers the *Abifa* (Diviner) to enable him effectively decode the messages from *Ibegwu*.

## **OBI AS AN ITEM FOR OATH TAKING**

Traditional oath taking (*emo-èbò*) exists in Igala Traditional Religion like in other Traditional Religions in Nigeria (Adegbola, 1998, pp. 218-219). *The New Webster's Dictionary of English Language, International Edition* (2000) defines oath taking as:

The evoking of God or some sacred persons or things as witness of the truth of a statement or the binding nature of a promise (p. 691).

Here are some occasions when *obi* is used in oath taking among traditional Igala people:

### **A. Suspicious Death**

If a person suddenly dies or dies after a protracted illness and some of the family members of the deceased suspect foul play, oath would be administered to the person or persons suspected to have mysteriously killed the deceased. The suspects are taken to either the deceased's grave (*ojinoji*) or the grave of a senior member of the deceased family. *Obi-Igala* (the kola nut with three cotyledons popularly called *obi ogwu*) is broken and kept on top of the grave. The suspects would take a piece of the *obi* one after the other saying:

Iche ñu ku nowo efu ukwu ene ki kwui ibegwu ki fumi kpa. Ebie legwudu, egwelu ki legwudu n. Imala chomi kpa n, Ibegwu ki gogbo mi ku kpojologbo.

Translation:

If I am responsible for the death of the deceased let our ancestors kill me within seven or fourteen days, but if I am innocent may the ancestors bless me and give me long life.

After the above swearing words each of the suspects would eat the piece of *obi* taken from the grave. It is believed, in Igala traditional circle, that if any of the suspects is involved in the death of the deceased he or she would die within fourteen days after the oath taking. P. Omakacha indicated that "Christianity and Islam have not be able to stop this type of swearing in Igala land" (personal communication, March 12, 2010).

### **B. Agreement Between Persons**

If there is a commercial enterprise that is to be carried out by two or more persons oath taking would be employed if there is suspicion or fear of future betrayal by any of them. *Obi ogwu* would be used for the oath taking (*ebog-emo*). Each member would pledge honesty in the business, no cheating, no betrayal and so on. After the pledge the *obi ogwu* is broken and each member would take a piece and take a bite and give to other members. The eating of this *obi ogwu* is significant, because all the members will be honest to each other. The terms of the business agreed by members would be kept by all. Anyone who breaks the terms of the business would be visited by the wrath of *ibegwu*.

### **C. Suspicion of Ill – Feeling Against One**

If one feels that one's relation is harbouring some ill feelings or hatred against one the taking of oath with *obi* would take place. An elder in the family or (traditional priest) would be called upon to witness the oath taking (*ebog-emo*). *Obi ogwu* would be brought and parties involved would say the follow swearing words or similar ones as gathered from an interview (O. Yunusa, personal communication, March 2, 2010):

Ugebo kunibe ebiene oji amomayemi kidemi-n  
Amaa ufibe abalene amibegwu wa kuma fumi kpa  
Ilacheñu kedomi chefe, ojo kpai Ibegwu wa kuma  
fumi-de Tudu ale nalo obi yi kpai edo afu

Translation:

I swear I have no ill-feelings against my relation here  
If I do may our ancestors kill me  
But if my heart is pure let God and  
Ancestors protect me  
I, therefore, eat this kola nut with a clean heart

After the swearing words by the persons involved in the oath taking, the eldest person or *Atama-ebog* present would break the *obi* into pieces. Each of the swearing persons would take a piece of the *obi* and take a bite and give the rest to his or her swearing partner to eat. The eating of the same *obi* by the swearing persons ratifies the swearing rite. By this swearing with *obi ogwu* it is believed in Igala tradition that the parties involved would not harbour ill feelings or hatred towards each other. If any does, he or she would be punished by *Ibegwu*.

## ***OB* IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY**

*Obi* as an economic, ritual and social fruit is used in various ways by many Nigerians, but it seems that its social use is more today than its ritual use. This is because many Nigerians chew *obi* on social basis individually and collectively, especially in the Northern part of the Country. They use *obi* as part of fruits for entertainment during occasions like



naming ceremonies. Interestingly however, many Churches in Igala and in other places use *obi* commercially during their annual harvest and thanksgiving celebrations. During such celebrations *obi* is broken traditionally and this is followed by the commercial breaking by donation of some amount by individuals who want to partake in the eating of the kola nut. Since Christianity preached against traditional rituals many Christians see the various traditional ritual uses of *obi* as bad and magical. J. Manaba (personal communication, November 28, 2010) maintained that such Christians, therefore, do not applaud Igala traditional sacrifices and others where *obi* is used. The various religious significances associated with *obi* are nonsensical to such Christians.

As a disciple of inculturation I think *obi* wears some Christian theological gabs like some of our Christian rituals – baptism, confirmation, marriage, inauguration of church officials and reconciliation parley. Gradual education of our Christian members is needed before the full inculturation of *obi* into the said church ceremonies and others. Making Christianity indigenous to our socio – cultural, socio – economic, socio – political and socio – religious experiences are what we need today if Christianity is to have firm roots in African soil.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Bearing in mind all we have discussed above we make bold the following recommendations.

- Igala tribe is one of the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria, yet not much is known about its rich customs and traditions within and outside the state. It therefore, behooves on Kogi State mass media of communication to see it as a matter of priority to constantly show-case the customs and traditions of the various ethnic groups in the State.
- Intensive research should be carried out by Igala scholars so as to come out with the possibility of using *obi* as an alternative swearing method for traditional Igala people in our civil courts in Nigeria, especially in Kogi State. The suggestion is advocated because of the strong significance traditional Igala people attach to oath taking with *obi* than metallic object (*ebije*).
- Igala scholars should brave themselves to the challenges of researching into the various socio - religious roles *Ata* (alligator pepper), *Afu* (native white chalk), *Aba* (native hook), *Okpe* (Igala burial cloth), *Uloko*(parrot's red feathers) and so on play in Igala traditional religion. Publication of articles and books on these mentioned items and others would greatly help to preserve their usage for future generations.
- In the spirit of inculturation our Igala theologians should work out ways in which *obi* can be incorporated in the liturgical rites of baptism, confirmation, marriage, ordination and reconciliation. If this is effectively done, it would make the said ceremonies more meaningful to our indigenous Christians.
- Our Nigerian pastors and Imams should in the spirit of inculturation study the various *Ifa* divination systems, which include *obi* divination, and use the knowledge acquired to help their members socially and spiritually. *Ifa* divination system in the opinion of the researcher, is not demonic as some people think ,but African traditional science.

## CONCLUSION

In this study an attempt has been made to bring out some of the socio - religious roles *obi* plays in Igala traditional society. *Obi* is an important item for welcoming a guest to a place which signifies love, friendship, hospitality, peace, unity and acceptance. Interestingly, the praying over and breaking of this socio-economic and socio - religious fruit (*obi*) is traditionally reserved for those qualified to do so. Furthermore, *obi* is often used to reconcile warring parties who after eating it would promise to drop all hostilities. Igala traditional marriage is incomplete without the presentation of *obi* by the parents of the groom to the parents of the bride. Equally, we have shown in this paper how *obi* plays an important role in the ratification of agreements and traditional oath-taking to prove one's innocence. Moreover, its social roles are recognized in our contemporary society. It is, therefore, our hope that this research work would serve as an academic light for Igala scholars and others to carry out research work in many other areas yet to be explored. Truly, many aspects of Igala rich customs and traditions are patiently waiting to be exposed by mass communication media for the global- world to see and appreciate.

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