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The Semiotic Function of the Kola Nut in Nigeria

Its Socio-cultural Value and National Significance

Abstract: Kola nut is a ubiquitous crop that is the most valued, respected and widely used of all foods and cash crops grown in Nigeria. The presence of kola nut at a gathering or the offer of it generates a whirlpool of feelings in the giver and the receiver. In addition to building on existing knowledge of the kola nut, this paper – semiotic in approach and based on many years of empirical study – establishes and elucidates the inherent qualities and contents that make kola nut unique, iconic and symbolic. The paper concludes that kola nut is a great icon of socio-economic, socio-cultural and religious values and thus it enhances national cohesion.

Keywords: icon; kolanuthood; national cohesion; semiosphere; socio-cultural values; socio-economic values

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1 Introduction

Kola nut is a cash crop widely grown and used in Nigeria. Kola-nut trees are perennial plants that grow high with many branches, thick, rough bark, glossy, evergreen leaves and white flowers in their productive season. The tree grows pods that contain the kola nuts themselves, which are naturally and beautifully swathed in a soft, thin, whitish outer layer and padded internal cushion surrounding the kola nut itself (see Figure 1). There is a saying in the northern part of the Mid-West of Nigeria (now Edo North), to wit “kola nut is the princely

crop that comes into the world well-wrapped and protected in a white *asoke* cushion”.¹



Figure 1: The kola nut plant (Wikipedia Encyclopaedia online)

Found everywhere in Nigeria, kola nut has various names and appellations in different communities. The Hausa people of Northern Nigeria call it *gworu*; the Yoruba tribe of Western Nigeria call it *obi* and ‘the crop of the gods and elders’: As the Yoruba people say, *enu agba lo obi gbo si*, meaning ‘it is in the mouth of an elder that kola nut finally matures and finds its true significance’. The Igbo race calls it *orji* or *oji* and ‘the food of the gods’ or ‘the crop that gives life’. The Edo people and the other Edoid languages and dialects call it *evwe*, *evbe* (Edo-Benin, Urhobo, Isoko and Esan), *ilagbe* or *eregbe* (Akoko-Edo North), *irebu* (Ebira, Kogi State in Nigeria Middle Belt), etc. Although the identification tags differ from tribe to tribe, kola nut performs essentially the same socio-cultural functions and is accorded similar significance and interpretations in any community in which it is found. It is mainly grown and processed in the South-West of Nigeria. This paper undertakes a study of kola nut as a ‘friend’ of all Nigerians; a highly respected symbol of the Nigerian peoples and cultures, an icon of socio-cultural values and national cohesion.

¹ *Asoke* is a popular fabric valued and used in Nigeria for important occasions such as marriage, naming, burial and other ceremonies.

2 Methodology

The study is semiotic and is based on library research, interviews and observations over a period of time across the various tribes of Nigeria. A case study of events involving the use of kola nut across Nigeria was undertaken from 2000 to 2010 and findings and observations were interpreted qualitatively using Charles Peirce's theory of 'signhood'.

Qualitative research is concerned with individuals' personal accounts of their attitudes, motivations and behavior. It offers substantial descriptive reports of personal or individual perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, views and feelings. The meanings and interpretations given to events and things, as well as their behavior, display how these are put together, more or less coherently and consciously, into frameworks that make sense of their experiences. Qualitative research also illuminates the motivations that connect attitudes and behavior, the discontinuities, or even contradictions, between attitudes and behavior, or how conflicting attitudes and motivations are resolved in particular choices made. Although qualitative research is about people as the central unit of account, it is not about particular individuals per se; reports focus rather on the various patterns, or clusters, of attitudes and related behavior that emerge from the interviews (Omorogiuwa 45). Interviews and the Internet were also used to supplement the observation of kola nut events.

3 Theoretical Background and Review of Related Scholarship

This research is based on the theoretical propositions of Charles S. Peirce on "signhood" and "the community of signs" as well as the propositions and expansion of the theory by Charles Morris, Daniel Chandler and Thomas A. Sebeok. In his theory of signs Peirce identifies three triads of signs. Each of the three classes is subdivided into three subsets. The first class he calls "qualisigns, sinsigns and legisigns". A qualisign connotes a quality or state and a legisigns connects a norm, habit, rule, law and so on.

His second class of signhood, which is of importance to this study, consists of icons, indices and symbols. In this category, Peirce says that every sign refers as an icon through its similarity to its object or as an index through real link to its object, or as symbol through interpretive, conventional habit or norm of reference to its object (Peirce 287–298). In V.U. Longe's paraphrase,

The icon is a sign which shares certain similarities with what it is used to represent or signify. For instance, a map as well as the portrait of a person is iconic because each sign shares certain obvious similarities with what it represents – a map and a person. An index is a sign in which there is a causal relation between the sign vehicle and what it represents. For instance, the cloud gathering in the sky is an indexical sign that rain is about to fall. A symbol is a sign in which the relationship between the vehicle and what it represents is a conventional one. (1996:16–17)

In the third category of Pierce's signhood are "rhemes, decisigns and arguments." This third category is quite similar in meaning and categorization to the first class of qualisigns, sinsigns and legisigns. Pierce and subsequent scholars of semiotics have elaborated these triumvirates of signs and distinguished among "representamen", "sign" and "interpretant". A sign, or "representamen" functions as a representative of something else. A sign may be symbolic, linguistic, or artificial. An object or "semiotic object" is the subject matter of a sign and its interpretant. An object can be anything under the sun: a thing, event, relationship, quality, an abstraction, law, argument, or fiction. The "interpretant" or "interpretant sign" denotes the sign's implications, its significance and explicable ramifications. In the world of signs, these three dimensions of signs are inseparably linked. They have causal relationship, one leading to or from the other. A sign consistently remains in a clear-cut kind of connection to its object and its interpretant.

Charles Morris (1938) on the nature of signs says that "the way in which something functions as sign may be called "semiosis". Semiosis involves three or four basic features; namely, "that which acts as sign, that which the sign refers to, and that effect on some interpreter in virtue of which the thing in question is a sign to the interpreter". He calls these three components "the sign vehicle", "the designatum" and "the interpretant" (3). An interpretant is the influence and effect of the sign on its semiosphere and the mind, semiosphere being the environment or situation in which the semiosis obtain its existence and establishes its compelling presence.

An excellent example of a sign is the kola nut in Nigeria, which is culturally coded. Umberto Eco (1976) has observed that icons are culturally coded in a conventional and flexible sense (192). Beyond the reality of its cultural coding and conventional interpretations, and leading from this reality, icons and their interpretants have effects, either positively or negatively, on their semiosphere and on the humans mind in very evocative ways. As Arthur Bierman (1962) says, iconicity can sometimes be "a life and death matter" (249) and Thomas A. Sebeok (1975) asserts, "Iconicity plays a decisive role in shaping everyday life, in all cultures. Iconic signs suffuse man's communication codes, verbal no less than non verbal" (1446).

4 Socio-historical Background: Origin, Content/Nature of Kola Nut

Two versions (or schools of thought) of the origin of kola nut exist. First, it has been argued that kola nut came from the West Indies during the era of slave trade and found tropical Africa as its permanent home. This is the idea one finds in most foreign and local books on the origin of kola nut and other cash crops grown widely in Nigeria (Omoruyi 2002: 158). However, this view has been criticized as lacking in merit and characterized with colonial bias. Accordingly, the second group or school of thought argues that kola nut has always been native to tropical West Africa, where it is cultivated generally, and that the colonialists later discovered its value and consequently encouraged its cultivation as a cash crop on a wide scale. Kola nut had been widely used in Africa before the coming of European voyagers. As early as 1556, a voyager named Leo Africanus mentioned a certain bitter nut called ‘goro’, which he found during one of his visits to Western Sudan; ‘goro’ or ‘guoro’ is the Hausa name for kola (Russell 1955: 210–240).

There are approximately 125 species of kola nut trees native to Africa (Lovejoy 1980: 97). In Nigeria, specifically, several species have risen to popularity through widespread national uses. The first is the whitish or greyish type, which can have two or more parts or lobes naturally glued together in one nut and the second is the brownish, pinkish, reddish type with several lobes often generally called ‘native’ or ‘traditional kola’, so called because of the traditional functions that it is used to perform. The third is the thumb-sized (more or less) rounded one-lobe species called bitter kola, which is used for medicinal purposes.

Technically, experts differentiate kola nuts according to their species and parts. There is *cola nitida* and *cola acumunata*. *Cola nitida* simply describes the two lobed species while *cola aumunata* refers to the one with several lobes. Whether white or brown, the beauty of this crop is that it is a friend to all Nigerians and is found everywhere in the country.

What is not clear, however, is the point at which the kola nut assumed universal acceptance and similar socio-cultural interpretations in Nigeria. Was there at any point in the past when our forbears had a *Pan Kola Nut Conference* where it was debated, unanimously agreed and decreed that kola nut should be treated as a crop for socio-cultural uses and expression? Not likely. But somehow, kola nut became loved, valued and widely used because of its rich content, uses and general acceptability. It probably started as a cash crop of high economic value in the slave trade era, and even thereafter. Gradually, our

forefathers came to discover the great uses and contents of the crop, just as they discovered many useful herbs and plants of medicinal value without the assistance of the West Indies and colonial masters. Indeed, there must be something unique in kola nut that our forefathers discovered socially, spiritually and simultaneously, or at different times, which encouraged them to start using it for socio-cultural expressions, for showing respect and for hospitality.

Nigeria is blessed naturally and spiritually with this fascinating crop. The reason is that kola nut is a crop that Nigerians use to achieve and express different goals and things in its natural form. Even though the uses and style of use may vary, its presence is always there and respected in any Nigerian community. Kola nut, therefore, stands out as a national crop and a “detrribalized patriot”.

We look, in turn, at the medicinal value, pharmacological effects and the chemical components of kola nut, established by scientific research worldwide, noting that our forefathers indeed discovered, at an earlier time, the invaluable contents and potential meaning of kola nut. Unfortunately, however, illiteracy prevented them from recording their findings, as modern scientists have done. In the case of kola nut, nevertheless, they did ensure that they promoted the crop to a socio-cultural position of prestige that it now enjoys.

5 Medicinal Value of Kola Nut

Kola nut has many medicinal values. Essentially, it contains caffeine, which is a bronchodilator, a substance that dilates the bronchial passages. It is also a flavoring ingredient and the source of caffeine in Coca-Cola, Pepsi Cola and other similar drinks and beverages in western cultures. The ‘cola’ in the names of these beverages is actually a reference to the presence of kola nut in soft drinks. More recently, kola nut has been replaced in soft drinks with artificial ingredients (Benjamin et al 2010: 108).

Kola nuts are sometimes ground and combined with different herbs as a cure for various ailments and infections. The species called bitter kola is highly medicinal, although it is socially and culturally coded as *C. Nitida* and *C. Acuminate*. Bitter kola is chewed to reduce high blood pressure, used as an anti-aging agent and it is often combined with honey and herbs to treat cough (interview with Dr. Adegboye Akande, an herbalist and traditional healer). There is a less popular species called ‘wonder kola’ common in Cameroun, Northern Nigeria and the Middle Belt of Nigeria, which combines with honey

and various herbs to cure numerous illnesses and infections (Yusuf 2002: 1–22). Every part of the kola nut tree can be used for medicinal purposes. The leaves, twigs, flowers, fruit and bark of *C. Nitida* and *C. Acuminate* are used to alleviate or cure dysentery, cough, diarrhea and vomiting (Ayenusi 1978: 15).

Furthermore, kola nuts themselves are known to contain *xanthine*, similar to the *xanthine* found in chocolate, coffee, *guarana* and *yerba* plants, which stimulates the central nervous system and heart. Some animal experiments conducted show that kola nuts have *analeptic* and *ipolytic* (fat-burning) ingredients. They also stimulate the flow of gastric juices. Human studies have equally shown that kola nuts have positive *chronotropic* and weak diuretic effects. They keep the brains and mind alert, improve physical vigor, stimulate the mind and tactile sensitivity, reduce appetite, increase body temperature and improve respiration. (This is why students, ordinary people and security personnel chew them during examinations, at duty posts, wakes and vigils to be on the alert). The refined extract of kola nuts is used as a stimulant for the cardiac and central-nervous system (Wikipedia 5). However, excessive consumption of the crop may be toxic and may cause a fever, headache, insomnia and so on, as a result of its high *N-nitroso* compound and caffeine content.

6 Chemical Composition

Kola nut contains many chemicals in differing qualities. The two major ones are caffeine, which is about 2 to 3.5%, and theobromine 1 to 2.5%. Others are theophylline, catechin, epicatechin, D-catechin, phenolics, phlobaphens, betaine, protein, starch, fat, thiamine, riboflavin, niacin, ascorbic acid, sugar, gum, cellulose, water, calcium, potassium, iron-carotene and tannic acid (Benjamin et al 2010: 80–105). Purseglove (1968) and Odebode (1996) have shown that kola consists of 13.5% water, 9.5% crude protein, 1.4 fat, 45% sugar and starch, 7.0% cellulose, 2.8% caffeine, 3.8% tannin, 3% ash and 0.5% theobromine (Odebode 1996: 513–515).

Against these scientifically established facts, how and why our forebears chose kola nut as a crop of socio-cultural value can be better appreciated. Now, everywhere in Nigeria, kola nut enjoys a cultural pride of place, showing up as a symbolic icon in social functions, rituals and worship. Clearly, in Nigeria kola nut is not just a crop or fruit like any other such as banana, palm nut, cashew, etc. It is a symbolic icon or an iconic symbol that is used nationally to express socio-cultural messages. It is held in high esteem and wherever it appears or is

presented, it generates the aura of respect, love, friendliness and solemnity, depending on the occasion. For these reasons it can be claimed that kola nut enhances national cohesion.

7 The Symbolic Meaning and Functions of Kola Nut

The kola nut performs several symbolic and iconic functions, elaborated in the following subsections.

7.1 Kola Nut as Socio-Cultural Symbol

Nigeria is a country blessed not only with a multiplicity of languages and tribes, but also with diverse cultures and ways of social expression. Our forbears discovered the invaluable qualities and contents of kola nut. Hence they promoted it to a high socio-cultural position in the life of the people, unlike other crops discovered at different periods of history (cocoa, coffee, cashew, palm nuts, etc.). Vast and different as the peoples and cultures of Nigeria are, kola nut has been found to be the only crop that one may find in any village, whether it is grown there or not, and it is used and accepted in all socio-cultural functions across Nigeria. Let us look at the three major tribes in Nigeria for example, the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa.

Among the Yoruba of Nigeria, kola nut is used for social expressions in local festivals, marriage and naming ceremonies and as gifts to traditional chiefs, the Obas and very important and esteemed visitors. Similarly, traditional chiefs and rulers often present kola to their esteemed visitors, praying with it and pronouncing what is popularly known as “royal blessings” for the visitors.

According to Olufemi Abo (2010: 3), kola nut features prominently in the Yoruba naming ceremony, bride price and other social events. Yoruba bride price, which Abo says takes place in two installments, has kola nut as an essential item: “The bride price was usually in two installments, the *ijowun* and *idana* – the *ijowun* consisted of pepper kolas, beer, wine, gin, bitter kola and honey... The second installment, the *idana*, included the same things as *ijowun* plus some cloth wrappers. Similarly, in the naming ceremony, kola is one of the components used and given to the newborn child to taste. The giving of kola to the newborn to taste is a symbolic wish of good fortune for the child (Titilayo 1999: 2). *C. Acuminata* has been found to be widely used in ceremonies and

social functions, as gifts and presents for visitors, as a valued crop shared during business deals and as symbolic offers during marriage proposals (Johnson and Johnson 1976: 375; Russell 1955: 210–240). In some cultures, a kola tree may be planted when a baby is born. If the tree survives, it remains the lifelong plant of the child (Tindall 1998: 1–3).

Interestingly, this practice is not peculiar to the Yoruba alone. In virtually every Nigerian tribe, particularly those in the south, southwest, southeast and middle west (the Edo Delta), kola nut is a must-item in the payment of the bride price. The amount of money is negotiable, other items may be negotiable, but the amount of kola nut to accompany the bride price is not negotiable.

Among the Igbo, kola nut is a great icon, a socio-cultural icon coded with several meanings. First it means life; second, the word “orji” represents hospitality; third it means respect and fourth, it is regarded as the food of the gods and ancestors. Emmanuel N. Onwu (2010) has shown that the Igbo people conceptualize kola nut as a life-affirming symbol. He explains that the rituals of presenting, breaking and sharing kola nut involve the totality of life: Chukwu (God), clan deities, ancestors, the spirit forces and market days are mentioned and invoked during prayers with kola nut. The kola nut ritual chant normally ends, as it begins, with “Onye wetera oji wetera ndu”, meaning ‘he who brings kola brings life’ (5).

Onwu explains the myth of the four Igbo market days in connection with kola nut: Four strange visitors, probably spirits entities, who would not eat anything offered to them nor talk to anybody, were said to have visited a place. By chance, someone offered them kola to eat. Surprisingly, the strange visitors started speaking after eating kola and they gave their names as Orié (Oyé), Eke, Nkwó and Afo, which became the four market days in Igbo land. Henceforth, kola nut assumed a pride of place and became the food of the spirits. It also became a symbol of life or animation. Someone who could not eat nor talk “is as good as dead”. Only a crop that can give life could do the miracle of restoring life to the spirit visitors. For this reason, the Igbo always say “Onye wetera oji wetera ndu”.

In addition, Onwu (2010: 7) asserts as follows: “Apart from being an affirmation of life, it is also a symbol of continuity of the entire life process as a continuum. Kola nut ritual is always a feature of the Igbo society, social functions and ceremonies which has resisted westernization and Christianity”.

Kola nut also finds symbolic representation among the Hausa, who eat it as a snack food and give it as a present. Although it may not feature in Hausa/Muslim rituals and worship, it is presented as a gift during marriage ceremonies, visitations and social functions.

The Urhobo and Isoko people of Delta State express love and hospitality in a very special way with kola nut. It is the number one gift item for elders, visitors and loved ones among these people. It is normally put on a plate, accompanied or not with gin or a bottle of *kain-kain* (local gin) or any other drink. “Wedging of kola nut” is a common phrase among the Urhobo and Isoko people. When the Urhobo natives offer kola nut to someone (in a gathering), they often ‘wedge’ it, that is, support it, with money. The presenter adds money to it and others present follow suit. If it is presented to a guest or visitor, he takes the money and breaks the kola nut to share with his host. If it is offered to a group, every member of the group shares in the money. This cultural habit promotes love, sustains friendship and eradicates or neutralizes disaffection among people in a social function.

Lastly, on the socio-cultural use of kola nuts, it has been found that kola nuts are used for conflict resolution, settling family quarrels and land disputes. They are broken and shared with prayers in some Akoko Edo communities of Edo State. When two friends or brothers settle a misunderstanding, they share kola nut, praying and promising not to do any more harm or keep malice against each other. Taboo words and curses are reversed with the offering of kola nut, wine and a he-goat to the spiritual realm. The utterer of the taboo words or curses such as “may Ogun bathe with your blood”, “you will never succeed in life”, “so long as I live, you will never have a child”, “you are no longer my son or daughter”, “I curse you with these breasts you sucked”, “as far as I am concerned you no longer exist in this world”, etc. and the cursed one are brought face-to-face, or if one is far away, an effigy of one is made for the reversal sacrifice with a kola nut and other items. Among these people, it is believed that kola nut offered by someone ‘keeping malice’ with you (that is someone who is not well disposed to you) is poisoned kola nut. So, as a rule, people do not share kola nut with perceived enemies and detractors.

Furthermore, people in a dispute settlement are sometimes asked to swear with kola nut to affirm their innocence or that they are telling the truth (interview with HRH Oba Ogunnubi 2008). Besides, the various symbolic social cultural expressions of kola nut in different communities, it rose to become a cash crop, a binding economic symbol that pulls different peoples from far and near together, which is the next point examined.

7.2 The Economic Function of Kola Nut

It is common knowledge that kola nuts of diverse species have assumed significance as a cash crop of high economic value (see Figure 2). Nigeria can

boast of many crops like cocoa, cashew, palm nuts, cassava, yam, etc., which are exported as cash crops or sold and consumed locally. Kola nut has special, added economic value and meaning of all cash crops that are cultivated in Nigeria. Kola nut has emerged as a unifying crop whose presence brought foreigners and Nigerians of various socio-cultural backgrounds together. As it is often said in Nigeria, “the Yoruba people cultivate kola nut, the Igbo venerate it and the Hausa eat it”. Till now, its place as an icon of economic unity has not been challenged by any crop of its category.

Mainly grown in the southwest and southeast, the crop is found, used and eaten everywhere. Thus, kola nut inevitably brings together southerners and northerners in a robust trade and economic activity. Although some other crops also perform this role, none is as symbolic and valued as kola nut. So, in the economic and commercial sphere of our national life, Kola becomes a “nut” that screws together the various linguistically different and far-flung peoples of Nigeria. Often, these “economics meetings for kola nut” further generate affable social interaction, sharing of socio-cultural ideas and inter-tribal marriages, all of which create inter-ethnic brotherhood and enhance national stability and international cohesion. Moving from the economic plane, kola nut was taken into other areas of human interrelationship (culture, rituals and worship) and it has assumed perpetual symbolism in those spheres. Hence the ritual symbolism of kola nut should be examined.

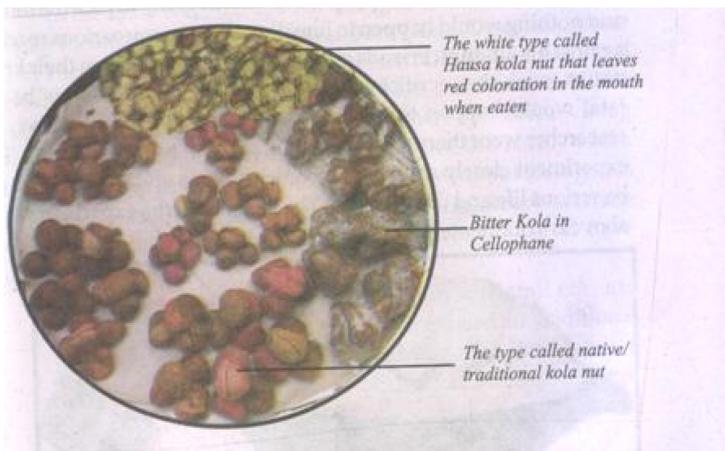


Figure 2: A tray of kola nuts displayed for sale in Oba market, Benin City

7.3 Kola Nut as a Symbolic Icon of Worship and Rituals

Everywhere in Nigeria, particularly in the southwest, southeast, south and the Middle Belt, the kola nut is the number one object of worship and sacrifice. On March 9, 2000, researchers carried out a field experiment in a community in Akoko Edo Local Government Area of Edo State to establish the ‘interpretant’ (that is the meaning and interpretation) of kola nut as iconic symbol in the community. A kola nut of four lobes was broken and the four lobes placed on a bundle of crisp fifty naira notes, one hundred naira note in all, totaling five thousand naira notes (naira being Nigeria’s currency). They were placed at a major three-road junction at 4:30 in the morning while the villagers slept. At dawn, the researchers stood at a vantage place to watch passers-by react to the sign at the junction. Not only was the bundle of money, kola nut and cowries avoided, people avoided going near the junction. Even though people wanted the money and they said so, they did not go near it because of the kola nut placed on it, which signified that the money was not “ordinary”. It was believed that the sign was an ominous sacrifice or something that must not be touched. The bundle of cash with the kola nuts was left there till the next day. When the researchers told people that they were going to pick up the money and nothing would happen to them, there was an uproarious reaction against this attempt. Friends and relatives begged them on their knees not to touch the sacrifice because they believed something bad or fatal would happen to them if they did. At night the next day, the researchers went there secretly to retrieve their money and kola nuts. This experiment clearly shows that iconicity, signs and interpretant can be serious life and death issues. The kola nut in the experiment cited above is a quintessential case.



Figure 3: Kola nut pod (left) and kola nut seeds (right) cast for divination

There is a common saying in the native home of one of the researchers that “he who is going to consult an oracle, or native doctor, must be ready to buy kola nut and pour a libation at the end of the consultation”. Similarly, the first invocation when kola nut is being offered as a sacrifice or gift in the same area goes like this: “*Illagbe/eregbe na ha go Okpa, e na ha go Ovie*” meaning “It is kola nut we use to praise and bribe Okpa and Ovie”. Okpa means a god or great personality and Ovie means a powerful ruler, Oba, or king. The implication is that no matter how highly placed anyone may be kola nut is a choice gift that no one refuses. In some communities studied in the same area, namely, Bekuma, Lamkpese, Ekpe, Imoga, etc., there is an annual festival called *Ukpe* celebrated between June and August. In Bekuma and Lamkpese communities, the *Ukpe* festival is an all kola–nut and palm-wine affair. People pack plates and containers full with kola nuts of different species, sit beside their ancestors’ graves to pray or chant with them. After invocations and prayers, the kola nuts are broken and family members scramble for them heartily. In other places in the area, the kola nuts are augmented with *moi-moi* or pounded yam and palm wine.

In the same way, the Yoruba and Igbo races use kola nuts to worship their pantheons (of deities) and ancestors. *Ogun*, the god of iron in Yoruba and some other tribes, is often offered kola, wine and dog, or rooster. The four-lobe types of kola are sometimes used for improvised divination (see Figure 3) in emergencies and where veritable divining cowries and objects are not readily available. One can hardly visit traditional setting or a typical shrine in Nigeria without seeing kola nut. It is one crop that all religions in Nigeria accept and use ceremonially without reservations, as Ogundele J.O. et al (2009: 4) have observed, “Orthodox religions like Christianity, Islam, etc. are accustomed to criticizing most objects used in traditional religion and worship as fetish and ungodly. But here is a great crop of traditional origin that the Christians, Muslims, free-thinkers, the educated and political elite accept without qualms”.

Indeed, Christians do not frown at the use of kola nut even in strictly Christian functions. Surely, they will not accept the cowries, native chalk, palm wine, or animal blood, but they will accept kola nuts. Kola nuts have been broken right inside some churches during a wedding reception, for as Onwu (2010) maintains the kola nut ritual has stubbornly resisted the corroding influence and stigmatizing tendencies of westernization and Christianity.

8 Conclusion

Details of the various signs, objects and interpretants of kola nut in different communities cannot be exhaustively examined in a limited paper of this type. However, it has been established here that kola nut, apart from being an economic and food crop, is coded and reserved for socio-cultural functions and religious worship. It grows widely in the south but is present everywhere for multifarious uses. Kola nut remains the only crop that finds expression in all facets of our personal and community life, a friend of everyone and a “fan” of all the religions.

Against this backdrop, therefore, it has been recommended that the kola nut species of four or more lobes be depicted on the middle white band of the Nigerian flag, as in Figure 4. Symbolically, the several lobes of the “nut” will represent the several major tribes of Nigeria bound together in one kola nut. It should also be added as a symbol in the Nigerian Coat of Arms to show that even though we are different lobes, we remain together in one kola nut. Finally, many believe that the federal government should declare kola nut a national crop. Although the federal government may not deem this proposal expedient to execute, the people of Nigeria deem the kola nut as a symbolic unifying crop, as is evident in the slogan, “Though tribes and tongues may differ, in kolanuthood we stand”.



Figure 4: Proposed Nigerian flag

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