

**Orature, Cultural Nationalism, and Literary Onomastics:  
Kola nut as Semiotics of Bonding in Chinua Achebe's Novels**

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**Abstract**

This article examines the essence of literary onomastics of food consumption generally and the signification of kola nut particularly, in Chinua Achebe's literary oeuvre. Kola nut's consumption as semiotics of bonding is focused upon in *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People*, and *Anthills of the Savannah*. Recognizably, while witty sayings and proverbs are vehicles of orature in Achebe's oeuvre, oral narratives as sources of inspiration and elucidation cannot be discountenanced. The article argues that it is within the scope of language use that a people's cultural nationalism is encountered and understood. If semiotics is a philosophical theory of signs and symbols that deals especially with their function in both artificially constructed and natural languages, kola nut is a "sign" embedded in Igbo's cultural semiotics and ostensibly serves as a vehicle for cultural integration and channel of communication. Literary onomastics is an indispensable unit of literature that essentially utilizes methods of linguistics and literary criticism for the analyses of proper names in Literature. The article engages with the intersection of semiotics, literary onomastics and cultural materialism for the decoding of kola nut symbolism in Achebe's novels. Cultural materialism emphasizes that every text derives its relevance from the intersection of history and society of a particular cultural community.

**Key words:** literary onomastics of kola nut, semiotics, cultural materialism, orality, social cohesion, Chinua Achebe

## Introduction

Chinua Achebe has affirmatively demonstrated in his literary oeuvre that his unique preserve is reclamation, preservation, and a reiteration of the place of Africa in the global cultural context. His novels serve as a site for the African identity formation and cultural nationalism whose essentiality has relevance in semiotics and ontological sensibility in what Abiola Irele describes as “traditional oral discourse” (Irele cited in Scott 2024:33). Irele further explicates that orality implies a built-in principle of instability. But what may seem, from the point of view of literate culture, a disabling inconvenience has been transformed into a virtue in African orality, for although the textual elements cannot be disregarded in the forms of our imaginative expression, they are more often experienced as the outline of a verbal structure. If the possibility of interpreting Achebe's literary oeuvre within the context of orature depends on the explication of cultural objects – that encompasses all signs system (not just language) and symbols that semiotics seeks to elucidate, this article argues that the literary signification of kola nut in Achebe's novels is significantly rooted in Igbo's verbal structure (Culler 1981: viii and Bock 2014: 58). Arguably, orality serves as “reference points for the development of ideas and images, as suggestive signposts in the narrative or prosodic movement of a discourse that is still in the future” (Irele 2001:34). If we took time to look beyond overt appropriation of orature in Achebe's oeuvre and reassess his exceptional contribution to the making of contemporary African literature, we would find reason enough to always re-read his novels as to go in search of different narrative strategies previously undermined due to error of a simple oversight.

Although orality is entrenched in a larger space in Achebe's oeuvre, it marks a boundary between indigenous African culture and the European [written] literary culture. As gruesomely and shamelessly choreographed in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*, if the European civilization had made a grandstand play out of its purported cultural superiority over and above other cultures in the global cultural context, Achebe has continually rebuffed this, and reaffirmed the self-sufficiency of African, albeit the Igbo cultural nationalism. Underscoring this vital point, Adebayo Williams asserts that “as a cultural nationalist, it is inevitable that Achebe would find himself up in arms against the cultural and intellectual agents of imperialism” (11). Williams further unmasked these agents to be Conrad, Cary Elspeth Huxley, Rider Haggard and others “in Achebe's gallery of literary scoundrels...” (11). Consequently, as much as the corpus of Achebe's literary production strikingly reflects a binary between

Eurocentrism and African cultural affirmation, he has proven to the world that African literature is one of the mainstays of the world literature.

While literature creates a space different from reality, literary onomastics engages with the names of characters and objects in a literary text as to tease out the intersection of linguistic and literary for the purpose of deconstructing their intertextual fragments (Hramova 2009, 11). The article engages with the literary onomastics and semiotics deconstruction of kola nut in Achebe's novels.

### **Cultural Ideology in Achebe's Novels**

Alan Sinfield argues that "ideology is not just a set of ideas; it is material practice, woven into the fabric of everyday life...the principal strategy of ideology is to legitimate inequality and exploitation by representing the social order that perpetuates these things as immutable and unalterable..." (114). Countering Western imposed ideology and waging relentless criticism against Western imperialism and cultural denigration by the European hegemony, African writers strikingly weaponize Afrocentricism as an ideology to redefine themselves and reclaim the African cultural exegesis during the colonial period. Albeit orature or orality, David Carroll argues that "African writers have employed literature in one of its traditional roles to explore and open up new or neglected areas of experience by clearing the ground of prejudice and preconception" (22). In confronting the inevitable choice between the often-opposing demands of artistic commitment and individual interest, Achebe in his literary oeuvre has chosen to continually rely upon the possibilities entrenched in the indigenous traditions, where the requirements of aesthetic satisfaction and social relevance were synthesized in such a way that both could be agreeably realized. Achebe's fulfilling these requirements in his novels, conforms to Alan Swingewood's suggestion that "art objects were never simple, passive artefacts to be consumed by an already existing and static public, but elements in a process of cultural production which both succeed in creating a public for the object and aesthetic appreciation of it"(79).Achebe in his creative enterprise utilizes themes and styles grounded in traditional drama, folktales, and poetry. This adaptation does not come without complexities, "as borrowings from the indigenous practices to suit the requirements of modern literature, especially the novel, which often has no direct equivalent in traditional literature" (Akingbe 2010:17). Arguably, Achebe reshapes the indigenous materials in his novels to meet with the expectations of his audience, which for the most part, is made up of an urban, western-educated elite.

If we are to agree with Ferdinand de Saussure that language was only one kind of semiotics system, yet language was the most powerful and important one and should therefore be the focus of

linguistic study. Over time, de Saussure's theory has been expanded to include non-linguistic signs and cultural objects. Saussure argues further that the meaning of a sign depends on its relationship to other signs within the system: the one has meaning only because it is *differentiated* from the other signs within the same system. Thus "language as a sign system can be described as arbitrary and differential" (Saussure cited in Bock and Mheta 201:63). While literature is inconceivable outside the context of language, the issue of what language a particular text is written often arise either implicitly or explicitly when it is subjected to literary criticism (Owomoyela 1996, 3). Although all his novels are written in English, orality provides a backdrop for Achebe's novelistic enterprise by inescapably tying his writing to the African cultural consciousness. Simon Gikandi declaims that "Achebe's works are all experimental in nature: narrative strategies are shaped by the author's need to experiment with different forms of representation" (16). Gikandi's words are further corroborated by Kolawole Ogungbesan who admittedly observes that Achebe's novels are situated within interstices of cultural ideology embedded in three phases – Achebe as a teacher, a guardian of social consciousness and a radical seer "who must help envision meaningful change" (Akingbe 2012, 107). Gikandi further acknowledges that Achebe's experiment with multi-dimensional literary techniques unusually manifests in his use of the multiple-narrative mode that unambiguously enables him to concretely demonstrate and thereby reinforce his notion of the pre-eminence of stories and storytellers, and the way in which both are intricately intertwined (Akingbe 2012, 116). Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* condemns Eurocentric notions of precolonial Africa as barbaric and unenlightened; in *No Longer at Ease*, he criticized the corruption and moral degeneration of a nation that was already failing to live up to its ideals soon after independence. In *Arrow of God*, Achebe revisits jealousy, intrigue, and lack of dynamism that made indigenous African societies even more vulnerable to the pressures of colonialism, Christianity, and Western education. In *A Man of the People*, Achebe protest the venality and corruption of leadership, as well as the passivity of the citizenry that made socio-political chaos inevitable. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe's mode of narrative encapsulates a fitting culmination to a lifetime of literary commitment that weaves together many of the diverse strands of his earlier novels and turning them into a comprehensive and far-reaching examination of a people's response to societal challenges (Akingbe, 2012, 106). Each of these texts, in its context, reviews a periodic documentation of historic—social and political developments as they impact on the societal unfoldment. A segment of each unfoldment denotes a reciprocity between cultural consciousness and political situational context. In Achebe's literary oeuvre, the conundrum of how the Igbo pre-colonial traditional societies transited through the colonial to the postcolonial periods without recording a substantial loss of its cultural nationalism is often demonstrated in the symbolism of kola nut.

### **Cultural Materialism**

If language interrelates closely with culture, “literature” should not be privileged as a form of expression outside the realms of society, politics or history of its place of production (Brannigan 1998, 21). Brannigan argues further that “both Cultural Materialism and New Historicism insist that there is no division between text and context or between literature and politics (21). This assertion obliquely intensifies the notion that Achebe’s literary enterprise continually serves as a compass for the navigation of the Igbo cultural nationalism, as it references the pre-colonial bliss of the past to negotiate the complexities of the colonial disruptions of the present. Referencing this notion, Sinfield buttresses the essence of cultural materialism when he contends that “...it is damaging to human beings to persuade them that their language and culture are inferior” (291). Therefore, Achebe’s dwelling on his Igbo culture of communalism to emphasize the importance of kola nut as a metaphor of bonding and integration incontrovertibly reflects Frantz Fanon’s observation in *Wretched of the Earth*, where he states unambiguously that the colonized indigenous writer/artist engages in certain phases in the process of cultural de-colonization, the first of these being a reification of European culture, the need to prove that she/he is capable of mastering these forms. Written literature is validated over oral; “Western literary forms (the novel, for example) are preferred to indigenous orality; mastery of European language becomes a goal” (Fanon 221). Reassessing Fanon’s argument on this note, Constance Richards agrees that assimilation of the European culture is achieved, however, at the expense of the artist’s connection to his/her own cultural history. The struggle between colonial and indigenous cultural identity “moves the writer/artist to a romantic immersion into the precolonial stage of African identity” (21). By exploring the dynamic connections between the past and present in his novels, Achebe succeeds in offering the onomastics significance of Kola nut to the Igbo’s cultural well-being. The relationship between Igbo culture and food consumption has been a major focus of exploration in the recent time.

Arguably, within the context of semiotics, kola nut obviously personifies the objectification of the intrinsic values imbedded in the Igbo traditional worldview. Achebe’s evaluation of Igbo’s cultural practices, including an appraisal of the food culture is dominantly designed to promote national consciousness that corresponds to Fanon’s “fighting phase” that requires individual African writer’s movement from the celebration of indigenous culture to the conceptualization of a “revolutionary literature [...] a national literature (*Wretched of the Earth* 235)”. Richards argues further, that the development of a national consciousness and a national culture are seen by Fanon “as inherent aspects of, and necessary steps toward, de-colonization” (22). According to Fanon,

“[I]t is around the people's struggles that African-negro culture takes on substance...” (*Wretched of the Earth* 235). While the occasional communal feasting during marriage, burial and festival builds a bridge between the people and the community, the thematic of social cohesion versus social dislocation, which Achebe establishes in his first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), remains a significant focus in, *No Longer at Ease* (1960), *Arrow of God* and in *Anthills of the Savannah*.

Taking a cognizant tour through his literary oeuvre, Achebe has written much on the history of the colonized people, especially on the plight of his people [the Igbo] in their cultural encounter with the European/colonial authority. Beginning with the pre-colonial past, through the colonial period, and into the post-colonial present. Gloria Ernest -Samuel stresses this point by validating the intersection of history and culture in these novels. Ernest -Samuel claims that, Chinua Achebe's rural novels are arguably the most popular and most studied African literary works globally...Most of the study on Achebe's rural narratives concentrates on “how the writer, through the resources of art, opens a window into the understanding, preservation, and reflection on the Igbo culture, and by extension, the African culture and worldview during the pre-and post-colonial era around the turn of the nineteenth century”(75). In his examination of history, Achebe looks at the uncanny fragmentation of cultures of the colonized societies and its consequences, as fictionalized in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. Oladele Taiwo (1976:112) has noted that, it is indeed characteristic of Achebe's novels:

[...] to look [...] at a situation from very varied points of view, sometimes bringing them before the reader simultaneously. The reader finds, almost invariably, that no one point of view is wholly acceptable and that, to reach a satisfying conclusion, several points of view have to be taken into consideration.

This kind of complication is also true of the meanings which Achebe attaches to the practice of consumption in his novels. In all, Achebe elucidates the practice of consumption as metaphor in his novels: *Things Fall Apart*, and its sequel, *No Longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God* and *Anthills of the Savannah*.

### **Semiotics and Onomastics of Food Consumption and Social formation in Achebe's Novels**

Grace Alvarez-Altman defines literary onomastics as a more specialized literary criticism in which scholars are concerned with the levels of significance of names, in drama, poetry, fiction and folklore. These include “names of places, characters, cosmic symbols, etc., as they relate to theme, structure, and other literary considerations” (220). In Achebe's novels, like in any other human societies, the naming of eating marks one of the most important areas of the social negotiation of

meaning in the context of common humanity. In the novels cited in this article, there is primacy of feasting and nourishment over materialistic values. In the context of communalism and good neighborliness, the language of social integration among the traditional Igbo society in Achebe's novels, continues to revolve around the metaphors of eating and by extension, kola nut symbolism. In the view of Bock "semiotics refers to the study of all signs systems (not just language) and how these signs are combined and used to communicate different meanings" (58). Semiotics as appropriated in this article, in this regard, engages with the interpretation of the significance of food typology and their meanings specifically in Achebe's novels, within the context of the narrative of how food, communal feasting and kola nut breaking are valued and appreciated in Igbo cultural paradigm.

This implies that, Achebe in his novels, employs semiotics as a metalinguistics enterprise that manifests in the use of English language for the deconstruction of the importance of varied types of food and kola nut's symbolism not only to the linguistic sensibilities of people of Igbo extraction, but generally to the broad comprehension of his entire audience. Notably, Yam is unarguably considered, as men's crop, and it can only be grown traditionally by men and not women. This notion is further illustrated in Uche Odibo's clarification, that "in some part of Igboland like Afikpo and other places, women may plant or harvest any other crop but not yam" (43). Among the Igbo, yam cultivation is treated with reverence as nature is symbolically venerated by the people. This notion underlines yam as men's crop that holds significant symbolic importance to the Igbo in the pre-colonial age. The metaphors that sustain some of the most important social understandings are derived from eating. In the introduction pages in *Things Fall Apart*, for example, we are informed that "Among the Ibos the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (1958: 5). This is a witty and profound allusion to how communication is performed with excellence in the Igbo traditional society. The proverb of palm oil evinces the quintessence of eating as a metaphor for living. Sengova (1997: 337) acknowledges that among the Igbo palm oil is:

[...] the main ingredient of sauce dishes that accompany the staple. Not only is palm-oil eaten on a daily basis, but it also has religious significance in mediating with spirits and supernatural forces through food offerings. In its figurative use here, it is a complementary vehicular ingredient to words in the mediation of social intercourse through discourse.

Wherever Palm oil appears in any of Achebe's novels, it often intimates the literary onomastics of food consumption generally. As nutrition reverses starvation, yam, cassava, palm oil and kola nut reference the quality of life lived in the pre-colonial Igbo traditional society to denote a period of

high-yielding agricultural productions. Like proverbs, therefore, food mediates social relationship in Achebe's Igbo community, as demonstrated in Okonkwo's solicitation to Nwakibie:

I have brought you this little kola. As our people say, a man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness. I have come to pay my respects and also to ask for a favour. But let us drink the wine first (1958: 14).

In *Things Fall Apart* eating defines social acceptance and status. As one man reminds his friends, "if a child washed his hands, he could eat with kings" (1958: 6). The most inspiring fable in the novel is that of the little bird 'nza', who ate so much that he quite forgot himself and challenged his personal "chi" to a contest. Within the locale of semiotics, we can describe the relations that exist between the words identifying these objects: yam, palm oil, kola nut, chalk, palm wine (and other cultural objects) in Achebe's novels and their meanings therefore, as an indispensable part of our consideration of language as a system.

But in *No Longer at Ease*, the act of naming of food and its consumption has assumed a new meaning, to emphasize avarice, greed and sectionalism. Here the metaphor of eating revolves around eating of the "national cake", which different Nigerian federating units crave endlessly. For instance, a gain in efficiency of communalism is reverberated in the wedding feast in *Things Fall Apart*, of two friends who, having fallen onto opposite sides of a mound of pounded yams, only to discover each other as the sun is about to set, is reversed in *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People*. In these two novels, there is an emphasis on semiotics of "chop alone" where individuals like Obi in *No Longer at Ease*, and those living in the urban places, Lagos specifically, shortly after Nigeria attained independence in 1960, engage in corrupt practices that afforded them the privilege to drive expensive cars and build palatial buildings like the minister of culture, MP Nanga in *A Man of the People*. The semiotics of "chop alone" in this context, serves as a Nigerian urban myth, that refers to when a language of discourse on moral issues borders on corruption, and is manipulated and fragmented to protect an individual's self-interest. Hence, an individual could be described to have "chopped alone", if he/she engages in a corrupt practice, where he/she only benefits him/herself and does not share the proceeds of corruption with members of the immediate community. The "chop alone" syndrome is pursued with great vehemence when Obi was caught and arraigned before a magistrate court for collecting a bribe in *No Longer at Ease*. Curiously, a criticism of "chop alone" is further extended in the depiction of language of political power in the meeting of Umuofia Progressive Union (UPU), when Obi is condemned, not for his corruption, but for his inexperience, for settling for less, and the fact that he was going to prison for a paltry sum of twenty pounds:



I am against people reaping where they have not sown. But we have a saying that if you want to eat a toad you should look for a fat and juicy one [...] It is all lack of experience [...] He should not have accepted the money himself. What others do is tell you to go and hand it to their houseboy. Obi tried to do what everyone does without finding out how it was done. (1960: 5)

The proverb of the “fat and juicy toad” here is perverted, and it lacks the moral philosophy entrenched in the Ndigbo cultural nationalism amplified strenuously in *Things Fall Apart*. The oldest man in the meeting then breaks a kola-nut to foreground his hypocritical “prayer”, that tends to seek vengeance on members of other federating units of the country who have turned on the whistle blowing mechanism that exposed Obi's trepid Twenty Pounds bribe take:

We do not seek to hurt any man, but if any man seeks to hurt us may he break his neck [...] We are strangers in this land. If good comes to it may we have our share”. (1960: 5-6)

To this, everyone answers, ‘*Amen*’.

A subverted Christian form of prayer is, therefore, invoked to legitimate and endorse corrupt practices. Strangely, in this prayer, the members of Umuofia Progressive Union have conveniently lamented their losses, encapsulated in a fierce polemic against the inequalities of eating the “national cake”. By so doing, the group has embraced a self-debasement that acquiesced to the delusion of being “strangers in this land”. Juxtaposing the private and communal act of eating in these two novels, the tension between private conscience and public interest draws attention to the breakdown of social morals as an aftermath of colonial incursion into Africa.

### **Semiotics and Onomastics of kola nut in Achebe's Novels**

As a marker of conviviality, the phrase “he who brings kola brings life”, insists on the validity of its objectification. Grown only in the forest, and often seen as perhaps the most outstanding king of all fruits in West Africa, kola nut plays a prominent role among different ethnic groups scattered across the sub-region. Paul E. Lovejoy agrees that “kola found a ready market almost everywhere in West Africa, including the savanna and southern Sahara, many hundreds of kilometers north of its production zone” (97). Undoubtedly, West Africa is made up of a diverse group of ethnicities, who speak different languages and have varied cultures, but kola nut remains a cultural staple. A stimulant that boosts cognitive activities [but less potent than narcotics], kola nut unites the living and the dead as it connotes a symbol of love and trust, that initiates a feast of togetherness. As a cultural practice, kola nut is used for currency among the Malinke and Bambara, it is used to negotiate marriage among the Wolof of Guinea, Senegal and southwestern coastal Mauritania. Holding a dietary benefit that stimulates extensive discussion in social gatherings, and considered

as a nervous stimulant, kola nut is commonly chewed and used for traditional ceremonies across West Africa. Monumentalizing a craving for its crunching bite, Kola nut is entwined on the cultures of the varied groupings in Nigeria. Kola nut commonly referred to as “Gurru” has its relevance in the Gambia and Senegal during naming ceremonies, weddings, funerals and when striving to initiate peace with adversaries.

Reviewing the onomastics exegesis of names in literary texts, Kyallo Wadi Wamitila has associated name use in literary texts with a semiotic decoding, when he remarks that, “names play a very central and important role in any reading exercise and so would certainly the names given to characters *and objects* (emphasis mine) be of importance to us” (35). Names of characters and of significant objects in a particular literary text constitute the linguistic or semiotic signs that play a very crucial role in the overall linguistic structure of a literary text or its signification. Decoding of the names therefore becomes an important critical engagement in as far as it helps the reader in his deciphering of the text in which the “names *and the objects of importance* are (emphasis mine) are” (35). Among the Igbo, kola nut is regularly used for prayers, offerings and supplication to God and the ancestors. Kola nut is one of the exceptional African fruits that surprisingly survived the colonial intrusion and distortions. Strikingly, Kola nut [Obi] is produced more abundantly in the Yoruba speaking South-West, Nigeria, [Oji] is ritualized, romanticized and fetishized by the Igbo of the South-East Nigeria and [Gworo] is consumed with great gusto by the Hausa/Fulani of the Northern Nigeria.

Deified in a wide range of cultural activities, breaking Kola nut is perhaps the most hectic and arduous task among the Igbo, as minutes, if not hours are often assiduously spent on the protocols of speaking to it. Often assigned to the eldest in the Igbo gatherings, kola nut derives its onomastic essence from the Igbo's cultural production. The significance woven around kola nut is the essentiality that often reiterates the sublime beauty of the communal gathering and social interaction in Achebe's literary oeuvre. Viewing the aesthetic of kola nut with anxious solicitude, Bawa Kammampool and Suuk Laar draw inference from its utilitarian value among the varied Igbo:

The kola nut is an indispensable fruit in Iboland as far as formal and

Informal social gatherings are concerned. Before any further discussions

are carried on, on any issue, there must be a formal kola nut presentation

and this stands out as a life-wire in its social life. Throughout *Things Fall Apart*,

we find expressions that give a symbolic function to the kola nut. For instance,

Okoye a character in the opening pages of the novel says, he “who brings kola brings life”. This connotes prosperity and continuity. When the kola was given to Unoka he prayed to the ancestors for blessings. Afterwards, he broke the kola and threw one of the lobes on the ground for the ancestors... (32)

Deconstructing the indispensable link between language and social interaction, Eileen Julien reminds us that “language and discourse privilege certain forms of social relations” (371). Within the context of this link, the exchange of interaction and camaraderie between Okoye and Unoka while performing the symbolic naming of kola nut expressed in words, delineates, in lofty details, how Achebe pays an indelible tribute to kola nut in the passage. The passage innocuously reveals the power of words to both objectify and expand ideas attached to the onomastics of kola nut. This notion reflects Saussure's take on “signs”, when he argues that signs only exist because they are used by communities of speakers to communicate and because “they are established through social convention and passed on from one generation to the next” (Saussure cited in Bock and Mheta 2014:65). Even though kola nut appears ordinary as an everyday food, its phenomenology encoded as a cultural [semiotics] “sign” evidently proves that it has a sacred attachment to the Igbo culture. I argued elsewhere that a sacred object or place combines the mythical with an undeniable affirmation of the spiritual, the mystery of which is often attested to by personal or collective experience. “Any doubt as to the claims of the sacred being integral to an individual's or community's milieu is dispelled by the abundant demonstration of traceable attachment to its spirituality” (Akingbe 2023, 9). Looking at how mythology influences the perception of a particular people, anecdotes abound with evidence of how kola nut is sacred to the Igbo's social, cultural and spiritual philosophy. Hence, the relationship between the privilege of cultural essence and daily practice is recognizable in Achebe's emphasis on the onomastics qualities attributed to kola nut in his novels. As Angela McRobbie (1992: 730) puts it succinctly:

The site of identity formation in cultural studies remains implicitly in and through cultural commodities and texts [...] Looking at it this way, identity becomes submerged into and virtually indistinguishable from everyday life in all its contingency and with all its historical specificity.

Casting a sternly appraising look at kola nut, Achebe tends to suggest that kola nut functions in three dimensional ways among the Igbo: kola nut is a sacred fruit offer to propitiate the gods. Kola nut is a snack for initiating bonding between individuals and among a group of individuals. Finally, kola nut is a harbinger of peace, as it is often used to mediate differences on several important

issues. Kola nut offering in whatever circumstances provides the site where social meanings are negotiated and exchanged.

In Achebe's depiction of the Igbo society, the naming and consumption of kola nut is frequent, as to demonstrate its social relevance. Ugbala (2009: 1) notes that the kola nut:

[...] occupies a unique position in the cultural life of Igbo people. *Oji* is the first thing served any visitor in an Igbo home. *Oji* is served before an important function begins, be it marriage ceremony, settlement of family disputes or entering into any type of agreement. It is used as a channel of communication with the ancestral gods and the spirit world [...] It is not preposterous then to claim that kola-nut in Igbo culture fulfils a double function spiritual and entertainment.

Kola nut as a "marker" [semiotics] of social relations is reevaluated in *Things Fall Apart*. On his visit to Unoka, Okoye replies to his host's offer of kola: "Thank you. He who brings kola brings life. But I think you ought to break it." Unoka, in turn, insists: "No, it is for you, I think", and they:

[...] argued like this for a few moments before Unoka accepted the honour of breaking the kola . Okoye, meanwhile, took a lump of chalk, drew some lines on the floor, and then painted his big toe. As he broke the kola, Unoka prayed to their ancestors for life and health, and for protection against their enemies. (1958:5)

In this passage, within the context of semiotics, Achebe demonstrates the utilitarian function of kola nut among the Igbo. Apart from its being used as an offering to the gods, kola helps to facilitate and reconfigure social relationships and statuses. Ukaegbu (2009: 1) notes, the Igbo name for kola, *oji*, means "custom that unites the Igbo".

Ugbala's remark on Okonkwo's visit to Nwakibie illustrates the cherished value of kola nut as it "is used according to tradition for rituals, [...] to welcome visitors and to introduce very important discussions and requests" (2009, 1). In *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God*, *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* there is an unprecedented feast of kola nut in different dimensions. An unwavering commitment to the use of kola nut, often accompanies every social visit be it individual or communal in these novels. The use of kola nut as a semiotics "sign" is also extended beyond the world of human beings to that of the animals. Identity and belonging underline the significance of kola nut's symbolism as grounded in the anecdote of animal gathering in *Things Fall Apart*. The animal feast that culminated the exposure of Tortoise's shenanigans, for instance, is preceded by the sharing of kola nut. Again, when, Okonkwo breached the Week of Peace, Ezeani, priest of the goddess of the earth, tells him: "Take away your kola nut. I will not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors." (Achebe 1958: 21)

The naming and semiotics of kola nut in *A Man of the People*, manifests in the words of Odili's father who always greets his guests with "I owe you a kola nut". Even Unoka [an efulefu], trapped in the quagmire of debt, has at least some kola to offer his visitor in *Things Fall Apart*. For the Igbo in Achebe's literary oeuvre, offering kola nut is a natural way of exchanging greetings. For Uchendu, kola nut is "the greatest symbol of Igbo hospitality. It always comes first. "It is the king"" (74). Breaking of kola nut (Oji Igbo) constitutes one of the most practiced cultural activities among the Igbo as it serves as a symbol of bonding. Kola nut engenders bonding to create solidarity across the Igbo communities who, have witnessed the negative effects of colonialism in not-too-distant past. Naming of kola nut in *Arrow of God* denotes a marker of hospitality as entrenched in the social interaction between Ezeulu and Akuebue:

... 'Then break it.'

'No. The king's Kolanut returns to his hand.'

Ezeulu picked up the kolanut in his right hand and offered a prayer. He

jerked the hand forward as he said each sentence, his palm open upwards

and the thumb holding down the kolanut on the four fingers... 'Ogbuefi

Akuebue, may you live, and all your people. I too will live with all

my people... May we have the things with which to live well... May good

come to the land of Igbo. (96)

Ezeulu's offering of prayer in the passage, re-contextualizes the Igbo's spirituality which has to be channeled through the symbolism of kola nut breaking. The symbolic outline of kola nut is further reemphasized in the words of Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, when he enthuses that, "for the Igbo, the kola nut goes beyond the red and yellow seed that you find in trays on the streets and in kiosks... It is a food that must be eaten with relish; it commands adoration and many accolades and must be attended to with deserving feast..." (43). In *No Longer at Ease*, however, kola nut is engaged in the reconstruction of tense social relationship, and its symbolism is also fractured. For example, in the meeting of the Umuofia Progressive Union, kola nut is now subordinated to Christian doctrine, in terms of offering prayers to the ancestors:

Many towns have four or five or even ten of their sons in European positions in this city.

Umuofia has only one. And now our enemies say that even that one is too many for us. But our

ancestors will not agree to such a thing.' *Amen*. 'An only palm-fruit does not get lost in the fire.'  
*Amen*. (1960: 6)

In *No Longer at Ease*, kola nut's symbolism appears to have been degraded, as it has been ostensibly replaced with water and alcohol. This replacement underscores a colonial society transitioning to a postcolonial status. The degradation also reflects a strand of cultural hybridity. Working within the perspective of carnivalesque that referenced the wide footprints of Edward Said and Mikhail Bakhtin, Homi Bhabha stresses the relevance of cultural hybridity as it pertains to an individual and groups in colonized societies:

The reevaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. It displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination. It unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power but reimplicates its identification in strategies of subversion that turn gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power. For the colonial hybrid is the articulation of the ambivalent space where the rite of power is enacted on the site of desire, making its objects at once disciplinary and disseminatory. (112)

The transition in *No Longer at Ease* marks a significant cultural hybridity that indexes civilization and its attendant burden. Cultural hybridity as demonstrated in the Umuofia Progressive Union's non-compliance with the traditional standard practices, signifies a decline in Igbo social and cultural norms. This non-compliance underscores what I have described as a reflection of how in the post-colonial period, the contemporary "Nigerian society has been weakened by its ambivalent positioning between poorly-digested western values and half-forgotten indigenous norms" (Akingbe 2013, 150). This disruption marks the striking contrast between a life lived in the rural, agrarian and communally oriented society in *Things Fall Apart* against the urban, individualistic and lesser family cohesion found in *No Longer at Ease*. A society working at cross-purposes plays out in *No Longer at Ease* when President of the Umuofia Progressive Union "presented three kola nuts to the meeting" (1960: 5). This is, in fact, a cultural aberration, as underscored in Ugala's (2009: 2) words, it is "not customary to present three kola nuts at a time." Shakir Mustafa remarks on the importance of culture to both the individual and society when he argues that "cultural interactions impact individual and collective identities" (16). An offer of three kola nuts instead of

two, only denigrates the Igbo culture. Hence, Achebe's condemnation of the Umuofia Progressive Union's president's condescension reiterates a fracturing linearization of the composite Igbo traditional practice that speaks to the ritual of kola nut breaking.

Naming and the [semiotics] symbolic strength of speaking to the kola nut in *Things Fall Apart*, echoes in a critical prophetic warning of impending doom from one of Okonkwo's maternal uncles in Mbanta, where he has spent seven years of exile:

It is good in these days when the younger generation consider themselves wiser than their sires to see a man doing things the grand, old way [...] You may ask why I am saying all this. I say it because I fear for the younger generation [...] I fear for you young people because you do not understand how strong the bond of kinship is. You do not know what it is to speak with one voice. And what is the result? An abominable religion has settled among you. A man can now leave his father and his brothers. He can curse the gods of his fathers and his ancestors, like a hunter's dog that suddenly goes mad and turns on his master. I fear for you; I fear for the clan. (1958: 118)

While kola nut is continually used as a symbol of cultural integration, it is rarely used as a symbol of social relationship in *No Longer at Ease*. For instance, during Obi's visit to the village, his father, Isaac Okonkwo (Nwoye) almost disallowed the use of kola nut for a communal prayer, as he hesitated not to encourage a "heathen" practice of breaking kola in his house. Nonetheless, this practice was upheld by a persistent old villager, Ogbuefi Odogwu, who insists and threatens to bring one out of his own store. At last, an uneasy truce was negotiated, as kola nut was offered, but with a caveat that a Christian prayer must be said. Ogbuefi Odogwu now performed the traditional rite, as he:

[...] took the saucer, drew up his knees together to form a table and placed the saucer there. He raised his two hands, palms facing upwards, and said, 'Bless this kola nut so that when we eat it, it will be good in our body in the name of Jesu Kristi. As it was in the beginning it will be at the end. Amen. (1960: 47-48)

This is followed by an endorsement of the old man's tenacity, since he "was not a Christian, [...] he knew one or two things about Christianity" (1960: 47).

This is a staggering contrast to the friction-free Kola nut offer of prayers by Uchendu in *Things Fall Apart*:

We do not ask for wealth because he who has health and children will also have wealth. We do not pray to have more money but to have more kinsmen. We are better than animals because we have kinsmen, an animal rubs its aching flank against a tree, a man asks his kinsman to scratch him (1958: 117).

When conducting the ritual of kola nut breaking during the naming ceremony of Ikem's daughter in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Elewa's uncle "assumed a sacramental posture, picked up the kola-nut in his right hand and held it between forefinger and thumb, palm up, to the Almighty" (112). A naming ceremony previously presided over by a woman, which defies all known traditional norms, where there is no alcohol, and the baby is given a boy's name (Akingbe 2011, 111). In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe engages "with a variety of forms of humour, including clever wordplay, brazen ribaldry and the communally-enjoyed anecdotes that delineate the joys, follies and tragedies of contemporary life (Akingbe 2011, 117). If such engagement facilitates the reclamation of African culture hitherto fragmented by Western imperialism and colonialism, it also affords Achebe the options of narrative strategies entrenched in his literary oeuvre.

### **Conclusion**

Many articles have been written on kola nut and its medicinal and cultural importance to the people across the West Africa's sub-region. This article is focused primarily on Chinua Achebe's appropriation of orality and social history that examined the importance of culture in his literary oeuvre. The article has essentially illustrated the literary onomastics and semiotics of kola nut in Achebe's novels.

It further argued that kola nut as a cultural object serves as a symbol [semiotics] of social integration in the West Africa's sub-region and considered as the king of exotic fruits which Achebe has used as a leitmotif of social cohesion against cultural fragmentation in *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God*, *A Man of the People*, and *Anthills of the Savannah*. Not surprisingly, the emphasis placed on its naming and utilitarian aesthetic has proven that the Igbo's narrative traditions are poignantly rooted in the symbolism of kola nut to reinforce the ultimate repository of their estimation of themselves within the contexts of social dignity, spirituality and cultural nationalism (Okpewho 1998, 5). As the ontological essence of kola nut's semiotics is concomitantly established in these novels, Achebe seamlessly bridges the distance between the mundane and the symbolic. In this way, Achebe revisits the African cultural practices, which the Western imperialism albeit colonialism has obtrusively fragmented.

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