COMMENSALITY AMONG THE IGBO

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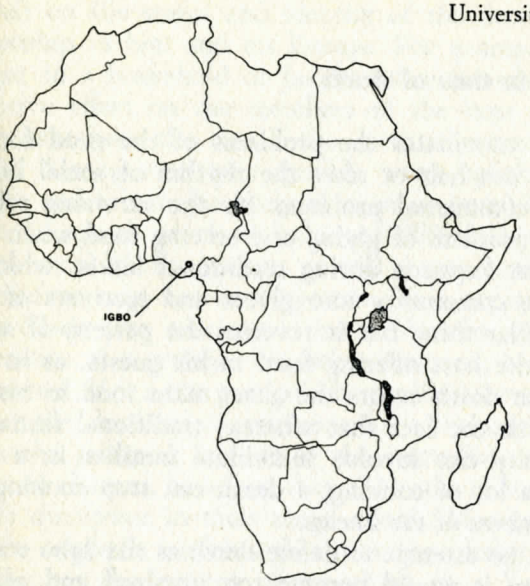

Commensality is the expression of social relationship through the idiom of food sharing. In formal occasions, unity, disunity, peace, feuding or distance can be shown through it (Stevenson 1954: 46; Bailey 1957: 189; Mayer 1965: 48). Among the Igbo of Nigeria traditional festivals are great occasions for commensality (Anigbo 1980: 32). There, during traditional feasts, a whole village group, the descent units within it as well as affinal ties and friendship can be redifined. At that time, there is plenty of food for everyone. But custom prescribes who must be present and what to expect from each person. The failure to comply with the prescriptions becomes a pointer that something serious has happened. The occasion of death, however, adds a new dimension to the problem of food sharing.

The kola-nut enjoys a unique position as an item of food among the Igbo. Its sharing can have many kinds of cultural messages.

In the following paper I propose to analyse the meaning of commensality on the two occasions of sharing food in time of death and sharing kola-nut for social purposes.

1. Sharing food in time of death

Death, which terminates the problems of the need for food for the deceased, can halt or alter the rhythm of social life and trigger off many commensal problems for the surviving relatives and friends. The problem of giving and serving food when death occurs recalls what happens during traditional feasts, which can structure a village community into givers and receivers of food. Death does a similar thing but it reverses the pattern of serving food: instead of the host offering food to his guests, as in traditional feasts, when death occurs the guest takes food to his host. This is linked with the fact that whereas traditional festivals in an Igbo community can involve individual families in a major lineage in doing a lot of cooking, a death can stop cooking altogether by the members of the lineage.

Here, there is no attempt to define death as the Igbo conceive it. This is because it would become too involved and may not cohere with the issue of commensality. Here I propose to deal with the specific problems identified with the cooking and serving food where death is reported.

1.1. *Food on a child's death*

A death in an Igbo community is normally announced by the women who wail together for a considerable length of time. An individual woman who is present when death occurs can weep and wail but she is expected not to cry out until she is joined by two or more women. It is considered an insult for a woman to cry out alone to announce the death of a lineage member. By so doing she would suggest that there are very few people in that lineage. A woman crying out aloud and alone for a long time simply indicates that she has been beaten by her husband. Neighbours come to the scene but such individual noise does not attract as large a crowd as collective cries would do.

Where collective cries are heard, neighbours must stop what-

ever they are doing and go to the scene to find out for themselves what is happening. But then how long they remain in the place, and how their activities for the rest of the day are affected, depends on the status and identity of the deceased and on their relationship to him and his lineage. For example, the death of a stranger in a household or family other than his own has a less disruptive effect on the members of the host communities than would have been the case if the deceased were a member of the lineage. Strong men may quickly wrap up the remains of the stranger and return the body as soon as possible to the members of the lineage to which he belonged. When this is done, the pattern of social life resumes its normal course in the family although the incident may not be forgotten. This explains why the Igbo say: « *Ebulu ozu nwa onve ozo odika ebu ukwu nku* » 'when the remains of a stranger are being removed, one recalls a bundle of firewood' (i.e. a not particularly significant event).

But the death of a member of the lineage can be disruptive within the group as well as in the immediate neighbourhood. It cannot he claimed, however, that all deaths of lineage members are equally disruptive in their social effects. Morton-Williams (1960: 34), for example, explains that it is the identity of the deceased that dictates the pattern of mourning in a Yoruba community. According to him, the death of the very young is horrifying, for such mourning can be private; the death of the elderly, on the other, can stimulate the community to hold a series of celebrations, thus apparently symbolically hiding the grimness of death.

Among the Igbo, death can alter the pattern of cooking and serving food in the family. But the extent to which death in a lineage disrupts life within the group can reveal the identity and the status of the deceased in the lineage, and even the death of babies can influence the pattern of cooking and serving food. As soon as a baby's death is announced, the place of death is crowded with people, women staying in a group usually with the bereaved mother, in and around her hut, and men staying around the bereaved father. Babies are buried almost immediately following the confirmation of death. But the group does not disperse straight away after interment has taken place. The bereaved are comforted by the neighbours.

In this sort of situation time loses its meaning. All activities have come to a standstill. The effect can be compared to what is observed during traditional feasts when work is limited and

people gather together. Food and drinks are distributed lavishly to mark the occasion. But when death occurs there is no food, no drinks. As the wake continues, people become hungry. Individuals look around to see who should give the instruction to mothers to go home and prepare food for their respective families. This must be done without causing hurt to the bereaved parents. Therefore the person to do this must be someone who is as closely involved with the deceased baby as are the bereaved parents themselves. This is either the bereaved father himself, his mother or father or the head of his joint family group who can make a formal announcement in the following manner: *« umu nwanyi jebenu chobalunu umu aka nni »* 'Women, go and prepare food for the children'. The is a way of saying that everyone is hungry and that it is time the people had something to eat. Most women accordingly return to their huts to cook something for their families to eat. The bereaved mother, however, does nothing of the sort. On the contrary, she is attended by the more elderly women who have either sons' wives or grown-up daughters to cook in their stead.

As the bereaved mother is not expected to cook because of her sorrow (there is no taboo imposed on a woman to refrain from cooking because of her baby's death), her neighbours, especially her husband's brother's wife, would take over her domestic work and supply her husband and her surviving children with food. This is a temporary arrangement. The mother or the sister of the bereaved woman has to stay with her, even though it may disorganise their own family life to do so.

There are many variations as to what happens when a young woman loses her baby. Sometimes, the bereaved mother's mother comes to stay with her daughter for about eight days. At the end of this period the bereaved mother has her hair shaved and resumes her role as housekeeper. During the period her mother does all the domestic work and prepares food for her daughter's family. But in Aro Ndizogu, very much in the centre of the Igbo heartland, a mother fetches her daughter home with her and she remains in her natal home for a month after her bereavement. Her husband can visit her, bringing uncooked food to her and if possible other presents to assure her of the continuity of their marriage.

Among the Igbo generally, young mothers whose babies have died do not sleep in their matrimonial huts the night immediately

following the baby's death. They must observe this rule for at least one night. This is not to prevent husband and wife sleeping together, nor is it the fear of ghosts common in Igboland. The temporary change of sleeping accommodation is organised to outwit the dead baby itself, as explained below.

The death of babies is linked with what is locally known as *ogbanje*. *Ogbanje* literally means an individual who repeats act or performance, especially where it is not sought or asked for by anyone. Where it refers to children, it means children who are said to be capable of experiencing several rebirths and deaths. When it means a collectivity of activities of such babies, *ogbanje* becomes a union of migrant babies who are believed to roam the earth and are born into a family only to die soon afterwards or when they are still young (Shelton 1971; Achebe 1966). *Ogbanje* never attain a ripe old age. Invariably, they rouse the hopes of their parents when the baby is born only to shatter them soon afterwards by a premature death.

In Igboland, amazing stories are recounted about the machinations of such children. One means of foiling them calls for the bereaved mother to abstain from sleeping in the matrimonial house temporarily after the death of her child. This is because the Igbo believe that children can prepare themselves for conception even before intercourse takes place (Achebe 1966: 70). It is also held that *ogbanje* return to their former mothers on the same night of their death.

The mourning continues and as the evening drags on into the night the group of women still in attendance at the bereaved woman's house whisper among themselves as to where she should sleep. Normally this does not present much difficulty, as most married women have their own huts apart from those of their husbands. However, it does not matter how far removed the chosen house is from the bereaved woman's hut. The principle is that the woman should move and not remain in her matrimonial hut that night.

The practice is enforced with greater precision and urgency when a young woman has had recurrent incidents of deaths of babies. If her experience continues and none of her babies survives, it is mooted that either or both parents have grievously offended children, for which the penalty is the failure of children to stay alive with them. They may be encouraged to organise a party of atonement for the children of the locality. If, a year or

two after the party, the couple still fail to give birth successfully to a healthy child, the series of disruptions to family life may end in divorce. Thus, the death of babies can seriously disrupt domestic arrangements and threaten marriage stability.

1.2. *Food on a mature adult's death*

The death of a mature adult, on the other hand, can paralyse different kinds of activities in the major lineage, including those immediately connected with the cooking and serving of food. Eating itself can be restricted to hidden places in the compound or some other place in the neighbourhood.

As soon as a death is announced in a major lineage, cooking stops forthwith. There is no signal or order for people to stop cooking, but the censure flows from people's understanding of the implication of cooking in their culture. For them, cooking is a joyful activity. If a man seriously quarrels with his wife, he shows his anger by refusing to eat the food prepared by her. A woman caught in an adulterous union must ritually cleanse herself before she cooks for her husband (1). On the other hand, a man who annoys his wife can assuage her anger by buying her extra meat or fish for supper. In Ibagwa Aka I learned that a man who wants to have a sexual intercourse with his wife easily obtains his wish if he buys her some bottles of palm wine or beer. It would follow from this that for a member of a lineage to start cooking when death has been announced would show that his relationship with the deceased was strained.

When death has been announced in a major lineage, the standard reaction is for every adult member of the group to report to the place of death. This is compulsory, especially where the deceased is a man. Where it is a woman, a different rule applies (2). If, however, death occurs far away from home, such as on a farm, the members of the major lineage must organise themselves to bring the body to the ancestral land, unless of course there are sufficient representatives of the lineage members at the place of death to mobilise help to return the corpse home. Bringing the corpse home to the ancestral land is considered an important part of lineage obligations. Therefore to fail in such duties shows a clear disregard for lineage duties. It can also constitute a decla-

ration that the deceased is not worth bothering about by members of his group.

However, it is in the activities connected with the cooking and serving of food that the identity of those immediately connected with the bereaved can be made known. When an adult dies, burial is delayed for information to reach members of the major lineage who may be living in other territories remote from the place where death occurred. Such people are expected to be home before interment takes place. While their return is awaited, cookind does not take place because to organise cooking before interment would show that the group is happy. Only occasional outbreaks of wailing among the women can break the stillness that is imposed by the death. After a prolonged period without food or drinks, signs of hunger begin to appear. One can hear children, who cannot appreciate the gravity of the situation, crying and asking their mothers for something to eat. No one serves the children with food because none is available. Yet the children are openly voicing what is in the minds of most people. But the adults dare not give the order as they would have done if a mere baby had died.

First of all, for them to ask the mothers to go home and feed their babies would mean to break up the group. It would be difficult to gather them again once they have dispersed. Moreover, for the members of the major lineage to declare that food should be prepared would scandalise other visitors who may have come from afar and who are only waiting for the burial to take place. There is also a kind of face saving or social pretence, whereby people refuse to eat because all the members of the major lineage can make the claim *« madu nwuolu anyi »* 'a human being has died in our midst', which simply means that one of the members of the major lineage has died, and that all the members of lineage are affected by the death.

It is clear, however, that although all the members of the major lineage can make the claim that a human being has died in their midst, the signifcance of this is not the same for all of them. People know the individuals within the group who are most affected by the death; they know that the father and mother are most affected by the death of a son or daughter, and a set of siblings when one of them dies, more than people in some remote sections of the major lineage. Wives are also most greatly affected by the deaths of their husbands.

These categories of people are those most likely to go into seclusion to mark the period of mourning for the bereavement they have suffered. Traditionally, when that period begins, they no longer eat with anyone in the community except among themselves. How long the period lasts varies from one locality to another. In Ibagwa Aka, a woman remains in seclusion for eight days if her husband dies. At the end of the period, the group shave their heads and resume a normal life. Women were traditionally expected to stay at home for one year, but this period has been reduced to three months by the elders of the community.

The people who are most affected by the death can be identified through the medium of serving food. Such people cannot take the initiative themselves either to prepare or to ask someone for food. To do so would mean that sorrow is no longer deep in their heart. Food must be given to them and sometimes with a great deal of persuasion. Members of the same major lineage as to serve them food because to do so would shatter the claim that themselves are not expected to serve them food because to do so would shatter the claim that all are equally bereaved by the deaths. Therefore the only category of persons qualified to offer such food without embarrassment are friends or groups of affines. However, such food must be offered secretly and eaten in secret too.

As the moaning and groaning continue, the sisters or brothers of the deceased are called. It will be said that they are wanted for some consultation with regard to some important matter connected with the funeral arrangements. A wife can be said to be going to the toilet; a mother is asked to come and indicate which of the goats should be brought out for the funeral sacrifice. But all these are phrases designed to convince the crowd that it is not food that matters at the moment. However, when the close relatives come out, they are led to secret places where the friends persuade them to eat. No one else may join them in the meal. For anyone to do so is an assertion that he himself belongs to the same sibling group as those sharing in the meal. If an outsider joins them, the friend who brought the food can protest or he may ask those for whom the meal is intended to abandon it for the intruder. Soon people get to know that the category of people who are most affected have had something to eat. From then on members of the major lineage can search for food secretly.

Members of the major lineage can be defined with reference to secret meals as those who cannet of their own initiative search

for food because of their bereavement. These are the parents, full siblings, wife, some other persons whose positions in the lineage can be regarded as being almost as close to the deceased, and close friends.

It is not all kinds of friends who can present secret food where death occurs. In most Igbo communities, people are most cautious about when death occurs. People claim that an occasion of death is when an enemy gets at the bereaved group through poisoned food. Therefore to accept secret food from a friend shows the intimacy of their friendship. In Ibagwa Aka such friends are drawn from those with whom the individual or groups have entered the relationship of *Obe*. Friends who must reciprocate invitation during traditional masquerade festivals are known as *Obe*.

While the presentation of secret food by a friend and the acceptance of it show intimacy and trust, sharing food in that situation constitutes another aspect of social deception; everyone is hungry and yet no one wants to admit that he needs food or that he has eaten.

1.3. *Public presentation of food*

The secret presentation of food by an intimate and trusted friend contrasts with the public presentation of food whether cooked or raw. Such public presentations can also include palm wine, money, domestic animals, such as a goat, ram or ox. The animals are not kept for rearing. They are slaughtered during the course of the funeral. This is called *ije akwa* 'to go and cry'. But *ije akwa* has nothing to do with crying at all except that it is organised within the context of bereavement.

Ije akwa can take place on the day of interment, the day after, during the conclusion of funeral, or even years afterwards. No matter when it is done, the record of the presentation must be kept. When the Igbo could not write, memory was the index card where the record of such gifts was kept. Today, pen and paper ready in hand, someone sits beside the chief mourner to record the names and addresses of the donors, as well as the nature of the gifts made on such occasions. This is because the gift must be reciprocated when the donor in his turn finds himself in a similar situation. Even where the original recipient dies,

a member of his lineage must repay the gift and often with interest.

Even though *ije akwa,* the presentation of different kinds of gifts to the chief mourner, can confirm the existence of friendship, it is the timing of the presentation that can indicate the quality of such friendship. Timing here does not refer to the mechanical clocking system, nor does it refer to the traditional system of counting the passage of time. Timing here means the balancing of social relationships in terms of a given situation. One can call it a psychological time utilised in the service of social relationships. What is done in the morning may not be suitable in the afternoon. Who does what and when it is done can be regarded as one of the most delicate issues in the study of commensality.

A trusted friend can present secret food even before the remains are buried and he will not be misunderstood. However, certain categories of friends can present food secretly before interment takes place and the food is refused because the motive is suspect. Similarly, there are friends who may present the public gift recognised as *ije akwa* soon after interment and get public ovation for their achievement, while a similar gift presented by others a day or two after the interment will cause the bereaved group to murmur disapproval even though the gift may still be accepted. Members of the bereaved family group would say « *ochezikwelu ka madu nwuo?* » 'can he not wait until the individual is dead and buried?'. This means that the donor of such gift at such a time is being accused of anticipating the death. On the other hand, there are other individuals or friends who do not visit the bereaved or who fail to present the gift of *ije akwa.* The bereaved will remember this when he is called upon to reciprocate.

All these calculations are based on the examination of personal ties of social relationship brought about by the incident of death. On such an occasion a man must measure accurately the quality of the friendship between himself and the bereaved family before he can present his gift. To fail to do that is to court disaster in the relationship. It is therefore easy to see why commensality, demonstrated in the presentation of different kinds of gifts when death occurs, not only illustrates the respective status of the donor and the deceased, but also the credit worthiness and the quality of the friendship itself.

2. Sharing kola-nut

The fruit of the kola tree (chiefly *cola nitida* and *cola acuminata*) is a large nut, the size of a Brazil nut, ranging in colour from dark red to cream white. Very many peoples in tropical West Africa make use of it and trade on it (cf. Alland & Hertz 1967; Cohen 1966; Uchendu 1965). In the last fifty years, according to the FAO report on agricultural development in Nigeria, kola-nut production has increased from an estimated 2,000 tons to 111,000 tons annually.

Abner Cohen has carefully analysed the type of organization which revolves around the kola-nut and the ways some peoples in Nigeria, like the Yoruba and the Hausa, have managed to stay in the business of kola-trade in spite of bitter competition (Cohen 1966; 1969: 29). In this section I shall not be interested in discussing the Igbo's trading problems but I wish to show what kind of cultural symbolism and social effects they have developed in the use of kola-nut.

2.1. *The kola-nut and marriage negotiations*

The Igbo are exogamous (Uchendu 1964: 48) But this does not merely mean that where there are technically no reasons of consanguinity to prohibit marital union, marriage would normally he allowed to take place. This is not the case. Two other significant social factors could impinge on a marriage. These concern the *Ohu* and *Oso*. The *Ohu* (slave), Horton declares, is a propertyless man, since he and what apparently looks like his personal property, including his wife, belong to his original owner (cf. Ayandale 1966: 331). The *Osu,* on the other hand, form a distinct category of people who are dedicated to the service of a god or shrine. Arikpo (1956: 201) describes them as a « tabooed category of persons within their community who were obliged to intermarry and to accepts exclusion from most of the social activities of the community ». Then of course there is the *nwa di ala* 'the freeborn'. This analysis deals with the implication of the non-presentation and therefore the non-sharing of the kola-nut on a formal occasion of marriage negotiations.

Early ethnographers in Igboland have noted the place of the kola-nut in marriage. Adams (1934: 454), for example, claims

that its introduction in a marriage context means that the negotiations have got underway. This is because in Igboland marriage is not an individual affair and various issues must be discussed. So the mere fact that the kola-nut has been exchanged shows that some ground has already been covered. Nwokocha (1969: 95), in an unpublished thesis on the kola-nut and the Eucharist, has this to say:

> For the suitor, the kola goes first to win the favour of the bride-to-be and her relatives, while the bride's father's presentation of the kola is a sign that the suitor and his companions are most welcome. In short the exchange of kola here expresses goodwill and friendly disposition on both sides and is a sign that the day's discussion would be most cordial.

But when the kola-nut is not presented or not shared, the atmosphere is generally considered to be ominous — an implication which comes out clearly in Chinua Achebe's novel (1963) *No Longer at Ease*. The young man, Obi, meets a beautiful girl, Clara, and falls in love with her, only to discover later that she is *Osu*. Difficulties arise and Obi decides he must marry her. His confidant and friend Joseph questions Obi closely as to whether he would try to marry the girl according to native custom or the 20th century way: « Are you going to marry the English way or are you going to ask our people to approach her people according to custom? » (Achebe 1960: 74-75). The implication of this statement is of course whether Obi would allow his father to present the kola-nut — a process which, if Obi accepted, would inevitably destroy the chances of the marriage ever taking place. This would then confirm Clara's earlier observation: « I am an Osu — so you see we cannot get married » (Achebe 1960: 71).

The presentation of the kola-nut in the context of marriage can be seen as a validation of custom. It is an indication that at least one of the parties is in earnest about the proposal. Basden (1966: 68) has remarked that marriage is the most important event in the Igbo's life. To undertake marriage means maturity, a responsibility which one takes not only for himself but for his own descent group. This is because the Igbo regard procreation as the end of marriage — the creation of new life, to increase the numerical strength of the group. In fact, marriage means life and in certain contexts life becomes synonymous with the kola-nut.

For the Igbo say: « *Owetere oji wetere ndu* » 'he who brings kola-nut brings life' (Achebe 1966: 5; Nwokocha 1969: 89; Nzekwu 1961; Uchendu 1965).

The refusal of life (kola-nut) in the context of marriage means that the society rejects the idea that new life should come into being as a result of the proposed union. This is a very respected custom, the violation of which is thought to have terrible consequences. Achebe (1963: 33), in the novel just referred to, represents what goes on in the mind of an anxious Igbo parent whose son is about to take a girl he loves when that girl happens to be an Osu:

> I beg of you my son, not to bring the mark of shame and leprosy into your family. If you do, your children and your children's children into the third and fourth generation will curse your memory (cf. Ojiako 1966: 84).

Earlier on it has been suggested that a father in this situation would not lead his son to present the kola-nut to the family of a girl with this type of social stigma. For kola — *oji* — in this context is like a bridge. It is a symbolic representation of social equality and of unity. It signals commensality and represents commonness of purpose. In a normal marriage negotiation, it means: « We accept you as equal. Give us your woman to procreate for us and we recognise that we could also give a woman to a member of your group for the same purpose ».

But the freeborn Igbo — *nwa di ala* — would not accept that he shares a commonness of purpose with an Osu in what concerns him greatly, namely the family. The reason for this stems from the nature of Igbo inheritance. Uchendu (1965: 64) considers the Igbo to lean heavily on the patrilineal side of descent for the purpose of inheritance, while Ottenberg (1968) shows that the Afikpo (still Igbo) are double-unilineal and Offonri (1951: 467), describing the strength of Igbo clan feeling, writes:

> Every Ibo man feels a sense of responsibility towards another from his own village or clan whether or not they are closely related. In towns like Lagos, Ibadan, Kaduna and Jos, it is most usual to find an Ibo civil or mercantile servant lodging and feeding as many as four or more jobless men whose only relation with him is that they all belong to the same village or clan.

Should the Igbo bridge the gap and share the kola-nut with the *Osu* and therefore exchange women with them, it would mean that the Igbo would condone the idea that anyone could marry wherever and whenever he likes. It would mean that the meticulous care with which marriage is negotiated would disappear. This would signal a significant change in the status of the *Osu*. They would no longer be considered socially debased persons, of doubtful ancestry (Achebe 1960: 82). Finally it would also mean that land, the valuable asset of the Igbo people, would pass on to offspring resulting from intermarriage between a cult slave and a freeborn. Barry Floyd (1969: 199-200) writes:

> In most Eastern Nigerian communities the land belonged, as it still does in the last analysis, to a group of kin, a family or a clan, the membership of which included not only the persons alive at any particular time, but persons dead, persons not yet born. Land was therefore more than tangible property: it expresses the social and spiritual identity of a group of kinsmen in contradiction to other groups in other communities.

It is not difficult to assess from this that if the kola-nut is accepted between the *Osu* and the freeborn, it would also mean the mutual exchange of women. This then would indicate a great deal of change in Igbo social structure. Furthermore, an inference could be drawn from the strong sanction which the Igbo impose on any attempt at marital union between an Osu and a freeborn. This may be an indirect effort, though the Igbo may not be conscious of the implication, to forestall the creation of another distinct class of people similar to what Oberg (1940: 130) has observed among the Ankole of Uganda:

> On the other hand, however, Bahima men took concubines from among Bairu girls. These women have no status as married women and were usually described as servant girls. Bairu concubines were especially common among Bahima chiefs and gave rise to a class of half-castes known as Ambambari.

What is important, however, is that no significant changes have occured in the context of marriage with the Osu. Despite influences from Christianity and Western contact, the kola-nut still represents the division between the Osu and the freeborn and marriage is not exchanged without severe sanctions.

2.2. *Kola-nut in a mixed gathering*

Uchendu (1964: 58) makes the point that the sharing of the kola-nut with a guest usually demands three processes. They are: the presentation; the breaking; and the distribution. Where these processes are carried out the occasion is formal. The formality is generally governed by the nature of the business in hand together with the composition of the group. When members of the same kin groups are assembled together it is not necessary to go through the formality described above. In fact such a group could meet without the use of the kola-nut. Thus when Akiebue in Chinua Achebe's novel *Arrow of God* (1964: 116) visited his friend Ezeulu and was presented with the kola-nut, he retorted: « Must you worry about kola-nuts every time? I am not a stranger ». The significance of this statement is that the kola-nut has a special meaning which could demarcate the boundary between different peoples.

What Basden (1966b) says about the kola-nut for the Mohammedans could equally apply to the Igbo: « Kola-nuts enter into the daily life of all West African Mohammedans and constitute almost a language ». It is a symbolic language, the proclamation of which starts with the presentation of the nut.

For a person to present the kola-nut is in itself an assertion of his social status before the group to whom it is presented. This action means that the individual donor regards himself as a responsible man, a mature man and indeed a political man who is asserting that he is knowledgeable in the political symbolism of the kola-nut. Every step from now on is highly symbolic. Basden (1966b: 162) notes:

> The owner (the host) first receives it (the kola-nut) from the slave attendant or one of his wives. He takes a nut and puts it to his lips, thus signifying that it is about to be offered in good faith. This symbolic offering proves it to be free from malice.

This is really an initial revelation of the commensal property of the kola-nut. What the host has just done can be put in a few words like this: « Please accept me as I am, I am one of you. You are safe in my house. Accord me similar reciprocity if I visit you ». Nwokocha (1969: 88-89) expresses with very deep emotion the symbolism of the kola-nut in the following citation:

Here the kola for us represents that – call it supra-sensible, moral or psychological, social or religious – visible sign in which a man, as it were, incarnates his whole being – *nay* – his heart, stripped of hatred, rancour and all evil intentions, and when offered to a fellow human being, invites the latter, in joy and unlimited love, to share with the host the seat of his very life – his heart – symbolically represented in the kola – what is the heart but the centre of a man's life?

This citation compares favourably with the different stages by which the Kono people of Sierra Leone declare that their visit is not a very significant event or is not concerned with any serious matter. This is how Parson (1964: 5) represents it:

When the meal is finished, the guest asks the family to sit about to listen to his errand. He begins formally, '*N na e famu*' (I have come), to which the head man asks, '*A minin take i ya*' (What has brought you?) implying some trouble at his home. If it is nothing serious he will quickly assure them by adding, '*I n – n*' (no, no). Sometimes the family will insist upon knowing the truth and so they ask, '*A gbandi*' (Is it hot?) which means they suspect it to be a serious matter. If it is nothing serious the guest will say, '*Komi*' (It is nothing). When once they are certain that his visit is purely social and concerns no serious matter the head man says, '*Boden*' (Hang up your bag and be at home). The guest replies '*N na den*' (I hang it up). If he actually carries a bag, he will then hang it up as a sign of his acceptance of their hospitality. The head man then will say, '*I kona*' (Be at rest). The guest is at rest.

So, like the Kono, the Igbo displays his anxiety about relating his identity to the identity of his guests by offering them the kola-nut as a dramatization of his honesty and good will. But there is a definite system whereby each person present declares his own identity. When the Igbo meet traditionally, a man does not say « Here is Mr. Okeke » «Okeke, please, meet Mr. Ohafor ». Instead, it is through the presentation of the kola-nut that each person's identity is revealed. This self-introduction begins with the chief host. He does not himself present the kola-nut to the assembly. He just calls his most senior kinman present, and asks him to present the kola-nut to the assembly (cf. Uchendu 1965: 74). What follows is a process of self-introduction whereby the persons assembled link themselves together according to the accepted method of social interaction in the group. Thus the host's most senior kin-group member accepts the nut, scans through the group and offers the nut to a man from the next lineage or

group that has the closest ties of social relationship with his own group. This process is continued util the kola-nut travels round to all the members of the group. Then it returns to the original donor.

The process of presenting the kola-nut is important. It completes the formal identification of the members present and reveals the status of each man in the group. It therefore follows that in this part of the formal presentation and self-introduction linked with the kola-nut, the Osu or the Ohu would discreetly disappear. This is because the handing round of the nut, associated with the self-explanation of individual identity, does not suggest friendship: it must follow the principle or idiom either of descent or of territory. Both idioms are utilised for social action, as Ottenberg (1958: 297) explains:

> Each unit was in a certain way and for certain purpose linked with nearby units, and we can conceive of an Ibo country as a series of units interlocked for certain purpose but sometimes cut off from each other by warfare or dispute.

The different units remain separate for practical purposes and could be brought together at least through their heads when specific common problems, such as land, are discussed (Ottenberg 1958: 297). The kola-nut is therefore a medium of instruction in traditional Igbo custom. Not to interpret it correctly could give rise to deep social feelings. Even today, with Western contact and the influence of Christianity, the custom is still intact. This is probably what Basden (1966b: 243) means when he writes that the Osu or the slave cannot eat the kola-nut with the freeborn:

> At the same time, the stigma remains. There may be no open manifestation of slavery, yet, underneath, the old ideas still persist. Today, many of the civilized, educated men will not share "kola" with a man of slave descent, though in other respects he is a friend, and an equal, or even superior in wealth and employment.

With the completion of the presentation of the nut and the formal introduction of the members present, the next stage is to have the nut broken. Uchendu (1964: 49) claims that it is the custom of the freeborn to break the nut. But even among the freeborn, the question of who breaks the nut varies from com-

munity to community. Where the breaking of the nut is regarded as a form of service, it is the youngest person in the group who must break it. This accords with the Igbo custom of sharing things, which is institutionalised. It is the youngest person in a group who must share out whatever there is to be shared. But those who see the breaking of the nut as a privilege relegate the exercise to the oldest member of the group. It is in rare cases that women are found to break the nut in the presence of men. The accepted custom is that a man, no matter how young he may be, should break the nut if he is in the midst of women.

The final stage in the whole process is the distribution of the nut that is now broken into tiny pieces. Uchendu (1964: 49) claims that even here a definite system must be followed:

> The first share of the nut goes to the host who eats first to demonstrate that the nut is "wholesome" and free from poison. The guest and his party are given their own share. Then each member of the host's party gets a share following the principle of seniority.

Some interval must elapse between the distribution and consumption of the nut. This interval is filled by the oldest member of the host's lineage who utters formal prayers to the ancestors. This is a skilful exercise. First, he invokes his own ancestors and all the revered members of the group and invites them to share kola-nut. He then invites the ancestors of those other people present to do the same. If he cannot remember their ancestors, then he must invoke their land, the earth goddess to come and share kolanut. Then he strews little pieces of nuts on the ground to emphasize that the ancestors have had their share. It is after this that he himself consumes his own share. It should be noted that he gives a part of his own share to the ancestors to symbolize his union with them. As soon as the supplicant has eaten, he receives ovation from the assembly and everyone eats his own share.

The consumption of the kola-nut in such an assembly is not a bond. It expresses unity but unity of a different kind from that envisaged in a bond. To make a comparison between the sharing of the kola-nut and the creation of blood brotherhood, as Nwokocha does, is wrong. For blood brotherhood seals people unrelated by kinship into an everlasting union, the violation of which is thought to have adverse consequences not only for the individual but also for his kinsfolk (cfr. Evans-Pritchard 1933; Te-

gnaeus 1952). The kola-nut lacks the sociological strength endowed in the mechanism of the blood brotherhood. With the sharing of the kola-nut, there is no obligation, no duties and no rights. Its basic property or quality remains a means of identification, of grouping or mapping people in their respective social boundaries whether of blood or geographical.

2.3. *The kola-nut and the host/stranger relationship*

I now deal with the kola-nut in the context of the stranger/host relationship. I shall consider the pure strangers, men who do not belong to the community and who are not known by any member of the household into which they find themselves. They are travellers *simpliciter* whose designation is *ndi ije,* literally meaning 'those who are on the move'. It is important to take note of the plural form of the expression *ndi ije* which is used in the place of the singular form *onye ije* 'a traveller'.

The use of the plural form is not arbitrary but refers to the limitation of the traditional Igbo as a traveller to within only a narrow area. I support Ottenberg (1958: 296) where he claims that the Igbo is not a traveller. Leith-Ross (1937: 206) also appears to endorse a similar observation where she makes the point that for the Igbo, his compatriot, living in another village area only a few miles away and unrelated to him by ties of kinship, is considered as a foreigner and capable of the darkest crimes.

There is no contradiction between Ottenberg's assertion, which I support, and the expression *ndi ije* 'travellers' as used here. For the Igbo, anyone who has left his village and walked a distance beyond which he was expected to make a return journey the same day before he was overtaken by darkness, would thereby become a traveller. Before colonialism took root, distant travels would scarcely have been undertaken in sub-Saharan Africa (Prothero 1957: 254), because of slavery which was exploited either for domestic use or for shipment overseas (Meek 1937: 5; cfr. also 128). But this does not mean that the Igbo never travelled.

Certain personal or group needs would require some journeys of considerable distance away from home. The quest for suitable farm lands and the desire to obtain expert ritual advice would induce the Igbo to embark on relatively long journeys (cfr. Basden

1966b: 79 ff). Generally, such quests required that two or three people would travel together. I am convinced this is the sense in which Uchendu (1965: 72) refers to the Igbo as travellers. Anyone who had need to travel in those days must choose a companion — *ayilibo* — for mutual support, hence the justification for the plural form *ndi ije,* for the Igbo say *ofu onye bu osu* 'a lone traveller often disappears'.

When people are referred to as *ndi ije,* it means that they are not related to the speaker by ties of kinship or friendship. A confident "native" who encounters people moving at night would inevitably ask a question in the following manner: « "*Unu bu onye*"? » literally meaning, 'who are you?' When the response is « *Obu ndi ije* » 'they are travellers (we are travellers)', this simply means that the respondents are not local citizens and are passing through the town. They may complete the passage or go to seek shelter from any of the householders on the route. People fitting this description could be likened to Middleton's individual Lugbara whose ancestry may not be known. Such people are regarded as total strangers, objects who could be mutilated, killed or spared, depending on the disposition of those who encountered them (Anigbo 1972: 11; cfr. also Middleton 1954: 196; Middleton 1960). One could also relate the position of such people to the fictitious character in Camus' novel *The Outsider* where he records an account of an unfortunate Czech traveller who, after he had made a fortune, returned incognito to his mother and sister, lodged with them and disclosed his wealth without revealing his identity. He was killed (Camus 1961: 82). Where such travellers seek temporary accommodation for the night, they simply become lodgers — *ndi ije.*

I now proceed to describe the process of identification between such people and the head of the household that may have provided them with accommodation for the night. For the Igbo, it is the normal pattern of social life to invite anyone present to share meals wherever they are served, irrespective of whether such people are friends or enemies. To fail to respond to this pattern of social laws is a sign of uncouthness rather than a significant reflection of sociological laws (cfr. Uchendu 1965: 73; Ojike 1955: 128). Even people whose identity is not known, such as the *ndi ije,* are expected to be invited to a meal when it is being served.

Since the Igbo make no fuss about sharing meals with anyone, the kola-nut becomes highly significant as a symbol of identifica-

tion. Uchendu discusses the place of the kola-nut in the context of the guest/host relationship. But this relationship differs remarkably from the relationship of the head of a household to total strangers, *ndi ije*. In the Igbo language, a guest is known as *onye obia,* while lodgers are known as *ndi ije* 'travellers'.

In Igboland, it is the manner of presenting the kola-nut, supported by words and physical movements, that can go to show that there are differences in the way the host is related to his guest on the one hand and to *ndi ije* or lodgers on the other. The householder does not normally present his lodgers with the symbolic kola-nut. What is claimed here for the kola-nut is a significant omission in Uchendu (1965: 74-75), who discusses the presentation of the kola-nut to guests and rightly claims that failure to present it, or to plead pardon for the absence of it, may strain the relationship between friends on some occasions.

In fact on certain occasions failure to present the kola-nut to a guest could signal that some ill feelings exist between the two groups. On playing host formally to a guest, the host must therefore excuse himself properly, if the kola-nut is not presented. Thus Nzekwu (1961: 67), an Igbo, is able to write:

> Among us, kola-nut is a highly prized and indispensable product. It commands our respect in a way no other product has done. Though it is one of the commonest vegetable products seen in Nigeria it represents, in our society, a vital social and religious element. Kola-nut is a symbol of friendship, the proper offering at meetings and religious occasions. Its presentation to a guest surpasses any other sign of hospitality which any host among us can show, even though in some places it costs "only a penny".

But such travellers as *ndi ije* cannot complain if they are not offered kola-nuts. Just as people do not go about complaining that someone they do not know has not offered them presents or served them food, do they cannot complain that someone unknown to them has not offered them kola-nuts, primarily a means of identification, a symbol of knowledge and intimacy. Besides, it would be foolish for the host to offer his lodgers the kola-nut because he does not even know the object of their mission or errand. The host, on the other hand, is in his house and in the context of the guest/host relationship cannot be accused of being hostile. This is the reason why the onus of proving friendship lies square-

ly with the travellers, *ndi ije*. In order to do that, they must reverse the traditionl role of the kola-nut and take the initiative of presenting the kola-nut to the host, as a declaration of peace and noble intention.

The host receives the nut from the travellers and thanks them for their gesture of good will. The long process of presenting the kola-nut observed in the context of the guest/host relationship is shortened. The host would proceed with the invocation of his own ancestors and the land, and present himself as a peaceful man who is kind to travellers. He would then inquire from the travellers their homes of origin and their clans, followed by the object of their travels. If their mission is noble, he would pray for the successful completion of their objectives. His concluding prayers on such occasions inevitably end with *« Obialu bu onye abiagbune ya, Onawakwa nkpunkpu aka asugbune ya »* 'let a host not suffer unnecessary misfortune on account of having received lodgers, let the lodgers depart in peace when they are ready to go'. After the prayers, the two parties exchange the kola-nuts. This is the opening of real social contact between people who have not known each other before, By sharing the kola-nut in the manner described, the lodger reverses his status and becomes a guest. The relationship could be terminated as it had begun, nevertheless a significant beginning has been made. From that day forward, the visitor would no longer be expected to present the kola-nut. On subsequent visits, it would be the duty of the landlord to serve such people with the kola-nut if they came back again.

In the same way, a person taking kola-nuts to another householder would thereby declare himself a stranger in a particular type of situation. Such a person could be an established friend or even a brother or some other acquaintance. A person who is already well known to another person and who could be on intimate terms with him, but who yet takes the kola-nut to him, would reverse the normal run of social relationships and must be prepared to explain his motives. He must explain why he is presenting the kola-nut. In other words, there is something hidden in his mind which has not been made known to his brother or friend, as the case may be. Where such a presentation is made, it would he received, but the receipt is immediately followed by the question: *« Kedu ije oji? »* 'Why is the kola-nut travelling?' or what in the motive behing the presentation of the kola-nut?

If the motive behind the presentation is honourable and justifiable, permission would be granted for the nut to be shared according to custom.

The presentation of the kola-nut by someone who is not a member of a household could become a means whereby that person reveals his own identity. It could also serve as a means for someone to reveal his motives in a specific issue. Outside the field of personal identification, an outsider could take the kola-nut to a householder in the following circumstances:

1) marriage negotiations;
2) restoration of peace after a breach between individuals or groups;
3) land requisition for farming or for building purposes;
4) acquisition of capital goods which could be utilised to produce more goods.

I have already dealt with the presentation of the kola-nut in marriage. Where there has been a breach in a relationship, peace can be restored to individuals or groups who have previously enjoyed a great deal of friendship or intimacy. The normal condition is that tempers must have cooled down and a unanimous desire for peace must exist on both sides. However, it is for the weaker party, or the younger person, or the party that is in the wrong, to take the initiative by presenting the kola-nut to the superior. The gravity of the breach would determine the composition of the group who must be present when peace is being restored. Other items such as additional palm wine, food and meat may also serve depending on the nature of the breach. What is important, however, is that the two parties should be seen to share kola-nuts together and pledge unity and peace from that day onward.

Secondly, a man who requires land for building or for farming purposes may obtain a lease of land by taking some kola-nuts to the owner of the land, explaining his motives. The owner may decline to receive or share the nut if he feels he cannot meet the request. But the common experience is that the kola-nut is shared and the request met under specific conditions.

Thirdly, one could obtain a loan of money or domestic animals from a wealthy man by presenting him with kola-nut and explaining one's desires. If it is cash, the interest may be dis-

cussed and the loan approved. Where it is a loan of domestic animals that is sought, request for this is accompanied by the presentation of a kola-nut. In Igboland, domestic animals such as goats, sheep, cows or even chickens are hired out to people to rear them on a profit basis. This is called *inulu madu anu* 'to rear an animal for another person'. A special arrangement is made for the sharing out of the offspring. The animal in question is supplied by the patron to his clients once the terms are agreed upon. This creates enough economic potential for both patron and client if luck is on their side.

Conclusion

Commensality as food sharing implies a great variety of social meanings and symbolism. Cooking and serving food in time of mourning can be an expression of social status and testifies to the friendship of the peoples involved. Sharing the kola-nut basically establishes the identity of an individual in his encounter with his fellow men in a "strange" environment. This is not the only aspect of the symbolism of the kola-nut. Ilogu (1964: 235) sheds further light on the aspect of unity and peace symbolised in the sharing of the kola-nut:

> Soon after the disturbance in the Western House in 1962 Tai Solarin lamented in an article in the Daily Times about the sacrilege of using the mace in the House of Assembly as a fighting weapon. He thought that if the Yoruba used Oba orangyau and the Igbos used kola-nuts instead of the British initiated mace, perhaps greater respect would be accorded such symbols of authority and decorum. *The correct thing the Igbos would use in this kind of situation is Ofo and not kola-nut. The splitting and eating of kola-nuts symbolizes authority and unity of purpose growing out of a common origin.*

Equality and unity are dramatised in the formal acclaim which follows the prayer that introduces the eating of the kola-nut: « eghe belu ugo belu » "the hawk and the eeagle should perch peacefully on the same branch".

Notes

1. A woman caught in an adulterous union is penalized along with her partner in the crime. How grave her penalty depends on the status of her husband. In all cases of adultery she must plead guilty before her busband and beg for forgiveness

on her knees. Having done so the *dibia*, medicine man or fortune teller, must then prepare the cleansing herbs which he mixes with water and sprinkle the woman with mixture and sprays the compound with it. After this, she can resume normal relationship with her husband. However, in some communities a woman must confess a secret adultery openly if she conceives a child as a result of the illicit union. She must do so because it is the belief of the people that there cannot be safe delivery of her child unless the confession is made.

But if the husband is a man of title, the woman must in addition provide a cock and a pot of palm wine which are used in sacrifice to the shrine protecting his kitchen. No food is prepared for the title holder in the kitchen until the sacrifice is offered.

The man on the other hand is asked to pay a fine. This is negotiated between the members of the husband's lineage and the lineage members of the culprit. As soon as the obligation is met, friendship returns between the parties though the crime may not be forgotten.

2. Traditionally, a woman who died in her matrimonial home was brought to her natal home for interment. But whatever bride price was still outstanding must be paid by her husband or his people before the remains were returned.

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Summary

Commensality, among the Igbo of Nigeria, implies different kinds of social relationships and symbolism. When death occurs, cooking in the major lineage is halted. Friends and affines must provide cooked food to the mourners. But it is not all kinds of friends or affines from whom food can be accepted on such occasions. Any misconduct on the issue can arouse serious suspicion. Therefore, who cooks food and to whom it is served and where it is served can reveal the structure of social relationships in the community.

Sharing kola-nut conveys many kinds of cultural messages. Formal presentation of kola-nuts to guests is indicative of a mature host. Normally, it is the host who presents the nut to his guest, meaning by it welcome and peace. The role, however, can be reversed. To accept the kola-nut from his guest indicates that the host understands the implication of the presentation: the guest asking for peace or seeking a girl's hand in marriage. Kola-nut differentiates betwen the sexes because women cannot formally present the nut to men nor men to women. For a group to approve that kola-nut be shared means that the members know each other and accept the purpose of the gathering. Thus, sharing means unity, equality, peace or agreement.

Sommario

La commensalità implica, tra gli Igbo della Nigeria, diversi tipi di relazioni sociali e di simbolismo. Quando vi è un decesso il lignaggio maggiore del morto smette di cucinare. Gli amici e gli affini devono cucinare il cibo per coloro che sono in lutto. Ma non da tutti gli amici o affini si può ricevere cibo in simili occasioni. Ogni errore di

condotta al riguardo può suscitare gravi sospetti. Così, chi prepara il cibo, chi lo riceve, dove viene servito, può indicare la struttura delle relazioni sociali esistenti in una comunità. L'offerta di noce di cola può trasmettere messaggi culturali diversi. La formalizzazione dell'atto di donazione indica la maturità anagrafica, sociale e politica dell'ospitante. Normalmente, è infatti l'ospitante che offre la noce all'invitato, e l'atto significa benvenuto e segno di pace; ma il ruolo può anche invertirsi. L'accettazione della noce di cola da parte dell'ospitante significa che questi ha compreso ciò che è implicito nel dono: una richiesta di pace o della mano di una ragazza. La noce di cola segna anche la differenza esistente tra sessi perché alle donne non è consentito offrire formalmente agli uomini né gli uomini alle donne. Per un gruppo, accogliere l'atto di spartizione della noce di cola significa che i membri si conoscono a vicenda e consentono allo scopo della riunione. La spartizione viene così ad esprimere unità, uguaglianza, pace e accordo.