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HIGHLIGHTS

- Masking-Encounters with the Dead

- Form and Conceptual Background of Igbo Traditional Sculpture

- Kolanut and the Stranger

- Omaba Festival

- Bride Price in Igboland
Commensality, the Kola Nut and the Strangers in an Igbo Community

Among the Igbo of Nigeria, commensality or the sharing of food can be pursued in two distinct ways. The first refers to commensality which must take place at set times or seasonally. Such meals are organized to reflect the social and economic needs of the farming community. Meals served at set times are breakfast (in the morning), lunch (in the afternoon) and supper at night. These meals are expected to be served to a definite group normally the household units. Seasonal meals can be regarded as traditional festivals organized to mark different cycles of farming. They indicate the unity of the descent group or reunion with friends (see Anigbo 1980: 159-229). Rules connected with the cooking, serving and eating food on both occasions must be obeyed: for failure to respect them can arouse suspicions within the group and may become the means through which an existing tension is communicated. But meals can still be served outside the set periods. These are the informal occasions marked by the arrival of a guest or a stranger at the door.

But the Igbo make no fuss about sharing food with anyone, especially those present when it is served (Uchendu, 1965: 73) even where such are total strangers. However, there is a food item, namely the kola nut, the sharing of which has different kinds of commensal implications. In this article, the significance of commensality in the context of host/stranger relationship is examined.

The fruit of the kola tree (chiefly *colas nitida* or *colas acuminata*) is a large nut, the size of a Brazilian nut, ranging in colour from dark red to creamy-white. Very many people in tropical West Africa make use of it, trade in it and carry on stiff business competition around it (see Alland and Hertz, 1967: 8; Cohen, 1966: 18-33; Uchendu: 74).

The kola nut serves many uses for the Igbo. It can constitute a system of recognizing rights. This is especially applicable to what is generally known as kola tenancies (see Meek, 1957). Kola tenancy refers to the occupation and use of land conferred by lineages or other land-owning units by virtue of some token payments which take the form of ceremonial gifts of kola nuts by the grantee to the grantor. Rights to the use of such lands can be revoked should the original owners require the land for their own use.

Kola nuts can be used to secure loans, whether of money, good or services. The presentation of the kola nut can also indicate that peace and unity exists between friends. Nzekwu summarises the Igbo feelings about the kola nut in the following lines:

"Among us, kola nut is a highly valued 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 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."

(Nzekwu, 1961: 67; see also Branden, 1966: 165)

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This article, though very brief, is nonetheless complicated because it deals with various concepts including the stranger, which has many shades of meaning. Moreover, even for the Igbo who live very close together, people can still behave to each other as strangers in a specific situation. The Concise English Dictionary, for example, explains the word stranger as "foreigner", a person in a country or town or company that he does not belong to, a person unknown to another, a person entirely unaccustomed to some feeling or practice or experience.

In Ibagwa Aka, there are many categories of residents, some of them officially designated strangers. This article is not concerned with them. They are regarded as strangers not because they are not known: they are strangers because they are 'non-natives'. In fact they have all the appearances of the members of the traditional community. They can inter-marry with the natives, live in the village as long as they like provided their activities do not threaten the internal peace of the village as a whole. Some of them have actually lived in Ibagwa Aka all their lives and produced children and grand children who, like them, have remained strangers. Their future descendants may forever also remain strangers in the community as long as the pattern of land ownership and Igbo traditional religion continues to apply in society. Those people are strangers because they cannot share the land and what it implies in the community. Sharing land in the Igbo context means living on the land and formally practising the different kinds of traditional religious worship connected with it.
People who cannot trace their ancestry in the village where they live cannot worship their ancestors there. This is because ancestor worship carried out on land can suggest land ownership of that particular land (Anigbo, 1980: 83). Where an individual stranger falls out of favour with some members of the host communities, his designation changes accordingly, and from then on he is regarded as mbia mbia. Mbia mbia has very unfavourable connotations or nuances, and can only apply to a stranger who is positively hostile to some interests of his host.

There is no occasion for commensality between Ibagwa citizens and these different categories of strangers. This is because there is nothing between them to celebrate. There is no property the ownership of which might unite them or divide them, as the case may be. Their village communities lie outside of Ibagwa Aka and they have come there to settle as individuals. They pursue different kinds of business concerns and can be affiliated to some unions not because they are strangers but because the interest of their business may demand it. They may also belong to different kinds of religious groups in the village. Moreover, they do not live in a separate quarter set apart for them by their host communities. Only a very small proportion of the Hausa/Yoruba elements still occupy a separate quarter allocated to them early in the century. Therefore, the host/stranger residential set-up envisaged by Cohen for the Hausa element in Sabo, Idaban, Nigeria, is not really verified (see Cohen, 1969).

II

Here the implication of having to share the kola nut with different kinds of strangers in a specific situation is examined. Who the stranger is can be known in the process of sharing the kola nut. Let me deal with the total stranger first. Total strangers can be regarded as men who do not live in a particular territory and are not known there. They are travellers simpliciter who can be termed ndi ije in the Igbo language. Ndi ije literally means those on the move or people walking in an alien territory. The singular term of the expression is onye ije which means a traveller. But the Igbo prefers the plural form ndi ije. The preference may have something to do with the way the Igbo make their journeys. They can be regarded as travellers only in a limited sense. Thus, Ottenberg claims that the Igbo is not a traveller can be supported (Ottenberg, 1958: 206).

A similar idea is found in Leith-Ross, where she says the Igbo may regard a compatriot living in another village only a few miles away and unrelated to him by ties of kinship as a foreigner and capable of the darkest crimes (Leith-Ross, 1937: 206).

There is no contradiction between the claim that the Igbo is not a traveller and the expression 'ndi ije' — travellers as understood cannot mean the same thing as European explorers of medieval times who travelled the globe. For the Igbo, anyone who has left his village and walked a distance beyond which he cannot make a return journey the same day before he is overtaken by darkness thereby becomes a traveller. Before colonialism took roots, distant travels would hardly be undertaken in sub-Saharan Africa (prothero, 1937: 254), because of slavery which was either engineered for domestic use or for shipment overseas (Meek, 1937: 5). But this does not mean that the Igbo never travelled.

The Igbo travel in quest of suitable farm land and when there is need to seek experts in the field of medicine or charms (Udo, 1971: 81). Moreover, ritual experts may sometimes be found only outside the confines of one's territory, thereby encouraging people who need their services to travel out to them. This may be one of the senses in which Uchendu refers to the Igbo as travellers (Uchendu, 1965: 77).

Anyone who had need to travel on those days must choose a companion — ayilbo — for mutual support, hence the justification for the plural form 'Ndi ije', for the Igbo say ofu onye bu osa — a lone traveller often disappears.

When travellers are referred to as ndi ije, it can mean that they are total strangers unknown to the speaker and not related to him either by ties of friendship or kinship. Relatives who have been absent from home for a long time can also be termed ndi ije when they come home. Important guests visiting their old friends can also be classified as ndi ije. What determines the differences between those categories of travellers is the reaction of the people they are meeting in the house. Through certain communal processes they demonstrate the worth of the traveller in an actual situation.

What hour a traveller arrives in the house can influence the type of reception accorded him. If it is daylight, people can pick him out easily and tell on sight whether he is a relative visiting home after a prolonged absence, or an important guest visiting and old friend, or just someone unknown. The reaction of the people at this particular moment will show the difference between those categories of travellers.

III

In the community, as soon as a wellknown guest is seen approaching the house, or a member of the family returns home, all those present will go out to meet him. He
will be indiscriminately embraced, hugged, and showered with a barrage of words of welcome. Children may take his walking stick, others his hat, if he is wearing one, and the more able will help him with his load. The long stream of words of greeting will continue to flow from all sides — alua, aluke, dej — welcome, welcome, you are really welcome in our midst. Uchendu, who discusses the Igbo generally says that such gratings seem to be endless (Uchendu, 1965, 72). But even by normal Igbo standards, other people visiting the community will be flabbergasted by the amount of words of welcome poured out to guests in Ibagwa village community. Ibagwa people say that the greater the repetition, the greater the assurance of welcome and intimacy (see also Firth, 1973: 29).

By now everyone has found a seat, with the guest or visitor occupying a most conspicuous position in the house. What follows next is the presentation of the kola nut. It is this that divides the stranger and the guest from each other and can also establish who is a member of the household unit from a mere guest. A member of the family coming home after a long absence is received with exclamations of joy, but is not offered the kola nut. To offer the kola nut to a brother in such circumstances can be regarded as misplaced, for it may suggest that differences exist between the two brothers. However, food is prepared for him immediately following his arrival, although if he indicates that he is not hungry, no offence may be taken.

Only the wellknown guest can be acclaimed and also offered the kola nut. Three nuts, at least, must be presented to an important guest to mark the solemnity of the occasion. He bags two of the nuts and returns home with them when his mission is over. This is for him to proclaim to his own people that he has been well received by his host. The Igbo say: ofi lue uno, okwu ebe osili bia — when the kola nut reaches home with someone who has been a guest of someone, it will explain that he has been received with dignity and respect by his host. The remaining nut is shared among those present, following the custom of the people.

With the conclusion of the kola hospitality, the host may go on to serve other food or drink. If food is cooked already, it is served first, because the Igbo do not like drinking on an empty stomach. If, however, food is not ready, the host can explain to his wife the quality of the food that must be served. Meanwhile, the partif can discuss privately the object of the visit. As soon as the food is ready, it is served to the guest. The host and guest can share the meal, but if the host has already eaten, he must taste the food to show that it is free from poison.

However, tasting the food must be done with caution. A brother cannot taste food for his brother. To do that means that the brother to whom food is served suspects his brother of wishing to poison him. Secondly, to taste food for a close friend may also give rise to similar suspicion. Tasting food is used generally for guests who are regarded as not so close to the host. It may be necessary to add that a woman cannot taste food for a man in normal circumstances, especially if her husband or any of her sons is present. To do so is placing the wife on par with a man. A guest can refuse to eat the food tasted by a woman. Similarly, a man cannot present the kola nut to a woman. He can bring it out, break it and offer it to her, but not present it to her formally.

After the guest had had his meal and drinks, he can remain with his host as long as he likes. On departure, he can also be given some presents to take home with him. It must have been such an experience that enable Marloghae and Ferguson to write in the following style:

"Throughout the country there are closely similar sacred traditions, which reminds us of what people in Europe have lost. The universal welcome to strangers and the glowing hospitality are heart warming. One of us went with a Nigerian to visit his home village, and came back loaded down with gifts, which would be disconcerting to refuse — eggs and chicken, snails and tortoise, dried fish and dried meat, beer and stout, vegetable dishes, locally made pottery and even money — often coming from people who were quite poor, but glad to share what they have."

(Marloghae and Ferguson, 1965: 4)

The total stranger is neither acclaimed nor offered the kola nut. Instead, he arrived when the householder’s are eating, he may be asked to the meal. This is mere courtesy. It is not expected that the offer will be accepted.

Anyone who arrives in a house at night, or is met in the village, may expect to hear a question about his identity put this way — obuo onye or unu bu onye? These are the singular and plural of the expression meaning, who are you? Such questions are necessary at night because darkness conceals identity. If the person is a guest or a member of the household, he will give his name, thus disclosing his identity immediately. If, however, the reply is obuo ndi ije — they are travellers. It means that they are total strangers.

People fitted to the description of ndi ije can 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 (see: Middleton, 1954: 196; 1960a; see also Anigbo, 1972: 11). One can also relate the state of such people.
to something similar 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 to his mother and sister, lodged with them, disclosed his wealth without revealing his identity, and was killed (Camus, 1961: 82). Where such people seek temporary accommodation for the night, they simply become lodgers — *ndi ije*.

I now proceed to assess the relationship of commensality between such people and the family that provides them with accommodation for the night. Such people are not the same as guests in Igbo language; a guest is known as *onye obia* while a lodger is *ndi ije*. *Ndi ije* can be greeted with the term *nnọ na*, but not with *alụa*. *Alụa* and *nnọ* can be rendered into English as welcome, but *alụa* signifies intimacy or cordiality. (see also Beattie, 1958: 198). Such travellers can even be asked to a meal if one is in progress at the time of their arrival. But that is all. The inmates of the house cannot rush out to prepare meals for someone whom they do not know.

Above all they must not offer them the kola nut, for the presentation of the kola nut signifies intimacy, cordially or peace. But it is impossible for the host to establish the objective of people he does not even know.

Therefore, in contrast to the travellers, the inmates of the house can regard themselves and justifiably so, as peaceful, friendly, while the travellers can be seen as intruders and therefore provocative. This is because who they are or what their mission is has not been disclosed. They can be thieves, armed robbers, passers-by seeking shelter for the night, or they may have come for a specific purpose which has not yet been named.

They can also leave as they came without saying anything about the object of their visit. But whether they succeed, to go away may depend on who are in the premises to break the deadlock by explaining the motive behind their visit. They can say it in a few words. But if their visit is to be considered a serious affair, they have to take the initiative themselves and present their host, who must be a man, with the kola nut, at the same time explaining the motive behind the presentation. If they are travellers pure and simple, and seeking shelter for the night, the host will accept the nuts from them and thank them for the presentation. The normal method of passing the kola nut around to declare the identity and status of those around is eliminated. (See Anigbo, 1972).

But before the kola nut can be shared, the host will ask for the names of the travellers, the names of their ancestors, and the territory of their origin. This constituted their formal identification. The host then proceeds to offer prayers to his own ancestors and to the goddess of the land, asking them to share kola nut with them and ensure their safety especially in dangerous situations. He asks them to protect the strangers who have come to lodge with them. Similar prayers are also said to the ancestors of the strangers asking them that the inmates of his house should not come to grief for having sheltered members of their group — a form of prayer which can be summarised in the following Igbo saying — *obulu he onye ubiagbunye ya, onawukwu nkpunku ake asugbune ya* — A host should not come to harm for having sheltered travellers, and when the visitors depart, let them return home safely. Having expressed those sentiments together, they can then share the kola nut.

Thus, a new tie of social relationship is formed. It may be strengthened or terminated. Nevertheless a significant beginning has been made between the parties. For from the moment of kola nut exchange, the lodger or the traveller has altered his status before the host and on future visits will no longer be classified as a total stranger — someone unknown. When he comes again, he will be regarded as *onye obia* and will no longer be expected to present the kola nut on subsequent visits. The situation has completely changed. Should he come back again the burden of having to present the kola nut falls on the host. If he does not do so then he must apologise for it. If he does not do that much, then there is something hanging between them.

V

For an individual to present the kola nut to his host can signify all sorts of things. This is mainly because the standard pattern of using the nut is for a host to present it to his guests, a sign that they are really welcome. But wherever this rule is reversed, it demands some explanations. It does not matter who reverses the rule. Whether the reversal is the act of a brother, or a friend, or even an enemy, they must have some reason to justify the conduct. Such reversal automatically declares the donor a type of stranger in a specific context. What is implied is that the donor has something in mind which he must communicate to his host. In other words, the kola nut represents an idea in the mind which has not yet been com-
In such a situation, the kola nut cannot be shared until the idea which it represents is disclosed. In this kind of situation, commensality symbolised in the sharing of the kola nut means peace, or at least the absence of hostility.

An outsider taking the kola nut to a household can mean he is seeking an agreement on a specific issue. Such cases can be many, but marriage may be taken as the most significant example. It also fits the example of the host-stranger situation in the Igbo context. This is because, for the Igbo, marriage is exogamous. A man cannot marry a woman from a lineage with whose lineage members he shares full commensal relationship. This means he cannot marry a woman of the same major lineage, different kinds of property may be inherited across the line including women. Were marriage tolerated in any degree for men and women of the same lineage, one could end up inheriting his sister. This is not worked out by the Igbo, but they have a saying which implies such possibility. They say 'madu ada anu nwanye ya' — meaning that human beings should not marry their kinsmen or kinswoman as the case may be. But nwa nne in the Igbo context can include all cognatic ties of father and mother. This is because of the bilateral system of reckoning descent, especially in matters relating to marriage.

Where a man is about to marry in Igboland, it is for the members of the man's lineage to go out in search of a potential wife. Kola nut must be used for this (Adams, 1934: 445). Where, therefore, an outsider presents the kola nut to a man who has an unmarried daughter, that act can be analysed as seeking agreement on a vital issue of marriage. Whether the party of this potential bride lives next door to the potential groom does not cancel the use of the kola nut in the way specified. In that context the kola nut is known as oji ajulu — meaning the kola nut that asks so many questions.

Among the Igbo, marriage is not an individual affair and different kinds of questions must be raised and settled objectively and satisfactorily before real negotiations can even be started. Such questions concern the status of the man and woman as well, as their identity within the general scheme of descent links in the society as a whole.

Therefore oji ajulu can be presented, but sharing it refused. Where oji ajulu is presented and sharing refused can mean at least one of three things. It can mean that the possible bride and groom are linked somewhere by blood relationship. In that case refusal to share the kola nut in the context means unity and agreement. Everyone in the group is satisfied that the relationship is so close that marriage should not be allowed to result. But it can also happen that those involved have examined the issue, found that a certain amount of linkage exists and decide to do something about it. This is the case where the elders have judged that marriage can take place despite the clear case of blood relationship. Normally when this obtains, certain forms of sacrifice may be offered to the ancestors, asking them to ignore the ties of relationship. After the sacrifice, the kola nut can be exchanged. Here sharing the kola nut marks unity, agreement as well as division or segmentation.

But it is also possible for the sharing of the kola nut to be refused for an entirely different reason unconnected with blood relationship. Kola nut in this case investigates the status of the proposed bride and groom. The investigation aims at establishing whether the bride or groom happens to be an osu or slave. Where either of the parties happens to be osu, the kola nut may be presented but it is certain to be rejected (see Anigbo 1972: Arikpo, 1952: 20; Achob 1960: 74-75). Refusal to share the kola nut in such a situation does not imply hostility or disharmony. Here it suggests exclusion or avoidance.
In certain circumstances the father or the guardian of a potential bride may refuse a priori to have anything to do with *oji ajuju* presented on behalf of one of his daughters and does so without any apparent sociological reasoning. Such rejection experienced in that context has many implications. It shows that different meanings can be found in the presentation of the kola nut. The inquiry does not suggest that the marriage must take place between the two parties. The presentation and acceptance of the kola nut at the beginning of a marriage only shows that the members of the two lineages concerned can sit down together and discuss serious issues affecting them with a view to coming to some agreement. Therefore, in a situation where the guardian of a potential bride has refused *oji ajuju* without offering an explanation, it may imply enmity, hostility, status or power.

From the few cases of refusals observed following the presentation of the kola nut in marriage contexts, one learns that it can be grossly inadequate to attach only one meaning to a word in commensality. Refusal can mean unity, avoidance, rejection — depending on the context in the marriage. This shows the usefulness of commensality in being able to be applied to different aspects of social life. Social behaviour is variable and cannot be committed to memory or made to conform to a mathematical formula.

In Ibagwa Aka, *Oji ajuju* is reinforced by the institution of the middleman, known in the local language as *onye obu uzo*, i.e. a man who leads the parties to a marriage. *Onye obu uzo* is distinct from *onye ofu uzo*. The latter can be a man or a woman who has found a potential bride or groom and reports back to the appropriate quarters where necessary. *Onye obu uzo* on the other hand must be a man, who acts as a go-between in a given marriage. He is the official witness in a specific marriage. In some ways, it can even be claimed that the institution of this go-between forms the very essence of the mechanism through which marriages are negotiated and concluded in the community.

As such, the go-between must be acceptable to both parties to the proposed union. He must also have the full backing of members of his lineage. This is because if he should die while the marriage still lasts, it devolves on the members of his lineage to find a substitute from among themselves to keep the services going. This underlies the importance of the institution. The individual who occupies the position of such a witness is not just there at the conclusion of the marriage negotiations, he is actively and most seriously involved in each aspect of the transactions which can occur in the lifetime of that marriage.

In Igbo land, different symbols are exchanged between the potential partners to mark the stages of progress in the negotiations. The first of these is the kola nut, which must be exchanged not only at the initial period of the marriage inquiry, as already indicated, but also on every subsequent occasion when the two groups meet to discuss issues affecting the marriage. On those occasions, the presentation of the kola nut may indicate that some progress has been made in previous discussions as well as that, by unanimous consent, the negotiations should be continued. Eventually, the negotiations reach the stage where the consent of the bride to the proposed union can be publicly tested. She gives approval to it by formally accepting a drink from the palm wine presented on her behalf, and sharing the cup with her prospective husband or any senior member of his group.

The formal consent is celebrated. Normally, it is for the lineage group of the groom to invite the group of the bride to the celebrations. It can be regarded as a kind of engagement party. It is a public announcement that the negotiations are reaching completion. Who is invited to the party will vary from community to community.

The brideprice payment is what may follow next. This can be regarded as putting a seal on the marriage negotiations. As soon as the payment is made, the woman is transferred to the group of her husband and the husband/wife relationship begins.

All these transactions or the various exchanges, whether it is the kola nut, drinks, food, money or goods and finally the woman herself, must be exchanged via the go-between. All these items must first be handed over to the appropriate quarters with the handing over of the woman crowning the entire negotiations.

The duty of the go-between does not end with the exchange of the woman. From then on, whatever threatens the union must first of all be reported to him, for him to convene a meeting of the respective groups to resolve the conflict. If in the end the marriage fails and the termination of the contract becomes inevitable, the return of the brideprice and other payments must be made through the middleman or the go-between as at the beginning of the marriage. Until the family of the bride returns the brideprice through the go-between to their former allies, the family of the groom retains right to all the children the woman may have, even if she lives with other men (rights in genetricm). If the woman dies before the brideprice is paid back, her former husband and his group must bury her according to the rites
due to a properly married woman.

One can infer from the duties of the middleman that his status must at least be equal to and never inferior to those of the parties for whom he acts as a witness or middleman. This is because he himself must be able to present the kola nut as of right to any of the parties. It may be recalled that neither the oru nor the oru can present the nut to a freeborn. It follows that while investigations about the status and identity of the bride and groom are being made, discreet inquiries are also conducted about the status and character of the middleman. Thus in the community, marriage can be seen as a union involving the corporation of two lineages which must work together to protect the alliance.

Oji ajuju is an important social institution for the Igbo. It provides some safeguards against possible unions between individuals who may be related by consanguinity. Thus it is impossible to find members of the same lineage who live and work in different territories from each other. This is as true today as when the traditional occupation of the Igbo was mainly growing yam. In modern urban conditions, job opportunities have attracted different kinds of skills away from the villages, thus fostering a new situation in which individuals or families can live and develop outside their traditional ties. Under such conditions, it is possible for members of the same major lineage to meet without recognising their ties. An example of such meeting is contained in Jerrone's study of the Igbo in London:

"A young woman who described how she spent her off duties (she was a nurse) with her 'brother' and his wife, said that she had not met him until she came to England or even known of their relationship. She said with some wonder that she had worked with her brother in the same bank at home without ever knowing that he was her relation."

(Jerrone, 1974: 10)

If the individuals referred to in this case study had been interested in marriage when they worked together in the same bank, there was nothing to stop them from proposing marriage to each other. However, it is likely that the inquiries connected with the oji ajuju would have stopped the marriage developing between them. Thus, it can be upheld that the kola nut is significant as a means of identification in certain situations.

Conclusion

I have examined the problems of commensality in the context of the quality of social relationship between the host and the stranger in Ibagwa village community. It is clear from the study that each meal offers the Igbo a regular opportunity to assess the quality of social relationship within the group. This is because every meal is guided by some rules which ought to be respected. A special case has been made for the kola nut, the prescription of which can reveal different patterns of social ties between those present. Where the rules are broken or ignored become an open admission that tension exists or clear portrayal of ignorance of the customs of the land. Commensality therefore provides a symbolic mechanism to dramatize the culture of the Igbo and to ensure its continuity.

But it is clear from the analysis that words are important in shaping the nature of the quality of commensality, in fact it is words uttered in certain circumstances that inspire a guest with confidence or fill him with suspicion. For example, an individual who is long absent from home and failed to receive laudable words of welcome on return knows that he is being rebuked. On the other hand, a total stranger who is given an ovation on arrival at a door feels no little discomfort. An outsider who presents the kola nut to his guest but failed to convince him of the validity of his gesture knows that he has lost his case because it would not even be discussed.

Words however well uttered cannot obscure the importance of food, the sharing of which reveals all the social ties. It is therefore important to utilize words and food in approaching the problem of commensality.

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NOTES:

1. Ibagwa Aka is an Igbo village community five miles north of the University town of Nsukka. It is now popularly known as Ibagwa Nkwo being the most important traditional market in the area. It is a traditional village community but settlers from different localities in Nigeria give it the appearance of an urban community.

I lived in Ibagwa Aka for four years carrying out field research in the community but with special bias to the problems of commensality in an Igbo village. The result of the research is embodied in a Doctoral thesis which has since been submitted and successfully defended at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. The title of the thesis is "Commensality and Social Change in Ibagwa Aka, Anambra State, Nigeria."

The present article is taken from the thesis, some alterations having been made.

2. "Osu" is a man or woman who either because of their acts or the acts of any one of their parents or grandparents are guilty of a crime against the land, the punishment for such crime being death. To escape the punishment, they seek protection under a powerful divine. The refugee obtains the protection he seeks, but he also severs all connection with the land and his family (cf. Anigbo, 1980: 71; Achebe, 1960; Basden 1960: 246).