

## Features article 11: Kola Nuts: The Precious African Nuts

### The use of Stimulants

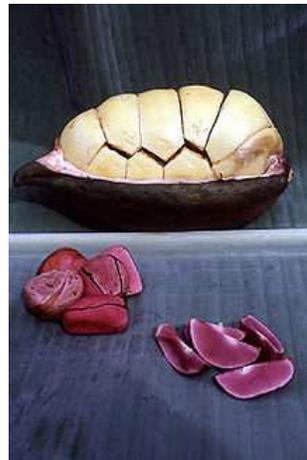
The quest for vitality is what drives the need for stimulants. There is a TV advert that promotes instant coffee, and it goes thus, “a cup of coffee in the morning will lift you, and later in the day when you need another **lift**, coffee will always take you there”. Stimulants are either drugs or other agents that temporarily quickens some vital process or the functional activity of some organs or part of: Stimulants are any food or beverage that stimulates especially coffee, tea or in its initial effects, alcoholic liquor. In Africa, an indigenous tree, the kola nut tree bears a fruit which, over time has proven to be of immense importance to the indigenous populations due to its stimulant supplying properties. In the west, south and east coffee is popular for its stimulating effects. Traditional Africans rely on the natural nuts of the kola tree for stimulant intake, social interactions and divinity practice.

### Kola Nuts

Kola Nut, commonly referred to as Cola, is the nut of the Kola tree, it is a genus of trees native to the tropical rainforest of Africa. Cola nuts are classified in the family of Malyvaceae, a sub family of sterculioidae. It is related to the South American genus Theobroma. The Kola tree is an evergreen tree, growing up to 20 meters (about 60 feet) tall, with glossy ovoid leaves up to 30 cm long. When a Kola nuts tree fruits, its fruits are of star shaped.



*Cola acuminata*



*Cola pods and seeds*

### Selected species of nuts are:

- *Cola acuminata*
- *Cola ossambicensis*
- *Cola nitida*,
- *Cola octoloboides*, etc

There are over 125 species of kola nut trees, and the most commonly edible are Bitter cola, *Garcina kola*, or kola nuts *nitida* or cola acuminate, and monkey cola, *Cola suboppositifolia*. These three species are used as stimulants. Kola Nut trees are native to Central and Western Africa, but are now found in the West Indies and Brazil, where they were introduced by African slaves.

### **The history of kola nuts**

The use of the kola nut, like the coffee berry and tea leaf, appears to have ancient origins. It is chewed in many West African cultures, individually or in a social setting, to restore vitality and ease hunger pangs. Kola nuts are an important part of the traditional spiritual practice of culture and religion in West Africa, particularly Nigeria. Kola nuts are used as a religious object and sacred offering during prayers, ancestor veneration, and significant life events, such as naming ceremonies, weddings, and funerals. They are also used in a traditional divination system called Obi divination. For this use, only kola nuts that are divided into four lobes are suitable. The kola nuts are cast upon a special wooden board and the resulting patterns are read by a trained diviner. This ancient practice is currently enjoying increased growth within the United States and Caribbean.

### **Kola nut trees**

In Western Africa these trees are usually found growing near the sea-coast. In other parts of the continent, planting of kola nut trees is common in most farm-family premises. The tree usually takes so many years before maturing to its fruiting cycle. This had scared some indigenous people to plant these species because impressions in some quarters were that, one may never live to see the fruits of a kola nut tree which he had planted. This made believe system has been demystified by modern techniques of tree crop marcotting, propagation and related technologies.

In Cameroon, especially in the grassland populations of Tikari origin, if one cuts or chops down a kola nut tree in some of those communities, he has to pay some fine to the community because, irrespective of who planted it, a kola nut tree becomes a community resources and asset. So no particular individual has right or monopoly over the community resource. This rare communist practice in those communities is reserved only to the kola nut tree, the precious African tree. Asides from planted kola nut trees in residential areas and farm lands there are few patches of primary kola forests in some regions of the continent. Where this is found, the immediate community or communities to the virgin kola nuts forest, usually exploits the resource through its customary administrative systems. In all cases, the kola nut tree is precious tree, that merits the name "tree of life", hence, the common slang when acquaintances gather is express in communion by continental Africans that "he who brings kola brings life".

**Income earner**

Kola nuts have been an income earner in most parts of the continent, especially the West African sub region. Hawkers' trade in the business of kola nuts is popular in the continent. Typical of the informal economy, many people; family heads feed their families from the kola nut trade, normally; traders buy from farmers in large quantities which supply to retailers, each making a reasonable return on capital outlay.

This precious African nut has now found its way into African shops in the West and the US. This move is an aspect of transfer of a cultural practice to foreign lands which facilitates selling African culture worldwide. Initially consumers of that product are Africans moving to the West, etc, in search of greener pastures, but do not forget their natural home grown stimulants and cultural symbols. The feelings of being "home sick" is a human virtue, and when those moments come, an African in Diaspora will find solace by getting necessary African condiments on the spot. With more Africans moving further into foreign non-African countries, the way is open for continues expansion of the kola nuts markets.

We advocate for tree crop farmer to plant more kola nut trees, maintaining existing stock to be able to response to the growing kola nut markets both at home and abroad. Existing government agricultural services and Community Based Organisations (CBOs) are in the field, ready to assist with modern methods of promoting this precious African tree of life, if this features page can be of assistance do not hesitate to contact us, we will direct interested farmers to consult result oriented CBOs who are ready to assist in propagating fast growing and fruiting trees. Why stay behind, the kola nut tree may be the alternative you need to improve earnings and income, or better still for your stimulant intake.

**Commercial uses of kola nuts**

Kola nuts are found to be of industrial uses. In parts of the African continent, the reddish starch liquid from the fruit is used by cultural fashion designers in embroidering traditions dresses. In modern beverage factories, its caffeine properties are extracted for soft drinks. Kola properties also have a place in the pharmaceutical industries. Another growing market is the alternative medicines and foods supplements markets.

**Chewing of kola nuts**

The taste of Kola nuts may not be the best for non-traditional Africans. The older generation of Africans who grew up to appreciate the fruit will prefer a kola nut cotyledon than a sweet caplet. For those who have the old age practice of chewing kola nuts, there is no limit to the number of cotyledons that one can take at any particular time; it is simply a matter of self restrain or control.

Within a day one may chew as many as he can, except the individual chooses to limit the number of cotyledons per day. Serve to friends and in occasions, the same as coffee is served in the west, east and south, traditional Africans enjoy kola, at will. It's natural, with no chemical (factory) processing elements which other stimulants such as coffee and tea go through. In kola chewing communities any time acquaintances meet they share the fruit as a sign of love and togetherness. Writing generally, on the use of kola nuts, a learned journal has this to say about kola nuts: "The Journal of the American Medical Association advocates the use of kola over other stimulants, because it is not addictive and does not lead to depression. Because it is also a diuretic, its use has been suggested for those with renal diseases, cardiac or renal edema and rheumatic and rheumatoid conditions".

### **The effects of kola nuts on ones teeth and breathe**

People, who hate the practice of chewing kola nuts, hold that chewing kola nuts cause tinting of ones teeth, and some holds that kola nuts cause bad breathe. These believe are yet to have any scientific backing. On the contrary and from ordinary observations, people who chew kola nuts have strong good looking teeth than people who take coffee, chocolate, and sweets. The effects of food or whatever one eats on the teeth depends on whether the individual has a regular habit of teeth cleaning or not. In comparison with the effects of chewing sweets and from ordinary observations, kola nuts present the best option.

People do chew sweet caplets to freshen up breath. Chewing kola nuts freshen up ones breathe too, leaving no stain or chemical action on the teeth surface as is the case with sweets, chocolate and coffee. The features page calls on researchers to carry out studies to confirm or disprove these believe.

### **Divination powers (Information service) of kola nuts**

It is believed in the African traditions and cultures that kola nut properties have divinity powers. The peelings or shelves of the fruits are used to search for information. In communities where this is practiced, almost every kola nut flavour seeking person can use the peelings to obtain at least some basic information.

Besides freelancers, there are specialists on divinity practice, who are consulted on special occasions. This practice has been used over time, meaning that it's a sought after service. Alternative medicinal practitioner are offering these services too in the West, US, etc, which in effect is exporting African cultural information systems, as rare models yet to be offered by emerging Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs). Divinity practices are unclassified, so there is no unique way of practicing it. Each community does it in their own customary administrative methods. Cultural or traditions practices therefore have no universal basset of explanations, but irrespective of these challenges indigenous knowledge bases should be protected.

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Practitioners should liaise to build universally accepted theory to underpin divinity practices. That will increase the chances to practice and to sell African culture most appropriately overseas. The good news is that some institutes of higher learning are developing interest in exploiting alternative medicines, which goes with indigenous people's cultures.

Presently each African ethnic group or community carry out divinity practice with kola nut products in many different and complex ways.

Through this practice, they are able to seek for and to obtain information concerning:

- Contacts with other people, before setting up on a meeting journey
- Family welfare and what the future holds
- Group activities and whether one should belong to a particular group
- The sources of sickness of family and community members
- The sources of death of family and community members
- Happenings in the community, be they good or bad omen practices
- Perpetrators of bad deeds of witch crafts, etc,
- Well being of family and community, etc

Cultural oriented Africans are proud of their traditional and cultural practices, these are the fragile strings that have held the society to date, and will continue to lead the way to improvements in research and practice. Kola nuts over time has been and will continue to be a very significant link in delivering cultural practices, i.e. in kola nut flavour loving societies of Africa.

### **Independent research studies on kola nuts abound**

Most of the studies points to the following properties of kola nuts:

- High quantities of caffeine, which combats fatigue
- Theobromine
- Tannins
- Phenoplics
- Starch, etc,

Studies also points to curative properties of kola nuts including whooping coughs, asthmas, body maintenance (weight loss) properties, etc. Scientific research is meant to improve the quality of life, and the good news science has for kola nut flavour seeking people is that the advantages of chewing kola nuts out weigh the disadvantages. Scientific results on kola nuts are simply confirming the experiences lived by Africans over decades. To cite just one pleasant case of kola nuts chewing people a clear example is the cattle fulanis' in Africa. Despite spending all their lives running around the hill sides to free range cattle, you would see a strong slim beautiful built looking person, whose stimulant intake as well as food snacks within the days are complimented with kola nut cotyledons. But remember, obesity is a cause for concern for everyone.

**Conclusion**

In the West, coffee serves as stimulants and in African societies kola nuts serve too as stimulant. To differentiate from the two cultures, people living in the Western capitalist societies of free enterprise systems have the monetary resources to enhance personal comfort. Poverty in Africa means that indigenous populations should practice cost effective habits that, equally stimulate and vitalises ones state of mind for better performance. The cost of providing a cup of coffee is comparatively prohibitive to providing a cotyledon, but each of the two serves the same purpose. So kola nuts are economically friendly and affordable at low cost.

Before the arrival of emerging Information Communication Technologies, through which instant communication with distant acquaintances is possible, divinity information services had and is still serving kola nut practicing communities. The African old generation of yesteryears will not move without verifying, their pathways whether they are clear and free from enemies or hazards. They will like to know in advance whether the person or contact the journey is planned for will be available and whether the journey will be fruitful. Cultural Africans will seek to know the feelings of their gods, and what the ancestors hold in stock for their families and communities. It is of prime importance that these indigenous knowledge systems of the African people be preserved and promoted.

There have been many independent research studies on kola nuts each with promising results. Kola nut properties are good for the human body; either by chewing the cotyledon(s) fresh from the pods, or taking it as pharmaceutical products. Essential vitality stimulating properties together with body weight reduction (keeping fit) properties are the most sought after qualities by people for their work imperatives, health and good looks. Vitality properties combine with divinity properties, makes kola nuts a necessary cultural fruit to indigenous Africans, the "The Precious African Nuts". Try kola nuts, why not?

Gideon Njini

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Kola - Nuts, Trees, Tree, Flower, Production, and Nitida

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