



# Ethnobotanical Leaflets

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## The Culture of Cola: Social and Economic Aspects of a West African Domesticated

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The area of study known as "economic botany" is a wide-ranging one, but is most often concerned with the relationship between humans and the plants they utilize for food and medicine and raw materials for shelter, tools and other material needs. Less often mentioned, although not entirely neglected, are those plants that may be seen primarily as being of less obvious and direct material benefit to the people who use them. The nut of the cola tree provides an example of such a plant product, one of limited nutritional or material use, but being of very great social importance. Among the various cultures using it, the cola nut plays important cultural roles in virtually every aspect of life, from birth to death.

The cola tree belongs to the Sterculiaceae family and is indigenous to West Africa, especially the nations of Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast and Nigeria, but is found eastward to Gabon and the Congo River Basin. The genus *Cola* is comprised of about forty species, but the most commonly used are *Cola verticillata*, *C. anomala* and *C. nitida*, with the latter two being of the greatest economic importance (Lovejoy, 1980). *Cola* is related to the cacao tree, but is taller (up to 30-40 feet), and has smooth bark with longitudinal cracks and dense foliage with large, leathery oblongate leaves alternate on large petioles. It has small cup-shaped flowers borne in clusters on short pedicels in the leaf axils. Both male and hermaphroditic flowers are found, although the latter are functionally female since the anthers are not pollen-shedding. The fruits are borne on young branches and form a star-shaped cluster of pods, usually numbering five, with each follicle bearing 4-10 chestnut-sized seeds. *C. nitida* is dicotyledonous, while *C. acuminata* has more than two cotyledons, and may have six or more (McIlroy, 1963).

Traditionally, the nut is used as a masticatory in a manner similar to that of betel-nut. Its popularity is due to the large amounts of caffeine and smaller amounts of theobromine, kolatin and glucose it contains, all of which act as stimulants and may be mildly addictive (Lovejoy, 1980). Its stimulant effect also makes it useful as an appetite suppressant, and it was often used as "iron rations" for armies on the march, allowing large distances to be traveled while carrying a minimum of food (Sundstrom, 1966). Other uses include refreshing the mouth, due to its unique bitter taste, alleviating thirsts, and use of the twigs of the cola tree as "chewing sticks" to clean the teeth and gums (Lewis and Elvin-Lewis, 1985).

Commercially, its use is limited to flavoring in cola drinks and in the manufacture of pharmaceuticals, and it is exported to Europe, the United Kingdom and North America for these purposes. Beverages such as kola-wine, kola cocoa and kola-chocolate, and one interesting sounding concoction called "Burroughs and Wellcomes Forced March Tabloid" were once tried in Britain, but were short lived. Oyebade (1973) states that "a few hundred tons annually are exported for this market (p. 417), but Lovejoy (1980) says that by 1910, exports had already reached 1000 tons. At any rate, off-continent exports appear to absorb only a minor part of the world production, estimated at 175,000 tons in 1966, with about 120,000 tons of that produced in Nigeria (Lovejoy, 1980). The vast majority of cola production is utilized within the African continent, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. This may explain why the introduction of the crop to South and Central Americas, the West Indies, Sri Lanka, and Malaya (McIlroy, 1963) has never caused severe competition with African production.

Cola is normally grown from seed and in commercial groves is planted 25-30 feet apart. The tree begins bearing at four to five years of age, reaches peak production after ten to twelve years, and may continue to bear nuts until 70-100 years of age. The nuts are harvested monthly during September-June and sometimes in July by climbers with knives on long sticks. The seeds are extracted from the pods and processed by Sun-drying or piling into heaps for "sweating" (Masefield, 1949; McIlroy, 1963). It could be argued that the domestication of the cola tree arose because of the vast importance the nut has in social interaction. Like coffee and alcoholic beverages, the food value of the cola nut is negligible (although it does have relatively large amounts of calcium; Johnson and Johnson, 1976), but it plays a part in many situations as a sort of social "lubricant." In many areas where other stimulants are not available, such as in regions influenced by Islam with its prohibition on alcohol, the cola nut may substitute for them, and it is in such places where the ritualistic role of the crop may be most evident, particularly if the nut is imported (Sundstrom, 1966). Vast trading networks existed in Africa, perhaps even before the 13th century, to supply the great demand for this product, and indications of the domestication of the trees in plantations are found in written records from the 16th century (Lovejoy, 1980).

Among the countless uses of the nuts in cultural settings include birth ceremonies in which a cola tree may be planted for the newborn, who will remain its lifelong owner; and death rites in which a tree is planted at the head of the grave of a deceased chief. Proposals of marriage may be made by a young man's presentation of cola nuts to the prospective bride's fathers, and her acceptance or refusal may be conveyed by a reciprocal gift of nuts, with the meaning depending upon the quality and color of the nuts. Wars have been declared and avoided by the ritual presentation and exchange of colas, insults or compliments exchanged by varying the color of the nuts offered, since they come in reddish and white varieties, with white being the most desirable. An audience before an important figure of authority may involve the offering of high-quality cola to show respect, and in many areas it is a social obligation to offer cola to any guests, lest an insult be given. Often the sharing of cola nuts is a necessary prerequisite to business dealings involving strict etiquette in presenting, dividing, and eating the fruit.

Cola figures prominently in religion and magic, being used as offerings to deities, in love potions and in forecasting the future by observing how pieces fall upon the ground. It has been used as an "ordeal" in determining the guilt or innocence of someone accused of an offence, a process in which the accused

may ask for the nut to poison him or her if they are guilty. In some areas it is a component of the oath-taking process. The nuts may serve as symbolic currencies used to pay debts of a mainly ritual nature. In this sense divorce has been granted by the payment of one cola nut, or an adulterer may pay for an infidelity by giving cola. As a symbol of wealth, the possession and use of cola nuts may be a matter of prestige, as related by Sundstrom (1966:145), "The more fashionable type of Wolof youth never goes outdoors without a supply of cola to treat any friends he may meet. It is considered chic to have some chewed particles of cola adhering to the corner of the mouth, thus negligently indicating a surfeit of cola." It is clear that this particular plant product has a cultural importance all out of proportion to its material value as food (for discussions and further examples see Sundstrom, 1966; Hauenstein, 1974; and Lovejoy, 1980), There is no reason to consider such social importance as any less "economic" than the importance of maize as food or bamboo as building material, however. The particular value of cola may be that it keeps the wheels of everyday society and commerce turning smoothly, as a tool of communication and ritual. It appears to play roles in processes which in our own society involve such disparate cultural items as notary publics, business lunches, greeting cards, juries, ambassadors and legal contracts, among many others. It probably became popular centuries ago for its stimulant properties and remains so partially for this reason, but it has become so interwoven into the social fabric of much of western Africa and beyond that its cultural functions now compete with, and may overshadow, its original uses.

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