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## EGALITARIANISM, WOMEN AND REVISITING THE BREAKING OF KOLA-NUTS (EVWE) AMONG URHOB0 PEOPLE OF NIGERIA: A CHRISTIAN FEMINIST ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

Every human culture has beliefs, and cultural practices such as rituals, rites, customs, and norms, that govern how life should be lived. These cultural practices are sociological and arose as people tried to understand themselves and the world in which they live. Some of these practices have become so sacrosanct that some persons feel they should never be questioned. But it ought not to be so, for as human beings continue to understand their existence on earth, they should subject their beliefs and practices, and ensure they truly enhance human and ecological flourishing and also are in line with authentic humanistic flourishing. It is in this that this paper argues that the ritual of breaking kola-nuts in Urhobo culture should be revisited in the light of egalitarian and Christian feminist ethical perspectives. The paper uses critical analytic and hermeneutic methods to examine and evaluate the concerns of the paper. The paper positions that the breaking of kola nuts, which is restricted to only males in Urhobo culture, is discriminatory, violates the dignity of women, and offends against the egalitarian ethos. The paper concludes that access should be granted to females to break kola nuts even in public gatherings, etc.

**Keywords:** Christianity, Feminism, Egalitarianism, Ethics, Women, Kola nuts, Urhobo, Niger Delta, Nigeria

### Introduction

One crucial aspect and ritual in many indigenous cultures, like that of the Urhobo people, is the ritual of breaking kola-nuts. In most cultures, where the breaking of kola-nuts takes place, it is an important sign, symbol, and offering of hospitality, welcoming, and reception of the guest (s). It is rare for visitors to come into a house among the Urhobo people, and the person is not welcomed with the breaking of kola-nuts. Urhobo culture, like most other indigenous/traditional cultures, is a patriarchal culture, a culture in which leadership and authority in all spheres of life, except women gatherings, is occupied by the male folk. Historically, the breaking of kola-nuts, an important symbol of authority and dominion, can only be ritually performed by men, in as far as men are present. Even though women can break kola-nuts among themselves and share, this is seen as a rare exception and in the background. In public cycles, where the decisions of the community are taken, and among the elders, women can never be asked to break loa-nuts, even if the woman is the eldest in chronological age in the gathering. It is always entrusted to the eldest male, even if that male is younger than the eldest woman. While many papers have been written on the ritual of the breaking of kola-nuts, they rarely examine the issue and critique it for it to be changed. The fact is that in Urhobo culture, especially in former times, women were discriminated against. Some of the ways this reared its head are: men were the only decision takers, the birth of the male child is celebrated with pomp and pageantry while that of the girl child is glossed over, the girl child is denied equal educational opportunity as the male child as the girl is seen as another

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man's property as she will be married away, she is expected to stay at home and is often accused of witchcraft for any family failure (Aziza, 2005, pp. 535-536). Things have improved but there is still much to be done in favour of gender equity. The kola-nut, which is a powerful symbol of royalty, authority, and power, continues to be broken in occasions and ceremonies only by men.

The ritual and breaking of kola-nut is an essential aspect of Urhobo culture and many other indigenous cultures that were not destroyed or eroded by colonialism, western versions of Christianity, and the forces of global capitalism and Westernization. For the foreseeable and unforeseeable future, the breaking of kola-nuts is likely going to remain an important aspect of Urhobo culture. The objective of this paper is to do a deconstruction of the ritual of breaking kola-nuts in light of the values of egalitarianism and Christian feminist ethics. The paper evaluates and questions why the breaking of kola-nuts is restricted to only men in formal community gatherings and other occasions. The paper argues for revisiting the ritual of breaking kola-nuts and advocates for its radical transformation.

The ritual of the breaking of kola-nuts is not divine, supernatural, and carved in stone. It is sociological, cultural, and embedded in human praxis that originated and has continued in the history of human society. It is worth noting that culture is not stagnant, and infallible. There are aspects of culture that have changed in society, such as some jobs that were reserved for men that are now undertaken by women, also, the girl-child now has access to education than it was in previous years, women sitting among men in churches, etc. The paper sees denying women of the breaking of kola-nuts in public functions and other occasions as discriminatory. By way of procedure, the paper will make some clarification of concepts, look at the situation of breaking of kola-nuts among the Urhobo people, evaluate this breaking of kola-nuts in the light of egalitarianism and the demands of Christian feminist ethics, and then conclude and make some recommendations.

### Clarification of Concepts

Some concepts like egalitarianism, women, kola-nuts, Urhobo people, and Christian feminist ethics. Let us first define egalitarianism. It can be defined as

... a school of thought in contemporary political philosophy that treats equality as the chief value of a just political system. Simply put, egalitarians argue for equality. They have a presumption in favor of social arrangements that advance equality, and they treat deviations from equality as *prima facie* suspect. They recommend a far greater degree of equality than we currently have, and they do so for distinctly egalitarian reasons (Bidadanure and Axelsen, 2025, p. 1).

At the core of the doctrine of egalitarianism is the idea that all persons and individuals are equal, should be treated as such in having their opportunities, rights, and social status respected and protected; and because of this all forms of social hierarchies that discriminate and deprive people of access to decision-making, resources, etc should be eradicated (Oxford Review, 2025). Without egalitarianism, there cannot be a just society. Egalitarianism does not mean people are equal in all areas of life, for instance, people have different backgrounds, shapes, sizes, colours, etc. But it does mean that people are ontologically equal and no one should be treated as inferior to another or discriminated against or deprived of equal access to the resources or benefits of social life. All should be granted equal access to life opportunities, decision-making, and equal participation in political and public life. Whatever indicates that one gender is less human to the other should be abrogated. Equality is not sameness in physical qualities. Equality does not mean things are identical. For this paper, a woman is seen as a human being who is female. In this paper, it does not include those who identify as female or with another gender. A woman "can be described as an adult female human being distinguished from a girl, man or boy. She may be married or unmarried, may or may not have children of her own" (Aziza, 2005,

p. 534). The argument in this paper is that a woman is as human as a man, and should not be deprived of access to conducting rituals at public functions such as the breaking of kola-nuts among the Urhobo people

Kola-nut is a “fruit from tropical plants that serve cultural, medicinal, social and religious purposes” (Ottuh, 2021, p. 51). Kola-nut can be defined as: “the bitter caffeine-containing chestnut-sized seed of a kola tree used especially as a masticatory and in beverages” (Merriam-Webster, 2025). The term “cola” is derived from kola nut which is a species of the kola tree, native to tropical African rainforest and is commonly used in West Africa in ceremonies such as funerals, weddings, naming ceremonies; and it believed to restore vitality, and a vital spiritual emblem (Onaolapo and Onaolapo, 2019). Regarding kola nut, “there are two common types of kola- nut in Nigeria: *cola nitida* (Gbanja ‘Goro’) and *cola acuminata* (*obi abata*). It is eaten in a fresh state for its stimulating effect” (Olumakinde, 2013, p. 6).

Christian feminist ethics (CFE) advances the argument that androcentrism is wrong, maleness is not humanity’s paradigm, and opposes all that oppresses women, who, like men, have been freed in Christ, and promotes the total flourishing of women (Traina, 2023). Women are equally in God’s image and likeness to men (Gen 1:26). The original blessings that God imparted unto creation and upon the human race are both upon men and women. Misogynist languages in the bible, in Christian history, and in human culture that demonize, dehumanize, and infringe on the dignity of women are to be eradicated. Ethics, as we know, deals with the study of right and wrong. What are the criteria for determining the right human conduct? Christian feminist ethics asserts that the right human conduct in human relations is to ensure that men and women are treated equally and one is discriminated against. It offends against divine purpose to put women down and deprive them of their basic human rights and personhood. The biblical texts must be re-appropriated and re-imagined in the light of the healthy flourishing of all people. It can be said that Christian feminist ethics is feminism rooted in radical Christian egalitarian values appropriated from Christian sources. Take note; “Feminism is a belief and political philosophy that upholds the full humanity of women. It desires to transform all social structures that hinder the realization of this goal in any way” (Hinsdale, 2007, p. 453).

This paper is about granting women access to perform the ritual of breaking kola-nuts among the Urhobo people and all other cultures in which women are denied the act of breaking kola-nuts. It may seem like a simple issue. But it is a serious matter, for breaking kola-nuts has become a way of expressing male dominance and authority over women. Men see the breaking of kola- nuts as a sign of their authority and many don’t want to relinquish that privilege. The Urhobo people, that this paper deals with, are the largest ethnic group in the present-day Delta State of Nigeria. Many Urhobo live in Urhoboland in the Western Niger Delta, with some in neighboring states and the Diaspora. Urhobo is the 5<sup>th</sup> largest ethnicity in Nigeria and the people live in the rainforest of Nigeria’s Niger Delta; the area occupied by the Urhobo people is partly coastal and upland (Ejoor, 2011, p. iii). The Urhobo people are seen as “part of the Edoid subunit of Kwa language-speaking people of the larger Benue (Niger)-Congo family group” lying in the West African rainforest (Edevbie, 2022, p. 4).

### The breaking of Kola-Nuts among Urhobo people

The breaking of kola-nuts constitutes part of *egho* (entertainment) of welcoming guests and others. The breaking of kola nuts is now very common and present in many other events that are not normally traditional ceremonies, such as Christian functions, book launches, government functions, etc. Outside the breaking of kola-nuts at ceremonies and welcoming guests at homes, people use kola-nuts for medical and health purposes. Some use it to stay awake, without sleeping, especially when they are preparing for an event such as an examination.

The breaking of kola-nuts in public gatherings is done by the eldest person (male), except there is a king present; and for the breaking of kola-nuts the provided kola-nuts are brought to the eldest person with money in the saucer (plate) for the kola-nuts not to roll, and the elder man offers prayers to the ancestors for the wellbeing of the persons present, beginning from the eldest among the host or the host himself while the elder who broke the kola-nuts offer prayers for himself last of all (Mouth Piece of the Urhobo, 2017 ). It should be noted that for the breaking of kola-nuts, when a guest is being welcomed, the host takes four items: a breakable plate, some kola-nuts, a bottle of gin, and some pieces of money, to entertain the host (Prechyrucky, 2020). Realize that: “There are two sets of money you drop alongside a plate of kola-nut(s). First, you drop money for the eldest man to break the kola and pray. Then, you support the kola-nut with more money for the kola-nut not to roll over the plate” (Naomitheboss, 2020). How many parts of kola-nuts are required in a marriage ceremony is not necessary, except for prayers for the couple, four parts are required, but in the absence of four parts, the one with five parts can be used (Naomitheboss. 2020). Before the kola-nuts are broken, when it is wedged, people are permitted to support the host in many communities by offering money, which the *Otota* (speaker) receives, announces the name of the supporter or donor, and adds the money to the plate. The guest who is being welcomed is to take the money, and later he shares it with his entourage, with the eldest getting the lion's share. The money used to entertain the guest is normally kept with the youngest among his entourage unless the guest comes alone.

Nowadays, it is common to see the guest donating the money towards some charitable cause. I have seen a book launch in which the chairman of the occasion or the church harvest donates the money back to the book launch or the church harvest. In some instances, now, because of the influence of Christianity in Urhoboland, at church occasions, even when the eldest person is present, they defer to the man of God to just pray over the kola-nuts. After he has prayed, the kola nuts are shared. But there are also cases where, even after the man of God has played, the eldest still performs his duty of praying with the kola-nuts. It has also been observed by this author that on occasions now, elders who are Christians no longer pray to the ancestors but rather they pray in the name of Jesus. This reveals the dynamicity of culture and change. This is another reason to say the breaking of kola-nuts is not sacrosanct. The way that kola-nuts have been broken has transformed. Granting access to women to break kola-nuts is in line with the egalitarian values of the kingdom of God. For Christian groups who have women as pastors, many will not see anything wrong with their female pastor praying over the kola-nuts instead of the eldest person. Christianity is very powerful when it comes to the transformation of culture. The argument why women are not permitted to break kola-nut is that it is the responsibility and function of the eldest person and in Urhobo culture, the male is seen as senior to the female, even if in literal biological age the female has experienced more years, she is still considered to be younger to the male. In every gathering, the most senior male is to break the kola-nut and never a woman (S. Obaseki, personal communication, March 15, 2025). This paper considers this to be an aberration and it is a tradition that should be done away with in the light of the egalitarian values of the gospel. Considering a young boy as senior to an adult female, just because he is a male is unjust and discriminatory.

The ritual of the breaking of kola-nuts is often accompanied by drinks, especially a native drink like *Ogogoro* or some other alcoholic drinks. Awhefeada (2014) writes that: “What is embedded in the presentation of kola-nuts include self-introduction which highlights praise names known as *odovan* in Urhobo, ornate speech embellished by proverbs and prayers with strong incantatory character” (p. 181). In the kola-nut presentation, when it is presented, it is also accepted and received by the guests or visitors. Awhefeada (2014) writes that, after receiving the kola nuts and refreshments, if there is a

need depending on the occasion, the visitor is expected to reciprocate the gesture by opening his items and offering them to the host (p. 183).

As the kola-nuts are being served, the youngest person in age, under the guidance of the eldest person, opens the drink and tastes a little sip following customs, with the bottle of drink dropped on the table momentarily; he then goes to the elder serving the drink while the eldest male prays blessings upon the people present beginning with the host or persons in order of importance, and the server ensures that the drinks go round with a little left for the eldest person failing which the youngest man is penalized by the eldest; and while receiving the last bit of drinks the eldest man calls to the attention of the people with prayers and gives some to the youngest person who has served and some are poured on the ground (Mouth Piece of the Urhobo, 2017). Among the Idjerhe people of Urhoboland, women can break kola nuts but only among themselves and never in public gatherings or places where men are (Ottuh, 2021, p. 55). It is also taboo for a woman to pick the kola-nuts herself from the plate at a gathering, no matter how elderly she is, it must be taken by a male and placed in the hands of the woman (Ottuh, 2021, p. 55). Still among the Idjerhe kola-nuts are used in oath-taking, offering of sacrifices, divination, and communion and communication (Ottuh, 2021, pp. 56-60). Awhefeada (2014) asserts that kola-nuts among the Urhobo is a male affair, kola-nuts can only be presented and received by the male and prayed over by the male and women can only receive indirectly through a male or their husbands and if the gathering is a women gathering, kola-nut is not brought (p. 183). The politics of kola-nuts presentation according to Awhefeada is grounded in patriarchal nuances (p. 183). It is these patriarchal nuances that should be questioned. Patriarchality is not divine and is not an infallible institution.

Diverse philosophies or perceptions abound concerning the ritual of breaking kola-nuts. It is generally believed in cultures where kola-nuts are broken that the bringer of kola-nuts brings life. To reject kola-nuts is to reject life. To reject kola-nuts is a sign that you don't love your host. Even if you will not eat it, it is preferable to accept and keep it. Kola-nuts are never to be thrown away. You can offer it to somebody else among those around quietly. Kola-nuts, which is common among the Urhobo people, and also native to their culture, signifies love, friendship, mutual trust, peace, happiness, joy, acceptance, and communion (Eventsally, 2023). It is not only in Urhobo culture that kola-nuts carry such tremendous significance. Kola-nuts are highly valued in Nigeria with unique symbolism and are seen as a powerful tool for national cohesion (Ekundayo and Ugwu, 2015, p. 19).

### **Egalitarianism, the breaking of Kolo-Nuts, and Christian Feminist Ethical considerations**

Despite the symbolism, meaning, and significance that the breaking of kola-nuts has in Urhobo culture and some other cultures, the ritual, and the practice seem discriminatory as only men are authorized to break kola-nuts in public gatherings and wherever men are present. The breaking of kola-nuts has become a symbol of male power, dominance, and authority over women. Many men don't want to ever hear or entertain the fact that women should be given access to break kola-nuts. It is as if there is something so distinctive that only men are entitled to break kola-nuts. As a symbol of male authority, men don't want to accede to women sharing in this authority. Restricting the breaking of kola-nuts to the male may look like an innocent cultural practice, but the message it subtly sends is that only men can break kola-nuts. It is a form of discrimination. In defining discrimination against women, Discrimination is any distinction, restriction, and exclusion based on sex, which has consequences and nullifies recognition of women in any endeavor of life (United Nations, 1979). The fact is that it may not be intended, but that is the effect. Those who promote the agenda that only men can break kola-nut may argue that it is not a form of discrimination and it does not mean women are inferior, but the fact is that it is the effect it is causing. In my educational studies, we were taught what is the null curriculum.

The null curriculum is what is not explicitly taught, but at the same time, people are learning from its absence. That women are excluded from the breaking of kola-nuts speaks volumes about the identity and well-being of women.

The breaking of kola-nuts as presently construed and practiced in Urhobo culture and many other cultures runs contrary to the egalitarian values and ethos espoused by Jesus, the liberator and freedom giver; and in the prophetic tradition of the Judeo-Christian scriptures, and the ethical demands of Christian feminism, of which this present author is an advocate. In his life and ministry, Jesus lived a life that welcomed and accepted women as equal children of God, just as men. He openly welcomed women and discussed with them in public as he did with the Samaritan woman and with Mary Magdalene when he rose from the dead. He allowed himself to be touched by the woman with the issue of blood, touched the woman bent over, allowed and praised the woman who anointed him in public, made women key characters in some of his stories and parables such as the lost coin, the importunate widow, the woman who gave the widow's mite, and many others. Jesus shared a meal with women in his public gatherings. In the ministry of the early church in the New Testament, Mary was with the other women in the upper room, sharing prayer, women shared in leadership in the ministry of the apostle Paul, such as Priscilla, etc.

Jesus through his life and ministry created an inclusive egalitarian community in which androcentric structures are broken down. This paper brings the centrality of the egalitarian values of the Jesus movement into play here for Urhobo's conception of the male, even when that male is younger as more senior than an adult female is unacceptable. It implies that women, by being female, should take a back seat to men. If you ask most Urhobo men and even women why a woman cannot break kola nut, they will tell you that is the way culture has established it. If you press the men further, they will tell you it must also always be the eldest male, because the male is always senior and only the senior has the privilege of breaking the kola nut. Is this not an aberration and an affront to the dignity of women? The woman can wash and bring the kola-nut on a plate to the man, but it is only the man who can break it.

Christ is to transform culture, not accede to culture. Whatever ritual or cultural practice that does not offend against the Christian gospel should be accommodated, adapted, and inculturated into the project of Christ. Women ministered to Jesus in the gospel. In Luke 8, the women who followed him and his disciples ministered to their needs. This implies ministering to him and the disciples at table and meal time also. Jesus broke bread with both men and women. His table fellowship is liberating, freeing, and egalitarian. None were discriminated against at his table fellowship. Someone may argue that in the most definitive and highest of Jesus' fellowship, which was the last supper, no women were present and shared in that meal. Despite this, the eucharistic table of Jesus at the Last Supper is not to be separated and cut away from his entire table fellowship. Within the context of a Jewish society which was patriarchal, we must understand Jesus' action at the Last Supper within the entire message that he preached.

The implication that this paper is drawing from the biblical witness is that there is nothing that makes women ontologically inferior to men. There is nothing that makes the hands and bodies of women inferior or less holy than men. The inference often in a patriarchal culture like that of the Urhobo is that there is something that definitively makes women unfit to break kola-nuts. A woman breaking the kola-nut will not make the kola-nut less a kola-nut or make the kola-nut lose its significance. Men will not lose anything or become less men because women are granted access to break kola-nuts. The kola nut is a natural fruit that is indifferent to whoever breaks it. It is not ingrained in the essence and core of the kola-nuts that only men can break it. For those who believe in God, God who created the kola-nut did not say that only men can break the kola-nuts. Cultural and sociological practices should not be divinized

and clothed with divine right. The kola-nut will not stop being kola-nut because a woman breaks it. The kola-nuts will not stop growing because a woman broke them. The myths woven around the breaking of kola-nuts that only men can break kola-nuts in public gatherings are false. They are the vestiges of a patriarchal society that wants to continue to keep women down and under subjugation. Christianity is expected to be liberating and break the shackles of culture. Culture is not sacrosanct.

A woman can carry kola-nuts to the market and sell them, but cannot break them in public. A woman can wash and prepare the kola-nut and bring it into a men's gathering, but cannot break it. This is irrational and does not accord with the dictates of justice and power distribution in society. The ritual of the breaking of kola-nuts should be viewed in the light of egalitarian ethos. There is nothing that makes a man better in breaking kola-nuts. Breaking kola-nuts does not require any special skill that women don't have. Many women can break kola-nuts better and perform the ritual with all the incantations better than men if given a chance. It is time to open access to women to break kola-nuts. To insist that a woman cannot break kola-nuts is to say that there is something inherently wrong in women that makes them less worthy than men to break kola-nuts. A woman can eat kola-nuts and the kola-nuts will nourish her.

In the Pauline letters, the patriarchal and reactionary passages, which some authors like Borg and Crossan (2009) have argued were written by either the later Paul or some of his conservative followers, have been re-imagined in the light of egalitarianism. Women now teach in churches. Women are no longer seen as the weaker sex in many Christian quarters. Women are no longer forced to cover their hair in some churches. The only function of women is not to bear children. The point is that if as rigid as the biblical texts are, some Christians reimagine them and foster equality and freedom for men, there is no reason why culture should not be critiqued and reformed. Women can break kola-nuts in public and gatherings and they should be granted access to do it.

The kola-nut has socially been used as a symbol of domination over women. Chris Anyanwu argues that male conspiracy, who want to retain a governor's power in the boy's club is what is hindering women from the office of the governor, and this is akin to restricting the breaking of kola-nuts to men, but it ought not to be, for in Anambra state a female former principle ran the state as governor for many months and the heavens did not crumble down (Nwakanma, 2025). The point is that just as women are discriminated against in the breaking of kola-nuts so also in many other domains of life. The same person who sees women as incapable of breaking kola-nuts is likely going to see the woman's position as being in the kitchen and the bedroom.

It is important to radically question the idea that because someone is male, even a boy, the person is automatically a senior to an adult female. This is one of the fundamental foundations for saying that women, by being female, are younger than men. This is wrong. Seniority in terms of age should be measured essentially in chronology. To arrogate seniority to a man simply because he is a male is an affront against the dignity of women. It is painful to note that the male is sociologically cultured to see himself as senior and superior to women. O. Akusu (personal communication, 15 March, 2025) an advocate of authentic Urhobo values, states that restricting the breaking of kola nuts to men is ingrained inside the Urhobo customs and practice. Asked whether it can change, she affirms that it can change but it will take time. She was also critical of aspects of Christianity that suppressed the rights of women.

## Conclusion

The paper has argued for granting access to women to be able to break kola nuts at public and other gatherings in Urhoboland. It was shown that the breaking of kola-nuts has great symbolism in

Urhoboland and that the breaking of kola nuts was used to welcome people at home or at occasion. It stands for unity, hospitality, love, care, joy, life, etc. It was also shown that the breaking of the symbol has become a symbol of male authority, superiority, and dominance. This ought not to be so. The paper argued that the breaking of kola-nuts is not divine or created by God, it originated sociologically within society. Society and people in culture have the power to transform the breaking of kola-nuts. It way that the breaking of kola-nuts is presently construed it shows that women and incapable and unfit to break kola-nuts, whereas women can buy and sell kola-nuts and even bring them to men's gatherings. The paper argued from the viewpoint of egalitarianism and the values of Christian feminist ethics that Jesus in his life and ministry and the prophetic tradition of scripture espoused the radical equality of men and women as children of God, equal sharers in the image and likeness of God. This being the case there is no reason why women cannot break kola-nuts.

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