The Meal Motif and Inculturation: A Comparative Study of the Christian Breaking of Bread and the Breaking of Kola Nut in Afemai Culture

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Abstract

The meal motif theory functions as a foundational symbolic structure through which religious communities articulate communion, sacred presence, moral obligation, and social identity. This study presents an in-depth comparative and inculturational study of the Christian breaking of bread (Eucharist) and the breaking of kola nut in Afemai culture. Drawing on phenomenology of religion, African philosophy, sacramental theology, and Afemai ethnography, the study argues that both practices function as ritualized meals that mediate life, covenant, and relational belonging. While acknowledging theological differences, particularly regarding Christological mediation and ancestral consciousness, this study demonstrates that the Afemai kola nut ritual provides a culturally embedded symbolic lens for interpreting Eucharistic theology within an African worldview. By expanding inculturation theory and engaging gender and power dynamics, the study contributes to African contextual theology and the philosophy of religion by showing how food, ritual, and community converge as lived theology.

Keywords: Meal motif, Eucharist, kola nut, Afemai culture, inculturation, African philosophy of religion

Introduction

Meals occupy a privileged place in the symbolic universe of religious traditions. Across cultures, the act of eating together transcends biological necessity and becomes a ritualized medium through which communities express identity, belonging, reconciliation, and sacred presence. In religious contexts, meals often

function as threshold rituals, marking transitions between the ordinary and the sacred, the individual and the community, the human and the divine.

In Christianity, the breaking of bread stands at the heart of faith and practice. Rooted in Jesus' table fellowship and ritually institutionalized in the Eucharist, the breaking of bread is a memorial and presence, symbol and sacrament, ethics and eschatology. In Afemai culture, the breaking of kola nut occupies an equally central ritual position, accompanying nearly all significant social, political, and religious encounters. Ethnographic studies consistently affirm that no formal gathering among the Afemai people is complete without the presentation and ritual breaking of kola nut (Okojie, 1994; Egharevba, 1968). Despite emerging from different religious systems, both practices employ food as a symbolic mediator of life and communion. This convergence invites sustained theological and philosophical reflection, particularly within the framework of inculturation, which seeks to articulate Christian faith through indigenous cultural forms without compromising doctrinal integrity.

This study argues that the meal motif theory provides a critical bridge for understanding how Christianity can be meaningfully embodied within Afemai culture. The breaking of kola nut is not merely a cultural parallel to the Eucharist but a deeply embedded symbolic practice that reveals African relational ontology, sacramental imagination, and communal ethics. When critically engaged, it enriches Eucharistic theology and advances African philosophy of religion.

Scholars of religion have long recognized meals as sites of symbolic density. Mary Douglas (1972) demonstrated that food practices encode social boundaries and moral values, while Mircea Eliade (1968) interpreted ritual meals as hierophanies, manifestations of the sacred in ordinary material forms. In phenomenology of religion, meals are understood as embodied acts of meaning, where the sacred is not abstracted from daily life but encountered within it.

In biblical scholarship, the meal motif has been interpreted as central to Jesus' ministry. Jeremias (1966) argued that Jesus' open table fellowship functioned as an enacted parable of the Kingdom of God. The Eucharist, therefore, emerges not merely as a cultic ritual but as a continuation of Jesus' radical social vision.

African philosophy consistently emphasizes relational being. Tempels' (1959) notion of vital force and Mbiti's (1991) dictum, "I am because we are," reveal a worldview in which personhood is constituted through relationships. Meals, in this context, are not peripheral but foundational expressions of ontology. African religious meals reinforce continuity between: the living, the ancestors, and the unborn. They affirm that life is shared, sustained, and morally regulated through communal participation.

Ethnographic studies of Afemai culture highlight the kola nut as a ritual object par excellence. Okojie (1994) documents its role in hospitality, dispute resolution, marriage rites, and ancestral invocation. Bradbury (1973) situates kola nut rituals within broader Edo political and kinship systems, noting their function in legitimizing authority and sustaining communal harmony. Importantly, Afemai cosmology does not separate the sacred from the social. The breaking of kola nut is simultaneously religious, ethical, and political, a convergence that resonates strongly with sacramental theology.

Inculturation theology emerged in response to the inadequacy of transplanting Western Christian forms into non-Western contexts. Shorter (1988) defines inculturation as the incarnation of the gospel within a culture such that faith both affirms and transforms cultural values. Schreiter (1985) emphasizes critical correlation, warning against syncretism while rejecting cultural alienation. African theologians such as Bujo (2001) argue that inculturation must begin with African symbols of life, community, and memory, precisely the symbolic world of ritual meals.

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive, and interdisciplinary methodology, integrating philosophy of religion, theology, and ethnography. The phenomenological method brackets doctrinal judgments to describe religious practices as they are experienced. This approach allows the analysis to focus on how meaning is generated through ritual action, particularly eating, sharing, and blessing. Comparison is used heuristically, not to equate Christianity and Afemai religion, but to illuminate how similar symbolic structures function differently within distinct theological horizons. The emphasis is on functional and symbolic resonance, not doctrinal identity. Inculturation provides the evaluative framework

for discerning how Afemai ritual symbols can inform Eucharistic theology. This involves: affirmation of cultural meaning, critical theological discernment, and ethical evaluation (especially regarding power and gender).

Ritual meals function as liminal events that collapse ordinary time and space. In both Christianity and Afemai culture, the breaking of food signals entry into a sacred moment governed by moral and spiritual expectations. Sacramentality refers to the mediation of grace through material elements. African religious symbolism already operates with sacramental logic: visible elements mediate invisible realities. This makes African cultures particularly receptive to Eucharistic theology. The shared meal embodies African relational ontology. To eat together is to acknowledge mutual dependence, shared destiny, and moral obligation.

The Breaking of Kola Nut in Afemai Culture: An Ethnographic Description

The Afemai people are an ethnic group predominantly found in the northern part of Edo State, Nigeria, comprising subgroups such as Etsako, Owan, and Akoko-Edo (Edo State Digital Library, 2024; Culturesherpa, 2024). They share a common cultural heritage, though each subgroup maintains localized dialects and customs. The Afemai language belongs to the Edoid group and is used in everyday communication, traditional ceremonies, and oral literature including proverbs, folktales, and songs, which help preserve identity and cultural memory across generations (Edo State Digital Library, 2024).

Traditional Afemai religion emphasizes ancestor veneration, belief in deities, and communal harmony. A supreme deity often conceptualized as the creator god, is understood to sustain life, with lesser spirits and ancestral forces mediating protection, fertility, and well-being (Culturesherpa, 2024; Grokipedia, 2024). Ancestors are believed to remain spiritually active, watching over descendants and influencing community prosperity. Ritual offerings, communal prayers, and festivals are performed to maintain balance between the spiritual and physical realms and to uphold social harmony, a worldview that parallels other West African cosmologies of sacred community relationships.

Afemai social life is organized around extended family, kinship ties, and hierarchical respect for elders. Elders are regarded as custodians of cultural

knowledge and moral authority, playing significant roles in decision-making, conflict resolution, and the performance of rituals (Edo State Digital Library, 2024). Traditional leadership systems involve councils of elders supporting chieftaincy structures, where age and seniority carry weight in matters of governance, conflict mediation, and communal welfare.

Festivals form a central part of Afemai cultural expression. Many are aligned with agricultural cycles and spiritual observances, reinforcing communal identity and continuity. For example, the *Ukpe* Festival celebrated at harvest time features communal feasting, dance, and thanksgiving rituals; the *Ekuochi* Festival inaugurates the new year with masquerades and communal rites; and the Ijeki Festival invites purification and renewal through dances and rites that honor ancestors and deities (Edo State Digital Library, 2024). These festivals emphasize social unity, collective responsibility, and spiritual gratitude.

The kola nut holds cultural significance among many West African societies, including Afemai, where symbolic motifs often represent values such as hospitality and spiritual connection (Culturesherpa, 2024). Although detailed ethnographic studies on kola nut rites specific to Afemai ritual practice are limited in the accessible literature, it is consistent with broader Edo and neighboring cultural patterns that sacred food items, such as kola nut, are integrated into rites of welcome, prayer, reconciliation, and communal affirmation. These symbolic practices reflect the Afemai value of communal solidarity, respect for elders, and harmonious relationship with ancestors and the divine.

Among the Afemai people of Edo State, the kola nut is not understood primarily as food but as a ritual object imbued with symbolic, moral, and spiritual significance. Ethnographic studies consistently describe kola nut as a "carrier of life, truth, and peace" within Edo-speaking societies (Okojie, 1994; Egharevba, 1968). Its presence marks the seriousness and legitimacy of any social encounter. The kola nut is closely associated with life-force and continuity. In Afemai cosmology, life is not an isolated biological phenomenon but a shared reality sustained through relationships among the living, the ancestors, and the unborn. The kola nut, as a seed that contains multiplicity within unity, symbolically expresses this worldview. Its internal lobes are often interpreted as signs of

fertility, blessing, and divine favor. Importantly, kola nut is never eaten casually in formal contexts. Its ritual use distinguishes sacred eating from ordinary consumption, reinforcing the idea that meals can function as theological acts.

Ethnographic sources identify several key contexts in which kola nut breaking occurs in Afemai society. The offering of kola nut is the first ritual act when a visitor arrives. Refusal to present kola nut signals hostility or illegitimacy. As Okojie (1994) observes, "a visitor who has not eaten kola nut has not truly been received." Kola nut is central to reconciliation processes. Once shared, it ritually seals peace agreements and obligates participants to truthfulness and restraint. The breaking of kola nut often accompanies prayers to God, the earth, and the ancestors. The ancestors are invoked not as deities but as moral witnesses and custodians of communal order. Marriage negotiations, naming ceremonies, and funeral rites involve kola nut, underscoring its role in marking transitions within the life cycle. In all these contexts, kola nut functions as a mediatory symbol, bridging the social and spiritual worlds.

The ritual breaking of kola nut follows a structured sequence, which ethnographers describe as remarkably stable across Afemai communities:

Presentation
The kola nut is presented on a wooden plate or tray, often accompanied by alligator pepper or palm wine. The act of presentation itself communicates goodwill and peaceful intention.

Prayer and Invocation
A recognized elder, usually the oldest male present, offers prayers. These prayers invoke God, the ancestors, and the moral values of peace, longevity, and communal harmony (Egharevba, 1968).

Breaking
The kola nut is physically broken, an act symbolizing openness, sharing, and the release of life-force.

Distribution
A piece is first offered to the ancestors, by dropping on the ground, then other Pieces are distributed according to age, kinship, and status. This ordered distribution reflects Afemai social hierarchy while affirming communal belonging.

Consumption
Eating together completes the ritual, transforming social relations and creating moral obligations among participants.

From a phenomenological perspective, the sequence reveals that meaning is generated not only by the object (kola nut) but by ritualized action, speech, and bodily participation. Participation in kola nut rituals carries ethical consequences. Those who share kola nut are bound by expectations of honesty, hospitality, and peace. Violating these expectations is not merely a social offense but a moral and spiritual breach, potentially attracting ancestral disapproval. Ontologically, the ritual affirms Afemai relational anthropology: to be human is to be embedded in a web of relationships sustained through shared symbols and practices. Eating together is thus a declaration of shared destiny.

The Christian Breaking of Bread: Ritual, Theology, and Early Practice
The tradition of breaking bread holds profound theological and communal significance within Christianity, deeply rooted in biblical narratives and early Church practice. Far more than a simple act of sharing food, breaking bread symbolizes fellowship, remembrance, covenant, and the unity of believers in Christ. Its origins lie in Jewish meal traditions, but its meaning was decisively reinterpreted through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, becoming central to Christian worship and identity (Wright, 2012).

In the Old Testament, communal meals often signified covenant relationships, divine hospitality, and fellowship with God (Genesis 18:1–8; Exodus 24:9–11). Bread, as a staple of daily life, carried both material and spiritual significance. Jewish meals typically began with a blessing acknowledging God as the giver of sustenance (*HaMotzi*), reinforcing the belief that food was a gift from God. One of the most important ritual meals was the Passover, during which unleavened bread (*matzah*) was broken and eaten in remembrance of Israel's deliverance from

slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12:14–20). This ritual of remembrance and covenant provided the liturgical background for the Christian understanding of breaking bread.

The meaning of breaking bread was fundamentally redefined during the Last Supper, a Passover meal Jesus shared with his disciples. According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and said, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19, NIV; cf. Matthew 26:26; Mark 14:22). Through this action, Jesus transformed an ordinary ritual into a profound sacramental act. The broken bread became a sign of his impending sacrifice and the establishment of a new covenant between God and humanity (Wright, 2012).

Following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the early Christian community continued the practice of breaking bread as a defining element of worship and communal life. Acts 2:42 records that believers devoted themselves "to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer". This passage suggests that breaking bread was both a regular communal meal and an emerging Eucharistic celebration. Witherington (2007) observes that in the early Church, the practice encompassed both ordinary table fellowship and sacred remembrance, reflecting the inseparable relationship between worship and community. Evidence of the centrality of breaking bread also appears in Acts 20:7, where Christians gathered on the first day of the week to break bread, indicating its liturgical importance. Similarly, the narrative of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:30–35) underscores the theological weight of the act, as Christ was revealed to them in the breaking of bread.

Theologically, breaking bread embodies several core dimensions of Christian faith. First, it serves as a memorial of Christ's sacrificial death (1 Corinthians 11:24). Second, it signifies participation in the body and blood of Christ, making believers sharers in the mystery of salvation (1 Corinthians 10:16). Third, it expresses unity within the Christian community; Paul emphasizes this communal dimension by stating, "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body" (1 Corinthians 10:17, NIV). Failure to discern this communal meaning undermines the integrity of the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:27–29).

In the early Church, breaking bread was often practiced within agape or love feasts, which combined Eucharistic celebration with communal dining. These gatherings embodied the radical inclusivity of the Gospel, bringing together rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, as equals at one table (Ferguson, 2013). Over time, however, the practice became more formalized. By the second century, writers such as Justin Martyr described structured Eucharistic services involving prayer, thanksgiving, and the sharing of consecrated bread and wine (González, 2010). The term *Eucharist*, derived from the Greek *eucharistia* ("thanksgiving"), came to define this central act of Christian worship.

Across Christian traditions, interpretations of the Eucharist vary—ranging from transubstantiation and consubstantiation to memorialism—but the significance of breaking bread remains universal. McGrath (2013) notes that, despite doctrinal differences, the Lord's Supper functions as a unifying practice that expresses remembrance, grace, and communal identity. Calvin (2006) emphasizes that, in the breaking of bread, believers are spiritually nourished and strengthened through communion with Christ.

Beyond its sacramental meaning, breaking bread also has ethical and social implications. It symbolizes equality, reconciliation, and shared life in Christ, breaking down social and ethnic divisions (Galatians 3:28). Moreover, the act carries an eschatological dimension, pointing toward the future "wedding supper of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:9). Each celebration of the Eucharist thus holds together past remembrance, present participation, and future hope.

In contemporary Christianity, breaking bread continues to be practiced in both liturgical and informal contexts. While the form may vary, from elaborate Eucharistic liturgies to simple fellowship meals, the underlying meanings of communion, remembrance, and unity remain constant (Smith, 2013). Modern practices reflect both continuity with the early Church and adaptation to cultural contexts, demonstrating the enduring theological and communal significance of the ritual.

It will be safe to affirm therefore that the Christian breaking of bread originates in the table practices of Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospels consistently portray Jesus

eating with tax collectors, sinners, women, and the socially excluded. These meals were not incidental but constituted enacted theology, challenging purity boundaries and redefining community (Jeremias, 1966). The Last Supper institutionalized this meal practice, transforming bread and wine into symbols of Jesus' self-giving life. In the post-resurrection narratives, recognition of the risen Christ occurs precisely "in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35), underscoring the meal as a site of divine revelation.

The Acts of the Apostles describes early Christian communities as devoted to "the breaking of bread and prayers" (Acts 2:42). These meals were communal, frequent, and embedded in daily life. Scholars note that early Eucharistic celebrations blurred the line between ordinary meals and sacred ritual, emphasizing fellowship and mutual care. Paul's critique of Corinthian Eucharistic practice (1 Corinthians 11:17–34) highlights the ethical dimension of the meal. The Eucharist loses its meaning when it reinforces inequality, demonstrating that the breaking of bread is inseparable from justice and communal responsibility.

In Christian theology, the breaking of bread functions sacramentally: bread becomes a sign that both represents and mediates divine grace. While theological interpretations differ across Christian traditions, the central symbolic claim remains that Christ becomes present through shared eating. From an African philosophical perspective, this sacramental logic resonates with indigenous understandings of sacred mediation. Material elements are not neutral but capable of bearing spiritual significance.

Comparative Phenomenological Analysis

Both Afemai kola nut rituals and Christian Eucharistic practice transform ordinary food into vehicles of sacred presence. In neither context is the food consumed merely for nourishment. Instead, it mediates relationships, between humans, and between humans and the sacred. Eliade's concept of hierophany is particularly helpful here: the sacred manifests not by abolishing the material but by inhabiting it (Eliade, 1968). In both traditions, the shared meal creates community rather than simply expressing it. Participation establishes moral bonds and obligations. Just as sharing kola nut commits participants to peace and truthfulness, participation

in the Eucharist commits believers to love, justice, and reconciliation. The meal, therefore, functions as an ethical event, not merely a symbolic one.

Despite their communal orientation, both rituals also reveal structures of inclusion and exclusion. In Afemai culture, age and gender shape ritual authority. In Christianity, ecclesial structures determine access to sacramental leadership. This comparative insight prepares the ground for a critical inculturation analysis, which must ask not only how symbols communicate meaning, but whose voices and bodies are authorized within ritual space.

Inculturation Beyond Translation

Inculturation is not merely the translation of Christian language into indigenous idioms; it is a hermeneutical process through which faith is re-expressed within the symbolic universe of a people. In African theology, inculturation affirms that culture is not a neutral vessel but a theological locus, a space where God's self-communication is already active prior to missionary encounter (Shorter, 1988).

Within Afemai culture, the kola nut ritual constitutes such a locus. It embodies values of life, peace, communion, and moral accountability, values that resonate strongly with Eucharistic theology. The meeting point between the Eucharist and the kola nut ritual is therefore not superficial analogy but deep symbolic consonance.

Kola Nut Ritual as Hermeneutical Key to Eucharistic Meaning

The Afemai kola nut ritual offers an interpretive framework through which the Eucharist may be understood. In Afemai cosmology, life is sacred and shared. The kola nut symbolizes vitality, continuity, and blessing. Interpreted through this lens, the Eucharist appears not primarily as a juridical sacrifice but as participation in divine life. The breaking and sharing of kola nut establishes binding moral relationships. Similarly, the Eucharist renews covenantal bonds among believers and between humanity and God. Just as ancestors are ritually invoked as moral witnesses in kola nut ceremonies, the Eucharist affirms Christ's living presence among the community. Inculturation re-centers this presence Christologically without denying the African intuition that presence is relational and mediated.

This hermeneutical dialogue allows Afemai Christians to encounter the Eucharist not as a foreign rite but as a fulfilled and transformed cultural intuition.

Ancestral Mediation

One of the most sensitive areas in African inculturation theology concerns the role of ancestors. In Afemai kola nut rituals, ancestors are invoked as guardians of moral order and continuity. Christian theology, however, affirms Christ as the unique mediator between God and humanity (1 Timothy 2:5). A critical inculturation approach does not eliminate ancestral consciousness but reinterprets it. Ancestors may be understood as part of the communion of memory and moral witness, while Christ remains the definitive source of salvation and reconciliation. Schreiter (1985) describes this process as transformative appropriation, in which cultural symbols are neither absolutized nor erased. Inculturation involves both affirmation and critique. While the kola nut ritual affirms communal values consonant with the gospel, it also requires purification where cultural practices conflict with Christian ethics, particularly regarding exclusion, hierarchy, and gender. In this sense, the Eucharist does not merely borrow from Afemai culture but reorients cultural meaning toward radical communion, forgiveness, and justice.

Ethnographic studies of Afemai culture reveal a persistent pattern: women are custodians of food production and preparation, yet ritual authority, especially the act of breaking kola nut, is predominantly male (Okojie, 1994). Women's labor sustains the ritual, but men control its symbolic enactment. A similar pattern appears in many Christian contexts, where women prepare the elements of the Eucharist but are excluded from sacramental leadership. This convergence raises critical questions for inculturation: Which aspects of culture are being inculturated, and whose interests do they serve?

African feminist theologians argue that inculturation must be evaluated by its capacity to promote life, dignity, and justice (Oduyoye, 2001). Cultural symbols incorporated into Christian practice should not reinforce patriarchal exclusion under the guise of tradition. Ritual authority rooted solely in gender contradicts both African relational ethics and Eucharistic theology. An inculturated Eucharistic theology informed by the meal motif invites a reimagining of ritual

leadership as service rather than control. In Afemai culture, elders break kola nut on behalf of the community; the theological challenge is to interpret this authority in ways that affirm communal care without excluding women from symbolic agency.

Philosophical Implications for African Philosophy of Religion

The comparative analysis demonstrates that religious knowledge in African contexts is embodied and performative. Meaning is not primarily abstracted in doctrines but enacted through rituals such as shared meals. This insight challenges Western epistemological models that privilege propositional belief over lived practice. The meal motif reinforces African relational ontology: being is constituted through participation. Sacramentality, understood as mediated presence, aligns naturally with African metaphysics, where material reality is open to spiritual significance. Both the Eucharist and the kola nut ritual show that ethics is not an external code imposed on ritual but emerges from ritual participation itself. To eat together is to accept responsibility for one another.

This study contributes to African Eucharistic theology by grounding sacramental meaning in indigenous meal symbolism, emphasizing communion over individual piety, integrating ethics, ontology, and ritual practice. The Afemai kola nut ritual thus becomes a theological resource, not as a replacement for Christian sacramentality, but as a cultural grammar through which the Eucharist can be authentically lived in African contexts.

Conclusion

This article has examined the meal motif as a point of convergence between the Christian breaking of bread and the Afemai breaking of kola nut. Through phenomenological description, ethnographic analysis, and inculturation theology, it has shown that both rituals function as embodied expressions of communion, life, and sacred presence.

While theological distinctions remain, particularly regarding Christological mediation, the symbolic resonance between these meal rituals provides a robust foundation for inculturation. When critically engaged, the kola nut ritual enriches Eucharistic theology, affirms African relational ontology, and challenges both

cultural and ecclesial structures to embody justice and inclusion. Ultimately, the meal motif reveals that theology is not only spoken or believed but performed, shared, and eaten within the concrete realities of culture and community.

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