

CULTURAL CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF EDIBLE CROPS AMONG THE IGBO OF SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study investigates how the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria perceive and understand edible crops within their cultural enclave. Although studies on cultural conceptualisations have examined animals, body parts, and other cultural symbols, limited attention has been paid to how edible crops function as culturally grounded conceptual resources in Igbo ethnocognition and meaning construction. The study explores the conceptualisation of edible crops among the Igbo community, analyse the meanings associated with these crops, and assess how these connotations relate to people's behaviour, appearance, or characteristics in Igbo society. Drawing on Sharifian's Cultural Linguistics, particularly the notion of cultural conceptualisations through the constructs of cultural schemas, cultural categories and cultural metaphors, the study explores how shared cultural knowledge and cognition shape symbolic interpretations attached to edible crops in Igbo discourse. Following a qualitative approach, data for the study were collected through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with native Igbo speakers. The findings reveal that the Igbo people of Southeastern Nigeria associate edible crops with culturally shared meanings used to conceptualise human behaviour, physical appearance, social identity, and traits. The study argues that edible crops in Igbo discourse do not function merely as lexical, agricultural and dietary objects, but as cognitive and cultural resources for interpreting social realities and human attributes. The findings therefore demonstrate the centrality of edible crops in shaping linguistic creativity, ethnocultural cognition and culturally situated perceptions of persons within the Igbo society.

Keywords: Igbo, edible crops, cultural conceptualisations, metaphor, schema, category, Nigeria

Ụmị edemede

Nchọcha a na-enyocha etu ndị Igbo nke ndịda-ọwụwa anyanwụ Naijiria si ahụta na aghọta akụkọala ndị a na-eri eri n'ụwa ha. N'agbanyeghị na e nweela nchọcha metụtara nkwa keomenala dika o si metụta anụmanụ, akụkọ ahụ dī iche iche, nakwa ngwa ọdịmara omenala, elebabeghị etu ndị Igbo si akọwa akụkọala ndị a na-eri eri anya nke ọma. Ebumnuche nchọcha a bụ inyocha etu e si ahụta akụkọala ndị a na-eri eri n'etiti ndị Igbo, itụle nkwa a na-enye akụkọala ndị a, na ileba anya etu nkwa ndị ahụ si metụta agwa mmadụ, ọdịdị, maọbụ ejirimara n'ala Igbo. Site n'igbado ụkwụ n'atụtu Lingwistiks Keomenala nke Sharifian, ọkachasị echemeche nkwa keomenala site n'igbado ụkwụ na nhazi echiche keomenala, katigori keomenala na mbụrụ keomenala, nchọcha a nyochara etu mmata omenala na echiche si ahazi ntapia ọdịmara ndị Igbo na-enye akụkọala. Sitekwa n'iji usoro nchọcha kwolitativ, a nakọtara njiatule site na nsonye nakwa ajụjụonụ. Nchọpụta gosiri na ndị Igbo nke ndịda-ọwụwa anyanwụ Naijiria na-enwe nkwa ufodu gbasara akụkọala ndị a na-eri eri, ma jikọta ha na agwa mmadụ, ọdịdị, maọbụ ejirimara. Nchọcha gosiputara na akụkọala ndị a na-eri eri anaghị arụ ọrụ naanị dika okwu, ngwa ọrụ ugbo na nke ndozi ahụ, kama ha bụ ngwa echiche na eomenala ndị Igbo ji akọwa nhurupụwa na agwa mmadụ. Nchọpụta na-egosi onodu akụkọala ndị a na-eri eri na nhazi ekereuche lingwistiks, echiche nakwa nkwa keomenala gbasara mmadụ n'ala Igbo.

Ọkpurukpụ okwu: Igbo, akụkọala ndị a na-eri eri, nkwa keomenala, mbụrụ, nhazi echiche, katigori, Naijiria

1. Introduction

Language is highly indispensable in how human societies construct, organise, and transmit culturally shared knowledge. Within Cultural Linguistics, language is not merely construed as a communicative tool but as a repository of collective cognition through which cultural groups conceptualise their social realities and experiences (Sharifian, 2017). Cultural conceptualisations therefore emerge from shared cultural experiences and are reflected in the linguistic choices of members of a given speech community.

Within Cultural Linguistics, conceptualisation is mediated through language because linguistic expressions often encode culturally shared ways of interpreting reality. Sharifian (2008, 2017) argues that cultural conceptualisations exist both as cognitive structures and as linguistic manifestations embedded within the practices of cultural groups. These conceptualisations are sustained through repeated social interaction and transmitted across

generations through language. Consequently, linguistic expressions often encode deeper ethnocultural schemas, categories, and assumptions shared by the members of a community. In this sense, language is viewed as one of the primary mechanisms for storing and communicating cultural conceptualisations. It acts as both a memory bank and a fluid vehicle for the transmission of symbols and norms. This highlights the interconnectedness between culture and language (Tamariz & Kirby, 2016; Dediú & Levinson, 2013). Language, therefore, functions not only as a medium of communication, but also as a cultural resource through which communities organise, interpret, and reproduce shared systems of meaning.

The Igbo people chiefly reside in the Southeastern part of Nigeria. They speak Igbo, a language of the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo language family, which constitutes an ethnic group in Nigeria (Okigbo, 2024). The people are primarily found in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo states. They are socially and culturally diverse, and renowned for their heritage, philosophical traditions, unique worldviews, beliefs, identities and customs (Osuagwu, 2021; Onwuatuegwu, 2023). Although they live in scattered groups of villages, they speak one language but different dialects. They have a distinct worldview grounded in their understanding of the world as dynamic and interconnected (Aniakor, 2018). The word *Igbo* is used in three frames: to describe the *Igbo* territory, the domestic speakers of the language and the language spoken by the people. On a general note, *Igbo* people share a common culture centred on a common language, institutions, food, dress, religion, and cosmological beliefs. In agriculture, the main crop cultivated by the *Igbo* people is yam, culturally referred to as *ji*, which is why an entire festival, 'Iri Ji' (the New Yam Festival), is organised to celebrate the harvest of new yams. The New Yam Festival in Igbo society shows that crops, particularly yams, possess not only economic significance but also deep cultural value in *Igbo* ethnocultural life. Traditionally, most *Igbo* are commercial and subsistence farmers. Their produce includes their chief crop, yam, cassava, corn (maize), melon, okra, pumpkin, and beans. Among those who are actively involved in agriculture, men are chiefly responsible for yam cultivation, while women cultivate other crops. Land is owned communally by kinship groups, and portions of it are made available to individuals for farming and building.

Given the agrarian orientation of traditional *Igbo* society, edible crops occupy important economic, sociocultural, and symbolic positions within everyday life. As a result, crops extend beyond their nutritional functions and become cultural resources for describing human behaviour, physical appearance, social identity and interpersonal relations. These crop-based conceptualisations reflect culturally shared patterns of interpretation rooted in *Igbo* ethnocultural cognition.

Although previous studies on cultural conceptualisation, such as Ezuruike (2017), Bustan et al. (2022), Nnamdi-Eruchalu (2022), Ode & Adzer (2023), and Aradi (2025) have examined domains such as animals, emotions, body parts and cultural symbols, limited scholarly attention has been paid to how edible crops function as culturally embedded conceptual resources in *Igbo* discourse. Existing studies on the *Igbo* culture have also rarely examined how crop-based expressions encode collective cultural knowledge within the framework of Cultural Linguistics. However, although Igbo edible crops are not merely agricultural products, they function as symbolic and interpretive resources through which individuals are described and socially understood. Examining these conceptualisations, therefore, provides insight into *Igbo* cultural values, social perceptions, and shared systems of meaning. This study examines the cultural conceptualisations of edible crops among the *Igbo* of Southeastern Nigeria. Specifically, the objectives are to:

- i. Identify edible crops that have cultural conceptualisations among the *Igbo* of Southeastern Nigeria;
- ii. Examine how the *Igbo* of Southeastern Nigeria culturally conceptualise the identified edible crops; and
- iii. Explore the different connotations that can be derived from such conceptualisations.

2. Review of related literature

This section presents studies on cultural conceptualisation, figurative language, and plant-based symbolism to situate the present study within the existing scholarship and to identify the theoretical and empirical gaps it addresses. These studies are reviewed to highlight

themes and findings that form the foundation of the present study. Sõukand and Kall (2015) investigated the emic conceptualisation of wild edible plants in Estonia during the second half of the 20th century. The study aimed to document and analyse the cultural and ecological knowledge associated with wild edible plants and understand how this knowledge has changed. Through a qualitative ethnographic approach, the study used participant observation and semi-structured interviews with key consultants in selected rural communities in Estonia. The results showed that wild edible plants have played a significant role in Estonian food culture for centuries, with locals possessing detailed knowledge of their nutritional value, taste, and preparation methods. However, the researchers observed that the use of wild edible plants has declined in recent decades due to urbanisation, industrialisation, and changes in dietary habits. Although the study provides rich insight into the relationship between food and cultural knowledge, its primary concern is on botanical reservation rather than the linguistic and cultural conceptualisation of crops.

Ezuruike (2017) conducted a study on the cultural conceptualisations of animal names in three Nigerian languages – *Igbo*, Yoruba and Hausa. Dwelling on the Sapir-Whorfian hypothesis, the study observed that Hausa and Yoruba had more similar associative meanings for animal connotations than *Igbo* did. It was further discovered that, despite similarities in connotation, differences still exist. Similarly, Ode and Adzer (2023) examined the cultural conceptualisation of animal names among selected communities in North Central Nigeria. Also relying on the same theoretical framework as Ezuruike (2017), the study noted that animal conceptualisations stem from linguistic and sociocultural experiences of language users. Both studies support the present study as they affirm that conceptualisation cannot be treated outside the linguistic and sociocultural perspectives of the language users. However, their studies focused on animals and did not employ the theoretical framework of Cultural Linguistics, even though their findings support the theory.

Furthermore, Bustan et al. (2022) studied the cultural conceptualisation of the origin of life among the Manggarai people. The study described the relationship between the Manggarai language and culture, as reflected in the Manggarai people's cultural conceptualisation of the origins of life in human beings, food, plants, and animals. The study's results showed a close relationship between the Manggarai language and culture. The study posited that cultural concepts are embedded in language and that the relationship between language and culture is reflected in conceptualisation as a fundamental cognitive process that naturally leads to the development of schemes, categories, metaphors and scripts. The study is of interest to the present study because it examines how language encodes culturally shared structures. However, unlike the present study, Bustan et al. (2022) dwelt on cosmological conceptualisations rather than on edible crops.

Nnamdi-Eruchalu (2022) examined the traditional *Igbo* poetry that employs figurative language to describe humans using crops and plants. The study documented and analysed oral poetry of *Igbo* society to discover how language is manipulated to create poems, and how the patterns, forms, and variants of the language convey and reveal the nature of the traditional society which produced them. It aimed to explore the role of language in clarifying the meaning of poems in the context of the socio-historical realities of the traditional society which created them. He analysed the figurative language used in *Igbo* literature and poems to showcase the richness of the *Igbo* language. Nnamdi-Eruchalu (2022) noted that the terms for *ji 'yam'* and *ede 'cocoyam'* encapsulate essential elements of *Igbo* identity: yam, being the main crop cultivated by men, contrasts with cocoyam, which is traditionally associated with women. This duality not only reflects gendered roles in traditional agriculture but also reinforces the cultural significance of these crops in the *Igbo* society. It further reflects broader cultural schemas regarding masculinity, femininity, labour, and prestige in the *Igbo* society. Nevertheless, the study analysed crops and plants from a figurative perspective rather than within the framework of Cultural Linguistics.

Again, Yakub and Owu-Ewie (2023) examined plant-related proverbs in the Nzema of the Akan ethnic group. The study aimed to identify and analyse proverb-related plants. Dwelling on data obtained from primary and secondary sources, the paper explored how plant imagery provides the basis for conceptualising human behavioural principles in the Nzema society. In the study, twenty plant-related proverbs were examined, highlighting their advisory contents concerning central themes such as generosity, hard work and

perseverance, justice and fairness, carefulness, patience, cooperation, and avoidance of litigation. Yakub and Owu-Ewie (2023) further observed that many didactics are concealed in Nzema proverbs that incorporate plants such as pawpaw, orange, sugarcane, pepper, coconut, banana, and palm fruits, as well as trees in general. Therefore, the Nzema use plant imagery in proverbs to convey various advisory messages that mitigate vices and straighten members' conduct within the culture.

Most of these reviewed studies show that plant-based conceptualisations are not exclusive to the *Igbo* but rather part of broader world-meaning systems. This cross-cultural resonance highlights the essence of examining crop-based conceptualisations within African societies. However, existing scholarship has largely focused on botanical knowledge, oral literature, cosmological beliefs, or the interpretation of proverbs, with comparatively limited attention to how edible crops reveal cultural knowledge within the framework of Cultural Linguistics. Specifically, there is limited scholarly attention on how edible crops among the *Igbo* encode cultural schemas and culturally grounded perceptions of human behaviour and identity. The present study addresses this gap by examining conceptualisations of edible crops among the *Igbo* through the theoretical lens of Cultural Linguistics.

3. Theoretical framework

This study adopts Cultural Linguistics, particularly Sharifian's notion of cultural conceptualisations, as its theoretical framework for analysing the perceptions of edible crops among the *Igbo* people of Southeastern Nigeria. Cultural Linguistics examines the relationship between language, culture, and cognition, arguing that linguistic expressions often encode culturally shared systems of knowledge (Sharifian, 2011, 2017). Within this framework, cultural conceptualisations refer to culturally constructed models, categories, and metaphors that emerge from collective and shared social experiences (Palmer, 1996; Sharifian, 2011, 2015; Keshavarz & Noshadi, 2024). They refer to the way people across different cultural groups construe various aspects of the world and their experiences (Sharifian, 2003). Sharifian (2011) further notes that language emerges from group-level cognition shaped by social interaction, serving as a collective memory reservoir of cultural knowledge and functioning as a medium for transmitting cultural cognition across generations. These assumptions are particularly important to the present study because crop-based expressions among the *Igbo* encode shared cultural understandings that have been socially transmitted and sustained within the community over time.

Among the *Igbo* of Southeastern Nigeria, edible crops are frequently used in the conceptualisation of humans, behaviours, identities and social attributes. Such conceptualisations are not arbitrary linguistic choices; rather, they reflect culturally shared cognitive patterns rooted in *Igbo* social experience and agrarian life. Through repeated use, these crops become symbolic conceptual resources by which members of *Igbo* society interpret morality, attractiveness, usefulness, social worth, and interpersonal behaviour. Cultural Linguistics, therefore, provides an appropriate framework for examining how these crop-based expressions encode deeper cultural schemas within *Igbo* collective cognition.

Dayyan et al. (2015) hold that cultural conceptualisations show how different cultural groups interpret the world, their experiences, and their relationships with others. Their position reinforces the view that meanings attached to linguistic expressions are culturally situated rather than universally fixed. Cultural conceptualisation, therefore, emphasises that meaning is shaped by culturally shared systems of knowledge. Members of a cultural group develop interpretive patterns through social interactions, and these patterns strongly influence how language is used to categorise experiences, evaluate people, and construct social realities. As it relates to the present study, edible crops are conceptualised not merely as agricultural produce, but as symbolic cultural resources through which human attributes and behaviours are analysed and interpreted.

Central to Sharifian's framework are three interrelated but analytically distinct constructs: cultural schemas, cultural categories, and cultural metaphors. Each of these constructs captures how cultural conceptualisations are organised and linguistically encoded. Cultural schemas are shared background cultural knowledge structures that members of a cultural group have about how processes, situations and relationships typically unfold (Sharifian, 2011). Actually, they are not properties of individual minds but are distributed

across members of a community. For the present study, cultural schemas are identified when a crop-based expression presupposes a structured, culturally shared script. Cultural categories are conceptual groupings used by members of a cultural community to classify and organise their social and physical world (Sharifian, 2017). They are prototype-structured. In the context of the present study, they reflect how Igbo speakers categorise social reality through crop imagery. Cultural metaphors are conceptual mappings between a source domain and a target domain, grounded in the shared cultural and experiential knowledge of a speech community (Sharifian, 2011; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Cultural metaphors are operative in the present study when there is a cross-domain mapping between a source domain (crop) and a target domain (human qualities). It is worth noting that these three constructs are not mutually exclusive in practice. A linguistic expression can instantiate a cultural metaphor, activate an underlying cultural schema and further locate its subject within a cultural category. For this study, the emphasis is not on assigning each expression to a particular construct but on identifying the constructs that are evident, how they interact, and what they reveal about Igbo cultural cognition.

This framework is relevant for explaining how crop-based expressions encode culturally grounded evaluations in the *Igbo* society. As noted by Sharifian (2011, 2017), cultural conceptualisations are most richly developed in cultural communities where collective life is organised around shared engagement. The Igbo of Southeastern Nigeria are historically an agrarian society, in which edible crops play central roles in many aspects of their lives. This helps transmit cultural cognition across generations through language, thereby enhancing the reproduction of Igbo cultural knowledge (Sharifian, 2011).

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to examine the culturally embedded meanings associated with edible-crop conceptualisations among the *Igbo* of Southeastern Nigeria. Qualitative inquiry is considered appropriate because the study investigates socially shared interpretations, symbolic meanings and cultural knowledge encoded in language use. It employed purposive sampling to select participants with substantial knowledge of the *Igbo* language and cultural practices. During the data collection process, participants were notified of the research's intent and their right to opt out at will. Their written consent was sought, and ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Arts Research Ethics Committee at the University of Nigeria (UN/FA/FAREC/09092023). Participants were selected across different age and gender categories to capture a broader range of culturally shared conceptualisations across generations and social groups within the *Igbo* society. The interviews were conducted with various *Igbo* individuals from Ebonyi, Imo, Anambra, Enugu, and Abia states in Nigeria. These states form the core Igbo states of Nigeria and are located in the Southeastern part of the country. Four participants: one man, one woman, one male youth and one female youth were selected from each of the states, making the total number of participants twenty. The participants provided different conceptualisations of the edible crops under study. Several open-ended questions were asked about the cultural conceptualisations of edible crops in the *Igbo* society. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed the researchers and respondents to delve into the core and detailed information about the research. Open-ended questions elicited responses that were meaningful and culturally salient to participants.

The interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent, and the identified edible crops were subsequently transcribed phonemically in Standard *Igbo* orthography with tone markings. Relevant expressions containing edible crop conceptualisations were extracted, translated into English and glossed in accordance with the Leipzig Glossing Rules to ensure linguistic clarity and consistency. The edibles were then categorised and analysed, and their sociocultural meanings were highlighted. Analysis was carried out qualitatively using the framework of Cultural Linguistics, particularly Sharifian's notion of cultural conceptualisations, to identify the cultural schemas, categories, and shared cognitive patterns underlying the crop-based expressions (see the appendix for pictures of the edible crops studied).

This study is further situated within the interpretivist paradigm, which recognises meaning as socially and culturally constructed. This paradigm is suitable because the study

seeks to understand how members of the *Igbo* society collectively interpret and assign meaning to edible crops within their sociocultural context.

5. Data presentation and analysis

This section presents and analyses the conceptualisations of edible crops identified in the study. Drawing on the framework of Cultural Linguistics, particularly the notion of cultural conceptualisations, the section examines how edible crops among the *Igbo* function as culturally shared resources for interpreting human behaviour, physical appearance, social identity, and interpersonal relations. The analysis focuses on the cultural schemas, cultural categories, cultural metaphors, and evaluative meanings encoded in crop-based expressions in *Igbo* discourse.

5.1 Overview of the studied edible crops

Table 1 presents the edible crops identified in this study, their English glosses and an overview. It provides the botanical background necessary for understanding the crops.

Table 1. Overview of the studied edible crops

s/n	Crop		Overview of the Crop
	Igbo	Gloss	
1.	<i>Òrómá</i>	Orange	The orange, also known as <i>oroma</i> in <i>Igbo</i> , is a yellowish-green fruit that grows throughout Nigeria. It is popularly known for its natural sweetness, especially when it ripens to a yellow colour. It contains white seeds.
2.	<i>Ùdàrà</i>	African star apple	Native to Africa's tropical nations, the African star apple is a fruit. In the southeast of Africa, this yellowish-red fruit ripens between December and March. Among the <i>Igbo</i> , it is generally referred to as <i>udara</i> .
3.	<i>Ọkwùrù-órù</i>	Pawpaw	The pawpaw fruit, which grows in hot or temperate climates like Africa, has green skin, sweet yellow flesh, and black seeds.
4.	<i>Ákwú</i>	Palm fruit	The palm fruit is a reddish fruit or seed of any palm tree in the palm family. It is a major source of red oil and also a cash crop.
5.	<i>Ọkwùrù</i>	Okro	Okro is a flowering crop that is widely cultivated for its edible green pods. It is called <i>ọkwurù</i> in <i>Igbo</i> . <i>Ọkwùrù</i> is known for its slimy texture. Okro pods are harvested when they are young and tender because they become rough and stringy when older.
6.	<i>Ákí óyìbó</i>	Coconut	Coconut is a tropical fruit that is widely cultivated for its meat, water, oil, and milk. The coconut fruit has a hard, fibrous shell, and its interior is composed of a layer of white, edible meat and a sweet, refreshing liquid known as coconut water.
7.	<i>Jí</i>	Yam	Yams are starchy tubers that are a staple food in many tropical regions worldwide. It is similar in appearance to sweet potatoes but has a rough, dark brown exterior and white, purple or yellow flesh. There are varieties of yams, such as white, yellow, and water yams, each with its own unique flavour and texture.

8.	<i>Ugiri oyibo/Mangoro</i>	Mango	Mango is a tropical fruit that is widely grown in many parts of the world. It has a bean-like shape, with sweet, juicy flesh encased in a tough, fibrous skin that ranges in colour from green to yellow to red.
9.	<i>Òrómá ñkírísí</i>	Lime	Lime is a citrus fruit in the orange family, but it is smaller. It is widely grown in tropical and subtropical regions around the world. It has a bright green skin and acidic juice, and its flesh is used in culinary preparations.
10.	<i>Ùkpákā</i>	Oil bean	Oil bean is a tropical tree that is native to West and Central Africa. It produces a large edible seed used in culinary preparations. Oil bean is a good source of protein, dietary fibre, and healthy fats, as well as vitamins and minerals like vitamin B6, iron, and magnesium.
11.	<i>Ọgbọ̀nọ̀</i>	Bush mango seed	The bush mango is a tropical tree native to West and Central Africa. It produces a large, edible seed used in traditional African medicine and as a dietary supplement. It has a slimy nature when ground. Africans, specifically the <i>Igbo</i> people of Nigeria, use it to cook a soup called 'draw-soup, <i>ọgbọ̀nọ̀</i> soup'.
12.	<i>Úgū</i>	Fluted pumpkin	Fluted pumpkin is a tropical vine that is native to West Africa. It produces large, edible leaves and seeds used in culinary preparations. Fluted pumpkin leaves are commonly used in traditional African soups and stews, and can be eaten raw in salads.
13.	<i>Ósè</i>	Pepper	Pepper is a spice widely used in cuisines around the world. It comes in varieties, each with its unique flavour and heat level.
14.	<i>Tomato/ótùbóàlà</i>	Tomato	The tomato is a fruit widely grown and consumed worldwide. It has various types. It has bright red, yellow, or green skin and a juicy, fleshy interior used in culinary preparations.
15.	<i>Ákí</i>	Palm kernel	A palm kernel is a hard nut obtained after the palm oil/fruit is removed. The nut can be chewed. Among the <i>Igbo</i> , palm kernel oil is popularly known as <i>ude akí</i> and is highly medicinal.
16.	<i>Ọkà</i>	Corn	Corn, also known as maize, is a widely cultivated cereal grain that has been a staple food crop for thousands of years.
17.	<i>Úkwà</i>	Breadfruit	The <i>ukwa</i> tree is of the Moraceae family. A pod/fruit is as large as a watermelon. It weighs as much as ten pounds or more. The fruits are huge, round and hard.

18.	Òsikápá	Rice	Rice is an edible starchy cereal grain and the grass plant (family Poaceae) by which it is produced. Rice is characterised by good quality and uniformity of size and shape, whiteness, and long, thin, uncooked grains.
19.	Ògìrì	Locust beans	<i>Ogiri</i> is a traditional Nigerian condiment made from fermented oil seeds (black when fermented). In English, <i>ogiri</i> is sometimes referred to as castor seed condiment or castor seed paste, although these terms are not widely used outside of Nigeria.
20.	Àgwà	Beans	Beans are a type of legume that is widely grown and consumed throughout the world. They are high in protein, fibre, and other nutrients, and are a staple food in many cultures. Beans are used in culinary preparations, including soups, stews, salads, and side dishes.

The table above lists twenty edible crops along with their glosses. Relevant biological descriptions of the crops are also provided to facilitate a clearer understanding and cultural interpretation of the identified crops.

5.2 Cultural conceptualisations of studied edible crops among the *Igbo*

In this subsection, the edible crops studied are analysed to demonstrate how they serve as a means of human description among the *Igbo* of Southeastern Nigeria.

5.2.1 Edible crops and the cultural conceptualisation of beauty, freshness and desirability

Among the *Igbo* of Southeastern Nigeria, several edible crops are culturally conceptualised as symbolic resources for constructing feminine beauty, desirability, attractiveness, freshness, and marriageability. Crops such as òrómá 'orange', ùdàrà 'African star apple', ókwùrù-òrù 'pawpaw', ákwú 'palm fruit', tomato, mango, úgù 'fluted pumpkin', and rice are frequently mapped onto humans, particularly women, based on culturally valued qualities such as sweetness, freshness, colour, softness, and appealing appearance. Within *Igbo* ethnocultural cognition, these crops belong to broader cultural categories of aesthetically valued and desirable edible items. Their metaphorical extensions into human description reveal culturally shared conceptualisations through which femininity and social desirability are interpreted. It further shows how agrarian objects within the *Igbo* society transcend their nutritional importance to become symbolic resources for constructing gendered meanings. A close analysis of the expressions in this domain reveals the operation of a dominant cultural metaphor, an underlying cultural schema and a culturally specific categorisation of feminine worth. Noticeably, the primary cultural metaphor in this domain is FEMININE DESIRABILITY IS RIPE EDIBLE FRUIT. The source domain comprises the sensory and aesthetic properties of edible fruits, such as sweetness, freshness, colour, ripeness, and softness, while the target domain concerns the social evaluation of women's attractiveness, maturity, and suitability for marriage. Consider the following expression:

- (1) Nwa bụ oroma mmịcha
child COP orange lickable
'The child/lady is a lickable orange.'

The copula construction (*bụ*) directly enacts the metaphorical identification. Hence, the woman is the orange and not merely like it. The modifier **mmịcha** 'lickable' intensifies the sensory dimensions of the source domain, such as pleasure, sweetness, and desirability, projecting onto the target domain of feminine desirability. Within *Igbo* ethnocultural cognition, orange belongs to the cultural category of sweet and aesthetically appealing fruits that are socially associated with attractiveness and enjoyment. Underlying the expression is a cultural schema of feminine maturity as ripening. The ripening schema in *Igbo* cultural

cognition operates as follows: just as fruit passes through stages of growth, ripening, and peak desirability before decaying, so also is the life scenario in which a woman passes through stages of girlhood, physical maturation, and peak marriageability. The linguistic evidence for this schema is visible in:

- (2) **Nwa nwanyị bụ oroma chara acha**
child female COP orange ripe ripe

‘The girl is a ripe orange.’

In this expression, the verb phrase **chara acha** ‘ripe, fully ripened’ is the key linguistic marker. Ripeness in this context activates the full cultural schema, highlighting the moment of maximum social value, the point at which the fruit/woman is most desirable and suitable for consumption/marriage. The schema is further instantiated in marital discourse:

- (3) **Anyị hụrụ oroma/udara chara acha na be gi**
1PL see.PST orange/star apple ripe ripe in house 2SG

‘We saw a ripe orange/star apple in your house.’

The expression is commonly used by the family of an intending groom to indirectly communicate marital interest to the family of a prospective bride. Here, the bride is metaphorically conceptualised as a ripe orange/African star apple whose freshness, sweetness and reproductive abilities are culturally valued. The choice of orange or African star apple as alternative instantiations of the same metaphor reveals that it is the conceptual structure of a ripe fruit equating to a marriageable woman that is of importance. This expression, therefore, reflects a deeper cultural schema in which feminine worth is associated with maturity, fertility and marriageability.

The expression below involving **ùdàrà nwannu**, a special African star apple, introduces a cultural category.

- (4) **Ọ bụ ùdàrà nwannu**
3SG COP star.apple special/species
‘She is a special African star apple.’

Ùdara nwannu is a species of African star apple that is sweeter than the others, thus drawing more attention. In *Igbo* cultural conceptualisation, it refers to a superior or exceptionally desirable variety of African star apple. In this context, it functions as a superprototype within the broader fruit-desirability category. When mapped onto a woman, it communicates that she does not merely belong to a category of desirable women but represents its most central and exemplary member. The linguistic marker **nwannu** ‘special species’ is the evidence for this prototype effect, marking categorical superiority rather than mere membership.

Expressions involving other crops such as pawpaw, tomato, mango, rice, palm fruit, and fluted pumpkin are part of this cultural metaphorical and schematic system. Expressions such as **Adaugo bụ pawpaw chara acha** ‘Adaugo is a ripe pawpaw’, **Tomato Jos m** ‘My Jos tomato’, **Nwa bụ ọsụkwụ akwụ** ‘The lady is a fleshy palm fruit’, **Nwa bụ fresh mango** ‘The lady is a fresh mango’, **Nwata nwaanyị bụ ọnụnụ ụgụ** ‘The young lady is a fresh fluted pumpkin’, similarly encode cultural metaphors in which feminine beauty and desirability are conceptualised through edible crops associated with freshness, sweetness, softness, plumpness, beauty, and visual attractiveness. Pawpaw activates the ripening schema. My Jos tomato introduces a geographical dimension to the metaphor since tomatoes from Jos are culturally known for their superior quality. Fleshy palm fruit instantiates a cultural schema in which physical fullness is a dimension of feminine attractiveness. Likewise, the expression, **nwata bụgodi foreign rice** ‘The lady is a foreign rice’ conceptualises feminine elegance and refinement through the imagery of polished foreign rice, which is culturally associated with refinement, attractiveness and social prestige. Collectively, these expressions demonstrate that FEMININE DESIRABILITY IS RIPE EDIBLE FRUIT is a culturally elaborated conceptual system. As noted by Sharifian (2017), cultural metaphors do not gain their meanings from individual cognition but from negotiations among members of a cultural group.

5.2.2 Edible crops and the cultural conceptualisation of body size and physical appearance

Within *Igbo* ethnocultural cognition, several edible crops are used as conceptual resources for representing human physical appearance, particularly body size, head shape, facial structure, and bodily proportions. The primary metaphor is THE HUMAN BODY IS AN AGRICULTURAL OBJECT. In these conceptualisations, structural and morphological properties of crops are mapped onto human anatomy. Unlike the previous domain, which foregrounded desirability, this domain concerns physical configuration and bodily evaluation. Consider:

- (5) **O nwere ukwụ ji**
3SG have leg yam
'He/She has yam legs (big legs).'

The linguistic structure in the expression is possessive (*nwere* – has/possesses), thereby framing the bodily feature as a quality that the person has rather than is. It positions the crop attribute as a descriptor of a part. The cultural metaphor evident here is that LARGE BODY PARTS ARE BULKY CROPS. The size/bulk of the yam in the source domain is mapped to the target domain of human leg proportion. Evidently, this mapping is grounded in a cultural schema of visual analogy. This is because the *Igbo* people, as an agrarian community with embodied familiarity with yam tubers, possess shared perceptual knowledge that makes the analogy legible. Such mappings reflect an ethnocultural schema in which largeness and heaviness are interpreted through agricultural imagery. Similarly:

- (6) **Isi mangoro**
head mango
'Mango head (elongated head shape).'
- (7) **O nwere isi ukwa**
3SG have head breadfruit
'He/She has a breadfruit head (large head).'

In these expressions, the irregular shapes of certain crops are projected onto the human head, projecting the cultural metaphor, HEAD SHAPE IS FRUIT MORPHOLOGY. The mango maps onto an elongated head shape, drawing on the irregular, oblong morphology of certain mango varieties. The large spherical structure of the breadfruit is used in the expression above to conceptualise a large human head. The breadfruit maps onto a large spherical head, drawing on the crop's known size and round structure. The beans are also used to convey a similar sense. The cultural schema underlying these expressions is morphological correspondence because the *Igbo* speech community shares a cognitive framework in which fruit shapes serve as a classificatory system for human physical variation.

Similarly, expressions involving rice **ọ dị ka mkpụrụ rice** conceptualise smallness and slimness, while **oroma nkịrịsị** 'lime' is used to represent small body size. Consider the example below:

- (8) **Ọ dị ka mkpụrụ rice**
3SG be like seed/grain rice
'He/She is a grain of rice.'

The above expression introduces a cultural category of bodily smallness whose prototype is the rice grain. The simile marker **dị ka** 'is like' signals that the person is not fully identified with the rice grain but compared to it, suggesting a notable deviation from the normative bodily category. Palm fruit and palm kernel expressions also contribute to bodily evaluation, particularly in describing plumpness or heaviness. **Akpa beans/rice** 'bag of beans/rice' is used to symbolise fatness and overweight. Also, the expression **eze ọka** 'corn teeth' is used to describe a person with scanty or irregularly spaced teeth. The mapping stems from poorly developed corn with an incomplete or uneven distribution of kernels on the cob. Hence, the arrangement of corn kernels is mapped onto the human dental structure through visual analogy. This presents a conceptual schema of spatial arrangement as dental morphology, grounded in the visual familiarity of corn cobs in everyday *Igbo* agricultural life. These conceptualisations demonstrate that physical appearance in *Igbo* discourse is systematically structured through agricultural analogies that reflect everyday sensory familiarity with crops.

It is worth noting that these conceptualisations are not arbitrary metaphors but culturally grounded systems that draw on shape, size, and properties of agricultural objects.

5.2.3 Edible crops and the cultural conceptualisation of behavioural traits

In *Igbo* ethnocultural cognition, edible crops are also used to conceptualise human behavioural traits, including speech patterns, speed of action, temperament, emotional reactivity, and social conduct. Unlike the case with physical appearance, which is grounded in visual analogy, behavioural conceptualisations are grounded in perceived functional properties of crops, such as texture, dispersal patterns, and physical responses to force. The cultural metaphor in this domain is HUMAN BEHAVIOUR IS CROP BEHAVIOUR UNDER PHYSICAL CONDITIONS. The source domain is the physical and functional behaviour of crops, while the target domain is the human behavioural qualities. The expression below highlights sluggishness and slow behaviour:

- (9) **Ngozi na-alọ ka ọkwurụ**
Ngozi draw like okra
'Ngozi acts like an okra (is sluggish/slow).'

The above mapping activates a cultural schema in which viscosity is understood as sluggishness. Here, the slimy and slow-moving texture of the okra is conceptually mapped onto slow, resistant human locomotion. This schema is culturally grounded because the processing of the okra is an everyday activity in *Igbo* domestic life, thereby making the perceptual analogy immediately accessible to all members of the community. This same schema is extended to **ọgbọ̀nọ̀** 'Bush mango seed' due to its slimy consistency when processed. In mapping speech, talkativeness and social excesses, **ụkpákā** 'oil bean' is used. Consider the expression below:

- (10) **Ọnụ ya na-agba ka ụkpaka**
mouth 3SG run like oil.bean
'His/her mouth runs like oil bean (very talkative).'

In the expression above, the explosive nature of the oil bean seed when it opens is mapped onto uncontrolled or excessive speech. The cultural metaphor evident here is TALKATIVENESS IS EXPLOSIVE DISPERSAL. The source domain is the physical behaviour of the oil bean seed, while uncontrolled excessive speech is the target domain. The cultural schema underlying this metaphor is that of contained substance seeking release. In the same way, an oil bean pod can only contain its seed until internal pressure forces dispersal; so is it for a talkative person who cannot contain their words. It further reveals that in *Igbo* cultural cognition, excessive speech is seen not merely as a social failing but as a failure of containment. Consider this expression that highlights temperament and aggression:

- (11) **Ọ na-akpa agwa ka ose**
3SG behave act like pepper
'He/She behaves like pepper (is harsh/aggressive).'

The above expression instantiates the cultural metaphor AGGRESSION IS BURNING SENSATION. The source domain draws from the sensory experience of the pepper and is mapped onto the target domain of harsh, aggressive, and emotionally assaulting human behaviour. This conceptualisation reflects a culturally shared schema in which intensity of physical sensation corresponds to emotional or behavioural aggression. An example of pride and social behaviour is:

- (12) **Ọ na-eko ka beans**
3SG swell like beans
'He/She is proud (like swollen beans).'

Here, the expansion of beans when soaked or cooked is mapped onto arrogance or pride, showing the cultural metaphor, PRIDE IS PHYSICAL EXPANSION. The source domain is the observable expansion of beans when soaked or cooked, while the target domain is arrogance. The cultural schema evident here is one of unnatural expansion beyond proper limits. The conceptualisation reflects a behavioural schema in which physical expansion corresponds to

perceived inflation of self-importance. Across the examples, it is obvious that the above mappings demonstrate that *Igbo* behavioural evaluation is grounded in embodied experiential knowledge of agricultural processes.

5.2.4 Edible crops and the cultural conceptualisation of intelligence and social worth

Among the *Igbo* of Southeastern Nigeria, edible crops are also used as symbolic markers for assessing intelligence and social worth. In these conceptualisations, the physical properties of crops such as hardness, hollowness, rottenness, and unpleasant smell are metaphorically mapped onto human cognitive ability and social acceptability. These mappings reveal culturally shared schemas through which members of the society interpret competence and moral behaviour. The operative cultural metaphor for intelligence is COGNITIVE ABILITY IS PHYSICAL TRACTABILITY. The source domain is the physical property of hardness or softness in crops, while the target domain is the mind's ability to receive, process and engage with ideas. Consider the following expression:

- (13) **Isi akị**
head coconut/palm.kernel
'Coconut head' / 'Palm kernel head.'

The expression **isi akị** refers to a person perceived as unintelligent, stubborn, or cognitively rigid. The conceptualisation derives from the hard shells of coconuts and palm kernels. Hardness in this context symbolises mental inflexibility and the inability to reason properly. In the case of the coconut, the hollow interior further reinforces the schema of intellectual emptiness. Thus, the crop's physical properties serve as cognitive models for interpreting intelligence and reasoning ability. Another related expression is:

- (14) **Isiokwu a tara akị**
matter this hard kernel
'This issue is hard like palm kernel.'

Here, the hardness of palm kernel is mapped onto difficulty or complexity. The expression reflects a cognitive schema in which resistance to physical breaking corresponds to intellectual difficulty or interpretive challenge. Another important conceptual domain involves moral and social evaluation:

- (15) **Ákwụ rebiri ọnụ**
palm.fruit spoil mouth
'Rotten palm fruit.'

This expression is used to describe a morally corrupt, socially irresponsible or ethically questionable person, reflecting the cultural metaphor, MORAL DECLINE IS DECAY/MORAL WORTH IS FRESHNESS. The conceptualisation derives from the cultural undesirability of rotten palm fruits, whose decay symbolises degeneration and worthlessness. In this case, physical spoilage becomes a metaphorical framework for interpreting moral decline. The cultural schema underlying this metaphor is that of value as freshness because freshness signals maximum value and desirability, while decayed crops represent worthlessness and contamination. Similarly, the expression below supports this assertion:

- (16) **Awarawa tomato**
damaged tomato
'Spoilt/damaged tomato.'

The expression **awarawa tomato** is used to refer to someone or something considered unattractive, inferior, or socially diminished. Since damaged tomatoes lose their market value and are often sold cheaply, deterioration in the crop becomes associated with reduced social value and diminished desirability. This reflects a schema in which freshness symbolises value, while decay symbolises inferiority and decline.

Expressions involving **ògìrì** 'locust beans', also encode moral and social judgment. The cultural metaphor is SOCIAL UNDESIRABILITY IS FOUL ODOUR.

- (17) **Eze/ọ̀nụ gi na-esi ka ogiri-okpeyi**
Teeth/mouth 2SG smell like locust.beans
'Your teeth/mouth smell like locust beans.'

Because fermented locust beans produce a strong odour, the crop is culturally associated with unpleasantness and social discomfort. When mapped on humans, it reveals a cultural schema of olfactory contamination as social contamination, highlighting negative social evaluation associated with dirtiness, poor hygiene, or social undesirability. Similarly, the *Igbo* use expressions such as **mmiri beans** 'bean water' to describe foul smell. Across these conceptualisations, intellectual inadequacy, inferiority, and social rejection are interpreted through culturally familiar agricultural experiences. Hardness becomes a model of stubbornness and unintelligence; spoilage represents moral decline, while an unpleasant smell encodes social disgust and rejection.

5.2.4 Edible crops and existential reflection

Beyond physical description and social evaluation, some conceptualisations of edible crops among the *Igbo* extend into existential and philosophical reflection. In such expressions, crops are used to convey the transience of human existence, the inevitability of death, and the vanity of worldly life. The cultural metaphor operative here is that HUMAN EXISTENCE IS THE LIFE CYCLE OF A FRUIT. Consider the expression:

- (18) **Ụwa bụ pawpaw**
world COP pawpaw
'The world is pawpaw.'

This expression, popularised in the song titled **Ụwa bụ pawpaw** by the *Igbo* musician Ted Obinna, conceptualises the world as a pawpaw fruit. The song is an *Igbo* classic highlife that centres on the instability and temporality of life. This confirms Sharifian's (2017) argument that cultural conceptualisations are often negotiated and stabilised across a speech community through repeated shared practices such as music and narratives. Consider the lyrics of the song:

- (19) **Ụwa bụ pawpaw**
world COP pawpaw
'The world is pawpaw.'
- Pawpaw daa n'ala ya akụwasịa**
Pawpaw fall LOC-ground 3SG scatter/burst
'Pawpaw scatters when it falls to the ground.'
- Ụwa bụ pawpaw**
world COP pawpaw
'The world is pawpaw.'

The conceptualisation stems from the nature of overripe pawpaw, which eventually falls from the tree, bursts open, and decays. This highlights the transient nature and temporality of human existence. It further provides a schematic elaboration of the metaphor, which is the schema of the fruit life cycle as a model of human existence. Just as the pawpaw inevitably deteriorates after ripening, human beings are understood to be subject to death, marking the fleeting nature of life. Each stage of this biological process is mapped onto the human existential trajectory, including birth, growth, maturity, death and dissolution. As Sharifian (2011) argues, cultural schemas come from the experience of members of a cultural group. With the *Igbo* being traditionally agrarian, no experience is more collectively shared, more cyclically repeated, and more existentially resonant than the life, ripening, and falling of fruit.

5.3 Positive and negative connotations of the studied edible crops

The findings reveal that the conceptualisation of edible crops among the *Igbo* carries both positive and negative connotations depending on the cultural context in which they are used. These connotations are informed by culturally shared perceptions relating to beauty, freshness, intelligence, size, and social desirability. While some of the crops serve as terms of admiration and praise, others function as forms of ridicule, insult or social evaluation. In

certain cases, the same crop may convey both positive and negative meanings depending on the context of usage.

Positive connotations commonly include beauty, freshness, attractiveness, fertility, and elegance. Expressions involving **òrómá** 'orange', **ùdàrà** 'African star apple', **òkwùrù-òrù** 'pawpaw', **ùgù** 'fluted pumpkin', **ákwù** 'palm fruit', and **Tomato Jos** are used as forms of praise and admiration. This is because these crops are culturally associated with sweetness, freshness, colourfulness, and visual attractiveness, which are mapped onto humans, especially women.

Negative connotations on their part are associated with sluggishness, unpleasant smell, unintelligence, pride, inferiority and deformity. Edible crops such as **òkwùrù** 'okro', **ògbònò** 'bush mango', **òsè** 'pepper', **ákí** 'palm kernel', **ákí óyibó** 'coconut', **ùkpákā** 'oil bean', **ògiri** 'locust beans', **òrómá ñkírísí** 'lime', and **awarawa tomato** 'damaged tomato' are used to convey negative evaluations. These conceptualisations reflect how undesirable physical properties of some edible crops become a cultural framework for evaluating human behaviour and social worth.

The findings further show that some cultural conceptualisations of edible crops have both positive and negative connotations. For instance, **Tomato Jos** symbolises beauty, attractiveness and superiority while **Awarawa Tomato** conveys inferiority or social decline. Similarly, rice may signify smallness in one context (**mkpùrù rice**) but refinement and elegance in another (**foreign rice**). These variations imply that the conceptualisations of edible crops are highly context-sensitive and culturally negotiated.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined the cultural conceptualisations of edible crops among the *Igbo* of Southeastern Nigeria within the framework of Cultural Linguistics. The findings reveal that edible crops within *Igbo* discourse transcend the terrains of agricultural or nutritional objects. They are culturally shared cognitive resources through which the *Igbo* people interpret beauty, behaviour, intelligence, physical appearance, and existential realities. These conceptualisations are embedded in *Igbo* ethnocultural cognition and are transmitted through language as part of collective cultural knowledge.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that the cultural conceptualisations of edible crops are largely grounded in embodied experiences associated with *Igbo* agrarian life. Through cultural schemas, knowledge shared by the vast majority of *Igbo* speakers concerning the identified crops is highlighted. Cultural categories reflected culturally constructed categories, while cultural metaphors showed cross-domain conceptualisations. Features such as sweetness, freshness, smell, hardness, ripeness, colour, and size are metaphorically extended to humans and social situations. This supports the Cultural Linguistics position that language encodes culturally distributed conceptual structures shaped by shared experience and social interaction. It is also observed that some of the conceptualisations are gendered, particularly those associated with beauty, desirability, and marriageability, such as orange, African star apple and fluted pumpkin. Additionally, the conceptualisations are context-sensitive and can carry both positive and negative connotations.

This study shows that the way *Igbo* people conceptualise edible crops is culturally transmitted and embedded in their language system. Even though the *Igbo* language has varieties, each with its unique conceptualisations, it is still understood to some extent, and the connection between each dialect and the conceptualisations of edible crops remains unbreakable. Therefore, understanding crop conceptualisations among the *Igbo* helps them avoid misunderstanding the content and context in which a crop is used to describe a person or situation. Although the identified cultural conceptualisations slightly differ among the *Igbo* of Southeastern Nigeria, they are mutually intelligible.

Overall, the study concludes that the cultural conceptualisations of edible crops among the *Igbo* of Southeastern Nigeria constitute an important aspect of indigenous cultural cognition, linguistic creativity, and ethnocultural meaning construction. It demonstrates how agrarian experience shapes language, cognition, and social interpretation within the *Igbo* cultural context.

Abbreviations

1PL=first person plural, 2SG=second person singular, 3SG=third person singular, COP=copula, LOC=locative marker tone, PST=past.

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Appendix – Images of the Studied Edible Crops

<p>Òrómá 'orange'</p> 	<p>Ùdàrà 'Star Apple'</p> 	<p>Ọkwùrù-órù 'pawpaw'</p> 	<p>Ákwù 'Palm fruit'</p> 
<p>Ọkwùrù 'Okro'</p> 	<p>Ákí óyibó 'Coconut'</p> 	<p>Jí 'yam'</p> 	<p>Mangoro 'mango'</p> 
<p>Òrómá ñkírísí 'lime'</p> 	<p>Ụkpákā 'oil bean'</p> 	<p>Ọgbòṅò 'Bush mango'</p> 	<p>Ụgū 'fluted pumpkin'</p> 
<p>Ósè 'pepper'</p> 	<p><i>Tomato</i></p> 	<p>Ákí 'palm kernel'</p> 	<p>Ọkà 'corn'</p> 
<p>Ụkwà 'breadfruit'</p> 	<p>Òsikápá 'rice'</p> 	<p>Ògìrì 'locust beans'</p> 	<p>Àgwà 'beans'</p> 