

# AESTHETICS, SEMIOTICS AND ILLUSTRATIVE ANALYSIS OF YORUBA CULTURAL MOTIFS

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## ABSTRACT

*Communicative purposes of encoding and embellishment are worldwide applications of symbols used in artworks, which are rendered in motifs. However, the conceptual process of decoding the motifs culturally demands learning to gain mastery in approaching its interpretation which this paper aims to achieve. The study provides the requisite background knowledge and an illustrative context for interpreting cultural motifs in a multimedia painting project. Consequent upon the argument in this study, the paper made submissions which can serve as working manual for stakeholders and way out of possible semiological challenges among which is dismantling the work into its component parts which will reveal the meaning of the whole from the parts. Conclusively, the experimental multimedia work under discourse opines that human destiny plays a mysterious role in controlling life events, while the manifestation of good desires depend greatly on human efforts, the action, inactions and reactions of man in his or her life are important pointers to what he becomes, legacies he leaves behind and the posterity accorded him/her.*

**Keyword:** - Semiotics, Yoruba, Cultural motifs, Aesthetic Analysis, Symbols

## 1. INTRODUCTION: ARTISTIC MOTIFS AND THEIR MEANING

The world over, symbols have been applied to encode, shorten and embellish the communication process, however, the role of cultural symbols in the communication instrument of a set of people does not debar any interest group from effective and efficient understanding of the message been passed across; these symbols are rendered in motifs which may be variants of what they represent or otherwise. Parks (2016) suggests, a motif is an element in a composition or design that can be used repeatedly for decorative, structural, or iconographic purposes. Motif can be representational or abstract, and it can be endowed with symbolic meaning. Motifs can be repeated in multiple artworks and often recur throughout the life's work of an individual artist (John A. Parks, Universal Principles of Art). Abdullahi-Idiagbon (2009) states that Yoruba cultural symbols are symbolic not because of what they are ordinarily but because of what they are representing within the Yoruba cosmology. A keen observer would find these symbols on household objects, houses, shrines, markets, shops and other items such as drums, calabash for eating, drinking or fetching water, terracotta water pitcher etc., this is evidence of personal identity and value that the owner of such object attach to the meaning of the symbols. These symbols are sparsely employed as motifs embellishing artworks among the Yoruba people; Areo and Kalilu (2013) infer that motifs thus becomes a voiceless semantic of a visual language, to be appreciated and enjoyed by all but only to be decoded by those with knowledge about the people, by this, an abstract (visual) sign is charged with meaning and symbolic value.

### 1.1 What is Semiotics?

In the opinion of Curtin (2005), Semiotics is concerned with the nature and function of language (be it the relatively ambiguous status of visual language) and the processes by which meaning is generated and understood. Semiotic analysis acknowledges the position, or role, of the individual in terms of a challenge to any notion of fixed or unitary or universal meaning and therefore subjectivity can be engaged dynamically with the image or object. A significant way that subjectivity is acknowledged is in the fact that our perception, or reading, of images and objects can be revealed as socially conditioned. Central to semiotic analysis, in this respect, is the recognition of how visual and

material culture is coded; the social conventions which link signs with meanings. Insofar as visual and material culture is coded, meaning is not intrinsic to the image or object and therefore not self-evident.

Semiotics is the study of works of art signs and symbols, either individually or grouped in sign systems that can give us more insight from the work source and meaning (Ferreira, 2007). Icons as a form of semiotics are all kinds of pictures representing an object like photos, drawings and paintings. Most pictures have a double meaning; visual and symbolic, conventional and arbitrary. Everyone knows, for example, that a picture of an old woman with a broom it is just a picture of an old woman but it can be perceived as a picture of a witch. Modern advertising is filled with this type of signage that holds double meanings. In similar vein, Williams (2000) asserts that, Semiotics is the theoretical accounting for signs and what they do. It is the study of signs and sign-using behaviour including semiosis or the action of signs. The submission of Williams is not without a caution, the words sign and symbol are not synonymous. A sign is a mark, emblem or pictogram that conveys specific information in a direct and unambiguous manner. A symbol is a sign, device or image that represents one thing but means something else. A symbol derives meaning from those who use it.

### 1.2 Statement of Problem

The differentiating stance of Williams (2000) between signs and symbols is the motivation for this research in that up and coming Art students, lovers and other stakeholders need to immerse themselves into the origin of each work in order to extract meaning from it. It is necessary to overcome four obstacles pointed out in the study, these are; first, the meaning may be cloaked in secrecy within the society, concealed from outsiders and at times, also from some within the society; second, the meaning may be forgotten over time; third, the meaning may change over time; and fourth, the pictorial representation may be altered over time. If any of the above characterise any artwork, dismantling such work into component parts.

## 2. AESTHETIC GUIDE TO YORUBA SEMIOLOGY

The current research is deemed necessary as we consider the contention of Carroll (1993) that it is a standard characteristic of artworks "that they often come with features that are unusual, puzzling, initially mysterious or disconcerting, or with features whose portents are far from obvious." This is not a problem to be dreaded when facing artworks, but a challenge to be enjoyed. Artworks require a tolerance for ambiguity. Since artworks are rarely obvious, they need to be interpreted in order to be understood. Even when artworks seem obvious at first glance, they can be revealed to be much more complex than we first thought, especially if we ask some of the interpretive questions on individual basis.

This study provides the requisite background knowledge and an illustrative context for interpreting cultural motifs in a multimedia painting project; while similar studies have shown their uses on Adire or simply drawn them in comparative illustration sake, this paper interprets the motifs based on Yoruba cultural semiotics. On this note, it becomes necessary to take a diet of semiological approaches to artistic motifs.

### 2.1 Approaches to Interpreting Artistic Motifs

Five classes were highlighted by Areo and Kalilu (2013) in an attempt to providing a framework for interpretation and understanding of Yoruba motifs; these are:

1. The geometric motifs are dots, lines of various forms such as straight lines, hatching, cross hatching, etc; triangles, squares, circles, semi-circles, spiral lines and rectangles.
2. The figural motifs are of two sub-types; zoomorphic and floral
  - A. The zoomorphic motifs are of eight sub-group: avian, reptilian and mammalian species, arthropods, annelids, mollusca, pisces, and amphibians.
    - i. The avian species represented are about twelve. They are Opeere (Brown-eared bulbul), Agbufon (Crowned Crane), Adaba (Red eyed dove), pepeye (duck), Asadi (Black kite, milvus migrans), Etu (Guinea fowl), Adie (fowl), Okin (Indian peafowl, pavo cristatus), Odidere (African grey parrot), Tolotolo (Turkey), Igun (Hooded vulture, necrocyrtes monachus), and Ogongo (Ostrich).
    - ii. The reptilian species in their own cases are about seven types: Alangba (Lizard), Akika (Pangolin), Ejo (snake), Alabahun (Tortoise) Oni (Nile crocodile, crocodylus niloticus), Eja (Fish), Omoole (Wall gecko), and Oga (Chamelion).
    - iii. Three mammalian species; Adon, (bat), Okere (squirrel), and Eerin (Elephant) are identifiable.
    - iv. The arthropods are about two. They are Okun (Millipede), and Akeeke (Scorpion).
    - v. Only one annelid, Ekolo (Earthworm) is identifiable.
    - vi. Similarly, Igbini, (African Giant Snail, archachatina marginata) is the only one represented in the mollusca sub-group.
    - vii. The pisces is the Tilapia in its own case.

viii. Only one amphibian motif, Opolo (Toad) is used.

B. The floral motifs are Ewe Ege, and Ewe Oye/Akoko, respectively foliage of cassava and *markhamia tomentosa*. Other flora motifs are Fulawa (Petals), Ogede were (Banana), Ogede Agbagba (Plantain) Koko (cocoa pod), Koro Owu (Cotton seed), Odan (Fig tree), and Oka baba (Guinea corn plant).

3. The skewomorphic, that is representation of man-made objects, are more varied. They range from utensils to other objects. In this range are mirror, knife, Irukere (horse tail), aago owo (wrist watch), walaa (slate), isana (matches), garawa (bucket), ese masiini (sewing machine's pedal), opo Mapo (Mapo hall pillars), koko taba (tobacco pipe) orita (road junction), amuga (scissors), agbo ile (house compound), igbako (ladle), suga (sugar cubes), opon Ifa (Ifa divination tray), ilu gangan (Gangan talking drum), sekere (gourd rattle), akete (straw hat), taya (tyre), ile eyin (egg tray), yeti (ear ring), atori (whips), agboorun (umbrella), ileke bebe (waist beads), and boolu (ball).
4. The letters are the alphabets of particularly the Yoruba language.
5. The motifs based on celestial bodies or planets for which Kalilu had invented the word celestiomorphic, such as, Osupa (moon), and irawo (stars).

Some of these motifs are pictorial and discernible, while some of them have little pictorial semblance to what is represented. The above submission of Areo and Kalilu (2013) is a result of an art historical study; through fieldwork, which traces the origin and meaning of these motifs thematically, analyses and group them in order to place them in context and as belonging and originating from among the Yorubas.

Parsons (1987) proposed a model of processing artworks based on the analysis of interviews. He described five different ways of dealing with artworks, that is, five different stages of aesthetic processing that are to be understood as developmental stages:

- A. favouritism (content-oriented preference and personal taste),
- B. preference for beauty and explicit realism,
- C. expressiveness (empathy with the artist's feelings),
- D. focus on style and form,
- E. autonomy (appraisal of the underlying concepts and the autonomy of the artwork).

Noel Carroll, a contemporary aesthetician, summarizes Arthur Danto's theory as containing five major propositions; namely, that a work of art:

- A. is about something,
- B. projects a point of view,
- C. projects this point of view by rhetorical means,
- D. requires interpretation
- E. the work and interpretation require an art-historical context.

The cultural perspective was the theme of Farzaneh & Merza (2014) assertion, Semiotics is believed to depend on culture and is regarded as the method with which people make communication, either consciously or unconsciously, via cultural features like the visual image (Lawes, 2002). Consequently, "images in different cultures have different meanings", different communities are expected to analyze and deliver messages differently because culturally different groups may respond to and understand differently regarding the existence of an equal stimulus (Muller, 2005). Moreover, cultural manifestations, like values, myths, symbols (rooted in semiotics) and customs have significant effects on perceiving and decoding the art works (Luna, Peracchio, & Juan, 2002).

### 3. ILLUSTRATIVE ANALYSIS

Different approaches may be taken to interpret an artistic workpiece, but it is sacrosanct to have the basic knowledge of the underlying concepts of the individual components of the artefact; the submissions above are put together to present the illustrative analysis hereby presented:





**Fig. 1: Ipo Ayanmo (Destiny Position), Mixed media, 96in X 48in  
Source: Authors' Collection**

- The process of biological birth registers a large mass into the destiny race with each struggling to attain the top among their colleagues in different strata; education, politics, career, leadership, religion etc,
- however, the factors determining the attainment of such pursuit may be totally subject to their destiny – the head (which is inalterable by different scholars e.g Oduwole, 1996, Abimbola, 1976 or alterable, according to other scholars such as Campbell, 1996, Idowu, 1962.
- Colour usage is chosen to depict the setting of the occurrence illustrated in the work, the earth.
- Masks – according to the theme of the work, “Que sera, sera”, the mask denotes the destiny of the individual soul – running the race of life.
- This informs the role played by social interaction, symbolised in this work as;
  - i. Ooya - it is an indication of imminent separation (Abdullahi-Idiagbon, 2009). This implies the making and breaking of relationships, gaining and losing of connections etc on the destiny journey; it is repeated to emphasis different scheming of trusted entities even close to the gate of fulfilment.
  - ii. alangba (lizard) – from the Yoruba proverb, “Opo alangba lo da kun de le a o m’eyi ti nu run” - (several lizards lie on their belly, the one with the stomach pain cannot be identified).The interpretation being that you cannot specifically discern the thought, feelings and plans of people towards you, therefore you must be very careful and watchful. Stephen (2002).

- iii. spiral lines representing curly nature of snake which may be experienced in social relationships in form of betrayals, intimidations etc and character of individuals which may clog their progress or even eliminate them untimely from the race of destiny.
- iv. Cowries – times of financial boom and losses will also characterise the journey, issues that will be occasioned by desire or love for money, integrity tests,
- v. Footprints – hereditary traits, inheritance and professional linkages across genealogies;
- vi. Crossroad – the bridge-like motif means, your journey may be difficult but you will get there (Areo and Omisakin, 2016). It is sometimes interchangeably used as bridge connoting ladder to the next phase of the journey of life
- vii. Dots - sanctifying and sacred pointillism that conveys transformation and transcendence of worldly entities, they are points of light and blessing – provided by the creator (Drewal and Mason, 1977)
- viii. Rectangular lines broken diagonally - your inner spirit will always defend you (Areo and Omisakin, 2016).
- ix. Wall gecko – in this work, it means safe journey that is peaceful experience through the journey home (destination). It is a prominent desire of every warrior to achieve the success without sustaining any injury. It symbolizes long life (Stephen, 2002) it is used to avert curses of death and other unfortunate occurrences.
- x. Cow horn – The cow horn is used here as a foreshortened view of the destiny endeavours of man embodied in the head; which is why a man (dot end of the horn) is selected among many equals as the head (leader) - the process of such emergence is subject to divine ordination which mortals cannot influence despite many intentional and unintentional efforts. Based on submissions of Ekanola (2006), the Yoruba believe that the prenatal choice of Ori determines, finally, the destiny and personality of man (used generically) on earth. Idowu, Makinde, and Gbadegesin argue that the Yoruba believe that there are still some ways by which a bad Ori can be changed for the better and a good Ori altered for the worse. They maintain that the Yoruba are of the view that a bad Ori can be improved through consultations with Orunmila (a deity in Yoruba traditional thought), etutu (sacrifice), and hard work. Conversely, an originally good Ori may also be altered for the worse through the activities of malicious agents like the aje (witches), laziness, or bad character.

#### 4. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The artistic make up of each viewer of an artwork is a vital determinant of the interpretation attached to the artwork before him/her at any point in time, since artworks are symbolic elements in term of component units and the whole, the knowledge of the source culture of the artist will help the viewer to better understand any artefact as closely as possible to the artist's mind. This paper has presented a working manual for stakeholders in artistic education and research, consequent upon the foregoing, this paper submits that:

- 1) The mental process of interpreting an artwork is determined by personal perception displayed by an individual's social conditioning;
- 2) Knowledge of wherewithal of encoding and decoding visual and material culture as well as social conventions is required in linking signs with meanings.
- 3) Meaning of any cultural artefact is not intrinsic but determined by the parent culture. In agreement with Ferreira (2007), each of these signs has no natural meaning and become signs only when we provide them with meaning. This is the thrust for studying the cultural semiotics since no intelligence is invited to created meanings for any cultural artefact of motif.
- 4) Initial puzzling, mysterious sight of artistic motifs is not to be dreaded nor scare the viewer but rather invoke explorative adventure of the semantics of the component parts and the whole.

In the eventuality of being faced with obstacles highlighted by Williams (2000), we recommend the following solutions;

- a) If the meaning is seemingly cloaked in secrecy within the society, concealed from outsiders and at times, also from some within the society; dismantling the work into its component parts will reveal the meaning of the whole from the parts;
- b) second, if the meaning is forgotten over time; this and similar scholarly works are reference guides that can be consulted from time-to-time

- c) third, if the meaning seemingly changed over time; this is usually characteristic of culture since it is an evolving phenomenon, however, visually breaking down the work into its basic units will provide an effective guide to interpreting from its origin to fit the prevailing context;
- d) fourth, if the pictorial representation be altered with time; dismantling such work into component parts irrespective of the composition techniques will unravel the meaning of the whole.

Conclusively, the experimental multimedia work under discourse opines that human destiny plays a mysterious role in controlling life events, while the manifestation of good desires depend greatly on human efforts, the action, inactions and reactions of man in his or her life are important pointers to what he becomes, legacies he leaves behind and the posterity accorded him/her. Every social interaction are paramount in fulfilling one's destiny as the popular adage goes, "Aguntan to ba b'aja rin, yio je igbe", therefore, the route that one's leg takes or who the legs follow after will influence ones habit or character which resultantly culminate in ones way of life.

Ekanola (2006) asserts, three key factors seem to be vital in the determination of a person's life course: hereditary factors, environmental factors, and character. The relation between the first two factors and the third one is such that in the formation of character, each person has a choice to either allow or disallow facts of heredity and environment to dictate the particular decision and actions which will ultimately form the character. Character in the work under discourse is the attitude that individuals portray towards every person and occurrences on the way of achieving their destiny and thereby agrees with Oke (1988) that "a man's character is his destiny" this entails his actions and reactions to fellow man and various events in his life.

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