

Abstract

A symbol is anything that is adapted to signify another thing or concept. The use of signs and symbols is inevitable in human existence because all objects, images, and gestures have connotative essence, no matter how relatively trivial they may seem. This paper seeks to, in line with the theory of semiotics according to Ferreira (2007), highlight some signs and symbols in African art forms. These symbols, some of which are human and animalistic motifs, colours, and shapes found on some African art forms, traditional clothing, as well as, utilitarian objects are however analysed based on the connotative functions they play within the various contexts in which they exist. The paper concludes on the note that, the disparities and dynamism of human existence can influence the use and contextual meanings of some symbols as one moves from one location to the other.

Keywords: Semiotics, African, Art.

Introduction

The saying that 'a picture speaks a thousand words' is perhaps an ideal way to describe a sign or symbol. A simple picture or imagery can convey messages often too complicated to be explained in several sentences. Signs and symbols are part of the everyday life of an average human. Some help humans to identify the safe speed to drive on a road or give warnings about impending dangers. Others, such as the Christian crucifix, identify individuals with a certain form of belief. The terms 'sign' and 'symbol' are sometimes used interchangeably as they connote almost the same meaning. However, UXL Encyclopedia of Science (2002) holds that while signs are often used as codes, symbols expand the notions of signs and signals. Symbols are characterized by rich meanings that are multiple, fluid, diverse, layered, complex, and frequently predicated on metaphorical associations that assert an analogy between things from different contexts that usually may not be connected. In the same vein, Jerome (2008) also sees symbols as anything that represents another thing by virtue of customary association due to a conceptual connection or perceived resemblance. For the sake of this paper, these two terms will be used together and interchangeably.

The Use of Signs and Symbols

The use of signs and symbols is an efficient means of communication; mostly a universal iconography that is understood no matter what language or dialect spoken. Corporate logos are an example of such iconography. Company symbols, also known as 'logos' are easily identified no matter the place or the language barrier. For instance, the logo of the Coca-Cola bottling company or the Mercedes Benz company can be recognized anywhere around the world. Health and safety signs and road signs are also examples of symbols that are created to be recognized by individuals regardless of the language they speak.

Distinguished signatures are sometimes used formally to connote an individual's endorsement and approval of something; often times a document. This form of signature is usually exclusively possessed by one individual. Also serving the same purpose of endorsement, in a semi-formal parlance, thumb prints are used as another form of signature; as it is known that no two human beings possess the same finger prints. Numbers, according to UXL Encyclopedia of Science (2002), are used to determine quantity...to express the rank or sequence or order of items...Finally, numbers can be used for purposes of identification. Numbers are therefore symbols adopted in denoting the mental perception of quantity. Before books, when manuscripts were used, abbreviations and signs were very common as they not only saved the writer time due to the fact that all the works had to be written by hand, they also saved space and were therefore a more cost effective option. Certain symbols, sometimes referred to as 'icons' are also used in sending messages on different social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, mobile phone text or instant messaging where space is limited.

Considering the number of heterogeneous groups existing in the world, it suffices to say that there are millions of signs and symbols in existence; although these symbols may not all be universally understood as a result of some social factors like language, cultural beliefs and other demographic disparities. It is in this sense that Jerome (2008) explains that:

Because virtually anything can serve as a symbol and because a symbol conveys information only insofar as it has meaning to a specific community, the connection between a symbol and its referent is not intrinsic to the symbol itself but rather is a function of agreed upon use, custom, or convention. It is in this sense that language is symbolic. The word water designates the liquid object only insofar as members of the English speech community agree that it does. The liquid has no inherent property that compels us to call it by that name. It could just as well be designated by other sounds, for instance *aqua*(sic) in Spanish, *mayim* in Hebrew, or *vo'* in Tzotzil Maya.

Different social groups have their codified signs and symbols in communicating their ideas, as well as in the conveyance of coded messages, especially when they are outside their comfort zones. These groups, comprising of corporative societies, religious groups, educational associations, political associations, peer groups, professional associations, occupational societies, just to mention a few; have their dress codes, coded languages, emblems, and colours. Some even go as far as adopting personalised gestures for salutation. Further, gestural signs are used and taught to people with difficulty in hearing and talking in order to aid communication.

Colour is another essential apparatus used in symbolic communications. A baby dressed in pink is an obvious indication that the gender of the infant is female despite the geographical demography. A red road sign warns of danger even if one might not recognize the symbol instantly. A country or sports team is identified by the colours of their uniform or flag. Also, colours are sometimes adopted literarily to portray a person's feelings or emotions; being 'green with envy' or 'in a black mood' are familiar terms to describe jealousy and feeling down.

Colour Symbolism in African Art

Contrary to the general notion of the universality of colour symbols, McNatt (2007) posits that in European art, colour is generally understood in terms of the primary colours red, yellow and blue. But throughout much of Africa, the primary colours are red, white and black. They do not mean the same thing to every group, but they appear over and over again. At this juncture, it is imperative to note that colours red, white and black are only considered primary colours in the traditional African setting and not in the whole of Africa as stated by McNatt. These colours were majorly used by traditional Africans because of their ready availability locally.

Colours, as part of the everyday life of the African people, are used for body decorations, wall decorations, calabash decorations, ritualistic worship, coronations and other festivals, and many other uses. However, the connotations of these colours differ from people to people and from culture to culture. McNatt (2007) explains that among Urhobo people of Nigeria, for example, red refers to the ideal feminine beauty of a nubile bride; but among Pende people in Congo Zaire, red is the colour of masculinity, and for Bullom people of Sierra Leone, it's the colour of blood lost in childbirth and warfare. Hinged on the same perspective as the foregoing, Jerome (2008) avers that while black may be associated with feces and therefore ideas of pollution, night, and death in many cultures; in Hinduism, it is white, not black, that is associated with death, funerals, and mourning. In essence, symbols and signs as a result of their abstract nature can be easily misunderstood by an uninformed observer. As such, it is important to locate and understand symbols in the original context for which they were intended.

The Semiotics

The foregoing line of discussion is basically a derivative of the theory of semiotics; as semiotics, according to Ferreira (2007) is the study of signs and symbols, either individually or grouped in sign system that can give us more insight from the work source and meaning. Ferreira explains that signs take the form of words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, acts or objects, but such things have no natural meaning and become signs only when we provide them with meanings. Also, Najafi and Abbas (2014), in accordance with Smith-Shank's impression of semiotics, defines semiotics as a wide ranging approach towards the perception of the nature of meaning, the understanding of cognition, culture, behaviour, and life. It is based on this background that this paper sets out to, in line with the semiotic theory, identify some forms of signs and symbols imbedded in African art; putting into consideration their meanings and functions.

Signs and Symbols in African Art

Every art work has a symbolic essence embedded in it. Some forms and motifs on art works are random while some were as a result of the deliberate effort of the artist in passing a coded message to an intended observer. Signs and symbols are therefore, incorporated into art works from the strokes of

the brush on the canvases, to the gorge of the chisel on woods. Siegman (1980) observes that African art is principally symbolic rather than representational. It is more concerned with visualizing concepts rather than with accurately representing nature. In African art, the signs and symbols imbedded in the art forms serve as a form of coded instruction or manual to be perused and understood in order to determine the specific function these art forms were intended to perform. The knowledge of these symbols will help in determining whether a mask is made to entertain, frighten, promote fertility, for commemoration or it is just a portrayal of a chief or ruler.

Nature, especially the human figure, has always been the inspirational basis for most African sculptures. Artists over the years have rendered the human figure in diverse stylistic forms ranging from naturalism to realism, semi-abstraction, even total abstraction. In the traditional art of Africa, a significant symbolic distortion is found in the representation of the human head. Christa (2006) adduces that:

In many African artworks, the head appears proportionately larger than the body. This formal emphasis has symbolic meaning, as the head is believed to have a special role in guiding one's destiny and success in many African societies. African artists also employ scale for symbolic effect in multi-figure compositions, a practice known as hierarchical representation. In these cases, the most important individual is depicted as the largest figure, while those of lesser importance decrease in size exponentially. (pp.21-22).

There is often a conceptual basis behind artistic conventions such as the simplification and exaggeration of the human features. According to the Ancient Symbols.com (2015), the use of animal symbolism is intricately woven into the fabric of the African culture. Animals signify human character traits and are therefore used in abundance in many African artworks, including embroidered clothing. The author further explains that a lion symbolizes royalty, and strength; the female lion connotes fierce motherhood and protection; the camel is a symbol of sobriety; the leopard stands for courage and aggression; and the elephant represents dignity, patience and wisdom. Also, animals with special attributes such as antelopes, snakes, leopards, and crocodiles are represented in art for symbolic purposes. For example, the nineteenth-century Fon King Guezo, according to Christa (2006), is represented by a buffalo, an animal signifying strength and determination, selected as his emblem through *fa* divination.

Representations of animals consuming other animals may serve as a metaphor for competing spiritual or social forces. Their depiction is meant to encourage other less destructive means to resolve a difficult social encounter. Features of different types of animals may also be combined into new forms that synthesize complex ideas. Christa explains that, among the Bamana, for example, *ci wara* headdresses are based on the features of various antelope species and may also incorporate those of aardvarks, anteaters, and pangolins, all highly symbolic animals. The resulting synthesis of animal forms evokes the mythic *ci Wara*, the divine force conceptualized as half man and half antelope who introduced agricultural methods to the Bamana.

Animal symbols may also take more abstract form. In the Cameroon grass fields, circular medallions represent spiders, a symbol of supernatural wisdom, and diamond-shaped motifs refer to frogs, which stand for fertility and increase. Some forms of symbolism in African art use plants as points of reference. An example of this could be seen on cast plaques from Benin, in which a background pattern of river leaves is a symbol for Olokun, god of the sea. In accordance, Siegman's (1980) figurative staffs were sometimes carried by representatives of chiefs and kings, symbolizing their power and authority. Often they spoke of him and represented him through visual proverbs as having power, strength and courage of such creatures as a leopard, water buffalo or elephant.

Fatuyi (1980) also suggests that art symbolizes the concepts of power, authority and prestige. Several symbolic art pieces have been used to represent political authority and presence of kings and leaders. One of such art forms is the linguist staff of the Akan, Ghana; called the '*Okyeamepoma*'. According to Christa (2006), this magnificent gold-covered staff was created to serve as an insignia of office for an *Okyeame*, a high ranking advisor to an Asante ruler. Monica (2008), on the *Oykeame*, expatiates that since 1900, linguists have carried carved, gold-leafed wooden staff of office. Each staff is topped by a figural sculpture that elicits one and more often, several proverbs. These multiple, overlapping meanings are available for use by the quick and witty linguist, who may have several staffs to choose from, enabling him to use the one which its imagery seems most appropriate for the situation at hand. Christa also opined that imagery on the finial of linguist staffs typically illustrates Asante's proverbs

about power and institutional responsibilities. As illustrated on Figure I, a spider on its web is flanked by two figures, representing the proverb: '*no one goes to the house of the spider to teach it wisdom*'.



Figure I: Linguist Staff Okyeamepoma, 19th–20th century Ghana; Akan, Asante.
Courtesy: Christa (2006)

The spider, according to Christa, is a fitting symbol for respect due to a person with great oratorical and diplomatic skills. The staff is composed of a long wooden shaft carved into two interlocking sections and a separate finial attached to the base. It is covered entirely with gold foil, a material that alludes to the sun, and to the vital force or soul contained within all living things.

Ezeajugh (2009) holds that human beings use their bodies as mediums of artistic expression, by endowing the skin with special significance. Through the use of a precise iconography, 'body' therefore becomes message with its decorations symbolizing a wide range of meanings. Facial marks and body scarifications are forms of symbolic art in the traditional African setting that majorly thrives through the systematic arrangement of lines and motifs on either the face or the human body. These conscious arrangements function on different levels like beautification, identification, stratification, rites of passage, healing purposes, and many others. There were pertinent symbolic reasons for facial ethnic imprints; they were not just drawn because it must be given. Different sets of people have similar tribal marks that differentiate them from people of a different lineage or village. Since tribal marks are done on the human body for diverse reasons, the marks, as well as, their locations on the human body, also vary. As such, some Africans have vertical, horizontal, slanted marks on their cheeks, forehead, temple, under the chin, etc.

These marks are in patterns based on the ethnic groups of the bearer and they have different meanings and names. Some marks run as parallel grooves from the forehead, through the temple and cheek to the chin and are complemented with accessory marks from the medial acanthus of the eyes downward. Parents also used tribal marks to lend credence to the legitimacy of their children. Hence, a tribal mark on a child is a way of a father acknowledging that he or she is his legitimate child. The scarification givers in the traditional African societies are mostly from the same family. Just as families are known for hunting, healing, and weaving, amongst others; so also, are the families of the body markers. Negri in Ezeajugh (2009), in accordance with the foregoing, observes that mark cutting was a hereditary profession, handed down from father to son in families of mark cutters. The families normally formed themselves into a union, in order to protect the secrets of their art and livelihood.

Sculptures are often characterized with conventional and unconventional female and male figures; sometimes sculpted to convey ideas of serenity, masculinity, power, fertility, motherhood, and many others. Bold and powerful shapes, such as the horns of animals are sometimes used to symbolize strength and virility; and frightening, expressionistic visages to inspire awe and fear for the enforcement of social customs. Symbols, from Najafi and Abbas's (2014) perspective, are a broadly unique classification of objects that are familiar to a certain group of people with a certain cultural background and associated with specific emotions and feelings. Similarly, according to Christa (2006), symbols may be nonrepresentational. Geometric patterns on *Bwa* plank masks have multiple levels of meaning that refer to ideals of social and moral behavior taught to initiates. Materials also hold symbolic value.

Christa further explained that gold foil used in Asante regalia alludes to the sun and to life's vital force. Indigenous forms of writing, such as *nsibidi* used among various cultures in Nigeria's Cross River region, embody multiple levels of symbolic meaning that can be accessed only by the initiated.

Gestures too are a form of symbolism. In Kongo art, a seated pose illustrates a dictum about balance, composure, and reflection, while a protruding tongue refers indirectly to the activation of medicines. Gowling (1983) sees art as a universal means of glorifying persons of rank. The presence of objects elaborately carved in such precious materials as gold, silver, or ivory usually indicates the presence of a ruling class, surplus wealth, and the wherewithal to employ specialized craftsmen. Backing up his assertion, Gowling further gave an example of a king in Dahomey who concentrated on the working of silver, brass, and the production of appliqué works in his court. In traditional African political setting, not all art forms are significant for the religious or socio-cultural roles they play in the society. Some art forms are just significant because of the value placed on materials used in producing them.

African textile designers, according to their cultural context, often deliberately incorporate some specific motifs in the fabrics they produce, in a bid to communicate different social and sometimes historical values or concepts. *Kente*, a colourful fabric of gold, yellow, red, black, green and blue, according to Leuzinger in Akinbileje (2014), is an intricately designed piece of fabric, and a functional art that conveys messages about the historical, cultural landmarks, philosophical thoughts, religious and moral values of society. Traditionally, *Kente* cloths were used only by people of certain status. The rich Ghanaian royal costumes, with heavily decorated clothes made of gold string patterns, coral beads and embroidery, were worn by their kings and chiefs to communicate their wealth and status to the world. The linear designs embedded in most *Kente* clothes can be likened to the design patterns found on the Kasai velvets of Congo. A lot of Yoruba religious textiles, country cloth of the Mende in Sierra Leone, *ukara* cloth of the Igbo



Figure II: *Ukara* Cloth. Cotton, Dye, 256 by 198 cm.
courtesy Akinbileje (2014)

and a host of other cloths and dresses from Africa, perform religious purposes and are repository of supernatural powers. Akinbileje (2014) explains that *ukara* cloth is one of the textiles that show how leadership regalia often transmits the ambivalent and dangerous qualities of the wilderness into symbols of power. The Igbo people of South-eastern Nigeria produce *ukara* cloth, covered with *nsibidi* symbols and motifs, which was initially meant for the Ekpe society. *Ukara* cloth, an indigo stitched and dyed cloth is significant to the people of Igbo land. The large rectangular *ukara* cloth is divided into seventy two or eighty squares, superimposed by three to five large stylized animal images. The squares or rectangles are composed of four design types of concentric rectangular boxes with various 'chequered' patterns, representational motifs; such as fish, scorpions, crocodiles, hands in friendship, war and work, masks, moons, and stars are dyed onto *ukara* cloths, which are symbolic representations of the repository power of the society. There are spiritual and historical significance in not only the choice of colours, dyes and type of threads used, but also in the decorative elements, the symbols used and the figural compositions which are directly related to historical proverbs and events. They sometimes represent a form of storytelling tradition often taking the place of the written word and they convey important messages.

Some Religiously Symbolic Objects in Traditional African Societies

As art in the traditional African parlance is basically tied to its religious significance, adequate justice cannot be done to its semiotic analysis, without viewing some of the symbolic props that hold religious connotations in African art forms. Ofuafo (2013) identifies some symbolic objects which are used to communicate religious truth in some African artistic traditions. These include:

- i. **Cowries:** They symbolize prosperity. Cowries are among the cultic items found in the shrine. It is the belief of Urhobo people that the water divinity releases such wealth from the sea for those who believe.

- ii. **White chalk (Kaolin):** This symbolizes the purity and holiness of the object of worship. It also depicts the purity, piety, and faithfulness required of the devotee. In view of its purity, lumps of it are kept in a shrine for a considerable length of time and are believed to attract sacred power from the divine being in the shrine.
- iii. **Palm fronds:** Traditionally, they symbolize sacredness and they are used to mark and consecrate entrances to shrines. Whenever a young palm frond is spread, it depicts a place that has been specifically marked, consecrated and set aside for a divine being. The marking serves as a warning to non-initiates to keep away from the place.
- iv. **Thunder Bolt:** An axe and some stones are the items that are usually believed to be thunderbolt in the different cults of solar divinities in West Africa.
- v. **Iron:** It symbolizes the power of justice, fair-play and war. It is associated with Ogun the tutelary divinity of hunters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, drivers and all workers of iron and steel.

On the whole, symbols and signs are represented, either as decorations or with connotative meanings in most utilitarian objects in the everyday African life. Such objects include pottery, textiles, carved images, leather works, jewelry, calabashes, and farming tools. As reported by Mikdadi (2000), Algeria's Kabyle women paint with their fingers on pottery and on the walls of their village homes. Many of their shapes and symbols have a marked resemblance to Neolithic pottery found in the region. Believed to carry healing qualities or to embody magical attributes that guard against misfortune and the evil eye, these signs and symbols assume new forms and meanings in contemporary art.

Conclusion

In conclusion, symbolism has taken the centre stage in the artistic expressions of the traditional Africans. All props, motifs and forms are signifiers of a deeper, and sometimes, greater entities. However, contemporary artists are not left out in the use of signs and symbols in embellishing their visual expressions. In accordance, Mikdadi (2015) avers that by combining signs with magical numbers or stylizing traditional symbols, contemporary artists tap the unconscious to create abstract works that reference the past and present. Symbols are therefore, essential parts of human existence, judging from the fact that, from religion to education, family, politics, economics, social science, agriculture, philosophy, psychology, and other spheres of life; the use and need for symbols cannot be overemphasized.

However, for the correct interpretations of these symbols, one must consciously locate the symbol within its intended context. The disparities and dynamism of human existence can influence the use and contextual meanings of some symbols as one moves from one location to the other. Contemporarily, signs have directly or indirectly played major roles in the development of contemporary art; as artists have in recent years taken to the interrogation of these connotative motifs in their various traditional backgrounds. A major frontier of this practice is the 'Zaria rebels', the first set of graduates from the Zaria art school. Subsequently, other artists and group of artists followed suit, leading to the advent of various art movements such as Onaism, Ulism and Araism.

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