

## SUSTAINING THE YORÙBÁ CULTURAL SEMIOTICS IN COMMUNICATION

<sup>1</sup>Àdisá Omówùnmí Àjoké? & <sup>2</sup>Agboyinu Amos Mivojour  
<sup>1</sup>Department of Yorùbá,  
Federal College of Education, Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria  
<sup>2</sup>Department of English,  
Federal College of Education, Abeokuta,  
Ogun State, Nigeria

### Abstract

Nigeria is a multilingual society with diverse cultural backgrounds. Among these multiple ethno-cultural communities are the big three; namely the Yorùbá, Hausa and Igbo. It has been observed that it is not only the languages of these ethnic groups that are under the threat of extinction in this dispensation; their cultural heritages are also dying due to the hegemony of the adopted aesthetics of foreign cultures and inadequate knowledge of the native culture. This situation has deprived the young and old in the Yorùbá cultural milieu of the knowledge of non-verbal semiotics that are embedded in their linguistic practices. This paper therefore, explores an inventory of Yorùbá semiotics, their meanings and significance as a medium of communication for cultural sustainability. The paper also emphasizes the richness of the Yorùbá language and culture through semiotics as media of communication; and also attempts to educate both indigenes and non-indigenes on the values of this semiotics in communications. Sociological theory is adopted as a framework for the study. Signs of Semiotic values are presented, analyzed and discussed. The presentation of Yorùbá semiotics in terms of structures, lines, rhythms' and meaning are articulated in this paper. This paper concludes that, in the Yorùbá speaking society of Nigeria, as in most other cultural settings in Africa, semiotics plays significant roles as a medium of communication; and that sustainability of culture in every nation and tribe requires the preservation of this ethno-linguistic heritage.

*Key words: Yorùbá Society, Yorùbá Culture, Yorùbá Semiotics, Cultural Sustainability and Communication Medium*

### Background to the Study

Every society in the world, be it Classical, Western, Eastern or Africa has its norms and values, custom and beliefs. Hence, the Yorùbá philosophy attests: 'Kò sí ibi tí ì?e kò sí' (There is no society without its cultural beliefs and practices). There is not just one culture but several cultures in Nigeria, as it is in many other African countries. The culture of these groups manifest in languages, tools, crafts, arts, artifacts, music, festivals, drama, dance, religion, myths, rituals, greetings and mode of dressing. These cultures reflect the differences found among the different ethnic groups that constitute Nigeria. Some of these

groups are the Yorùbá, Hausa, Igbo and several other minority ethnic groups in all the regions of the country ( Adisa, 2005). In the Yorùbá society, para-verbal means of communication are often referred to as code language. It requires that the sender and receiver have a shared linguistic assumption that will enable them to interact freely through such codes. This informs the focus of this paper on the sustainability of the Yorùbá cultural semiotics in communication among other ethnic groups in Nigeria. The paper discusses the background of the Yorùbá people and the concepts highlighted in the keywords to the study. These include: the Yorùbá society and culture, Yorùbá semiotics, cultural sustainability, concept of communication, elements of Yorùbá semiotics, their meanings, significance and how they can be sustained as a medium of communication.

The use of Yorùbá semiotics as a medium of communication, which linguists, sociolinguists and scholars have paid little attention to is the crux of this paper. This neglect is probably due to much concentration on oral and written forms of communication and especially the modern technology of communication. Alongside the oral medium of communication, semiotics as media of communication plays a significant role in communication among the Yoruba race. The understanding that one has of a culture goes a long way in determining one's level of knowledge in the cultural practices and language in all ramifications. That is why the semiotics medium of a language is associated with adulthood. Any youths or young person that displays ability to decode some of the semiotics signs is considered highly intelligent and versed in their culture.

#### The Yorùbá Society and Culture: Conceptual Clarifications

The Yorùbá race constitutes a distinct ethnic group in Nigeria. They are principally found in Lagos, Ogun, Osun, Oyo, Ekiti, Ondo, Edo, and Kwara States and some parts of the world in the diaspora (Odumuyiwa, 1997:299). The Yorùbá people are endowed with diverse cultural heritage which are mostly in practices and language. The cultural practices of the Yorùbá, as regard marriage, naming, burial, king enthronement, chieftaincy titles, house-warming ceremonies and festivals, among others, are expressed through the languages of the people. The oral expressions are however complemented with these semiotics as means of communication which signifies deep meanings among the users.

#### Language, Signs and Culture

This paper requires framing definition of language with direct relation to the semiotics aspect of language. Lyons (1970:4) says that 'language is a vocal sound symbols used for communication in a given speech community'. Language is unique to man, it is a unified system of symbols conventionally agreed among its users to permit a sharing of meaning. Language is seen as a mark of identity especially in Nigeria among many other groups clamouring for recognition. Also, Ezenandu (2010) posits that 'Language is crucial to human, no human can communicate without an agreed symbol of communication (signs inclusive). Similarly, Culture is the essential artifacts that bind people together. Culture is an informal education that is learnt from cradle to the adulthood.

#### Yorùbá Semiotics

The study observes that it is not only people that are suffering from speech or hearing impairment that use signs and symbols in communication. Yorùbá semiotics are means of expression with deep and significant connotations. There is however a clear distinction between the sign language used among the speech and hearing impaired folks and the culturally endowed Yorùbá semiotics. Hence, talking without speaking are specific ways of making signs that have meanings entrenched in the culture (Makinde, 1985). The Yorùbá semiotics are classified into different forms such as: Body gestures, signs, Aroko, Drums, Flute, Gong and so on.

#### Methodology

All Yorùbá semiotics forms of communication were analysed. These are gesticulation, facial expression-nose, eyes, mouth, blinking of eyes, silence, pictorial, smell, kinetics, smiles, eyes contact, signs, drums, flute, gong, cowries, leaves and so on were analysed.

## Communication

Communication is an exchange of information, this could be news, ideas, or opinions. It is also a mutual exchange of information and understanding by any effective means. Communication takes place when a message has been transmitted from one person to another with both people understanding the message approximately the same way (Udoada, 2000: 104). Effective communication is the transmission of any information in such a way that it successfully induces an expected response from the receiver. A simple communication model has four basic elements- the sender (s), the message (m), the channel (ch), the receiver (r), the feedback (f). Communication is a skill that can be developed through effective knowledge and practices, it is an art to be learnt and culture based. All human communication occurs through the use of twelve major signal systems - spoken words, written words, electronic, media, numbers, touch, time, pictorial, silence, smell, art fictional, kinetics' and so on.

## Communication System and Competence

Communication competence is succinctly explained by Udoada (2000:102) as what a speaker needs to know to communicate effectively in culturally significant settings. Communicative competence involves the competence to suit the language to the situation, the purpose and the participant. It is also involves the competence to interpret other speakers. It requires that learners know how to use expressions to signify politeness, anger, impatience and so on. It also includes what gestures and other body language are appropriate, when each might be made, conversational as well as the message content of stress and intonation. Daramola (1992) asserted that when one uses language, one is willingly or unwillingly using a network of meaning potential not only rooted in the environment in which it is being used but in the total culture of both the user and the environment in which it is being used. When human beings communicate with one another, they usually do so through speech or writing. Speech involves language sounds, which are associated with meaning. Ezenandu (2010) explained that a good knowledge of a language therefore presupposes knowledge of the speech sounds, stress and intonation of the language and how these combine with one another to form meaningful utterances. When one speaks, a chain of speech sounds are produced, which are arranged in sequence to give syllables and words.

## Literature/ Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts Sociological approach since it is centred on the issues going on within the society. It is also concerned with the process of change within the society. That is, how society changes gradually or radically from one norm to another and the effects these changes have on the social structure. Ogunsina (1992) state that 'sociology concerns itself with all that happens to human beings as a result of their relationship with each other'. He says that sociologists' emphasis is on beliefs, values, moral rules and symbolic communication, which form the distinctive features of human life. Caudwell (1977) cited in Ogunsina (1992) explains that sociology attempts to present a picture of the mechanisms of socialization, the process of cultural learning, whereby individuals are allocated to accept their respective roles in the social structure. It is obvious that the goal of sociology is to understand the society through scientific study. Looking at the interpretation of semiotics as a medium of communication, it is obvious that sociological theory, as a science of the society, is relevant to the exploration of semiotics in the Yoruba culture.

## Analyses of some Yorùbá Semiotics, their Meanings, and Significance

In the Yorùbá society, native wisdom speaks louder than voice. Action communicates more safely, diplomatically and intelligently than words. The Yorùbá semiotics which constitutes the data analysed in this paper are classified in relation to their forms and how they are used in signifying meanings.

**Gesticulation:** This involves movement of members of the body for communicative purposes ranging from the head to other parts of the body.

Head-- Shaking of head could connote two major meanings. It could mean positive or negative response. It could also mean feeling so sorry about a thing. It is refer to as agreement and non agreement voice.

Body Movement This is used to seduce, calling attention of people to oneself for recognition or to mimic a personality in a derogatory way.

Eyes Eyes contact communicates in so many ways. These could be blinking of eyes, blowing of eyes, staring at someone for so long. This may means that the encoder is expressing disapproval of what the decoder is doing or that he is expecting the decoder to do something. This medium of speech means a lot in Yorùbá views.

Shoulder Raising of shoulder at a matter could mean probability or disagreement.

Nasal cavity (Nose) Trisckling of nose connote lack of total trust or confidence in a person or not believing in a person personality.

Legs Stepping on another person's leg or hitting someone's leg(s) connotes a lot of meaning. This could mean that the person should not participate in a discussion or not to do something.

Hands Use of hand in communication could be in so many forms. One or the two hands communicate effectively.

1. Twisting of hands can be used in paying homage to the king or gods in Yorùbá setting ( Gbígbe ò?ùbà). This could also mean to appeal or to calm down a person from anger.
2. To call or calling attention of a person to something or pointing to a thing or a person.
3. Opening of hands to welcome or embrace someone depicts acceptance.
4. To invite someone or command such to go away.
5. Hanging of hands under the chick (Fíf?w? ` l?`rán) could mean feeling tired about an issue or to be having deep thinking about life or issue.
6. Waving of hands to express farewell greetings.
7. Hanging of hands on head could mean exclamation of a sudden doom (!)
8. Opening of a hand or two could be use to abuse someone's parents ('Ìyá ?, Bàbá ?' *that is woe betide your mother /father*)
9. Clapping of hands to be calm or calling people to order where there is rowdiness.
10. Clapping of hands to motivate and so on.

Kneeling In Yorùbá paralinguistics kneeling down could mean begging for mercy, alms or assistance, forgiveness, showing remorse or to show salutation to the elderly ones. The sign of keeling speaks louder than oral expression.

Finger Tapping of fingers could mean an expression of pains. It could mean expression of punishment towards a person.

Stomach this medium of communication could mean expression of hunger or stomach upset when it is touched.

Smiles as pleasant as an expression of smiles could mean, it could be termed in so many ways in Yorùbá semiotic expressions. Smile could mean pleasantries and it could mean negative expressions or a smile could be a reluctant answer to a question. It could also mean an intention to ignore a question.

Silence-- Silence is another Yorùbá semiotic form of speech. It sends information faster than words of the mouth. Silence depicts total negation of involvement in a discussion or lack of interest in a matter or discourse. It could also mean an avenue of deep thinking

before contributing to a discussion or before given an advice. It sometimes used to signify strong annoyance generally referred to dangerous silence.

Smell--Smell as a medium of Yorùbá semiotics talks more about individual personality due to the appearance and environment of a person. Hence, the Yorùbá would say: "*Ìrínísí nì is? nì l? 'j? "*" that is, your appearance dictates your treatment.

#### Yorùbá Objects Semiotics

Talking Drum (Ìlù) Talking drum could communicate beyond the mere objective of a dance instrument. Its significance goes beyond praise singing (Oríki). Drums can be used to create awareness --Drum can be used as oral communication, it can be used for calling someone's name or as language of instruction. Talking drum is a language of sign which can only be understood by those who have interpreting of drums ears.

Drum of War (Ìlù Ogun)-- In Yorùbá setting, the sound of this kind of drum signifies that there is going to be war (for example, a sound of drum like gídígò, gídígò, gídígò) is a sound of war.

Drum Drum (ìlù) Drum can be used as oral communication; it can be used for calling someone's name or as a language of instruction. Talking drum is a language of signs which can only be understood by those who have skills of interpreting drum language.

Flute-- Flute is a also a language of sign in Yorùbáland, it is not a common medium of communication, so when it is blown it depicts a lot of meaning to those who will hear the sound of the flute. The flute can be used to creat the arrival of a king, it could be used to disseminated information to the entire community. Flute is refer to as 'Kà kà kí' in Yorùbáland.

Gong--Gong is a type of communication tools that is used for information dissemination in Yorùbá land. The sound of the gong, to the community, conveys significant value as it is not common medium of expression. It could come often but not on daily basis. That is why it is regarded as a special tool of communication among the users. Gong is so special to the extent that a "Town Crier" would not need to ask people to come out before they start gathering themselves in two, three and so on to listen to the information.

Use of Symbols (Àrokò) The use of symbols is so common among the Yorùbá communities to the extent that till now, an average Yorùbá man still embraces this medium of communication despite the endangerment confronting the language in this dispensation. There are diverse ways in which the Yorùbá folks make use of symbols (Àrokò). Some of these include Symbols that are associated with the King, Warriors, Farming, individuals but to mention a few.

Symbols associated with the king: This includes the horse-tail (Ìrùk? r?) and sceptre (òpá àsè?) and the other paraphernalia of kingship in Yoruba tradition.

#### The King's Horse-tail (Ìrùk? r? oBa)

- (1) This is a language of sign by the king to whosoever the message is meant for. This could mean that the king wanted attention of someone in his palace.
- (2) It could mean that the king is interested in a thing or person that the object is sent to.
- (3) It could mean that the king is taking over or taking authority over a thing

#### The king Sceptre (?`pá à??)

- (1) If a king sends his sceptre to a person, this could mean the king would like the person to see him urgently.
- (2) The sceptre also means representation of the king in a particular place, meetings

or occasion. The king sceptre represents his person. The Yorùbá people believe in this symbol to the extent that the authority and respect that is to be given to the king in his presence will equally be accorded the sceptre or the person carrying the sceptre or whoever is representing the king.

- (3) Appearance of a king is another untold form of communication. When a king appears, his dressing, carriage, entourage, (which includes his chiefs and servants) and sounds of flute announce his royal status. Hence, the Yorùbá would say: '*Adé orí la fi n m? ba, Ìl? k? ?rùn la fi n m?`jòyè`*' (A king is identified by his crown and appearance)

#### Farming Semiotics

Farming is one of the occupations of the Yorùbá people. This group communicates mostly through the medium of semiotics. The interpretation of some of their signs at the entrance or within the farmland could mean many things. Some could mean that no one is permitted to trespass into this farm. On the other hand, some could mean that "I am around" or "I have left," especially if such person has an appointment with someone at such place. The objects of communication often used by these groups (Farmers) are:

- (1) Tying of a black rope at the entrance of the farm or hanging horn on a red cloth at the farm entrance.
- (2) Tying of cowries on red and black cloth
- (3) Tying a palm frond across the road
- (4) Hanging of farm instruments with cowries at the entrance of the farms.

In the Yorùbá settings, the above mentioned objects speak louder and command greater response than any other form of communication. Once these things are seen, they communicate faster than words

#### Semiotics Language Among Warriors

War leaders of a particular village or community may send war tools like Gun, Bullet, Sword, Axe and so on to a neighbouring village or community. This implies that the sending community is coming to wage war against the receiving community. So they should be prepared for war. In this manner of information, object depicts the interpretation. In Yorùbá setting, if the other party is not ready for war, the party will encode another semiotic object to indicate that they are not set for the war. Such peace-invoking object could be a "Gbéj?" leaf (Ewé Gbéj?) or to send gifts to the other party. Such gifts without verbal expression are also semiotic media of appeal.

#### Individual symbolic expressions

These are esoteric symbols that are peculiar to a group or groups of people and cannot be decoded by a non member. Groups associated with such esoteric signs are generally referred to as the occult group(s) such as the Ògbóni fraternity, ?rùnmilà Temple worshippers and host of others.

#### Offensive Symbols

If a person hangs a leaf in his\her lips before a deaf or dumb person in Yoruba land, it depicts that the person is likening the dumb person to a goat that can only bleat and cannot speak. This usually triggers aggressive reaction from this group of people in Yoruba settings. Therefore, this act is avoided whenever a deaf or dumb person is around.

#### Premonitions

In all Yorùbá settings, all the above items of information are real. However, there are more in terms of signs as means of communication. Signs of premonition are a prominent in this society up till today. For instance, when someone dashes one's left foot against a stone while setting out for an important journey, it could be taken as a bad omen. Also, a big rat is not expected to be seen publicly in the day time. A particular bird generally known as Kowéè must not cry around people's house. All these are considered as bad omen. Hence, when any of such things occurs, both the idol worshippers and other

religious groups are prompted to engage in aggressive prayers to avert evils in their neighbourhood..

In Yorùbá settings, there are other semiotic beliefs that are so common. These include the effect of gender contact in one's goal. For instance, it is believed that if someone is praying and a particular gender comes in unexpectedly, it would affect their prayer positively or negatively. In the Yoruba land the coming in of a male gender at such time signifies that the prayer has been answered by Olódùmarè. Also, the Yorùbá always attaches importance to the first person one comes across at the early time of the day. Some attach importance to having early morning contact with a male or female before embarking on the activities of the day. The inability to meet a gender that spells good fortune in the early hour of the day may be taken as bad luck for the rest of the day.

As at now, despite the declining trend of the Yoruba culture, the use of semiotics is still in vogue among some aboriginal communities. However, it is only effective, among the aged and those living in the rural area. Nevertheless, semiotics usage as a medium of communication is diminishing rapidly in the urban community.

#### Conclusion and Recommendation

From the above analyses, it is obvious that the Yoruba race is richly endowed with semiotic signs and symbols that play significant roles in interpersonal and inter-communal communication. It is also clear that these semiotic signs cannot be excluded from the present day social interaction and personal safety precautions. It has also been noted that some of the elderly members of the Yoruba communities are still in possession of rich information relating to this cultural linguistic practice. One is therefore optimistic that if we put our heads together and take decisive steps towards salvaging this cultural heritage, another very important medium of cultural identity would be saved from being drowned in the ocean of modernity.

It is therefore plausible to recommend that: One, research attentions should be focused on these signs as they are being employed among different dialectal groups of the Yoruba race with the aim of unearthing the lost ones and also standardise them. Two, the Yoruba scholars should awake to propagating these signs through their various academic contributions. Three, provisions should be made towards building these signs after they might have been collated and standardised into a central structure. Four, users of the Yoruba language across the world should come together to brainstorm over the relevance of these semiotic signs to the unification of all children of Oòduà at home and in the Diaspora. Finally, knowing well that spoken language is not easy to acquire as signs could be easily understood, it would be easier to educate all people that are from the Yorùbá pedigree on these signs, as distance has created a wide gap between the linguistic base and the dialects spoken by a vast population of them who are far from their home base.

#### References

- Adeoye, C.L (1979), "À?à àti i?e Yorùbá". Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Adisa, O. A . ( 2005), "Ritual & Governance in Yorùbá Society" A masters Project submitted to the Department of Linguistics & African Languages, University of Ibadan.
- Awoniyi, T.A (1978), "The Yorùbá Language in Education". London: Oxford University Press.
- Ezenandu, P.E. (2010), "The Language Situation in Nigeria: A critical Examination of 2004 Language Policy' in Language & National Development'. A book in Honour of Prince Bepo. Kola Ojelade & Ezenandu, P.E. (eds.) Abeokuta Pp.52-66

- Daramola, A (1992), "Decoding the Meaning of Utterances: A systemic functional Theory Analysis". Lagos: Review of English Studies. X1-x11, 103-122.
- Lyons, I. (1970), "Language & Linguistics: An Introduction". Cambridge: C.U. P
- Makinde, O. I. (1985), "Non-verbal Communication in Counselling Therapy". Inaugural Lecture Series 73. University of Ife.
- Ogunsina, B. (1992), "The Sociology of the Yorùbá Novels". Ilorin: UNIX (Nigeria) Ltd.
- Olajubu, O. (1978), "Ìwé À?à Ìbíl? Yorùbá: Lagos". Longman: Nigeria Limited.
- Orjime, D.M (2011), "Linguistics Diversity & Democracy in Nigeria in John, T.T. (ed). Democracy & Good Governance in Nigeria" Makurdi: Bookwork's Publishers.
- Udoada, M. P. (2000), "Developing Communicative Competence in English As A Second Language in The 21st Century". The Role of Pragmatics' in Olanye, A.A., Ajayi, K (eds.) Language, Literature & Linguistics in the 21st Century. Pp.101-105