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**Art Language through Selected Signs and
Symbols of the Yoruba People of Nigeria**

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Abstract

Many secret signs and symbols are associated with the Yoruba as we have it amongst many tribes in Nigeria. Some of these signs and symbols have deep meanings and have connotations amongst the tribe. They form the everyday language of the people and a thorough understanding of them is key in their relationship with one another as a people. The objective of this study is to express the cultural connotations of selected symbols in relation to the Yoruba people of Nigeria. The study hinges on the theories of Mimesis, Structural Formalism and Semiotics. This was validated through ethnographic study of symbols such as art, architecture, clothing, body marks and decorations among others to discover deep and hidden information about cultural beliefs and assumptions among the people under study. Pertinent literatures were reviewed, interviews were conducted, information was sourced from the internet and personal experience was

explored. The study points out to the fact that a lot of deep and secret meanings are attached to the selected signs and symbols. The paper concludes that meanings expressed are generally accepted by a host of the Yoruba people; however, there could be slight differences in belief system from one locality to another. The paper had contributed to the pool of knowledge by bringing unknown and hidden meanings of selected signs and symbols of the Yoruba people to limelight. The paper recommends that signs and symbols commonly used in communication among the Yoruba people of Nigeria should be incorporated into the curricula of schools; especially Yoruba as a subject and taught to preserve the tradition from extinction. It is also recommended that folklores, mythology and oral tradition be encouraged among younger generation so as to preserve cultural values.

Keywords: *Art Language, Signs, Symbols, Yoruba, Natural World.*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

For centuries, signs and symbols have played and are still playing important roles in the language of a people; the Yoruba not exempted. A few of these signs and symbols are common while others are secret. They range from variety of images derived from nature as well as man-made objects such as axe, cutlass and needle, to mention but a few. Examples of these include lines (facial), animals, birds, insects, flowers and fruits (fauna and flora). Poking around, the vestiges of these signs and symbols (hidden languages) seem to be everywhere across culture and it is the author's view that the images contained within them are easily accessed from our subconscious mind if we can find the key to understanding them. The use and interpretation of these signs and symbols vary from one culture to the other; ranging from communication, identity, body adornment, signs of oath-taking, agreement or covenant as well as cultural signs among others. Admittedly, the language of hidden signs and symbols was disappearing with modernization; but at one time or the other reappears when the need to re-associate with the root arises.

This paper is intended to seek a true understanding of selected signs and symbols among the Yoruba. It is aimed at analyzing a few common, secret, sacred symbols and indicators of the arcane, hidden world that are so thickly clustered around us. During the process, light would be shed on the philosophical, cultural, psychological and anthropological nature of these selected Yoruba signs and symbols. Through this, it would be surprising that many of the everyday things we take for granted can hold hidden secrets and provides opportunity for key knowledge and insight into the minds and concerns of our forebears who constructed and adopted them. Previous studies have been done by few scholars on traditional Yoruba symbols; Ajibade (2005), James (2012), Ogunkunle (2013), to mention a few, available literatures reveals that none of the authors looked at signs and symbols regard their use in regard to communication. This is the trust of this paper. Bringing this ancient knowledge from the shadows into the daylight of our modern world provides thorough understanding of what we are and how we think and how we relate to the world around us.

Theoretical Framework

The theories of mimesis, structural formalism and semiotics are used in this study to discuss the selected signs and symbols; either in their construction, adaptation and meaning. Mimesis; a theory propounded by Aristotle and later developed by Plato; centers on imitation of nature. Of special interest it is to us that signs and symbols are associated with the natural world. For instance, are the stars and the planets, landscapes, flora and fauna surrounding us. Human beings have always associated with and attach meanings to things in the natural world, hence, the imitation and adaptation of these natural things. Our inventions of signs and symbols and our understanding of them transcend the barriers of written language and are at the very heart of our existence as human beings.

Formal theory on the other hand sees an artwork (signs and symbols inclusive) as made up of lines, colour, shape, texture and other structural properties which are seen, appreciated and interpreted. This theory; developed by Plato and later promoted by Harold Osborne expresses the physical nature of a given artwork. The theory is used in the study to explain the construction and physical build-up of the selected signs and symbols. Semiotic theory; defined by one of Swiss linguists; Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) as the study of 'the life of signs within society' is the study of sign process, which are any activity, conductor process that involves signs (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>). Here, a sign is defined as anything that communicates meaning to the sign interpreter. The proponents of this theory pay close attention to how signs are used to impart and convey meaning to their intended recipients and ensure that their meaning comes across effectively. In this context, therefore, semiotic theory is used to explain the meaning of the selected signs and symbols to ensure that their meanings are properly understood.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Over time, man has used signs and symbols for a number of purposes, ranging from identity, beautification, communication, symbols of royalty and status and other important reasons. There have been occasions when it has been essential to keep certain information hidden. Sometimes, knowledge can be a dangerous thing and yet it would be imperative to recognize other people who were part of this secret cult or society. For example, in the early days of Christianity, when allegiance to the new faith attracted death penalty, followers had a secret code of recognition which was a simple symbol of a fish (Adele, 2008).

Similarly, a few signs were developed and used in the ancient times by travelers to keep track of one another; telling friends how far ahead they might be, places they had visited and had headed to, houses and farmlands to be avoided and people and towns that are accommodating and sympathetic. These are popularly referred to as 'aroko' among the Yoruba. These symbols; apart from their structural properties and interpretation, have inner meanings that are learnt by members of the Yoruba tribe.

Ogunkunle (2013) points out that to become a 'complete' member of Yoruba speech community, it is expected that one understands the various codes in the Yoruba modes of communication. The author states further that signs and symbols are used as tools to bear the mind and signal the worldview of the parties involved in the context in which they are used. Kathy (2021) quoting Rowland Abiodun notes that language mastery certainly provides the native speaker with access to inestimable insights regarding not only general worldview, but specifics of philosophy, history keeping, and subtleties of knowledge dissemination.

In a related development, Ajibade (2005) states that there are many taboos and myths about different types of animals, representing relationships that exist between the people and the animals, and the Yoruba philosophy about these particular animals. The author states further that Yoruba deities are numerous and each of them is associated with a particular animal which is sacrificial to these deities, for instance; 'Sango' is associated with ram, 'Obatala' with snail, 'Ogun' with dog etc. Adele (2008) notes further that symbols exist everywhere, not only on the pages of books or rock surfaces, but they breathe and live, and are essential landscape of our understanding. The author pointed out that there are coded alphabets and symbols given to us by angels or demons that are arcane scripts of languages long forgotten which still carry relevance today for those who would wish to keep their secrets very safe indeed, for reasons best known to them.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature involving identification of problem, raising research questions, collection of data from primary and secondary sources and synthesizing and criticizing them. Content analysis was done in the study of past documents, oral testimony of traditions and events, myths, folklores and interviews with older individuals within the context of Yoruba community.

Research Design

The study adopts both historic and descriptive research designs. It involved objective inquiry into events, developments and experiences of the past, systematic collection of data, evaluating them and synthesizing the evidences to establish the facts. This was carried out to gain understanding of the present in order to make prediction for the future. A survey of conditions or relationships that exist, practices that prevail, belief systems, points of view, attitudes that are being felt or developing trends were also explored to discover reliable facts about selected signs and symbols. These facts are presented in the paper in simple language for readers' understanding.

Selected Yoruba Signs and Symbols

Fish: called 'eja' in Yoruba language is the most prominent element of water. Apart from its use as a symbol of acceptance of faith during the early Christian era, fish represents prosperity, peace, fertility and strength. This is seen in its ability to lay many eggs at a time, the power to live on land and water (especially the mudfish) as well as its strength. The electric mudfish for instance, called 'ojiji' in Yoruba language represents the Oba's power over his enemies. The other mudfish is known for its ability to survive on land and in water. This illustrates the Oba as a divine being considered to belong to human and spiritual realms. It also has the ability to burrow into the mud in dry season; going into dormancy or temporary death and comes out to swim when the water is back. This is seen as a symbol of eternal life. The fish lives in the depths of water that are synonymous with the underworld and it is believed to have access to secret places that are forbidden to humankind (Adele, 2008). Water is closely linked to the womb, so the fish takes on the meaning of birth and rebirth too. Jesus Christ chose his disciples from fishermen and early Christians who had to keep their religion secret because of persecution; hence, they identified one another by a Priscine symbol called Ichthys (ibid).

The Scorpion: this insect is seen as dangerous among all tribes, especially the Yoruba. In some cases, its name is hardly mentioned because of the belief that it can invoked (appear). Scorpion is constantly ready to attack, the sting in its tail always unsheathed; therefore, it is seen as an embodiment of brute aggression. Garth (2021) notes that in African tribes, a scorpion is neither a symbol of pleasure nor of beauty, rather, it is taken to be the symbol of evil and death due to the amount of poison it has. The Yoruba believe that the scorpion is as dangerous as the snake and can open the doorway to the next world (death). So, when it stings, it is taken seriously and the venom is called out through a traditional means, especially in ancient times before the arrival of orthodox medicine and treatments. In ancient Egypt, the scorpion was a hieroglyph and was sacred to the goddess of Selket believed to have the body of scorpion and head of a woman. The power of the goddess lies in her ability to wield the power of the scorpion against her enemies and also the use of this same power for protection. Among the Yoruba, tatoos of the scorpion are inscribed on the body based on the same belief. Its spirit power is believed to attack enemies and protect the wearer.

The Butterfly: is associated with flights, attractiveness and metamorphosis. This insect like bees also goes from one flower to another with great sense of purpose and intention. The butterfly flutters about aimlessly with no great ambition lurking behind its beauty (Adele, 200). Because of its the power to fly above, it is believed that it has ability to communicate with other worlds and higher powers. Furthermore, due to its life cycle and its process, the butterfly is seen as a symbol of transmutation and metamorphosis. The African butterfly is known for its beauty and ability to fly long distance with effective navigation; perching on flowers. The Yoruba associate with this insect as a symbol of love, feminism and vanity.

The Snake (Ejo): the snake is arguably one of the most prominent animal symbols and carried with it diverse and contradictory meanings. Some of these meanings sees the snake as evil but also of healing powers, of been cunning and great wisdom and capable of reaching the greatest height of spiritual realms. The story of Adam and Eve comes to mind here; the temptation and great fall of mankind. The snake is seen a symbol of regeneration, reincarnation and of healing powers (Adele, 2008). This is seen in its ability to shed its skin and continuing to pulsate after it appears to be dead. Among Africans and Yoruba in particular, the snake is seen as a dangerous animal that has the power to terminate. Hence, it is believed that its spirit can be sent to bite and kill enemies. The venom is seen to be poisonous. In ancient Yoruba land, it is believed that a particular snake was used as a guard, to watch over treasures or goods placed somewhere for sale or preservation. Its meat is also forbidden as edible in some parts of Yoruba land, especially among pregnant women (interview with Mr Alabi Adebukoye, December 26th, 2021).

Arrow: the arrow known in Yoruba language as ‘ofa’ symbolizes penetration, direction and flight (Adele, 2008). In native Yoruba land, it conveys the power of the person who carries it, especially when it is drawn with a bow. As a symbol of direction, it points to its power of direction at the physical and metaphorical levels. When it faces the sky, it portrays the ability to serve as a link between the Earth and Heaven; taking messages to the gods. In Ancient Yoruba land, the arrow portrays dangers. It is believed that when shot at a person or an animal, the chance of survival is very slim, due to the belief that its impact on the recipient is poisonous. It is also believed that the wicked people of the underworld shoot arrows on whomever they intend to harm. Hence, healing such person from its pain is sought through herbal means.

The Lizard: Adele (2008) notes that lizards are attracted to the heat of the sun, closely linked to its light and synonymous with the soul that seeks knowledge and enlightenment. The author notes further that Egyptian hieroglyphs provides more evidence that the lizard is a benevolent creature; meaning ‘plentiful’. In Africa and Yoruba land in particular, the lizard is seen as a messenger between man and God and one of such messages given by the creature is that there is no life to be expected after death (ibid, 2008). The ability of the lizard to renew its skin symbolizes rebirth and regeneration. It also had the ability to walk both in the seen and unseen worlds; the world of the living and the dead. Agama (red-head) lizards are used in preparing charms to overcome and command the other person believing that it has the power to rule its territory.

The Bat: Bats are nocturnal animals. In Yoruba land, a bat is classified both as an animal and a bird due to its ability to fly and its physical structure. The nocturnal nature of the bat makes it have access to secret information; able to detect things in the hours of darkness that are not accessible to diurnal creatures. It is seen as a forbidden creature by the Muslims in Yoruba land, hence it is seen inedible.

Cowries: because of its shape which takes after the female genital organ; the cowry shell is seen as a symbol of fertility. According to Adele (2008) cowry shell originated from Malaysia and was once used as a currency in most parts of Africa too with no exemption to Yoruba land. Cowry shells are widely used as headdress decorations across Yoruba land and also a status symbol as it is worn on dresses, anklets and bracelets. It is also used in divination, especially the ‘Ifa’ divination counting series. The cowries in Nigeria has been used as a medium of exchange in trade, held a powerful spiritual position for divination, a treasured artifact in museums, and also used as traditional home decoration . . . it adorns gorgeously the hairstyles of both the men and women who respectfully cherish their native costumes and cultural heritage (Fati, 2022). James (2012) affirms that cowries played important roles in the day to day activities of the Yoruba in pre-colonial period.

Crescent Moon: shows the changing shape or metamorphosis of the moon; its development into full shape and return to the base. The crescent moon is one of the iconographic symbols of Islam, although the symbol is believed to predate the faith by thousands of years as the symbol of another of the great moon goddesses (Adele, 2008). In Yoruba culture, crescent moon is seen as a beginning or as a sign of great hope for something good to come. It is used to seek blessings from God to make all aspirations come to reality. When it is first sighted, the Yoruba use the symbol to pray to God for fortunes like; wealth, children, good health etc.

The Star: According to Adele (2008) the five pointed star is often comprised of the five distinct diamond shape is the emblem of Druze faith; an offshoot of Islam. Each segment is often coloured according to its meaning. Each stands for the five universal principles of the faith, i.e. masculine element; the sun and the mind is coloured green, feminine element and the moon in red, the word considered mediator between the Divine and humankind is coloured yellow, will and the realms of possibility in blue while white represents actualization, the manifestation of the word and the will. Amongst the Yoruba of Nigeria, it is believed that the star is connected to the spirit of an individual. Our ancestors believed that each star has its own spirit and this represents individuals within the

society. Whatever happens to an individual is said to be connected with the spirit of that person. Hence, to call someone a star is seen as a great compliment and the quantity and quality of blessings, fortunes a person has is often related to the brightness of the individual's star.

In another development, the appearance and sighting of a particular star in the sky announces a given phenomenon i.e. birth, death, fall and so on, just as it is in the case of the Three Wise Men in the Bible. When a bright star is sight, it is believed that a great personality is born; on the other hand, when it falls, it is believed amongst the Yoruba that an important personality is dead or goes to join the ancestors.

Axe: in Yoruba land, the axe is connected with 'Sango' deity. It is with this tool, he commanded lightning and fire from the sky. The axe is associated with great strength; it has the power to fight, separate and divide. It is also a tool used for splitting wood, cutting down trees and digging in some cases.

Dog: the dog is associated with 'fidelity' (Adele, 2008) and the trust and faith that a dog and its owner invest in one another is a definition of their great relationship. In Yoruba land and many African countries, man and dog are great companions; working together (as seen in hunting), living together and providing security alerts, and are in mutual bond and understanding. The dog is known to have great sense of smell; a skill denied humans and something that cannot be seen or detected by humans. For this reason, the dog acts as a mediator between the 'seen and unseen' worlds, seemingly gifted the powers of second sight and psychic abilities (Adele, 2008). Dog is also associated with strength and race; the ability to cover long distance as well as loyalty to its owner. The dog also is a good friend of man as a pet.

Crab: the crab; a common creature often found and associated with water. It possesses the ability to live both in wet land and water. The Yoruba associate the crab with success as seen in the phrase 'Ejan'bakan', here; a comparison is made between fish and crab, connoting fish as failure and crab as success. In another development, the crab is known for great sight and it is believed amongst the Yoruba that it does not sleep, hence, the saying-'eniti o ba reti atisun akan, yio pe leti omi'-meaning; if you are waiting for the crab to sleep, you will remain a long time at the river bank. This saying portrays the belief that if you wish someone falls, you may be disappointed after a long wait.

The Spider: this creature is known for its web. This connotes connectivity. Like most African myths, the spider is believed to have woven the fabric of the universe. But due to the fragility of the cobweb, it is illusioned that it is not a veil of reality (Adele, 2008). Hence, the Yoruba says 'owu alantakun, ko se e fi ran aso'-meaning its web cannot be used to weave a fabric as it is not reliable. This saying is in contradiction to the first belief. In Africa, the spider was supposed to have supplied the materials that created the first man and woman, and also wove the network of the Heavens; this is because it could travel in any direction and could fly through the air on its magical thread. It is seen as a go-between man and God (ibid). In Yoruba land, it is seen as ill-luck when a spider web is seen covering the entrance of a house and you have to run into it; especially in the early hours of the day.

The Snail: the snail is known for its slow and steady movement; but believed to get to its desired destination. Due to its ability to appear and disappear into and out of its shell, it is seen as a lunar emblem-a symbol of seasonal renewal. This creature also carries its 'house'; the shell with it, hence, it connotes self-sufficiency (Adele, 2008). Amongst the Yoruba, like many Africans, the snail is believed to contain a reservoir of semen, hence, it is recommended to be eaten to boost fertility both in man and woman. Laziness is also associated with the snail due to its fragility and its constant and instantaneous withdrawal from danger.

Tortoise: this animal; just like the snail is also known to carry its 'house' around, hence, it is self-sufficient. In Yoruba land, the tortoise is known to possess power in great wisdom, though very lazy

and crafty. Thus, many African tales and folklores are connected with the tortoise. The creature is known to have the ability to live both on land and in water. It is also known for slow and steady movement. Another belief amongst the Yoruba is that the tortoise is stingy; hence, a stingy person is likened to the tortoise. Just like the snail, it possess the ability to withdraw into its shell when confronted with danger, hence, it is seen as a lazy animal. It has a very tough skin and the Yoruba believe that the animal is cruel and does not cry. A person who does not have pity or cry is said to have eaten the head of a tortoise.

The Chameleon: the Yoruba believe that the chameleon does not have its own original colour. It has the ability to take on the colour of its immediate surroundings; hence, it changes colour as it moves from one location to the other. This creature is known for slow and gracious movement and possesses the ability to hide its true identity. Because of this, the Yoruba compares a person with unknowable and mysterious characteristics to a chameleon. The chameleon, because of its ability to climb to the top of the highest tree is believed to possess the power to communicate with the sun god; hence, it is seen as the creator of mankind (Adele, 2008). The chameleon is also believed to possess the ability to attract thunder and rain, and also thanks to its proximity to the sky. It is believed in Yoruba tradition that whatever the chameleon wishes is granted by God, hence, the saying – ‘aba ti alagemo ba da ni orisa oke n’gba’. Therefore, this creature is often used by herbalists to prepare charm to command their wish.

4.0 SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary and Conclusion

In this paper, a few secret symbols of the Yoruba have been carefully selected and briefly discussed. Their connotations, meanings have been discussed in relation to the context of the Yoruba belief system. The paper relies on information gathered from various sources and personal experience. However, the content of the paper may not be generally accepted as the view and belief of entire Yoruba race but in relation to the author’s cultural background. The paper had contributed to the pool of knowledge by bringing unknown and hidden meanings of selected signs and symbols of the Yoruba people of Nigeria to limelight

Recommendations

The paper recommends that signs and symbols commonly used in communication among the Yoruba people of Nigeria should incorporated into the curricula of schools; especially Yoruba as a subject taught in schools to preserve the tradition from extinction. It is also recommended that folklores, mythology and oral tradition be encouraged among younger generation to preserve cultural values.

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