



Communication Symbols in Nigeria Culture and Religions

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Abstract. This paper considered communication symbols from religious, sociology and anthropology perspective. Symbol is an instrument of learning, the image of a representable object. It is conventional and cultural conditioning. The history of symbolism shows that everything can assume symbolic significance. Scholars in many fields writes about symbolism from their discipline. In ancient time Greek and Latin words related to symbol had a variety of meaning, arranged round the notion of matching entities. A symbol is an instrument of expression and in early Christianity it was associated with set of beliefs. The method adopted in this paper is critical analysis.

1. Introduction

The ability to understand and be understood is central in communication. Competent comprehension must go beyond a topical awareness of another culture's communicative practices and behaviours. An appreciation of the cultural antecedents and motivations shaping an individual's communication conventions is necessary for understanding how and why a particular practice is used (McDaniel,1997).

An established method of explication the cultural motivations of human behaviour is to identify and isolate consistent themes among a social grouping. Anthropological writings have posited that each culture manifests a "limited number of dynamic affirmations" referred to as themes (McDaniel, 1997). In communication studies, the concept of thematic commonality has been utilized to help explicate relational communications. They conceptualized a series of interrelated message themes which have purported application to both verbal and non-verbal exchanges. These proposed themes have become a supposition cited in subsequent studies of interpersonal relations communication (McDaniel, 1997).

This paper focuses on communication symbols, a major function of symbols is in facilitating communication. In a ritual field, performance of a symbolic act allows ideas to be shared and reformulated without use of words (Firth, 1973:79). Some anthropologists and sociologists use the term 'ritual' to refer to symbolic action with reference to supernatural beings. They may use 'ceremony' to describe secular rituals. The only difference in the definition is whether the subject matter is restricted to religion or secular (Bocock,1974). Collins Dictionary and Thesaurus (2006:155) international edition define language as, 'system of sounds, symbols, for communication thought, particular system used by a nation or people. From a purely technical point of view, language may be defined, fundamentally, as an communication system employed in giving, receiving or hiding information. It may be made of sounds and calls, signs and signals, gestures and postures, including silence. Language may be oral or written. When the medium of communication is orality, an arbitrary system of vocal symbols is employed (Iwara,1990).

2. Symbol as Sign

A sign provides simple information, while symbols are used to communicate complex knowledge. A sign is a mark, object, symbol used to represent something like a mathematical sign. A sign is a word or words, design on a board or plate to give a warning, or to direct somebody towards something such as traffic or danger (Oxford Dictionary of current English).

The word symbol comes from the Greek word 'symbolon', which means contract, token, insignia, and a means of identification. Parties to a contract, allies, guests, and their host could identify each other with the help of the parts of the symbolon. In its original meaning the symbol represented and communicated a coherent greater whole by means of a part. The symbol is based on the principle of complementation. The symbol object, picture, sign,

word, and gesture require the association of certain conscious ideas in order to fully express what is meant by them. The symbol has a veiling and a revealing function, discovering its meaning is based on convention of a group that agrees upon its meaning (Religious symbolism and Iconography, Wilkiepedia Free press).

A symbol can be interpreted in various ways, it has been contrasted especially with allegory, the translation of an abstract idea into a concrete image (Firth, 1973: 72). The problem in the study of symbolism is the status. The relationship between a symbol and that which it represents. Some have argued that there must be a natural or 'real' link between the thing recognized as a sign (*signans*) and that for which it stands (*significatum*). Natural symbols of divinity in Semitic worship were rocks, trees, fountains- things of the external environment which had independent existence unaltered by man. 'Natural symbols' were those where there was a closely observable correspondence' between symbol and thing symbolized. As when the symbol is also a sign, as when weeping in a play indicates mourning; and when a symbol is dynamically expressive, as when darkness symbolizes mystery (Firth, 1973:59). Religious symbols are used to convey concepts concerned with humanity's relationship to the sacred, also to his social and material world. Other non-religious types of symbols achieved increasing significance in the 19th and 20th centuries, especially those dealing with human beings' relationship to and conceptualization of the material world (Wilkiepedia Free pree).

Creuzer saw the symbolic as the root of all imaginative expression especially in the theological idea of sacrament (Firth,1973:100). He devoted much attention to the many meanings of symbol and its allied forms found in Greek literature, and pointed out that writing about symbols specifically could be traced back to Greek times. He said, those who speak of things divine by means of sensible signs intuitively express themselves either in symbols and in myths, or in images (Firth, 1973:100). Through symbol man expresses his dream or production of images in dreams, dream is part of human life (Firth, 1973:94). Creuzer again said, the pragmatic significance of symbols is, it is an instrument of learning with the idea of mystical religious expressiveness (Firth 1973:99).

In the eighteenth – century anthropologists began to distinguish treatment of symbols from academic study of theology, art or philosophy in the fields of magic and religion. Their main concern was to

identify objects or actions as symbolic, not literally explaining what they meant, and looking for systematic ways in which such symbols were formed (Firth, 1973:92). A symbol is ordinarily the image of a representable object. There must be a link between the status and what it stands for. Natural symbols of divinity in Semitic worship were rocks, trees, fountains (Robertson Smith 1889: 180, in Firth, 1973:59), the things of external environment which had independent existence unaltered by man, for example Olumo rock in Abeokuta, S.F.Nadel writes, 'natural symbols' were those where there was a closely observable 'correspondence' between symbol and thing symbolized. Natural places like Olumo rock, Oke- Ibadan have be deified. They have priests dedicated to them, symbols are conventional and cultural conditioning (Firth, 1973:60).

3. Legal Symbols

The culture of marriage rite with simulated seizure of the bride as a symbol originated from the social and political institutions of the Greeks and Romans. A religious ceremony, arising from the need to transfer the bride from the jurisdiction of her own family sacred fire to that of her husband, where from now on it would be her duty to worship by his side. In this characterization of the symbolic significance of the pretended seizure, Raymond Firth indicated the essential sociological point of the function of formal transfer of the woman between groups (Firth, 1973:111).

The term 'engagement ring' can only be understood by knowing that this object is worn by a woman in Christian societies who is either signifying her intention to marry a specific man, or, if she is also wearing a wedding ring, is married. It can only be fully understood in the context that a man does not wear such rings but buys them for the woman he intends to marry, a fact signifying something about the different relationships of males and females within the social institution of marriage (Billington, Strawbridge, et al 1991:37).

Robert Boccock (1974) view marriage service which involves a man putting a ring on the fourth finger of a woman's left hand, 'with the pronouncing of with my body I thee worship', a symbolic action. This phrase is the voice of 'authentic' ritual, and should aid the lovers to enjoy their sexuality (union). Elizabeth Ree (1992) writes, we are all symbol- producing individuals, and the history of symbolism shows that everything can assume symbolic significance: natural objects such as trees stones, and human ante facts such as wedding rings, the cross and even abstract

forms such as numbers, the square and the circle. As St. Paul said, through visible things we learn to appreciate invisible ones (Romans 1:20).

In C.N. Adichie (2009) "The Thing around your Neck" the author wrote about an Igbo girl who had American Green Card, who travelled from Nigeria to USA. The book contains objects like masks used at royal ceremonies, necklace, rosary that Roman Catholics wear or use to pray but her real focus was on this girl. Marriage is the thing hanging around every woman's neck, it is what they dream about and the image around which the whole book was written. The young woman with green card got to America, saw different men but found it difficult in making her choice because she wanted her race man. Where marriage is not contracted in the church or court, the payment of bride price (dowry) is symbolic. The family of both the bride and groom must be gathered in a ceremony before there is agreement, for the girl to be considered wife or hand over to the new husband. The purpose is to regularize and stabilize marriage, if the full dowry is paid it usually ensures that the children of the marriage belong to the husband (Parrinder, 1976).

Non-verbal Symbols: The first step in communicating with another person is to form some impression of him/her. This impression directs one's reaction to that person and thus influences the course of the interpersonal communication. This process of forming impressions of others and making judgments about them is called interpersonal perception. Each of us tend to take the perceptions of others for granted without considering why and how these ideas are formed. And whether they are right. Friends are thus selected without conscious realizations of why 'A' is attracted to 'B'. These perceptions are formed based on every day "informal" judgments of others (Cook, 1971). Visual communication is inevitable and basic to the establishment of a relationship. Non-verbal communication is tied closely to the visual signals exchanged between people. Eye contact between people may establish the initial contact, the union and interaction of individuals is based upon mutual glances. The observer seeks to know the observed through the glances (Simmel, 1921).

Simmel, G. said, we use sign language which includes words, numbers and punctuation signs. Action language embraces all movements that are not used exclusively as signals, such acts as walking and drinking. Also, the use of object like art objects, architectural structures, including the clothes human being wear. The commonest means by which man communicate is by gesture and material objects.

Among the Japanese, a non-verbal code normally provides only partial interpretation of the intended message. The Japanese kinesics reflect the cultural themes such as gestures, bow, eye contact and facial expression (McDaniel, 1997). A Japanese manager might rely on gestures to communicate with subordinates, thereby demonstrating the cohesive familiarity common among in- group members. The Japanese are more relaxed and expressive within their in-group. Away from the in-group, however, the use of body language is usually restrained. In public, it is quite common to see both Japanese men and women sitting quietly and unobtrusively, with hands folded. This self-restraint of body movement in out-group environments is designed to avoid attention and maintain situational harmony.

The most common activity associated with Japanese kinesics is the bow, an integral and repetitive part of daily social interaction. A Japanese will bow when meeting someone, when asking for something, while apologizing, when offering congratulations, when acknowledging someone else, and when departing. Historically a sign of submission, the bow is a contemporary ritual that continues to convey respect and denote hierarchical status. The junior person bows first, lowest, and longest. An improperly executed bow can be a significant insult (McDaniel, 1997).

Traditional Japanese women exhibit a very distinct kinesic activity by obscuring facial areas with their hands or some object. As was reported by McDaniel (1997) women utilized these adaptors for impression management. A very explicit intent of these actions is to evoke a perception of humility when in the presence of a social superior. Prolonged eye contact is considered rude, threatening, and disrespectful. Children are taught from childhood to avert their gaze when one is part of an audience. Direct, sustained eye contact is normally avoided, unless a superior wants to admonish a subordinate. Japan has a homogenous indigenous population, culture and their ethics is Confucian- based (McDaniel, 1997). In Nigeria bowing one's head is what is taught in schools but some people bend their knee, while some prostrate to greet seniors as culture demands.

Identifications of one another are ordinarily facilitated by appearance and are often accomplished silently or non-verbally. This can be made crystal clear by observing the necessity for and process of establishing gender in social transactions. Everywhere we find vocabularies sexually distinguished: there are languages for males only, languages for females only, and languages employed

to communicate across the barriers of gender. The knowing of the other's gender is assumed silently, established by appearances. Appearance is that phase of the social transaction which establishes identifications of the participants. Ordinarily appearance is communicated by such non-verbal symbols as gestures, grooming, clothing, location and the like; discourse, by verbal symbolism (Stone, 1962:90).

Ritual Symbols: The emphasis here is on passage rituals of groups from one state of life to another, a life cycle ritual in Van Gennep's theorem. This begins with rites of separation, which remove the subject (individual) from the 'environment' or social field he is in, the rite of transition, while the individual is waiting on the threshold of the status or social field he is about to enter, and finally comes rites of incorporation into the new status. The ritual in each case is appropriate because it symbolizes the nature of the passage in each particular case (Meyer, 1987:86). There are ritual marking movement from one age –grade to another among ethnic groups, prince who are to become king pass through series of rituals. In initiation into masquerades cult in Ikuo clan at Ugo. The kids between the ages of 10- 15 years are initiated into junior masquerade cult of the street. Those between 16- 40 years are members of senior masquerade cult of the clan. The members pass through some ordeals of physical nature, they are flogged by the old members before acceptance. Initiation is an important threshold that must be passed in order for the person to live his society (Meyer, 1987). The kids expect to be accepted by the society when they reach the age. The cult of junior masquerade is a preparatory for the adult cult. This community celebrates new year festival with masquerade dance every new year since ancient time. The kids in a particular street perform their dance while the adult dance involves a clan which is a combination of streets. To become a member of adult masquerader cult, the elders of the clan elevate youths from children age-grade to youth- age grade at clan council meeting.

The newly elevated must strip off the paraphernalia of the junior mask grade and undergo the rituals which involve flogging and providing wine that will pave the way for acceptance or incorporation (Meyer, 1987). The masks worn by the dancers have iconic significance, the images have mythological tales surrounding each of them. In the most primitive societies ever studied, dancing has been a highly social activity. Anthropologists link dance to feeling of personal power (Raymond 1975:58). The appeal of the mask is enormous in aesthetic and utilitarian

terms in various aspects of the arts- performing and visual. In the visual arts, the mask has been a medium of plastic and graphic expression, and communication through the ages. As a cultural object, the mask is a device mostly worn on the face or the head together with costumes which cover all or parts of the body. The spiritual function of masks: mask-donning performers assume supernatural roles. It is a popular conception in African cosmology that masks contain the spirit powers of whatever material is used to produce the costume (Esekong, 2012).

Quite often, African masks function in religious and social events to represent the spirits of ancestors or to control the good and evil forces in the community. It is assumed they come to life, possessed by spirits in the performance of dance, and are enhanced by both the music and atmosphere of the occasion (Esekong, 2012). Among Ugo people one is not expected to fight a masquerade because of the belief that it represents spirit or symbol of spiritual presence.

4. Myth Symbols

Myth belongs to pre-historic times and was treated as a development of folk belief. It was one of the characteristics of the early stages of human culture. The primitive stages of human development were dominated by mythic consciousness (Raymond, 1975:57,96). Myth was a simple human attempt to explain in symbolic language the origin of the world, human discoveries and inventions, suffering and death, which the community accepts as belonging to it (Abanuka, 1999:5). Myth uses symbolic language to express the problem of origins. The symbols mainly employed are those of a Supreme Being, gods and goddesses including iconic heroes. Symbols are the images by which man seeks to explain concretely what he thinks about the relationship between the material and immaterial, the visible and invisible aspects of the universe. Man's aim is to give some meaning to his experience, and the community claims myth as its property. Myth has been a folk story inherited from the community or legend that came from neighbouring ethnic groups.

Ogun is the god of Iron among the Yoruba, there has been a myth about Ogun clearly and succinctly which narrates the descent of the gods. In its essence, the myth tells that when the gods came to earth determined to occupy their appointed places, they discovered that they were separated from man by some disorderly growth, a kind of primordial marsh. Of all the gods, Ogun, was the hunter, who had visited the earth before and who knew how to smelt iron (Abanuka, 1999:30). Ogun has been a god

among Edo people but the origin of Ogun has been traced to the Yoruba neighbours.

5. Aesthetic Symbols

Aesthetic is about appreciation of the beautiful in the arts. In *Pawns and Symbols* by Majliss Larson (1985) a book written on a cave, referred to as Klingon empire the author discussed the presence of Europeans in the cave. The city has massive architecture, buildings were almost all of stone or orange colour bricks, roofs were flat or dome-shaped. The city was laid out along broad avenues with heavy muscular statues of military heroes at intersections. The crowds thronging the road way, dressed mainly in browns, blacks, and maroons. There was an air of festivity, especially when there was an anticipation and an enthusiastic reception of their leader. Thick copse of trees was common in the cave with the custom of the people viewed as real. In the book custom served as a symbol of justification. The means of transport was small three-wheeled rigs pedaled by their occupants. Two-wheeled carts drawn by goatlike creatures. The procession ended in front of an imposing building whose dusky pink façade was decorated with silver and white tiles (Majliss, 1985:6-59). Symbols serve as monuments of the dead- the ancient Italian attached importance to the monuments of their dead. They had grave monuments as a most ancient cult of fertility (Firth, 1973:104). Ruth and Eileen claim that people often see symbols as they travel either by road or sea, they see doll houses, ornamental building containing candles and pictures where families buried their loved ones. The families put up a memorial at the spot where it happened. These memorials were monuments observed at Mythos Island in Greece. Poseidon was the god of the sea among the Greeks, while Amphitrite was the wife and the name of the boat through which Zeke and Elizabeth sailed to Mythos (Ruth and Eileen, 1997).

There is a close relation between symbols and civilization (Flora S. Kaplan, 1981). She discovered the close relationship in the royal arts in the courts of Benin, Nigeria; Ashanti of Ghana and some other nations like Luba, Songa, Fang, Kong, in African Continent. The Oba (king) of Benin has been a symbol of the living past, representing the unbroken dynasty that began in the 12th century. He resides in the palace which dates back to the 9th century. The Oba possesses the divine regalia- the staff and the royal coral beads that enables him to bring to pass whatever he utters. The king of Benin and personages of rank wore strands of coral necklaces piled about their necks. The necklaces are for embellishment

assumed to possess the magic and the force attributed to coral. In Benin, periodic festivals of coral were held and the king recited the famous incantation: "Oh corals, when I adorn myself with you, endow me with wisdom and keep me apart from evil spirits" (Obichere 1981:49). The use of brass and bronze works, ivory carvings have been in Benin, including coral for centuries. Bronze was reserved for royal usage, the bronze contains brass products, other objects are brass or carved in wood objects. The next symbol is ivory face masks which are distinctive part of the royal regalia (Jeffries, 1981:41). It signifies purity wore only by the king at ritual, religious and magical contexts. The other symbols are the beads given to members of the royal court as an honour by the king. The number of rows of coral in a necklace indicate the rank of a court official. The Queens of the Oba wore ivory and coral hair ornaments in their braided tresses and horsehair wig, in addition to necklaces and bracelets (Kaplan, 1981:79). There are many statues in the center of Benin City referred to as ring road, the statues are symbols of chiefs and the images appear as such. There is no single male statue displaying genitalia that can incite lust (Dan Brown 2000:27), *Angels and Demons*, New York: Pocket Books.

6. Symbols of Authority

In this aspect moral symbols and sacred emblems, serving as instruments of power is prominent in public domain. The 'will of the people' and the 'divine right of kings' is the central concept. The kings claim that it is God that gave them power to rule while the governors were voted into power by the people. The monarch wears the crown, he reigns 'by the grace of God'. The coronation of the king goes through different rites. The coronation was part of the supporting mechanism of the monarchy; it employed a range of traditional symbols, both political and religious (Firth, 1973:88). The symbolic relevance of the ceremony is not exhausted simply in power terms, it had aesthetic and moral interest. The people tolerated the symbolism of the ceremony because they enjoyed it and had already accepted the king. The coronation ritual was a demonstration of the way in which the crown had kept the society intact since ancient time. The crown symbolizes the authority system of the tribe, representing the hierarchy of values of the society (Shils and Young, 1953 in (Firth 1973:89).

6.1 Symbols as Roots to Imaginative Expression

Trees are often described as God's gift to human beings and animals, including birds. They featured in

history, in religion and folklore. Legend describes trees as the link between heaven and earth, and as the resting place for souls. The life giving role of trees is expressed in variety of fertility symbolism and has been traditionally preserved in sacred groves for the benefit of mankind (Ekhosuehi, 2022:45).

Egbe is a hidden and a special plant at Egume at Dekina in Kogi state that is meant for special occasion. It depends on less quality water which makes it possible for the plant to survive drought. The plant is believed to have provided shade for the ancestors of Egume Ome in the distant past due to its unique quality. Special herbal medicine, traditional juju and core traditional masquerades are kept under the shade of this tree and allege that traditional spirits reside under this special tree. Its attractive quality gives the tree a special position as leader of all trees, and the king is likened to Egbe in oral folklore (Ebeh, 2013:63).

Expressive Symbols: A symbol has instrumental value, and are instruments of expression, of communication, of knowledge and of control. As instrument of expression symbols are to a supreme degree tools of the artist (Firth, 1973:77). The instrumental nature of a symbol as a means of expression is especially clear with political and religious symbols. Early in history, sculptors tried to express the spirit of a rock by giving it the hint of a human figure; many statues of the earth mother take this form. Ancient Israelis held that God was too holy to be represented in any form, but early Christians, influenced by surrounding cultures, developed a rich tradition of statues and paintings (Rees, 1992:17). One of the earliest forms of Christian statue was that of the 'virgo Lactans', the mother of God seated, suckling her child (Rees, 1992:17). At the University of Benin teaching hospital gate is a statue of a Doctor attending to a mother breast-feeding baby, A pediatrics symbol.

There are many other expressive symbols such as the flag, church painting, scriptural text, national dress, school label they evoke powerful emotions of identification with a group and can be used as a rallying point for group action. Symbols are aesthetic and of political significance. In Nigeria political campaigns the use of 'broom', 'umbrella' signifies a rallying point for a group.

Symbols is a unique way of getting at the truth. Symbols may be used for reference and support when conduct is called into question; they are appealed to as repositories of values. Symbols can be invoked for justification, for example ancestral cult objects of

memorial (monuments). A symbol is a sign consciously designed to stand for something. A sign is comprehended if it serves to make one notice the object or situation it speaks. A symbol is a sign or status produced by its interpreter and acts as a substitute for some other sign for which it is synonymous or make one conceive the idea it represents, a red flag in the middle of the road usually means an obstacle ahead, a clear sign to slow down. This is conventional and well understood internationally (Firth, 1975:65).

Iconography: The word Icon is a sign that represents its object by resembling it- which is 'determined by its dynamic objectivity by virtue of its own internal nature'. The concept of the religious symbol embraces an abundantly wide variety of types and meanings. Allegory, personifications, figures, analogies, metaphors, parables, pictures, signs, emblems as individually conceived (Religious Symbolism and Iconography, Wilkiepedia Free press). The word Iconoclast refers to persons who took part in the movement against the use of images in religious worship in the churches of Eastern Europe in the 8th and 9th centuries, Christian era (Oxford Dictionary). Collins dictionary and Thesaurus defined it as persons who attacked established ideas or principles. Iconography refers to destruction of images (Foley, 1991:136)

Visual Symbols: The term visual refers to things visible, that aid learning, such as charts, films, books, pictures, maps. Artists are taking the objects of everyday life and making them into art objects, people are making their everyday lives into aesthetic projects by aiming at a coherent style in their clothes, appearance and household furnishings (Nicholas, 2000:7). Society is a particular social system of which the participants in the rite are members, which may be a tribe or clan, or a nation-state, or an organization. The rituals relate to the specific group of members and their experiences. Civil ritual is distinct from religious ritual, the distinction is analytical, empirically some rituals will be a mixture of the two, for example, the coronation service, the funeral of a national figure, Remembrance Day activities, morning assembly in schools are civic rituals.

When members of a parish church meet for worship, part of the ritual action involves, creating a consciousness of membership of the group, that is, the church, and renewing commitment to its norms and values. This may be achieved by the singing of hymns by all the congregation, all taking part in the

communion, and being taught the values of the church in sermons.

Symbols in religious ritual have a reference to the Holy. The symbols may be special clothes worn only on ritual occasions, material objects or actions or words. The earring is a potent symbol of kingship (Kurtz, 1986:371). Shining mass of silver medals wore around necks were symbols of royalty The flag of a nation-state is used as a symbol for a secular social group (Bocock, 1974:64). Symbols distinguish the priest in the pulpit, some wear vestments while others wear coat. Culture is a distinctive and transmissible network of symbols which characterizes a designated aggregate of people. This term embraces man-made artifact, activities that people perform, ideas and feelings. In the study of a culture, it is germane to analyze the symbols, customs and conventions, values and norms which distinguish a particular culture from another. First and perhaps the most common symbol that is found in all cultures is language. Language is a major instrument through which people express their ideas, thought, feelings and sentiments and through which they communicate with each other (Nwosu and Kalu, 1982).

7. Conclusion

Communication symbols is an important area to study because it features in every area of society. When one move along the streets you see evidence of symbols in posters, paintings, statues, images and designs. In the religious realm, there are many symbols, if one walk into a Catholic Church he will genuflect, as he joins the procession he will see candles on the altar, a crucifix above it gave at least some reference point on which to focus. There is altar rail and the priest kiss the altar. There will be a solemn hymn as people come into the church (Kurtz, 1986).

In the tradition culture, the paintings in chief houses often distinguish their building from others. In the secular realm there are visual symbols in ritual, dance and art objects. This paper also discusses non-verbal symbols mainly from literatures on non-African society.

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