

A Semiotic Study of the Performance Rituals of Igede Dance Group: The Case of Aita Musical Ensemble

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Abstract

The paper is an analysis of the range of significations in the acts and materials of the *aita* dance group in Igede society. In Africa, people use different signification systems (verbal and non-verbal) to communicate meaning. Although some of the acts and materials cut across dance groups, and even cultures, the purpose and the interpretations attributed to them may differ. It is on this basis that the paper examines the semiotics of performance rituals of the *aita* musical ensemble in Igede society. To achieve this, the paper identifies, selects and interprets refreshment rituals during life performance in funeral ceremonies. Using Peirce's theory of semiotics, the paper explains how parts of chicken and how they are shared among performers means more than just mere eating of meat to the group. The interpretation was aided by oral interviews held with some Igede elders versed in the area of Igede world view and culture. Explaining the effects of these rituals, the paper concludes that material communication is culture bound. It does mean that the phenomenon of signification is culture specific which largely depends on the world view of a group of people. The achievement of this paper is its ability to unveil the hidden meaning behind the acts and materials of musical groups in Igede society. It also shows that the act of sharing chicken as well as the parts of chicken can be utilized to perform communicative functions within the Igede culture. At large, the paper contributes to the study of non-verbal signification system.

Keywords: *non-verbal signification, Igede and Aita dance group*

Introduction

It has long been established that the use of language sets man apart from other lower animals. The use of language therefore is a powerful distinguishing feature among primates. Humans as social beings engage in communication in order to foster development, love and social cohesion. This can be done by sharing of ideas, thoughts, feelings or emotions as well as beliefs. This process usually takes various forms which include facial expressions, gestures, body movements, symbolic use of objects and many others. All of these are aptly categorized as verbal and nonverbal communication. Thus, verbal communication uses words, (spoken or written) to express ideas, thoughts and feelings, while the nonverbal aspect depends substantially on objects and other signalling system as a vector of communication. An analysis of signs and symbols as a means of language or communication either within a society or a social group is what is termed "semiotics." (Alagh, 2017)

This paper therefore concerns itself with the nonverbal aspect, which is within the purview of semiotics. It specifically focuses on the use of material of *chicken-parts* as a form of communication among the *aita* social group of the Igede society. The work thus limits its scope to the Igede cultural setting. The objective of doing this is to examine how these chicken

parts are shared in a particular manner among group members of the *aita* musical ensemble to communicate special meanings. This is premised on the fact that every society is marked by specific features that distinguish it from other groups. This being the case, it is worthy of note that in traditional African society, certain aspects of life are unique and peculiar to Africa, distinguishing it from the western cultures. Thus, the paper finds the Igede cultural practice of characteristic sharing of chicken-parts as a veritable object of discourse. It explores the several ways by which this practice enhances professionalism, commitment and social bonding within the group.

Aita is a male dominated musical dance group that can be seen in many villages in the Igede society. They have a unique formation, organization, costumes as well as dancing steps and pattern of behaviors which is line with their construction of meaning. The preponderance of this musical ensemble in the Igede society is an indication of its significance and influence on the people, hence the justification to examine this aspect of the people's culture. The goal of the study therefore, is to examine the sociocultural signification of chicken parts in Igede. The objective is to identify and describe roles the parts are believed to perform ion the cultural life of the dance group.

Conceptual Clarification

One of the major concepts which draw attention in this study is, “nonverbal signification” otherwise known as “semiotics”. To approach this task, the paper shall draw insights into what semiotics means. But before that, it is necessary to understand the meaning of communication since the whole idea about signification anchors on construction of meaning. Merriam Webster defines communication as the act of using words, sounds, signs, or behaviors to express or exchange information, or ideas, feelings, and thoughts to someone.” Communication has also been viewed by many as the means and process by which humans share ideas, thoughts and experiences (Alagh, 2017). In other words, it is an aspect of human social life by which ideas, thoughts or feelings are expressed. The act of engaging in arguments, sharing of ideas and experiences, imparting knowledge and so on are all regarded as communication. However, West and Tuner (2010) contend that communication is a social process in which symbols are employed to establish and interpret meanings. Similarly, Chapell and Real, quoted in Alagh (2017:28) assert that “communication is *any means* by which thought is transferred from one person to another.” These definitions clearly imply that communication does not only mean the production or use of speech to express thoughts and ideas, but it includes wordless signals, symbols and use of objects and materials for information transfer.

It is clear, from the foregoing, that nonverbal communication is a process of generating meaning using behaviour other than words. Nonverbal communication has a distinct history and serves separate evolutionary functions from verbal communication in different communities. Among the Igede, the use of material objects for communication purpose is a common practice. For instance, a walking stick is a symbol of age and dignity. And, in hunting expedition, the one who kills a game is given the head to depict bravery and leadership; the left forelimb of the animal goes to the maternal kindred (of the killer of the game) to indicate motherhood while the right forelimb goes the paternal relatives to represent

patrimony or fatherhood. This sharing pattern is fixed and cannot be done otherwise for the sake of their cultural significations. All this goes to reinforce the role of symbols in interpersonal or group interactions. The primary function of nonverbal communication is to convey meaning by reinforcing, substituting for, or contradicting verbal communication. Nonverbal communication is used to influence others and regulate conversational flow. Perhaps, even more important are the ways in which nonverbal communication functions as a central part of relational communication and identity expression. Thus, an analysis of meaning based on signs and symbols is purely a semiotic enterprise.

Semiotics itself has been defined by many scholars and researchers. According to Salad (2019), Semiotics is an investigation into how meaning is created and how meaning is communicated. It is a way of seeing the world, and of understanding how the landscape and culture in which people live has a profound impact on them unconsciously. Semiotics can also be said to be the study of signs and symbols, in particular as they communicate things spoken and unspoken. Common examples of semiotics include traffic signs, emojis and emoticons used in electronic communication, and logos and brands used by international companies to sell their wares. Semiotic communication in general strives on human thought and consciousness. This is why the founder of semiotic thought, Ferdinand de Saussure himself says that Semiotics is a key study in thinking about the evolution of human consciousness.

The concept of sign is very crucial to the study of semiotics. de Saussure (1857–1913), went further to define sign as “... any motion, gesture, image, pattern, or event that conveys meaning.” However, the link between signs or symbols and what they signify depends largely on a group’s perception. In this line of thought, material communication relies on the acceptable conventional meaning by people who share similar or common experiences. This is because, materials such as chicken parts (as in the case of Igede) can be taken for granted by other parallel cultures (as investigations among Igede neighbours of Tiv, Idoma and Yala in the course of this research indicated.) But within Igede culture however, these materials are made to serve a signalling system to give information for the existence of culturally defined communication code.

Empirical Studies

This section looks at related empirical studies by scholars and researchers, which serve as a reference point to this current research. Though most of the studies here are based on artifactual communication, the common ground however, is the fact that they all have to do with nonverbal communication. Forwarded here, first, is Rebecca Holman (1980)’s work. Holman’s work was titled: “Clothing as Communication”. The study reveals how clothing has meaning beyond its protective value and aesthetic appearance. In this line of thought, Holman reasoned that the meaning of clothing use in one social system, situation and role could be explained in terms of attributions to a user. Citing Levy (1959), Holman explains, “...people buy things not for what they (items) can do, but for what they mean.” In a related sense, Robertson (1970) remarks that products vary in the degree to which social-symbolic meaning is important. Cars and clothing, for instance, are both products which are high in visual display and are recognized in our society as “saying something” about a person (cited in Holman, 1980) and quoted in Alagh, (2017).

Rudrow (2014) did a study on, “Artifactual Communication: A Modern Approach to Understanding Communication through Nonverbal Artifacts.” This was aimed at exploring phenomenology as a method used in explaining the usage of contemporary artifacts as a by-product of cultural materialism in modern approach to communication. In that direction, Rudrow examines how materialism works with artifacts to play a role in nonverbal interpersonal communication as well as physical attraction. Using phenomenological approach, (an aspect of quantitative methodology), Rudrow finds out that artifactual communication, as opposed to the notion of absolutism in decoding artifactual messages, is based on approximation of meaning (arbitrary decoding). To this end, Rudrow concludes that generalization in decoding of artifacts is not a reliant ideology (not absolute) since decoding is anchored on approximations. Perhaps Rudrow maintains that individuals should be cautious in their generalizations or abstractions.

Yina (2011) wrote on, “The Metaphysical in Tiv Visual Artifacts.” He observes the spiritual significance of these artifacts in the Tiv society. Discussing the spiritual significance, Yina makes reference to the Tiv god, *Aondo* whose affairs are superintendent by the earthly rulers or spirits. Yina, in the study, concludes that the presence of the spirits; otherwise known as *Akombo* is usually made manifest in objects and images in wooden and clay materials. He rationalizes that cultural artifacts are simply the products of creative imagination but they are essential in poetic description and representation of the supernatural forces and their potency.

Akaan, Agbedo, and Onukawa (2013) worked on “Nonverbal Communication: The Semiotics of Face Expression in Tiv.” The researchers look at the linguistic representation of facial expression in Tiv, thereby providing semantic descriptions of certain facial expressions. They therefore observe that, in as much as there are general universal recognitions of meaning of facial expression, some of these are peculiar to specific cultures; with Tiv being an example.

Lastly, Alagh (2017) did a work on, “Use of Artifacts in Communication in Tiv.” The paper examines the role of artifactual communication among the Tiv ethnic group. Towards this direction, the study selects some artifacts such as *indyer/ilvu*, *korough*, and *ikyoor* which, according to the researcher, have much communicative value in Tiv, for his analysis. Using Peirce’s theory of sign, the paper explains how these artifacts are used in peculiar manner to communicate messages in Tiv. Explaining the effects of the use of artifacts, the paper concludes that meaning in artifactual communication is culture-specific; it is dependent on the general world view of a people.

To a varying degree, all these studies have a bearing on the present one in that they are about nonverbal communication but none examined the communicative roles of chicken parts in Igede culture. This paper tries to examine how chicken parts, and how they are shared among aita musical group members; in special ways, in specific situation or occasion to communicate meaning. Like other similar studies, this work sees the symbolic significance in chicken parts as based on a people’s world-view- Igede being the case in point.

Theoretical Framework

A discourse on materials as a form of communication falls within the scope of semiotics; a field which deals with signs and their meanings. Many attempts have been made to define the concept of sign, and as such, several theoretical explanations have been advanced for clarity. According to Alagh (2017), some of these definitions are functional while others are constituent-based. The functional categories concern the role which an object (something symbolizing something else) performs in a particular domain(s). Constituents on the other hand refer to elements that make up something. What follows is a more detailed discussion of some of the theoretical explanations.

A pioneering work on the theory is Ferdinand de Saussure's (1857–1913). de Saussure (a French linguist) was concerned with the structural features of language. His writings explored the relationship between words and what they stood for. Saussure sees the sign as having two sided psychological entities which links a mental concept of a thing (signified) to a sound pattern (signifier). However, Saussure draws attention to the fact that the connection between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary- meaning, nothing makes a phenomenon to actually mean what it means.

Supporting this view, Lyons (1981) argues that given the form of a word, "it is impossible to predict the meaning and, given the meaning, it is impossible to predict the form." Unarguably, there are differences in meaning perception across cultures of the world. Notwithstanding, there may be some constraints, depending on the type of signifier and the situation, which could render this idea of arbitrariness invalid (Hebert, n.d). But to summarize Saussure's theory, Lyons (1981) contends that the sign is not a meaningful form: it is a composite entity resulting from the imposition of structure on two kinds of substance by combinatorial and contrastive relations of the language system. It adds up that meaning cannot exist in isolation of forms which they relate with and vice versa (pp. 221-222).

Eco (1979) however, observes that signs are of different types and they work differently. He opines that the relations between the signifier and the signified are often not at all arbitrary. Schneider (2013) also supports this view by giving an instance of falling rain: one who is woken up from a deep sleep by the sound of some heavy droppings against one's bedroom window need not be told it is raining; without looking outside, the sound already tells one what is happening. Therefore, the sound here is not an arbitrary connection with the rain.

Eco defines sign in terms of denotation and connotation. That is to say that meaning is not gotten only from the literal perspective but rather connotatively. Connotation is a semiotic relation (or sign-function) constituting another semiotic relation. Schneider (2013) makes clear Eco's argument that a sign-function is the correlation between an expression and a content based on a conventionally established code (a system of correlational rules). Eco's view thus suggests that there is always a code through which an idea (sign) is expressed, and this code determines the meaning.

However, to be considered here is Charles Sander Peirce's theory of sign (1868). In his work titled: "On a New List of Categories" which was presented in 1867, Peirce purports that sign is encoded in three elements of the object, the referent and the interpretant. According to

Peirce, anything that somebody upholds as representing something in some degree or specific situation is a sign. In other words, “a sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (Chandler, 2014). As Peirce further observes, the interpretant is central to the concept of sign in that it connects an object and its referent.

Stressing the connection between the object, referent and interpretant, Yina (2011) states that the relationship determines the precise nature of the process of semiosis, which represents individual signs and their significations. The individual signs are the icons, the index and the symbols. Icon is a sign in which the representative has the resemblance of the object such that the image of the real thing is hardly not recognizable. Drawings, photographs, impressions, and the likes are perfect examples of icons; for their semblance to the real thing they represent is always visible. Index is the consequence of the object to which meaning is referred; for there is always a directional connection in this regard. The human foot print, for instance, is an index of somebody’s presence in a particular place; just as smoke is an index of fire. Symbol is the sign that does not have any semblance of either the object, or the referent; thus it is experiential and conventional. Yina, (2011) explains that Peirce categorizes the three elements into “trichotomies” based on the kind of sign, the ground, and the kind of object or the interpretant-the ground being a reference to a sort of idea. The trichotomies include: the trichotomy of logical possibilities; the triadic relations of performance, and the trichotomy of thought relation.

Trichotomy of logical possibilities: this concerns sub-categories such as “qualisign”, “sinsign”, and “legisign.” According to Yina (2011), qualisign is quality which acts as a sign once it embodied (to take a bodily form). The embodiment, however, does not have a connection with its character as a sign. Sinsign is the actual existent thing or event which is a sign. This could involve several qualisigns. A legisign on the other hand, is the law that is established by men as a sign. Every conventional sign is a legisign. It is not a single object, but a general type which is agreed upon to be significant.

Peirce’s theory can thus be summarized as having to do with the mental image of an object on one’s mind, not only the physical appearance or structure of the object. That is to say that, sign does not only have a physical effect but mental as well. All of what has been said implies that an object does not signify anything unless certain values are attached to it. It is meaningful therefore to state that animals or chicken parts (which are mere objects without meaning) are made significant with the special value accorded them by the individuals or community involved. Hence the paper deems this theory suitable to explain the significations or communicative values of the *material-chicken-parts* used for analysis.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive approach which takes a surveillant observation of the Igede cultural phenomenon of the use of material-chicken-parts as a form of communication. This is however combined with Peirce’s theory of sign to support its discussion. In this instance, the researcher attended a burial ceremony where the *aita* musical ensemble performed live; he then observed and took pictures of how the cock (chicken) offered the group was shared

among group members to depict certain beliefs within the group which also serve as communication codes.

To elicit information, in addition to the researcher's shared knowledge, some elderly persons (between the ages of 50 and above) who were believed to be versed in Iggede language and culture were consulted for assistance. There were five (5) of such people from Iggede dominated local government areas in Benue state: DSP (Rtd.) Peter Achor, Dr. Isaac Ode and Achor Ijih were from Oju Local Government Area while Mr. Idigba Unyi and Pa. Aruta Okebe hailed from Obi local council of Benue state respectively. The interviews were conducted over a period of five days with each day assigned to an interviewee. This is to enable the researcher have enough time for a thorough coverage of the subject matter. For proper analysis and discussion, the recorded information (through phone recorder) was played for transcription and translation. The sampled *èga ny'ánu* (chicken parts) such as *òkò*, *ègbèju*, *àchú*, *ìgbogborochi*, etc. and *ogirigbo* were placed as plates, after which an analysis was done against each of the plates. The study, thereafter, discussed the individual chicken parts based on how they are used in the specific occasion for different interpretational purposes.

Data Presentation and Analysis/Discussion



Fig 1: Chicken being slaughtered
Source: Field material



Fig 2: Chicken feathers on slick drum.
Source: Field material



Figure 3: Ritual chicken legs
Source: Field material



Fig 4: Chicken laps



Fig 5: Chicken gizzard



Fig 6: Chicken throat/neck



Fig 7: *Onyunwhyunwhu* masquerade in action
Source: Field material



Figure 8: *Aita* Dance Group in live performance
Source: Field material



Figure 9: *Ibelibeli* masquerade Sitting and waiting to take his turn
Source: Field material

This section presents and discusses the selected materials (chicken parts and others) as well as examines the uses or values attached to them; especially, in the aspect of communication. The items selected are: *iwọ bal' aruru*, *ọkọ*, *ẹgbẹju*, *àchú*, *igbogborochi*, etc. and *ogirigbo*:

Figure 2 -- *Iwọ bal' aruru* (blood and feathers)

Among the *aita* musical ensemble, *ogirigbo* (the slick drum) is considered the chief musical instrument. It gives definition and rhythm to the group as a brand. Every other instrument or musical accompaniment functions to give a melodic support to the mother instrument- slick drum.

Iwọ (blood) is believed to contain life; when sprinkles on “*ogirigbo*”, it is interpreted that life has been released on it. This is also believed to perform a number of functions: (1) it gives energy to the slick drum which makes it to perform better or louder when beating. (2) it also binds members together because a people related by blood are always united together. In a related sense, according to an informant, Mr. Ijih Joseph (personal interview, 13th November, 2018), when *aruru* (feathers) are fastened to the *ogirigbo* on sprinkled blood, they remained glued to it. The feathers (*aruru*) are believed to be soaring agents. This means that the band (musical ensemble) will become popular—they will be heard afar off, and they will have cause to travel to places for purposes of performance. This is clearly anchored on the general Igede belief that “blood is life, and blood unites”. While feathers are considered a sign of royalty, it is also thought to confer popularity on a man who wears it on his cap.

Figure 5 --*Igbogborochi* (the gizzard)

This part of the chicken is reserved for the host of the musical group. This is the person at whose instance the band is in an occasion to perform. He is also regarded as the sponsor at that particular event. This part of the chicken is not expected to be given to any other person;

except the host. When this part is given to an individual, it signifies that that person or his representative is the host and no one contends this part with him; whether he is physically present or otherwise.

Figure 3 --Achu (phalangeal)

These parts are exclusively reserved for the two masquerades in *aita* dance group. One of the masquerades is called the *Onyunwhunyunwhu* as can be seen in figure 7 above. Onomatopoeically, it means “the masquerade with wool costume.” It is usually the violent one of the two masquerades. In some cases, because of its violent nature, a special liquid concoction known as *ilo* is usually put together and sprinkles on the masquerade to minimize the violent spirit believed to be controlling the “male masquerade” as it is sometimes called. Without this, the *Onyunwhunyunwhu* has the tendency to scatter and disorganize spectators who may gather to watch their performance.

The second masquerade in figure 9 above is called “Ibélibéli” (or the female masquerade). It is usually very gentle and regal in appearance. Only people with commendable height are allowed to wear the mask or dress in the costume. Unlike the *Onyunwhunyunwhu* whose dancing steps are chaotic and disorderly, the Ibélibéli dances with royalty, measured steps and, in straight forward and backward directions. Only the two masquerades are given the *achu* of a cock (chicken). It is believed that the achu (phalangeal) will enhance their performance in dancing. Hence no other member of the group/band will be permitted to share in this part of chicken. The right *achu* is given to the *Onyunwhunyunwhu* while the left *achu* is given to the *Ibélibéli* or the female masquerade.

Figure 4 --Átá nyánu (chicken laps)

Átá nyánu are other important parts of chicken that are designated for specific role-players of the musical group. In *aita* dance style, it is normally the practice that when the masquerades appear, (usually two as noted earlier); at the initial stage of their performance, they take turn to dance. While one is on the stage performing, the second one has to rest or wait for the other in a seated position. This sitting is done on a member’s laps—they do not sit on bare chair. The *Onyunwhunyunwhu* has a person on whose laps he sits, just as the Ibélibéli does.

The members who provide cushions for the masquerades are usually very hefty and strong. These are people who usually have the share of the chicken laps. The belief here is that this part of the chicken will continue to strengthen their own laps as they continue to bear the weight of the masquerades for as long as the performance lasts.

From the foregoing, the way parts of chicken are shared; people who are familiar with the and’s practice know the role(s) played by every member of the band because the part of the chicken they are given communicates this message to them. This knowledge is also a window into the belief system and indeed the worldview of the society in which the group is a sub-set.

Figure 6 --Ugbiroko nyunu (chicken Throat/neck)

This part of the chicken is traditionally given to the lead singer or singers in the group. The belief here is that when the singers eat the neck of a chicken, their voices will be lively and active. It is believed that they will not have cracked voices for as long as the performance will last. It is important to note that in most cases, *the aita* dance group normally performs both night and day when they are invited for an occasion and the same tempo of action is usually maintained from start to finish.

Discussion

The concept of sign or symbol is very crucial to the study of semiotics. From the study above, it can be deduced that any object or material can be imputed with meaning depending on the culture in question. This is in line with Saussure (1857–1913), when he suggested that any motion, gesture, image, pattern, or event can convey meaning. However, the link between signs or symbols and what they signify depends largely on a group's perception which is interpretable according to the worldview of the group. According to Peirce, anything that somebody upholds as representing something in some degree or specific situation is a sign. In other words, a sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. In this line of thought, material of chicken for communication purpose relies heavily on the acceptable conventional meaning by people who share similar or common experiences. This is because, materials such as chicken parts (as in the case of Igede) can be taken for granted by other parallel cultures (as investigations among Igede neighbours of Tiv, Idoma and Yala in the course of this research indicated.) But within Igede culture however, these materials are made to serve a signalling system to give information for the existence of culturally defined communication code.

According to Pa. Aruta, (personal communication, 15/10/2018) “slaughtering of chicken is a routine in our performance at every occasion; we use our sharing formula to control the excesses of our members as well as to promote role play. This is probably the reason why our fore fathers initiated the belief that any part of the chicken you eat regularly will assist you to use that particular part of your body more effectively in musical performance.” This we have seen in this study demonstrated in the use of: *Iwo bal' aruru* (blood and feathers), *Igbogborochi* (the gizzard), *Achu* (phalangeal), and *Átá nyánu* (chicken laps) to signal different role performances by aita members.

Conclusion

The paper examined performance rituals of the Igede cultural dance group as an aspect of symbolic communication. It drew attention to how chicken parts can play communicative roles outside the traditional function of serving as food for mankind. It is observed that the interpretation of meaning of the use of chicken materials in Igede culture is highly dependent on their belief system or world-view. This submission is predicated on the fact that investigations among Igede neighbours such as Tiv, Idoma and Yala by this researcher in the course of this study did not corroborate this practice. This further reinforces the fact that issues

of symbolic communication are society dependent which also anchored on people's world view and belief system. It is also observed that the sharing of chicken according to specific parts is intended to control the excesses of members of the group so that people don't clash over it because it is something that regularly features in their outings. But above all, the sharing of chicken according to specific parts is to enhance role play and professionalism within the team.

In view of the above, this paper recommends that Igede people should endeavour to maintain this cultural practice as part of the general effort to preserve individuality, uniqueness and national identity. Moreover, material or symbolic communication is an aspect of the nonverbal form of which complements the verbal form of communication.

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