Uses of Semiotics in Periods of Hostilities, Armed Conflicts and Peace Building among the Yoruba, South-West Nigeria

Olatunji, Rotimi Williams, *Ph.D.*
Department of Public Relations and Advertising
Adebola Adegunwa School of Communication
Lagos State University,
E-mail: rotimiolatunji@yahoo.com; rotimi.olatunji@lasu.edu.ng
Tel: +234-8034716840

Abstract

This paper examines the uses of semiotics during situations of hostilities, armed conflicts and in the peace building processes among the pre-literate Yoruba (of South-West Nigeria).   This is an ethnographic study that relies on secondary (historical) documents and participant observation. Semiotics is a communicative device in advertising and promotional efforts. Citing concrete historical instances, this paper shows the use of town criers, symbols, signals, signs, real objects, colour schemes, coded messages, itinerant musical entertainment, the use of drums, fire/smoke, indigenous proverbs, religious emblems, gift-giving and inter-ethnic marriages   as semiotics devices for advertising war and promoting peace among

the Yoruba. The paper discusses uses of semiotics in periods of hostilities and declaration of war and as a tool for peace building and concludes with appropriate recommendations on the relevance of semiotics in the reduction of armed conflicts and the promotion of peace in contemporary sub-Saharan African societies.

Key Words: *Advertising; armed conflicts; indigenous communication; peacebuilding; promotions; semiotics.*

Introduction

The Yoruba of South-West Nigeria are among the three largest ethnic groups in the country. Yoruba language is predominantly spoken in ten (10) of the existing 36 states of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, including: Lagos, Ogun, Oyo, Osun, Ondo, Ekiti states. Others are Edo, Delta, Kwara and Kogi states. Speakers of the Yoruba language are also found in the neighbouring Republic of Benin in West Africa, the United States of America, Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, and other areas in the West Indies.

Communication may take oral, para-linguistic, written or non-verbal or visual forms. Wilson (1987, p. 89) defines indigenous communication as "a continuous process of information dissemination, entertainment and education used in societies which have not been seriously dislocated" by external influences, (particularly Western civilisation). Abdullai-Idiagbon, (2010, p.5) addresses the use of signs and symbols, (called AROKO among the Yoruba), noting that "Aroko involves sending an item or a combinable number of items to a person from which the decoder (or receiver) is expected to infer a piece of information". However, Abdullai-Idiagbon limited her discussion to the non-verbal aspects of semiotics among the Yoruba. This paper examines both the verbal and non-verbal signs and symbols associated with the promotion of armed conflict and peace building in traditional Yoruba society. Today, indigenous media of communication seem to be waning in popularity in Africa largely arising from the advent modern communication media; dearth of skilled personnel; the drastic reduction of the power and influence of

traditional rulers; availability of globally acceptable signs; domination of the global economy and culture by powerful advertisers; and the negative influences of globalisation on indigenous cultures and languages (Olatunji & Thanny, 2011).

A conflict refers to a situation in which one or more parties perceive(s) that his/their interests, values or identity is being or about to be negatively affected by another party's actions; disputes, struggles, fights, wars, between individuals, groups, nations. Adenekan (2002) says that since the last 50 years, the global community had lost over 22 million people due to inter-state wars. Similarly, since the end of the Second World War in 1945, nearly all African countries had been engulfed in various forms of conflicts. Robinson (2006) also recalls that since the inception of the United Nations, there have been "over 200 armed conflicts in nearly 150 countries, with more than 100 separate conflicts occurring in the past 15 years". It may be observed that most of the on-going hostilities, conflicts and inter-ethnic/inter-tribal wars in sub-Saharan Africa have their origin in periods before or immediately after formal contacts with Western civilisation.

Wee (2006) classifies recent conflicts in Nigeria into religious (Muslim-Christian conflicts); Niger Delta Conflicts; and political conflicts, but also includes terrorism in all its ramifications, particularly the *'Boko Haram'* fundamentalism in Nigeria. Conflicts associated with electoral violence since 1999 have also been rampant in Nigeria (Obibi, 1996; Onuorah and Anuforo, 2006, *The Punch,* 2012). Onyekwuere (2012) reports that between May 2011 and March 2012, an estimated 515 Nigerians were killed during several bombings or attacks launched in the Northern parts of Nigeria by Boko Haram terrorist group. In one of the deadliest attacks which occurred in Damaturu, Yobe State in November 4, 2011, over 150 Nigerians lost their lives while over 128 Nigerians were killed on January 20, 2012 in Kano city. The *Human Rights Watch* (cited by *The Sun (*sunonline.com) retrieved 20/10/2012) reported that a total of

2,800 Nigerians had been killed by Boko Haram Islamist Jihadist since 2009.

However, peace building is not alien to societies in sub-Saharan Africa. Kaufman (2000, p.16) observes that peace-building "rebuilds relationships between communities and members of communities, replacing relationships of enmity with cooperative relationships." When carried out in communities, peace-building "can build a political constituency for the diplomatic peace process to leaders can persuade their people to ratify a compromise settlement, then keep it on track in the implementation stage" (Kaufman, 2000, p. 16).

Kaufman, (2000) identifies three levels of peace-building activities one of which is peace building at elites' level. Here, peace building efforts are carried out by elites who have direct access to political leaders. Among pre-literate Yoruba, elites included highly rated religious leaders (Ifa Priests; leaders of the Ogboni (secret) society), military leaders, and highly respected elders in society leaders of thought and women leaders (Iya L'oja or Head of Women Traders) among others. Peace building efforts at elites level "allow for informal and often more creative exploration of options than formal leaders are willing to risk" (Kaufman, 2000, p.16). Fayemi (2009) also says that Yoruba Elders perform useful role as arbitrators in conflict situations. .

The second level of peace building occurs at the middle-range level and is epitomized by activities aimed at influencing large portions of the society, mostly through opinion leaders or regional elites rather than through the government structure. The third level has to do with grass-roots peace-building which comes in public relations and public education efforts such as was found in Mozambique where a UNICEF-funded "Circus of peace" toured the country, using drama and arts to explore the challenges of war, conflict, and reconciliation, serving as a way for public to grieve over the country's war losses, to position it to implement the peace that followed" (Kaufman, 2000, p. 19). The traditional equivalence of this was seen in the use of

'edutainment' – travelling theatre, masquerades, dancing groups to herald peace in traditional Yoruba communities, or the invocation of peace through religious festivals.

The uses of indigenous advertising media and forms of communication in periods of hostilities, armed conflicts and peace building in traditional Yoruba society can be better understood within the framework of semiotics theoretical tradition. 'Semiology' refers to the study of signs within the framework of social life. Charles Sanders Pierce, an American philosopher, also coined the word 'semiotics' to mean "the scientific study of sign systems", (Tagg, 1999). Semiotics therefore refers to the study of sign processes, signification, or the study of signs and symbols.

There are the formalistic and social aspects of semiotics, the former abstracting signs from the contexts of their usage while the latter examines semiotic practices that are specific to a culture. Meanings are deduced from cultural values, norms, societal expectations, environmental contexts, and individual vicarious experiences. Symbols "require an interpreter who knows something of the system by virtue of which the symbol has meaning" while "signs require an interpreter who knows a theory, or a general law", (Wilson, 1987, pp. 92-93). Therefore, a sign is an index of the existence of something else, or the signifier, while symbols are the signified. The three basic components of signs are icons, symbols and indexes. Icons are objects that have "qualities which resemble those of the objects they represent" (Handler 2003, p.10). A portrait, a cartoon or a model may each represent the real person so portrayed. Indexes are only inferred, just as we infer the notion of time when we see a clock or a wrist watch. Symbols, as earlier explained, are interpreted based on rules or convention. Peirce (1931, p.58) refers to symbols as "the object that it denotes by virtues of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the symbol to be interpreted as referring to that object". Therefore, semiotics is a social oriented process whereby each sign generates meaning either collectively or individually, based on specific cultural contexts.

In a study, Abdullahi-Idiagbon (2010, p.5) examined the non-verbal semiotic system among the Yoruba, commonly called AROKO which refers to the process of "sending an item or a combinable number of items to a person from which the decoder is expected to infer a piece of information". Opadokun (1986) opines that AROKO among the Yoruba helps to maintain the secrecy of a message. Here, it is the message sender that may be aware of the content of the message, in which case the message bearer might be the carrier of his own death sentence. AROKO is also used to express confidence; to reinforce credibility of the message; to provoke conflict or armed conflict and for peace building. Examples of AROKO include sending bound arrows and gun (to signify a declaration of war), or sending of a parrot egg in a covered calabash to a reigning king, to announce that the king has been rejected by his people. In this case, the rejected king was expected to commit suicide. Signs are also used for marketing purposes, where a collection of units of stone placed beside a ware indicate the amount the seller was prepared to sell his good. It thus seems that signs and symbols appropriate to every situation are available for use among the Yoruba, but can only be correctly interpreted based on the cultural competence of the decoder.

This paper addresses two important questions: To what extent were indigenous signs and symbols employed in advertising war and promoting peace among the Yoruba during pre-writing era? What are the potentials of indigenous signs and symbols in managing armed conflicts and peace building in contemporary Nigerian society? Therefore the major themes discussed in this paper are: uses of semiotics in hostilities and war declaration; uses of semiotics in peace building; and relevance of semiotics in contemporary sub-Saharan African societies

Uses of Semiotics in Hostilities and Declaration of War

What really were the signs and symbols associated with hostilities or art of open declaration of war among the Yoruba in the preliterate era? The traditional 'Town Crier' in Yoruba land performs critical

functions such as announcing period set aside for town or village meetings, traditional festivals, market days, decrees of Oba-in-Council, outbreaks of war and or cessation of hostilities. Fatona (1979, p. 34) says that the Yoruba "regarded the town crier as the most authentic message carrier for traditional authorities". Layemi (1978) notes that in Ile-Ife, the town criers (called "Emese") went round the city and its suburbs to secretly inform the Ile-Ife warlords about the impending war, to catch the enemy territory unawares. The "Ilaris" in Old Oyo Empire performed a similar function (as town criers) like the "Emese" of the Ile-Ife Kingdom. Atanda (1979) says that the Ilaris' major duty was to "carry messages from the Alaafin of Oyo to different parts of the Empire". Ajayi and Smith (1964, p. 15) equally refer to a cadre of personal retainers of warlords who were employed as secret agents to "carry war messages".

The Yoruba traditional (talking) drum was both used for entertainment and for "transmitting serious non-entertainment communication between the communicator and the communicatee" (Fatona, 1979, p.34). During the Egba/Ijaye and Ibadan war in the 19th century (Ajayi and Smith 1964) the talking drum was used. "Moreover, the revelation by the war drums that the dreaded Ogunmola was present with the Ibadan force had a devastating effect on the defender" (Ajayi and Smith, 1964, p. 42). It was as a result of the gong of the Ogunmola's drum that the combined forces of Egba and Ijaye abandoned the town of Ijaye, which "was apparently never preoccupied after its destruction by Ibadan" (Ajayi and Smith, 1964, p. 42).

Sound or signals from drums may sometimes be confusing. This was the case during Ekiti Parapo (Ekiti United) war against the Ibadan military supremacy in 1878. While the battle was ragging, the Ibadan forces "practiced deception, sounding on their drums the war cry of Akintola, a leading Ibadan Chief and son of the late Balogun Ibikunle (of Ibadan) who had been left behind in the war front. Akintola's war-cry identity (Icon) was "Kiniun Onibudo", which means "The Lion of the war camp", (Ajayi and Smith, 1964, p. 42), a war cry that was taken up by the whole army of Ibadan. At this time, the left flank of

the Ibadan forces, led by the Osi (Third in Command), who was seriously engaging the Ijesha/ Ekiti forces, "on hearing the drums, broke off the engagement." Unfortunately he "lost control of his mount'… and fell to the ground", a big war casualty (Ajayi and Smith, 1964, p. 42). The deception paid off in that the Ibadan forces were eventually victorious, but at the cost of one of its most priced generals. The confidence that a dreaded war general was in the war camp, orchestrated by the drum, boosted the morale of the Ibadan forces and at the same time, it weakened the opposing forces. This singular example shows that signs may be deceptive and may be misinterpreted with dare consequences. This will imply that such signs or codes must necessarily be cross-checked and correctly interpreted for them to become useful.

A sign may have denotative and connotative meanings. This is the context we talk about the use of smoke or burn fire in warfare. The ordinary interpretation given to smoke as a sign is the appearance of fire. But bush fire or smoke signal, depending on the intensity or either, had various meanings. For example, there is the conventional bush burning for game hunting, or during preparation of farmlands for planting purposes. The smoke or the associated fire in either case might be seen spreading in several directions. However, in the days of inter-tribal wars in Yoruba land smoke bush or bush fire was extensively used by communities threatened by invasion to warn neighbouring villages or to call for help (Fatona, 1979). Fire meant for communication purposes was made in such a way to avoid being confused with conventional bush burning.

Moreover, there was the use of verbal signs, passwords, codes and proverbs associated with war prosecution and peace building among the pre-colonial Yoruba people. In the war between Ibadan and Ilorin forces, the Ibadan army had to be ferried cross a big river (separating Ikirun from the advancing enemy) in the night with each soldier paying the sum of 2000 cowries. Therefore, when the Ibadan forces launched an onslaught against the Ilorin army, any person captured by the Ibadan soldiers was asked: "What is the fare of the ferry?"

Whoever gave the correct answer (2000 cowries) was regarded as an indigene that should be spared, but whoever gave a different answer was executed (Ajayi and Smith, 1964, p. 35).

Proverbs were also used as signs in connection with warfare. A popular proverb among the present Yoruba asks: *"A kini nje akini, a finihan nje afinihan, e wo ni 'Ara Ijaye l'ojude Ogunmola"*. This proverb is a rhetorical question discouraging betrayal during warfare, meaning: "Is the salutation, 'Ijaye   man in front of Ogunmola's compound a greeting or a betrayal?".

Daramola and Jeje (1975 and Layemi (1978) identified certain deities that were associated with warfare by the Yoruba. Notable examples were Ogun, the god of Iron (or warfare) and Sango, the thunder god. Consequently, when any iron object such as gun powder, arrows, gun, sword and the like was sent by a king to an enemy territory, this was taken to represent an open declaration of war, (Abdullahi-Idiagbon, 2010). The Sango emblem also served a similar purpose of provoking warfare among the Yoruba. Ajayi and Smith (1964, p. 53), reported that during Ibadan and Ijaye war in 1844 "a quarrel led to a pitched battle at Batedo. Atiba (Alaafin) intervened, sending the emblems of Sango to the two camps, implying that if contestants did not respect him, they would probably respect his deified ancestor. The warriors decamped".

Uses of Semiotics in Peace Building

The political system of government in traditional Oyo Empire allowed for checks and balances on the powers of office holders (Ajayi and Smith, (1964); Akinjogbin, 1956; Crowder, 1978). The Council of Chiefs (Oyo Mesi), countered the excesses of the Alafin, and the Ogboni Society check mated the excesses of the Oyo Mesi. The system of rejection of a tyrannical Alafin in Old Oyo Empire follows the presentation of a white calabash with Ostrich eggs, the type of symbols mentioned by Abdullahi-Idiagbon (2010) and the proclamation of the King's rejection by the Basorun on behalf of the Oyo Mesi. It was the duty of Basorun to proclaim: "The gods reject

you, the people reject you, the earth rejects you"; all the nine (9) Alafin who reigned between 1658 and 1754 were rejected and consequently committed suicide (Atanda (1979, p.18).

Payment of tributes was a popular strategy to sue for peace. In 1720, the forces of the Alafin of Oyo defeated the king of Dahomey who sued for peace and promised to pay tribute. When he reneged, Oyo Empire once again invaded Dahomey in 1739, until they paid heavy duty imposed by Oyo to sue for peace. Inter-tribal marriages have potentials for ameliorating armed conflicts amongst communities, although it had not been known as a guarantee for enhancing lasting peace as examples among the Ife and Modakeke (Osun State, Nigeria), Sango-Kataf in Kaduna State, settlers and indigenes crises in Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria have shown.

Relevance of Semiotics in Contemporary sub-Saharan African Societies

Governments in Africa today can use the traditional town criers to build consensus and to promote peace, since the voices of such messengers carried stamps of authority with high credibility rating amongst the people. In contemporary political communication in Nigeria, the use of talking drum during political campaigns in several communities is common. Often, this turns political campaign arenas into carnival of sorts, accompanied with dances, praise songs and the like. This art has been perfected in modern day electioneering campaigns in Nigeria where artistes and musicians entertain electorates during rallies and rival political parties engage the services of praise singers and local drummers to sing the praises of candidates.

The Yoruba talking drum carries powerful messages that can be audible several kilometers away from the source of transmission, thus making it possible to relay war messages as well as messages of peace. It is the positive uses of drums for peace-building that should be emphasized in the modern era. Drum beats sometimes have serious limitations and at times may be misinterpreted. Same thing goes for the use of verbal signs, passwords, codes and proverbs associated with

war prosecution and peace building among the pre-colonial Yoruba people. For this reason, there is the need for individuals who are highly skilful in the encoding and decoding processes to be involved in message dissemination through drums, passwords, codes, proverbs and other associated forms of semiotics. Peace-building through traditional entertainment media is of great significance in today's entertainment-laden global media.

Use of religious emblems or deities in peace building also has implications and relevance in the modern era. Peace-building through inter-faith meetings remains a relevant option. Resolution of political conflicts should not be acrimonious but should follow democratically established principles. When despots are dethroned in Africa, they should be given the liberty to seek asylum in any country of their choice. Moreover, politicians in Nigeria should avoid resolving electoral disputes through violence, as was witnessed in the post-2011 Presidential elections in Nigeria, and the preceding general elections in Nigeria. Elders or highly respected members of societies can also be drafted in the peace process. Examples are highly successful members of the business class, professions and careers, religious leaders and traditional symbols of leadership.

Similarly, inter-tribal marriages have potentials for ameliorating armed conflicts amongst communities. Moreover, peace-building can be enhanced through inter-communal festivals; inter-religious dialogues; inter-communal sporting activities and entertainment options. Musical shows, theatre, drama or films, home video and today's Information Communication Technology (ICT) -powered social media can be relied upon for the promotion of peace, while playing down on the negative uses of these media channels.

Signs on a general note may not have uniform interpretations among people of diverse cultures. This implies that the uses of signs and symbols among the Yoruba in conflict and peace building situations may not have global applicability. However, the significance of this paper is that it provides a deep insight into communications systems

(notably semiotics) among homogeneous people, particularly in contemporary sub-Saharan African societies.

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