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**A Semiotic Study of Political Cartoon Strips in The Nation National Daily**

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**Abstract**

Communication is a very important means of exchanging ideas and the ability to communicate effectively is necessary to carry out the thoughts and visions of every individual, group or nation. Consequentially, communicators especially cartoonists have made vigorous efforts to portray the society by familiarizing people with on-going events in the societies through cartoons. This paper explores the sign of cartoon strips and examines how they are used in communicating message(s). Using a semiotic frame work, it presents a method of interpreting and gaining meaning into cartoons. The purpose of this paper is to help people who have great interest in cartoons to better understand cartoons and also answer questions raised in the paper which include; Are cartoons a true representation of current political parties, personalities and situations?, Do cartoon strips like other signs have both denotative and connotative meanings?, Do cartoon have the potentials for more than one interpretation/meaning?, can cartoons be understood better using the semiotic frame work?, The paper also presents the semiotic codes used in cartooning. Finally, the paper advances the analysis of verbal and non-verbal codes like cartoons as important medium of communication.

**Introduction**

For everyone who knows that communication is the bedrock of human existence, survival and development, there can be nothing more interestingly important than the study of every object or thing

that has a communicative value. Subsequently one of the most important, yet satirical method of communication is the cartoon. The term cartoon thus refers to a hybrid medium of communication with a variety of codes ranging from language, picture, colour and sometimes movement and are somewhere between what somebody or something is and what is not.

Thus, the primary function of the cartoon is communication. And communication more specifically is defined as a process of sharing meaning the source of the message and the individual or group of individuals on the receiving end. The term also means giving and receiving signs which have meaning attached to them. The importance of communication in the society cannot be over emphasized. That is why Oyewo (2000) stated that communication is a central activity that human life revolves around, a sine qua non to human to human existence.

In every social and cultural context, communication takes place through the activation and interpretation of signs embedded with messages. Thus, the science that studies the life of signs within the society is termed **semiotics**. Semiotics has a lot to do with the value of communication since it is a formal linguistic exercise that forms an idea of art as a form of communication through the social network of signs-systems and their signification in real life.

The purpose of this paper is to study cartoon strips in the Nation National Daily in the light of semiotics to reveal both intended meaning and unintended meanings. The role of a semiotic study is therefore to understand how signs perform and convey meaning in context.

It is also worthy of note that signs can appear in various physical forms such as Written or spoken Words, images, sounds, actions, drawings or graphics like cartoons or objects. Semiotics is therefore an essential part of cartoon analysis. Its model helps in identifying political cartoons as cultural construct, one that necessarily manifest the social values of the circumstances in which it is produced.

Semiotics also provides theoretical and methodological framework for isolating and explaining the levels of meanings both of language as text and image (cartoon) as pictorial text. The fact that political cartoons are one of the few art forms that make use of both image and text makes semiotics an important part of their analysis. Political cartoons are therefore the type of cartoons that relate to political parties, political actors of the legislative house, Government executives and other functionaries.

It is also important to state here that semiotics does not offer a universal meaning to images or all political cartoons but could succeed in identifying their meanings, relevance within the cultural domains in which they were developed. Consequently, The Nation National daily is selected for this paper. This is because; it is a great publisher of political cartoons and because of its wide coverage / usage.

In essence, the paper illustrates a better understanding of cartoons through a semiotic framework. And since cartoons are subject to more than one interpretation, this paper aids further researchers.

### **Literature Review**

Subsequent studies focusing on political cartoons have been carried out. Instances of such include: Wigston (2002) who worked on a case study on Aids and political cartoons examining the role political cartoons in Aids struggle in South Africa; Baldry and Thibault (2006) based his research on political

cartoons and public representation; Moris (1992) took a look on the power of political cartoons in the democratic process and in (1993) he further researched visual rhetorics employed in political cartoons using a structuralist approach; Seymour-Ure (2001) on the other hand examined the future of political cartoons in British; Olaniyan (1997) worked on cartooning traditions in Nigerian media prints; Refaie (2003) focused on the use of visual metaphors in political cartoons in Australian newspaper; Edward and Ware (2005) examined how political cartoons represent public opinion in campaign media. In the Nigerian society, Udoaka (2003) looked at the perception of audiences on Nigeria political cartoons. The above review has therefore shown that researches carried out on political cartoons was narrowed towards the nature and functions of political cartoons as well as the visual power of political cartoon in reflecting social and political issues in the society.

However, Goguen (2003) focused his own study on a semiotic analysis of political cartoons. His study thus linked cartoons to semiotics presenting cartoons as signs interpreted within the boundaries of semiotics; the science of signs. This review has therefore drawn our attention to the fact that although there are lots of studies on political cartoons, not many relate with semiotics which provide a better way of understanding cartoon strips.

### **Methodology**

In other to address the research questions used here as the guiding principles for the study, data has been collected from 'The Nation' National Daily.' Five political cartoon strips were gotten and analyzed using the interpretative method focusing on the connotation and denotation through the use of a semiotic frame work. The cartoon strips are first presented in figures and then interpreted using the Pierce's theory of semiotics. The cartoon strips used are those of 2015 and 2016.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework adopted for this paper is the pierce's theory of semiotics which in summary is an account of signification, representation; reference and meaning. The theory is adopted because it addresses signs which signify by resemblance. It views a sign as 'something which stands to somebody for something in some respects'. The theory also states that a sign signifies only in being interpreted and that the meaning of a sign is manifest in the interpretation it generates in sign users.

The Pierce's theory further classifies signs into symbols, icons and indetes. Icons are therefore the focus of this paper. And for icons, pierce says every diagram is an icon, even though there be no serious resemblance between it and its object and that icons signify by resemblance. They also excite analogous sensations in the mind. Based on this theory, many diagrams / figures like cartoons resemble their objects not in looks; it is only in respect to the relations of their likeness that consists. It is thus the focus of this paper to treat cartoon strips as Iconic signs and provide appropriate interpretations based on their connotation and denotations.

### **Research Questions**

Four questions were formulated to serve as guiding principles for this paper. The analysis will answer the questions. They include:

1. Do cartoon strips like other signs have both denotative and connotative meanings?
2. Are cartoons a true representation of current political personalities and situations?
3. Do cartoons have the potentials for more than one meaning?
4. Can political cartoons be understood better using semiotic framework?

### Analysis

**Figure One:**



The cartoon strip depicts people shouting ‘kill him!’ Burn him alive! Ole! Barawo! Onye-osi! With weapons around a man who has a tire round his neck. On the second panel depicts EFCC with a bag tagged loot ₦ behind a man in hand cuffs with his family telling EFCC to leave their son alone and shouting witch hunting with statement like its political victimization, he is not a thief! He was set up!

The connotation of this double panel political cartoon strip is the current situation in Nigeria where stiff penalty is always melted out on any commoner involved in a crime to the extent of being burnt alive by angry mobs, not minding the degree of his offence. While the affluent and those in political positions of authority loot / indulge in corruption but are rarely or never punished. When arrested, relatives and associates of such a corrupt politician then see it as witch hunting or political victimization.

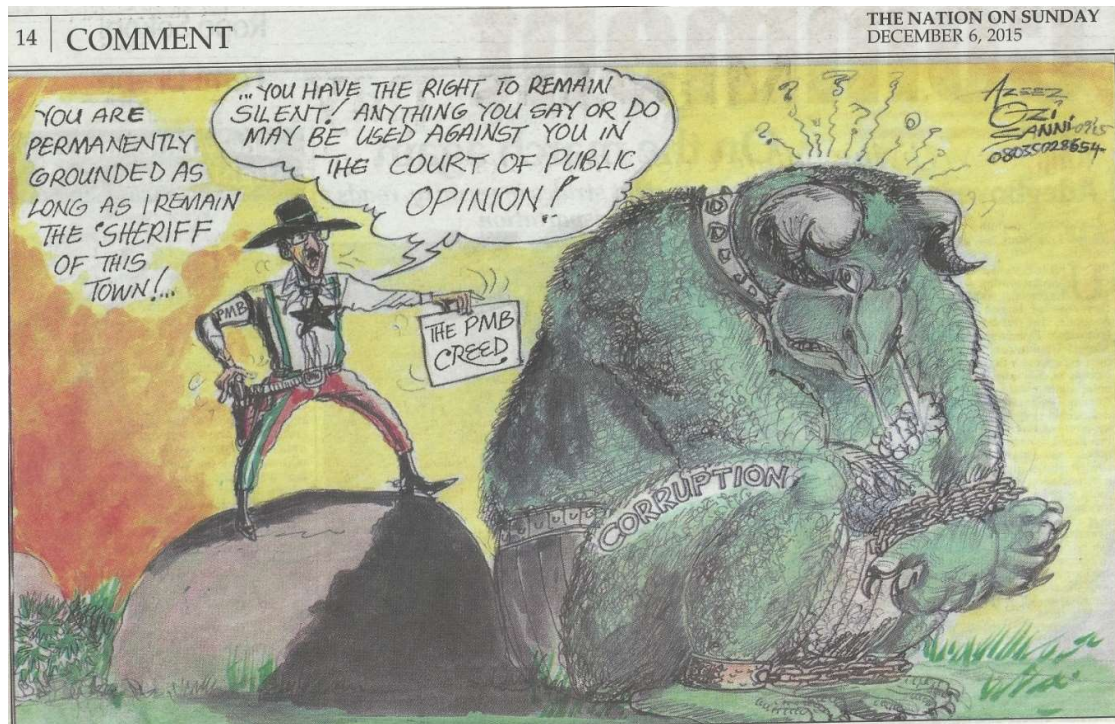
The denotation of this cartoon however is that looters in Nigeria see justice as victimization while simple offenders are severely punished.

**Figure Two:**

The cartoon strip depicts the present Nigerian president holding a sword and weighing scale. There are two dogs tagged EFCC and ICPC. Three captions are also depicted in the cartoon strip thus: 'it's operation rid the country of corruption and it's a task that must be accomplished! 'No retreat, No Surrender', No more Baba go slow'!

The denotation of this cartoon strip is that corruption is a canker worm that has been ravaging the country. The country is at the verge of collapse but the present president since his election is working hard to rid the country off corruption.

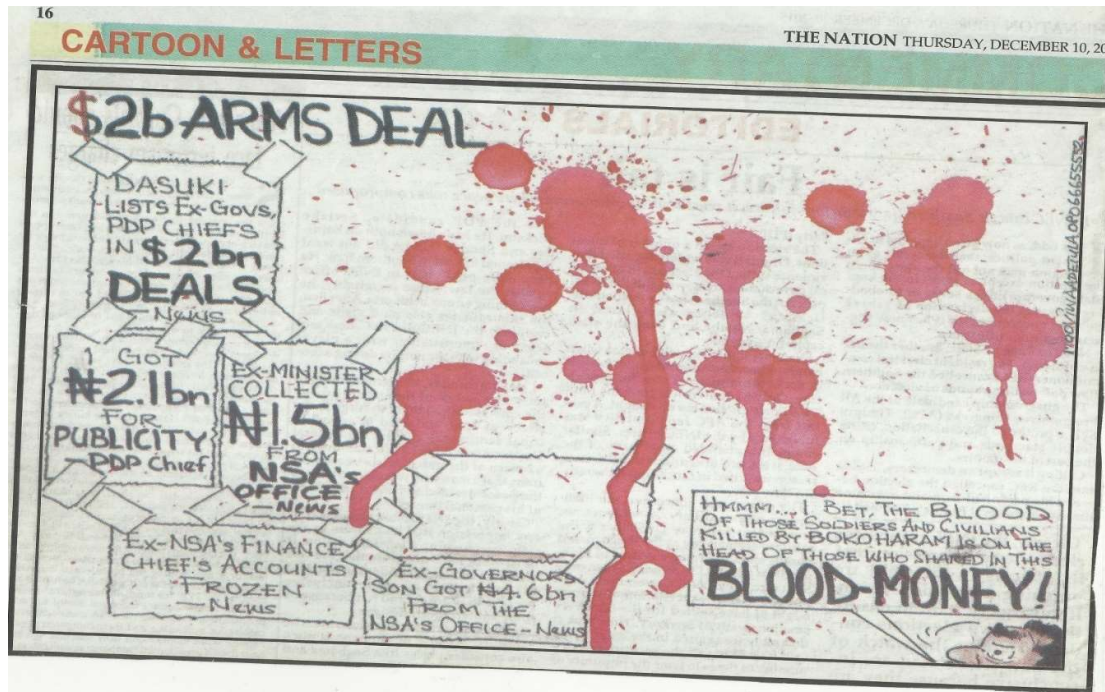
The connotation of this political cartoon strip on the other hand is that president Buhari is out to rid Nigeria off corruption. He has decided to use all possible means to win the battle against corruption by awakening the EFCC and ICPC as well as justice – the sword/scale while the masses who had tagged the president 'Baba go slow' due to his delay in executing policies have now seen ICPC and EFCC, the sword and weighing scale which portrays seriousness have begun to see him in a different light which is obvious in their statement 'No more Baba go slow'.

**Figure Three:**

The above cartoon strip depicts the present president Muhammadu Buhari with a caption The PMB CREED and a big monster in chains tagged corruption. Other captions in the political cartoon strip points to PMB's fight against the monster called corruption. The denotation of this cartoon strip is president Buhari's war against corruption and his determination to defeat it.

The connotation of the cartoon is thus the president's determination to fight corruption to its end. The strip portrays corruption as a big monster, bigger than the country Nigeria. However, the president in the caption has informed the citizens that as long as he remains the president of Nigeria, corruption will remain grounded as depicted in the cartoon strip where both the hands and legs of the monster called corruption are bound in chains.

Figure Four:



The political cartoon strip depicts lots of blood with the captions showing the sharing of the arms money.

The denotation of this cartoon strip is the Dasuki and arms deal saga. The connotation on the other hand depicts the height of bloodshed in the country by the deadly Boko Haram sect despite the 2 million dollars released for the purchase of arms during the Dasuki tenure as the National Security advisor. Though the whopping amount of money was released, the arms was still not purchased and as a result, the former National Security advisor is asked to account for the money and he begins to list Ex-governors and PDP chiefs who got their cuts from the money.

A PDP chief confessed to have gotten 2.1 billion naira, while an Ex-minister collected the sum of 1.5 billion naira. An Ex-governor's son got the sum of 4.6 billion naira. A Nigerian who has watched the news headlines had nothing to say but to conclude that the blood of those soldiers and civilians killed by Boko Haram is on the head of those who shared the arms money referred to in the cartoon as blood-money.

The cartoon strip also connotes that all who partook in the sharing of the arms money should be blamed / held responsible for the deaths of both soldiers and civilians linked by the Boko Haram sect due to Dasuki's failure in purchasing the arms which could have helped in combating security challenges in Nigeria.

**Figure Five:**

The cartoon strip depicts the former ruling party in Nigeria; PDP sinking into deep waters. Within the caption / News headlines heavy weight desserts PDP for APC. The denotation of this cartoon is the defect of PDP members to the APC. The first connotation of this cartoon strip is that, the PDP is sinking after being defeated by the APC. As a result, top most politicians have defected to the APC leaving the party without strong members who are not strong enough to keep it standing.

The second connotation is that PDP members have defected to the APC because it is the ruling party in Nigeria. The defected members change party after stealing a lot of money. The defect to the ruling party with heavy pockets leaving PDP to sink.

#### Semiotic Codes Used in Cartooning

CODES	MEANINGS
Metonyms	Using one thing in place of another e.g. dogs in place of ICPC
Sign systems and ideological functions	That which signs represents e.g. Monster for Corruption.
Semiotic Morphism	Transition of signs to Iconic representations e.g. a figure to PMB
Blending	Creating two or more frames leading to the other e.g. the two frames cartoon or figure1
Artistic world Views	This can be very subjective.



### Discussion of Findings

Findings in this study reveal that messages are decoded from political cartoons and that through political cartoons strips, the cartoonist comment on current political issues as well as political actors. The analysis also shows that semiotics, the science of signs plays a very important role in the understanding of political cartoons since the cartoonist brings together several semiotic codes to use and since it is also through the semiotic frame work that cartoons are better understood.

Findings also show that political cartoon strip have both connotative and denotative meanings. The denotation being the first order signification i.e. all kinds of association evoked by the signs (political cartoon strips).

Finally, it is worthy of note also that political cartoon strips like other signs can produce more than one meaning as seen in the cartoon on figure 5.

### Conclusion

There is no doubt that cartoon strips have a lot more to offer than just entertaining readers. Thus, cartoons are meant to investigate reflection on current situations / people in the society.

These political cartoon strips should not be disregarded as they subtly inform / give information that cannot be passed on in words for fear of political prejudices.

Thus, this paper perceives semiotics as an approach that can be used in other to better understand and interpret political cartoon as they depict and satirize members of the society with political issues in the country.

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