

## COMMUNICATION AND SEMIOTICS: AN ANALYSIS OF ISOKO CULTURAL SIGNS

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the semiotic dimensions of signs, symbols and cultural practices within the socio-cultural context of the Isoko people of Nigeria as a means of communication. It examines how these signs, symbols and cultural practices create meaningful communication. The study applies semiotic theories by Ferdinand de Saussure and Peirce to relate the forms of the cultural signs and what they signify. The paper adopts a qualitative descriptive method of data analysis. All the data analysed in this study are gotten through intensive interviews with cultural custodians such as Iletus and Edions. The study is very significant as it reflects the rich cultural heritage, identity, beliefs, norms and values of the Isoko people. It also contributes to the preservation of the Isoko culture.

**Keywords:** Communication, Semiotics, Isoko people, Cultural semiotics and Cultural signs

### **Introduction**

Communication is the sharing of ideas, information, feelings and thoughts. It can either be through words or signs. This implies that apart from words, there are other means of communication. These other means of communication are indigenous to a group of people who share common knowledge of such signs. Every community within Nigeria has a set or modes of communication that are indigenous to its people. Such modes of communication are part of the culture of that environment and are well understood by the inhabitants of that society. The study of Isoko cultural signs has its domain in semiotics. It is basically a branch of linguistics which offers the lens through which the cultural meanings in a given society can be understood. It is also related to the African communication system, hence cultural signs and symbols are non-verbal communication elements for sharing information, ideas, facts, opinions and meanings among a given cultural setting. The Isoko people have a robust cultural heritage marked by unique signs, symbols and practices. They are very effective forms of communication that have symbolic meanings. These signs, symbols, behaviours and cultural practices convey meanings that go beyond their literal, denotative sense to include connotative interpretations. These forms of communication and representation need to be explored and explicated for the sake of accessibility in a globalised world. Such explication contributes to the knowledge of the Isoko community identity, history and cosmologies. This is because the meaning in signs varies across cultures. Analysing Isoko cultural signs through a semiotic lens is a way of preserving the cultural heritage of Isoko land that generations unborn will benefit from. This study becomes

imperative as through Christianity, Isoko is being gradually de-culturalised, as Nsude and Nwakpope (2021) cited in Nsude (2022, p.147), observe generally that “Africans are discouraged from using their own communication system and consequently becoming de-culturalised to the extent that most means of communication in Africa are regarded as archaic, fetish and rudimentary.” This situation has led Udumubrai (2021, p.129) also to decry that:

...the effect of westernisation, which has now translated to globalisation is quite devastating to African societies, a very lamenting situation and sometimes deliberate alteration or an outright destruction of values and norms of African people in general and Isoko people in particular....(129)

Before the advent of Christianity, most indigenous communities in Nigeria had their traditional modes of verbal and non-verbal communication. Isoko land had a system of communication through signs, symbols and cultural practices. This system of communication helps to instil moral values within the land. The white man's religion came and gradually these traditional modes of communication are now going into extinction. This has given leverage to the present generation to commit different atrocities, which in turn leads to tragic ends, such as the untimely death of young people as compared to the olden days.

From the outburst above, there is a strong indication that without proper documentation such as this, the next generation will not be equipped with the knowledge of their indigenous communicative tools and what they represent. It is on this bedrock that this study deliberately explores the communicative signs and symbols within Isoko land to awaken the consciousness of the present generation and generations unborn.

## Semiotics

There are different definitions of the term 'semiotics' depending on the perspective of the user. Semioticians argue that there are other forms of communicating meaning apart from words. The origin of semiotics lies in the academic study of how signs and symbols create meanings. It is particularly concerned with the study of signs and symbols and their use and interpretation. It basically explores how meaning is created and communicated through signs such as objects, gestures and symbols etc. Leech and Onwuegbuzie (2008, p.588) define semiotics as “the study of signs and anything that represents something.” They added that semiotics is a science that explores the relationship between signs, including talk and text and their intended specific meanings. A more detailed meaning of semiotics in relation to this study is that of Ferdinand de Saussure (1966, p. 171) (a Swiss Linguist) who sees semiotics as the study of signs as part of social life. He added further that “a sign is composed of two inseparable parts, a signifier (the form which the sign takes, such as a word or image) and the signified (the concept or meaning the signifier represents.”

This study focuses on the cultural signs and symbols used for communication within the Isoko speech community. It gives a meaningful interpretation of selected signs and symbols within the

Isoko geographical location with a view to preserving the cultural heritage of the people. The interpretation of such selected symbols and signs will help to equip the future generation with the value systems of the land. Another semiotician, Charles Sanders Peirce (an American philosopher) asserts that semiotics is a formal doctrine of signs involving a triadic relationship between the sign, the object it represents and the interpretation. Ifejirika (2014, p. 151) asserts that semiotics refers to “all sign language (including those of verbal communication-words, which represent diverse things in a particular cultural and language community.” This implies colours, ornaments, traditional rites, drawings, looks, smoke, moon, sun, etc are means of communication. This is in line with Ferdinand de Saussure (1966) postulations that “a good diversity of human actions and production- our bodily postures and gestures, the social rituals we perform, the clothes we wear, the meals we serve are all elements of meaningful communication.” In line with Ifejirika and Ferdinand de Saussure, Nsude (2022, p.149) notes that the traditional channels of African communication are un-ending. He summarises the un-ending list with a table thus as:

S/N	MODE OF COMMUNICATION	MEDIA/CHANNELS USED
1	Instrumental	Membranophones-skins drum Aerophones – Whistle, ivory, horn, reed pipes Symbolography – Bamboo reed, tattoo, chalk marks
2	Demonstrative	Music- songs, choral/entertainment music, dirge, elegy, ballad
3	Iconographic	Objectics- Charcoal, kolanut, white clay, egg, beads, flag Floral _ Fresh palm frond, plantain stems,
4	Extramundane	Incantatory-Ritual, libation, vision, prayer Graphic- Obituary, in memoriam
5	Visual	Colour-White cloth, red cloth, yellow, green etc Appearance – Dressing, hair style, body language
6	Institutional	Social – Marriage, chieftaincy, festival Spiritual- Shrine, masquerade

Source: Nsude (2022)

From the table above, there are diverse indigenous symbols and signs that convey different information and ideas in different societies. There are objects, songs, institutions, rituals, ornaments and ceremonies that communicate meanings. This study is however limited to cultural symbols and signs within Isoko speech community.

## Cultural semiotics

Cultural semiotics is the study of the system of signs and symbols that generate meaning. It views culture as a complex semiotic system often called ‘semiosphere’ where meanings are exchanged and interpreted. Igwedibia, (2021, p.82) suggests that cultural semiotics is the study of signs not in isolation but as part of semiotic sign systems.” These semiotics sign systems are in relation to a people’s culture via dressing, music, eating, clothing and other cultural practices of that society, which are used for communication. Cultural semiotics can be verbal or non-verbal communication. It is therefore a field of study that analyses cultural phenomena by understanding how meaning is created, maintained and transformed through symbolic interaction in a given society.

The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines symbol as a person, object, or event, etc., that represents a more general quality or situation. This depicts that any object that stands for something which is known by a group because they share the same knowledge about it, is called a symbol. Again, these symbols and their meanings are also arbitrary, as there is no correlation sometimes or resemblance between the object, events, and their symbols. However, there is a shared agreement and acceptance of its meaning that is generally accepted by a given society in relation to its cultural background or ethics. The meaning of these symbols varies from one society to another in relation to their culture.

Culture varies from one geographical location to another. While in some cultures, for instance, the kolanut is a symbol of reception, such as we have in Isoko, Urhobo, Igbo, and other places in Nigeria, there are places where a glass of water is served to a visitor as a symbol of reception. For this study, such symbols will be limited to the Isoko culture, though they can be replicated in other cultures around.

## Isoko Cultural Environment

The Isoko ethnic group, according to Otobo (2006, p.204), consists of two Local Government Areas: Isoko South Local Government with headquarters at Oleh and Isoko North Local Government Area with headquarters at Ozoro. Udumubrai (2021, p.2) avers that the two local government areas are bounded in the North and North-West by Ndokwa West and Ughelli North, respectively; South by Patani and Sagbama while South-East by Ndokwa East local government areas in Delta and Bayelsa States. They speak the Isoko language, which shares similar linguistic elements to the Urhobo language. Just like any other language, Isoko language has different dialects in relation to the geographical location. Such dialects include Owhe, Uzere and Ozoro dialects etc. The Isoko people have their cultural norms, values, practices, beliefs, superstitions and myths embedded into areas such as marriage, entertainment, religion, festivals, dispute resolution and communal life.

Some of the signs, symbols and cultural practices that are unique to the Isoko people are revealed through their dressing, such that when a married woman ties two wrappers and a blouse with a

headtie, it is a symbol of decency. Again, the men equally tie a wrapper with a walking stick and cap. The food delicacies within this region is mostly banga soup and starch. Other signs, symbols and cultural practices are unique to these people. They are well explicated in the data for this study below.

### **Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework employed for this study is semiotic theory, which has its foundations in the works of Ferdinand de Saussure (1966, p. 66) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1991). The models are key frameworks that serve as a guide to any semiotic study. Saussure's dyadic model conceptualises sign as composed of two inseparable components, which are the signifier (the form a sign takes, such as a word or symbol) and the signified (the concept the signifier represents). This relational model underscores that meaning is not inherent in signs but produced through differences in a system of signs within a cultural context. The other model for this study is Peirce's Triadic model. Peirce expanded semiotics by describing signs as consisting of the representamen (the form of the sign), the object (to which the sign refers), and the interpretant (the understanding or interpretation generated by the sign). Peirce classified signs into three types namely: icon (signs resembling their objects, e.g. images), index (signs directly connected to their objects e.g., smoke as a sign of fire), and symbol (signs with arbitrary or conventional relations to their objects, e.g. language and cultural symbols).

Though these two theories are similar, the study tends to be more comfortable with Ferdinand de Saussure's approach. The identified Isoko cultural signs and symbols are analysed by indicating the forms (signifier) and meaning of the forms (signified). Isoko cultural signs, such as objects, songs, colours, attire and cultural practices, are analysed as semiotic units. Each of the signs for this study is examined for its signifier (form), signified (cultural meaning) and the interpretant (community understanding). Emphasis is placed on the symbolic nature of the signs, illustrating how they function as mediums of communication that maintain and transmit Isoko identity and social norms.

### **Empirical review**

Using a semiotic approach to study cultural signs facilitates the understanding of how these cultural objects and practices serve as a mode of communication. Scholars studying African traditional semiotics have emphasised the significance of understanding symbolic objects, signs, behaviours and practices to have a better understanding of the values, beliefs and how they contribute to morality in the society where they are found. Okeke and Chukwu (2015) researched Igbo cultural symbols such as kolanuts and white chalks. The study reveals that these objects function as multilayered signs which represent different concepts beyond their physical forms. Again, Igwedibia (2021) investigated Nigerian cultural signs and symbols using pragmatics and semiotics to understand how meanings are derived from their context of use. Similarly, Omekeh and Itiveh (2017) studied Isoko menu items as semiotic signs demonstrating iconicity. They also

emphasised the visual relationship between signs and their referents. In another study, Uwen et al (2024) examined regimented practices in the Nigerian army. Also, Sani and Ogungbe (2024) analyse iconic and symbolic semiotic resources in Nigerian university logos and anthems. They highlighted the ideologies conveyed through them. Anyogo (2018) explores the use of non-verbal communication and signs among the Igede ethno-linguistic group. The study adopts the referential theory of meaning by Ferdinand de Saussure (1966) and Charles Sander Pierce's (1991) semiotic theory. The study finds out that non-verbal communication plays a very significant role in information dissemination and meaning sharing among the Igede people.

From the empirical review above, there are extensive semiotic analysis of Igbo and other Nigerian ethnic groups' cultural symbols, while studies on Isoko cultural signs and symbols are relatively limited. In the absence of this study, therefore, most Isoko cultural signs will be rendered meaningless hence, there is no proper documentation of such cultural signs. This study.

### **Cultural Signs and Symbols in Isoko Land**

S/N	OBJECTS	COLOURS	SONGS	CEREMONIES	SHRINE
1	Boundaries trees	Black	Elegy	Marriage	Orise-Owhe
2	Plantain sucker	White/ Red	Dirge	Chieftaincy	Eriokpe
3	Palm frond			Burial	
4	Feather of an eagle			Coronation	
5	Kola nut				
6	Flags				
7	Elephant trunk				
8	Cowries				
9	Beads				

### **Objects Analysis:**

#### **1. Boundary tree (Orise/Oviara)**

The orise and oviara trees (signifier) serve or connote boundaries delineation (signified), which can be understood only by the inhabitants of Isoko origin without any form of verbal communication. Within Isoko land, orise and oviara trees are used for boundary demarcation to avoid unnecessary encroachment by neighbours. This symbol is a significant mode of traditional

communication in Isoko. The orise/ovaira trees therefore, are communicative tools that symbolises boundaries.

## **2. Plantain sucker**

Again, without any form of oral communication, the young plantain sucker planted upside down (signifier) either in a land or someone's compound indicates that the said land it is planted on is in dispute (signified). Again, if it is planted on someone's compound, it signifies there is a problem. Nobody can trespass on the land or such compound until such dispute is resolved. Udumubrai (2010, p. 320) affirms that "if a young plantain is planted upside down, it means a neighbouring clan or community has declared war." The young plantain sucker planted upside down (form) in Isoko land therefore signifies 'dispute'.

## **3. Tender leaves of palm tree (Ohie).**

Within the Isoko nation, the tender leaves of a palm tree (signifier) connotes different meanings which could be abstract to strangers. First, it symbolises war (signified). The Isoko nation shares a similar culture with the Igbo cultural setting, as seen in Arrow of God, where Akukulia, as a character in Arrow of God, was sent to Okperi with the palm frond and white chalk over a land dispute between Umuaro and Okperi.

In addition, within the Isoko nation, when the tender leaves of a palm tree are tied on a vehicle /car (signifier)], it connotes that there is a corpse inside the vehicle (signified). This implies that the palm frond connotes different things even within the Isoko nation.

## **4. The feather of an eagle (Uleli ugo)**

In Isoko, there are warlords usually called Igbu (plural)/ ogbu (singular). These Igbu's usually fight or wrestle on behalf of their communities. In extreme cases, when such warlords kill their rivals (opposition) or assailant, the number of persons killed is replicated with the feathers of an eagle on a red cap (signifier). In this case, the number of feathers on the cap connotes the number of persons that have been killed by that warlord (ogbu). The war lords in Isoko usually dress in such regalia as a symbol of strength during festivals such as Orise-Owhe festival usually held at Otor-Owhe in Owhe clan.

## **5. Kolanut (ubiewe)**

Basically, the kolanut is very symbolic in most cultures across Nigeria. In Isoko, the kolanut is used for traditional ceremonies such as marriages, burials, festivals, worshipping of idols, and for spiritual divinity. There are two types of kolanut, namely ubiewe Isoko (native kola) and ugbaja (Hausa kola). The native kola normally has three lopes while the lopes of the ugbaja can range from four to six. The leaves of the native kolanut represent different things depending on posture and the direction of the head when used for divination. Udumubrai (2021, p.133) confirms that

divination is done in several ways, from one diviner to another, using different means and instruments for delivery. He added that these range from lobes of kolanuts, which is very common.

Again, the kolanut is usually presented as a symbol of hospitality to visitors. In fact, one of the interviewees for this study, Ojairuno Paul, the former Oletu-uzo of Owhelogbo affirms that “whoever brings kolanut brings life.” He added that the “kolanut does not understand English.” At such, it is always presented with a language that is indigenous to the people. From the interview with another prominent Chief from Owhelogbo Community, Chief Oghole, “the kolanut cannot be presented alone. It must be wedged to prevent it from jumping out of the bowl.” It is usually wedged with money. Without the native kolanut, no traditional ceremony can take place in Isoko land.

## **6. Big wrappers used as flags**

Within Isoko land, when an elderly man, usually known as Odio dies, long wrappers are usually worn on long sticks during the burial. It is a form of non-verbal communication which needs no explanation once it is seen. The wrappers are used as flags to indicate the status of the deceased, which is usually the Odio of a street or a community.

## **7. Elephant trunk (akperen)**

The elephant trunk (signifier), which is known as akperen in Isoko land, is a communicative tool used to announce the arrival of a king, or the death of a prominent person in a community. It is usually blown like a trumpet. It is used during festivals. Though the use of the akperen is gradually going into extinction because of theft, it is highly symbolic. Without this present study, the indomie generation may have no knowledge of this cultural artifact.

## **8. Cowries (Ibighabe)**

Cowries (signifier) known as ‘ibighabe’ in Isoko are of great cultural significance. They signify wealth. No wonder they are crucial part of traditional marriage rites. The cowries are used as currency for the payment made by the groom’s family to the bride’s family. This is in relation to the Isoko culture, where cowries as a means of payment of bride price traditionally tie the bride to the groom’s ancestral gods. In this case, if the bride commits adultery, the ancestors (esemo) of the groom’s family will arrest her. This can lead to the death of her children, or the woman may die if she refuses to confess. The cowries are also communicative tools for spiritual divination, such as to offer sacrifice. Again, they are worn as traditional adornment during festivals by the chief priests of deities. Cowries are also used for charms and many more in Isoko land.

## 9. Beads (Ivie)

In Isoko, beads (signifiers) signify different things. They are communicative tools that symbolise royalty, identity, authority and social status. It is a compulsory ornament worn by kings in Isoko land. The beads, which are worn in layers around the neck, wrist and fingers. Beads are therefore part of the royal regalia, which is traceable to their ancestral root, Benin. In some cases, members of the royal house also wear beads on their heads as ornaments. Again, when one wears beads on the wrist in Isoko, it symbolises that the person is a chief. There is also another spherical one worn by traditional chiefs in Isoko. In addition, Isoko brides wear beads as part of their dressing during and after traditional marriage. Once a young lady wears a bead as an ornament, it is assumed she has just got married. Such a person is usually called 'Ova', which means 'newly married'.

## Colour Analysis

In Isoko land, colours are forms of non-verbal communication. Some colours are usually worn to depict situations such as mourning, happy celebrations and as a mark of sacredness. When a young lad dies, the Isoko people wear black attire as a symbol of sadness. Again, the obituary posters are designed with black colours. This native communication system cuts across different ethnic groups in Nigeria. On the contrary, the white colour connotes joyful celebration. Even in burial ceremonies, once the white colour is worn, it connotes that the deceased was old. The combination of white and red or only red tied to a tree or farm connotes that the owner is a pagan, and anyone who harvests any fruit from the tree or farm will be cursed by the deity from where such pieces of cloth were taken.

## Music Analysis

The Isoko people employ different songs as a communicative tool to convey different information in relation to different ceremonies, such as war dance, escorting a bride to the husband's house etc. Udumubrai (2021, p.79) asserts that "each human event is considered highly important, therefore deserves peculiar songs that are rendered to observe and commemorate such events." Depending on the nature of the ceremonies, songs such as a dirge is rendered. A dirge is a mournful piece of music composed and performed during the burial of a young person. It is usually sung slowly, and it can be boring. Such songs are highly emotional and can invoke tears.

## Symbolic Cultural Practices

Again, in Owhelogbo within Isoko land, if anyone commits suicide, (signifier) the inhabitants of that neighborhood do not hang/spread their clothes on the twine (signified). Similarly, the venue of the market is shifted to another space within the community. Once, an indigene of Isoko land sees that there is a shift in the venue of the market from its original place to another venue, there

is an understanding that someone has committed suicide or someone died mysteriously. The corpse of such a person is usually taken to the evil forest.

Apart from such cultural items as described above, there are also mythologies within the Isoko context that serve as communicative tools. A myth is a traditional story which embodies a belief regarding some facts or phenomena of experience. It is a sacred narrative regarding a god, a hero and the origin of a given people. For instance, the Isoko people, who have a link or relationship with the Orogun people in Ughelli North, forbid the Iguana with the belief that it is their mother who saves them during the war. At such the iguana is well-revered among such persons. Again, the Isoko people that have link with Emu in Ndokwa have alligator as their totem. These people also believe that the alligator is their mother who saved them during a daring situation. Also, the Otibio people have a crocodile as their totem with a similar narrative. The Erawhe people in Owhe clan also have the rabbit as a totem. These people refer to the rabbit as 'ozadhe'.

All these symbolic cultural items and concepts are communicative tools that are unique to the Isoko people. While some express war, others connote peace, mourning and other forms of non-verbal communication to reveal the cultural identity of the geographic region.

## Conclusion

This study has been able to identify, analyse and give meanings of the cultural communicative tools within the Isoko community. These cultural signs, whether found in language, art, rituals or symbols, serve not only as markers of identity but as vessels of communication. Through this communicative vessels, the community's values, history and worldview are preserved.

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