

**SEMIOTICS IN IFÁ CORPUS**  
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**ABSTRACT**

Semiotics is a theory in literature that tends to study and analyze the signs and symbols present in literary corpus of which Ifa is one. It looks at how these signs and symbols convey meaning and interpretation. Semiotics explores the relationship between the signifier (the physical form of the sign) and the signified (the concept or idea represented by the sign). This theory helps us to understand how language, images, and other forms of communication contribute to the overall meaning and interpretation in a literary work. By examining the semiotics, we can uncover deeper layers of meaning, uncover hidden messages, and gain deeper understanding of meanings. It is a combination of symbolism and signs interpretations. This paper attempts to review the importance of signs and symbols as special stylistic features that characterize Ifá corpus notable are the ìyèrè (Ifá songs) and Ifá kíkì (chants). This paper then emphasizes that Ifa poetry makes use of words and sentences to suggest specific meaning with the backing of metaphoric features.

**Keyword:** Deity, paraphernalia, semiotics, Sign, Symbols

## INTRODUCTION

Religious objects known as Ifá paraphernalia (ohun èlò ìdáfá) have symbolic interpretation to convey man's relationships to life and the problems of life. Ifá poems contain words and sentences as well as physical objects that are used to describe and connote specific meanings with metaphoric features. Hence, it would be a combination of semiotics – symbolism.

What is symbolism? Symbolism means interpretation by symbols. A symbol is a visible or audible sign or emblem of some thought, emotion or experience, interpreting what can be really grasped only by the mind and imagination by something that enters into the field of observation. To Scott, symbolism means to invest objects, action or ideas with a symbolic meaning. A symbol is something standing for something else. Encyclopedia Americana (2007 vol. 26) says that symbols is something associated with or that signifies or represents something else. Semiotic on the other hand is more wider in that it gives meaning to the objects and its symbols.

### Ifa Corpus

Ifá otherwise known as Orunmila refers to the deity of wisdom and intellectual development worship by the Yorùbá of western Nigeria. The belief that environment is a reflection of the whole universe. The poems chanted by the worshippers are also known as Ifá kíkí and Ìyèrè Ifá. Inside it are two hundred and fifty-six odus which multiply itself to numerous odu all of which contain the philosophical beliefs, culture and knowledge of the worshippers. It is a spiritual system based on the belief of Supreme Being Olódùmarè and the Òrìṣà (deity). (Abimbola 1977, 2019, Anoba 2022, Kehinde 2018, Ologbenla 2021).

This study attempts to explore how these chanted songs reflect that of signs and symbols to make meaningful interpretation. This title will be discussed in line with the above definitions. An essential characteristic of Ifá poetry is the use of symbolic words to suggest intimate specific literary meaning to the corpus. The function of symbols and signs in Ifá is to represent a reality or a truth about a particular ideology of life. The paraphernalia of Ifá divination system are all objects of symbolism that signifies something, Notable among the objects of Ifá divination are (ikin) sixteen palmnuts, (oṣón ifá) divination tray, iyèrè osùn (divination powder) and iróké (divination staff).

Ikin m̀er̀indinlógún (sixteen sacred palmnuts) not èkùrò (ordinary palm nuts) symbolizes the divine presence of Orunmila (god of wisdom) at all times to deliver Ifá faithful from every calamity and bless them in every sphere of endeavours for it is believed that these sixteen scared palm nuts is Orunmila in person. Sixteen palm nuts were handed to the children of Orunmila when he decided to return to heaven – isálú ọ̀run. The ikin were to be cast to receive counselling from Ifa. This Ikin Ifá is feared and respected. No one toys with the Ikin Ifa.

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Ìgbà tí wọn ó débi ti ifá pòórà sí.  
Nídií igi ọ̀pẹ̀ àgùnká  
Èyí tó yà sí ya búkà m̀̀r̀̀nd̀̀nl̀̀óg̀̀ún  
Ó wá fún wọn ni ikin m̀̀r̀̀nd̀̀nl̀̀óg̀̀ún  
Bẹ̀ẹ̀ bá délé  
Bẹ̀ẹ̀ bá fówó ní  
Èni tẹ̀ ẹ̀ mọ̀ ọ̀ bi nù un...  
bẹ̀ẹ̀ bá fáya ní  
èni tẹ̀ ẹ̀ mọ̀ ọ̀ bi nù un...

After they had reached the  
palmtree that has 16  
different braches  
He (Orunmila) gave them 16 scared palmnuts  
When you reach home  
if you want to have money  
That is the person you should consult  
When you reach home  
If you want to have wives  
That is the person you should consult  
(Abimbola 1977:4)

These nuts were also given to the custodian of the divinity/deity called Babalawo (diviner) when cast reveals the role of some characters, whether supernatural forces, human or inanimate objects, antagonizing or favouring the client in real life situations. There is symbolism of the protagonist, the sacrifice, the name of the Babalawo as well as the sacrificial materials. In fact, the first verse or verses, which are usually the name of the diviner that performed the divination in the ancient time (Ìgbà Ìwáṣẹ̀), are symbols or reality of life as well as the transparency of life situations. The sacred nut as it usually refers to constitute a break in homogenous space and symbolizes an opening in space.

Let take a look at this excerpt from the Ifa corpus to illustrate.

Aboyún ò bí mọ̀  
Àgàn ò tọ̀wọ̀ àl̀̀à bosùn

A pón òbẹ sílẹ̀ o  
Ewúré hán an jẹ pankan  
(Abimbola 2019)

Pregnant women could not deliver their babies  
Barren women remained barren  
Well sharpener razor place in the floor,  
And goats attempted to devour them.

The excerpts depicted the state of confusion and uncertainty on the earth after the departure of Ifa divinity due to one of his son's (Ọlówò) disobedience.

The world no longer has peace. Imagine, how can goat attempt to eat sharpened razor? It is just a vehicle to convey the conception of famine, chaos and confusion, which the earth experienced because of the absence of divine intervention. In essence, it means that for the world to witness peace there must be a supernatural intervention from a Supreme Being.

That is, to explain that without divine rulership in the world socio-political-economic life may likely be in chaos. Thus, telling us the importance of religion in the society. If one refused to give superiority or honour to who deserved honour, it might lead to misunderstanding or war.

## Example II

Ìká méjì

The stone is not a single support for an art object which is being served.  
Ifa divination was performed for Yindinyindin who was weeping because  
she had no child Yindinyindin was told to perform sacrifice  
She was assured that she would have many children  
She performed the sacrifice  
After she had performed  
She said, that was exactly what her Ifa Priest predicted (in happy mood)  
“The stone is not a suitable support for an art object which is being carried  
Ifa divination was performed for Yindinyindin  
Who was a relation of maggot  
The wife is bearing children, and the husband is mounting them on his back  
'Yindinyindin' is certainly the relation of maggot.  
(Abimbola 2019)

After the protagonist Yindinyindin (a type of maggot) made sacrifice as prescribed by her diviner and she became mother of many children. Here the whole poem mirrors the importance of children

in the society. Women can do anything in order to have a child. Yindinyindin in the extract above, represents a barren woman seeking help to enable her become fruitful. Life of a barren woman is signified, life full of sorrow and agony coupled with monthly weeping just like it happened to Yindinyindin.

### Example III

If the host does not invite one to this party  
It is not an honourable thing to be present  
When a man does a shameful thing  
He wears a hard and shameless face  
Ifa divination was performed for Èjì Ọkànràn  
Who was going to the city of Ìtìlẹ̀  
Èjì Ọkànràn was told to perform sacrifice  
Because of a certain thing belonging to his father,  
And he performed sacrifice  
After performing the prescribed sacrifice  
He triumphed over his enemies  
He sang, that was exactly what his Ifa priest predicted.

(Abimbola 2019)

The moral stand here is that it is not an honourable thing to go to a gathering that one is not invited to. This also pictures the belief or custom of property inheritance at the death of one's parents because the client was told to perform a sacrifice in order to inherit his ancestral rights. In Yorùbá society, inheritance is mainly for men folk, for women are themselves a part of the property to be inherited. Hence, the popular saying, Àjẹmógún lobinrin.

If the prediction of Ifa is good, a sacrifice will help further to make it happen; if the prediction is evil, a sacrifice will help the client to dispel the evil. Every sacrificial rite in any corpus is an embodiment of symbolism and signs.

In Ifa, every recitation presents man's life struggles for life attainment, this is pertinent to the problem of the client. The names of the divinity-Ọrúnmilà has a symbolic-semiotic implication for life, hence, Ifa divinity is being referred to as;

Akéréfinúşogbón  
Akónilóran bí iyèkan ẹnì  
Èlẹ́rì ípín  
Ọní mojó alasire maa tan

The small man with a mind full of wisdom

He who gives one wise advise like one's relative  
The witness of one's destiny  
He who knows the death dates of every living

This statement symbolized the divinity as the only one that can foretell the future having known the destiny of every one. It was believed that Orunmila was the witness of destiny during the creation of man. He was believed to be a witness to the creation of every living thing on earth. Therefore, when a man goes to an Ifa priest for divination, he is simply trying to find out through Ifa the wishes of his/her ori (destiny).

Ikú mēran fèniyàn sílè  
Ikú fò lóri awo  
Orí ẹran ló gbà  
É è gborí ọni/3x

Death took animal's head  
and left human  
Death has left a diviner  
He chose animal's head  
He did not take man's head/3x

Death is personified here to symbolize human being that is the supernatural forces that work against human being. In the same vein, death can be warded off through sacrifice. Here, death is seen as something one can fight and defeat by warding it off through sacrifice.

Igún wá á jẹbo  
Kébo ó le ba à fín...  
À ẹ́ bá ò rí Gúnnugún  
A kì yòò lè ẹ́bo  
Igún Gẹreje  
Wá á jẹbo/3x

(Kehinde 2018)

Vulture, come and eat sacrifice  
So that sacrifice may be taken away by the gods  
One does not always realize that without vulture  
One cannot perform a sacrifice

In this verse, the vulture is regarded as a symbol and sign of old age, since both young and old vulture have bald heads. The Yoruba value old age so much that they pray to reach old age.

Chanting or singing of Ifa corpus in all its ramifications is dominated by the figurative use of words, materials and the actual performance of the chanting by the Babalawo through symbolism. This symbolism is made more meaningful through imagery as we have seen. In fact, symbols, signs and imagery are major stylistic features in Ifa especially to illustrate the problems of the client. The client symbolically attached himself to the story of the Ifa corpus. To the Yoruba, the actions of the protagonist and his fortunes determine the fate of the client. For example, the Ifa priest will recite the corpus that is similar to the client's problem, as the Ifa priest does this the client (Onibeere) will put himself in the position of the original protagonist of the corpus and decide to obey the corpus' instruction in order to determine his own future as to have 'breakthroughs' in life situations. Here, the client discussed in the corpus represents everyman who has to exercise his will to seek help and deny himself of something to get more valuable and important things of life.

## Conclusion

The deeper meaning of Ifá poetry is not only in the literary form but also in the use of signs and symbols. Each sign in Ifá corpus symbolized something and symbolism in Ifa poetry gives us valuable insight into the system as a sensitive instrument both during the period of consultation and after when the client ponders over the didactic implications of the corpus. It mirrors the social realities of the Yoruba about their beliefs, moral values and aspiration and culture.

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