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## SIGNS IN INDIGENOUS TALES: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT

Translation and interpretation may be all that are needed to break the bulwark surrounding meanings of folktales in some remote cultures. Using a combination of Peircean's semiotic objects, representamen and interpretant; Henrik Gottlieb's «semiotically based taxonomy of translation» finding expression in the concept of time and space, the paper progresses from intra semiotic translation which involves translation within «sign system» to «inter semiotic translation» which is «translation between sign systems» to unravel the wealth of meaning in the Ifa corpus. Even when no semantic significance may be found among the semiotic objects, the signs and the interpretant, there exists a nexus among the objects, the signs and the meanings to an adept in the field of folklore in the environment. Consequently, one appreciates the ingenuity of indigenous people in fashioning semiotic objects, signs and interpretations that could withstand the challenges of time and space. These signs record the philosophical ethos of the society with the intention of preserving such and rendering them periodically at the arena. Folktales may be better appreciated when narrators provide insight at the background which could further illuminate other nondescript areas in the course of such performances.

### KEYWORDS:

folktale, indigenous people, semiotic,  
performance

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### *Introduction*

Blake (1965) provides the needed authorial launch pad in the critical exploration of the wealth of meanings latent in semiotic signs. These signs constitute the totality of the symbols.<sup>1</sup> The symbol, according to Abrams *et al.*, signifies something, or suggests a range of reference, beyond itself.<sup>2</sup> Blake's statement becomes apt in relation to variety and meaning to different people: «the tree which moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing which stands in the way». The study further confirms the difficulties confronting interpretation from one language to another «without a translation

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<sup>1</sup> W. BLAKE, *The eternal world of vision*, in *The modern tradition: Backgrounds of modern literature*, Ellmann, R. *et al.*, Oxford University Press, New York 1965, p. 54-57.

<sup>2</sup> M.H. ABRAMS *et al.*, *A glossary of literary terms*, Wadsworth Cengage Learning, United Kingdom 2012, p. 394.

of its signs into other signs of the same system or into signs of another system».<sup>3</sup> According to Abrams *et al*, signs are «conveyors of meaning» and they may not be «limited to language».<sup>4</sup> These signs are references to some underlying cultural traits and «can be analysed as signs which function in diverse modes of signifying systems».<sup>5</sup> This study involves translation of semiotic objects, and these may constitute signs and the meanings from intra-semiotic perspective. It attempts a translation of the signs in the text under review from the original language into the English language.

The validity of the reference to the signs as «text» is based on the assertion of Gottlieb. The sign in the indigenous *Ifa* corpus is a «channel of communication» that contains meaning and constitutes nonverbal signs, and according to Gottlieb, «nonverbal communication deserves the label text».<sup>6</sup> The quest for translation is based on the uniqueness of every culture. No thanks to the modernist era that recognises every culture as unique and fundamental to the needs of the people. Interpretation of signs involves «translation». The first level of translation is «intrasemiotic translation». This involves a «reformulation of a given expression within the same semiotic system».<sup>7</sup> Bassnett, as cited in Gottlieb, avers that «translation belongs most properly to semiotics».<sup>8</sup> The interrelatedness of cultures and the fact of their accommodation of values that are no less significant from one culture to another may have conditioned this.

*Ifa* signs are, therefore, semiotic objects. The signs are intellectual constructs that might have been devised through uncanny association of specific combination of signs with a particular human behaviour and meaning. In view of the importance to the folks and the sociological imperative it possesses, it becomes a model. This belies the quantitative approach in the study of cultures as a deficient tool. This is in view of the seeming meaninglessness that the model may seem to critics from other environments. In plain language, quantitative approach is the holistic appreciation of cultural items as a body of artistic preoccupation of the folks through untidy value judgement. The search for meaning may not be confined to an appreciation of the total texts in one fell swoop. A piecemeal appreciation of other cultural ingredients subsisting in the milieu is the panacea for transcending the bounds of secrecy permeating the texts in the quest for interpretation.

The task of translation may be hindered by the world views of the people whose signs, finding expression in masks, and other semiotic objects are being translated. The first observation is the visible link between the spiritual and the physical. Even when this may not be limited to the environment in this effort, meaning becomes difficult to achieve except basic concepts from the emerging environment are conjured, explained and linked with the concept under focus.

Equally needful is the value that the people place on their iconic signs. It is defined as «...a sign that interrelates with its semiotic object by virtue of some resemblance or

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<sup>3</sup> R. JAKOBSON, *On linguistic aspects of translation*, in *On translation*, edited by R. A. Brower, *The translation studies reader*, 113-118, Routledge, London 1959 (Second edition 2004), pp. 232-239.

<sup>4</sup> M.H. ABRAMS *et al*. *A glossary of literary terms* cit., p. 358.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>6</sup> H. GOTTLIEB, *Semiotics and translation*, in *The Routledge handbook of translation studies and linguistics*, K. Malmkjaer (ed.), Routledge Taylor and Francis, New York 2018, p. 46.

<sup>7</sup> ECO (2004), cited *ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> BASSNETT cited *ibid*.

similarity with it».<sup>9</sup> Imputed to the subject of the paper, the divining shells (*Opele*) are iconic signs because they are easily identified with the signs and what may be inferred therefrom. Symbols are a combination of whatever may be related to the signs or whatever may have been culturally agreed to be the meanings in the environment. According to the claim, these objects when brought together are «linguistic signs whose interrelation with its semiotic object is conventional» at least within the class of adherents of the *Ifa* tradition.

Iconic signs harbour inimitable meanings to the art, religion and philosophy of the folks and they may be far from meaningful to people from other cultures. However, these metaphors constitute iconic and emotive charms to folks but are mere inscriptions to outsiders. The iconic signs are found within the behaviours of the divination shells. In this regard, the metaphor of the young man is a signifier of inexperience, exuberance, and indiscretion. Even when the *Ifa* codification may be salient to a geographical boundary, some of the interpretations are universally agreed upon. Within that category of unrestricted claims could be found the search of the boy-child for the father after puberty. No wonder Athena charges Telemachus to: «Go look for your father» which is the basis for Oedipus Complex or Electra Complex finding expression in Sigmund Freud's critical claims on infantile sexuality.

The study uncovers anthropomorphic and zoomorphic interrelatedness in the tale under consideration. This development is salient to the cultural tempo of the people to isolate related traits from the animal world in explicating behaviours. Animals such as the he-goat, ram, and frog are brought to bear in the narrative. This device might look silly to outsiders but the truth is that where many people are seen to be exhibiting similar traits, it is logical to class everyone in one category without necessarily giving the protagonist a familiar name that may be rejected as not applicable when deployed in the analysis of the persona.

It is the iconic sign that mirrors the intentions of the sages. It teaches through suggestions and unveils its latent seeds through conscious deciphering of the signs. It is the mirror that must be forced to yield its contents. The sign becomes the meaning and whatever ideas may be garnered from the master narrative which can be likened to the interpretations of a language that may only be understood by members of the culture. The culture is a password to unravelling the values and unwritten significations in the environment.

### *Concepts and Definition*

Gottlieb situates the root «sema» in semiotics within Greek word meaning «sign» and semantics which is the study of meanings. The term semiotics may be defined «as the discipline that deals with the communication of meaning through systems of signs».<sup>10</sup> It is not farfetched, therefore, that indigenous people chose signs to represent their thoughts and feeling, beliefs, values and concepts finding expression in *Ifa (afa)*: the philosophical, metaphysical, and material compendium of indigenous African people. It was expedient on

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<sup>9</sup> M. FLOYD, *Charles Saders Peirce's concept of the signs*, in *The Routledge companion to semiotics and linguistics*, Paul Cobley (ed.), Routledge Taylor and Francis, London 2001, pp. 28-30.

<sup>10</sup> H. GOTTLIEB, *Semiotics and translation* cit., p. 46.

the part of the folks to represent their thoughts and provide explanations for physical and spiritual developments that may beset folks. That need informed the emergence of the symbols under consideration.

Steconi's claims about the individual experience of people in relation to realities is significant in the formation of world views when juxtaposed with the cultural environment of folks whose signs are being considered: «semiotics can be described as the discipline that studies how people make sense of their experience of the world and how cultures develop and give currency to this understanding».<sup>11</sup> The peculiar cultural signs of the people may be studied and understood through conscious translation and interpretation. In this regard, «semiotics» which is «ultimately a theory of how we produce, interpret and negotiate meaning through signs» becomes a valid tool in the analysis.

Signs, in this study, refer to the veil that provides cover for all related issues. Fallout of this is that a single sign or mask becomes a meta-symbol from which behaviours and possibilities may be unveiled and analysed. Far from the symbols becoming a sculpted image, it is the totality that accommodates other minor concepts. Apposite to the claim by Gumperz and Levinson's, the interpretation of signs spells out the physical and metaphysical underpinnings of the people in the environment and a sound knowledge of the language is a prerequisite to the internalization: «The essential idea of linguistic relativity is 'that culture, through language, affects the way we think, especially perhaps our classification of the experienced world».<sup>12</sup>

Symbols are metaphors. They are the cover to diverse qualities and nature. They represent different things to beholders depending on the frame of mind of individuals at the time of interpretation. The wisdom behind the symbols during festivals may be known only to the sages of the land. No doubt, they speak to the audience in different ways and they have aesthetic qualities that only the audience can explain. The study's conclusion about the symbols may not represent values that are salient to the audience as well. They are awesome in design and may be situated within supernatural elements as the wooden designs are carefully tailored to inspire the sense of the unnatural in the audience. They equally resemble crocodiles and the idea may be tied to the fact that crocodiles and other animals in the symbols are significant zoomorphic representations.

The name of the personality involved in the signs in this paper is *Orunmila*. He is described as the witness to creation whose vast knowledge transcends heaven and earth. He is the repertoire of secret knowledge and may be relied upon to reveal hidden things through allusions. This may be accommodated under «isomesic identity. It is «isomesic» because the semiotic object or identity is retained as it is in the original language or sign system in the intersemiotic translation even when explanations may be provided towards aiding the semantic internalization of folks from the intersemiotic environment. Orunmila may be diachronically located. He is reputed to have lived at a place called Oke-Ijeti at Ile-Ife.

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<sup>11</sup> U. STECCONI, *What happens if we think that translating is a wave?*, in «Translation studies», II, 2, 2010, pp. 47-60.

<sup>12</sup> J.J. GUMPERZ, S.C. LEVINSON, *Introduction: Linguistic relativity re-examined*, in *Rethinking linguistic relativity*, edited by J.J. Gumperz and S.C. Levinson, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, pp. 1-18.

*Synopsis of the Folktale*

A semiotic examination of the annual festival of Obadimeji at Lemadoro, Ondo State, Nigeria, West Africa provides an opportunity to interrogate the philosophical base of indigenous people at a time when performances were the only means of keeping records. The festival, which comes up in June, 2018, attracts many folklorists with each one dressed in a peculiar regalia and symbols; within which several hundred years of records of human activities may be scrutinised and analysed. The celebration of the annual festival brings to the fore the nature and contents of an *Ifa* script that narrates the life of a typical personality named *Ebara Meji*. He is a metaphor for every male whose relationship with the mother may be broken upon the attainment of maturity to the chagrin of the mother. This type of translation is «conventional (bound)».<sup>13</sup>

The metaphor is a reference to everyone who might be having the same traits. The mother could go to any length to ensure the survival of the child in view of her platonic love for him and the glorious destiny that the boy might have. This possibility may be found in the new «intersemiotic» environment. The mother is incapacitated. Her arm is amputated. This may be applicable to women from the new «sign system». The situation may not be really tied to amputation. It could mean any form of deficiency or another. The father too is an eye-blind man. The symbol here may not be physical blindness; it could refer to a form of limitation that may mar the ability to exert influence on the boy. The innocuous nature of the boy exposes him to everyone. He has no restraint too in opening his mind to people on issues that may not be easily discussed in the public domain. The relevance of Gottlieb to the paper becomes manifest here as a conscious attempt to translate the *Ifa* signs and text into English encounters what is termed «isosemiotic translation» as «changes in semiotic composition of translation» may not be salient to the «semiotic objects», the signs, and interpretations. It is significant that the culture of the people may not be divorced from the conventions and interpretations that are associated with signs in the environment. Conscious efforts are made to evolve a synchronic analysis through transliteration of the issues involved in the intrasemiotic system and the «source text» to a meaningful translation and transliteration in «the new sign system (using the same channel(s) of expression as the source text».

*Ebara Meji* is young, vibrant and fearless. He is unwary of any harm to his personality through whatever he may say or do. He is innocuous and simple and may not be diplomatic in his actions. This may be salient to the two «sign systems». There is usually a conflict between the younger generation and the age of the parents. The latter are usually apprehensive of the harm that may befall the children who they usually suspect to be inexperienced to meet with the challenges of existence. The name of the individual also constitutes the title of the chapter that delimits him. *Ebara Meji* is the major chapter that explicates the relationship of the persona with the mother and the inclement society. The text is applicable to youngsters, perhaps in order to provide insight into the kind of ritual the individual would perform in order to put at bay encumbrances that may have arisen from his relationship with the mother before she passes on. The above substantiates the fact

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<sup>13</sup> H. GOTTLIEB, *Semiotics and Translation* cit., p. 46.

that man is a mere mask whose mask may be worn by personalities yet unborn. It also amplifies the fact that other people with similar physical and spiritual qualities may walk on the surface of the earth at the same time.

The mother's beauty becomes a magic wand. It puts at bay the looming death. The thought of death for the young man is out of it; and the fact dawns on her as he blabs about without a corresponding knowledge and information on salient facts about *Olofin*, the mythical king, whose travail is the subject of his discussion. The equivalent of *Olofin* may be found in the «interlingual» environment. He may be equated with a tribal lord whose private activities are subjects of social discussions. The translation here may not be difficult as similar personalities are present in both the «intralingual» and «interlingual settings». What may not have a corresponding parallel is the belief system between the indigenous Yoruba milieu and the «target language» finding expression in English or international semiotic system.

The personality of the mother may not be difficult to find in the «target language». This is because mother is a metaphor for sacrifice, dedication and care for the children. This may, however, negate the modern day carefree attitude of some mothers to the welfare of their children. Especially found in the category are young unmarried mothers who could abandon their newly born babies by the roadside. Of course, social realities may not be divorced from such developments coupled with the harsh economic realities of the modern times. Equally tied to such debilitating factor may be the susceptibility of young girls to promiscuity and prostitution. Both the «intrasemiotic» and «intersemiotic» environments are prone to such negation of mother's dedication to the welfare of their children.

*Ebara Meji* soon unravels the mysterious deaths of the children of the king *Olofin* to the amazement of the crowd. Of course, he has been privy to the mystery through the advantage that the mother takes of the nobles and decision-makers in the land of Ile-Ife. He soon presents the three answers about the nobles who play game with *Olofin* and turn round to kill his children. The three culprits are tagged in symbols and images. The allegories are meant to shield the individuals of their identities, possibly borne out of the consequences of the grave allegations on the people, nobles as they are; and their descendants who might be negatively painted should their ancestors be associated with such grievous crimes. The first is *Obuko* (He-Goat). The image of a he-goat reflects the irresponsibility of the nobleman who has no scruple in wining and dining with the monarch named *Olofin* and his stupendous wealth.<sup>14</sup>

### *Theoretical Framework*

Quayson becomes a plausible referent in the study of postmodernism. According to the thesis, «...no reality can be thought of outside the way in which it is represented, and that any attempt to do so is to ignore the implicatedness of any perspective within the very

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<sup>14</sup> O. C. IBIE, C. *Ifism: Complete works of Orunmila*, Design Printing Co. Ltd, Hong Kong 1986, vol. I.

object that is being described and vice versa». <sup>15</sup>Postmodernism is an exploration of the uniqueness of the culture of every folk and that meaning may be tied to the values that the people harbour for their art. The text is, therefore, a unit of ideas that may have been inspired by the environment and thus becomes a form of «paraphysics». <sup>16</sup> Postmodernism makes this desire to debate and question everything a possibility. This claim becomes plausible in view of the peculiar realities of individuals across geographical locations the world over.

Hanlon provides an illumination on the fact that «individual perspectives mattered most, that shared meaning was an illusion and that universal truth was a myth». <sup>17</sup>No wonder, therefore, that indigenous societies have towed different lines of addressing cultural realities through unique perspectives rather than relying wholesale on a monolithic submission. From the perspective of postmodernism, the text is a unit; a manifestation of art from a cultural environment. This is a negation of the erroneous perception that a single text may be representative of similar texts, the world over. It is in this respect that postmodernism, which represents the affirmation of the uniqueness of art across cultures and meanings confined to specific people rather than the universalisation of ideas that western conception of art, seems to represent will be deployed. From the preceding claim, therefore, meaning becomes limited to the world views and realities that are salient to folks from different cultures.

The truth in postmodernism, notwithstanding, the truths and meanings in diverse cultures may be internalised by folks from different cultures through translation and interpretation when critical tools are deployed in the analysis. The *Ifa* semiotic objects have a small degree of identity with the signs and interpretations in the original culture. However, these may not be applicable when translated into a different language.

#### *Application/Analysis*

There are two issues involved in what Gottlieb terms «isosemiotic» variation. This is because the «translation uses the same channel of expression as the source text». <sup>18</sup> What this means is that the «semiotic objects» in the originating source are transferred wholesale to the target language. Of course, these semiotic objects have no equivalence in the target language which explains why the type of translation is considered to be «conventional (bound)». <sup>19</sup> It is instructive to understand that the choice of «semiotic objects» is metaphoric and thus quite removed from the characters involved in the narrative.

*Ebara Meji* leaves the arena of the trial a hero. The sword of Damocles that hangs on his head may have been removed through the promiscuous intervention of the mother with nobles, shakers and movers of the land but the young man may have been oblivious of this development. He no sooner becomes a great achiever and barbers the head of the monarch

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<sup>15</sup> A. QUAYSON & T. OLANIYAN, *et al.*, *African literature: An anthology of criticism and theory*, Blackwell Publishing Ltd., Oxford 2013, pp. 647-652.

<sup>16</sup> Hassan cited *ivi*, p. 648.

<sup>17</sup> A. HANLON, *Postmodernism didn't cause Trump. It explains him*, in «The Washington Post», *Democracy dies in darkness*. Retrieved <https://www.google.com/December30/2018>.

<sup>18</sup> H. GOTTLIEB, *Semiotics and translation* cit., p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

named *Olofin* than he denounces the mother as irresponsible, promiscuous and a flirt. This ingratitude pisses off the mother exceedingly as she curses him there and then.

Gottlieb provides the missing link through a thorough analysis and provision of additional definitions to illustrate the concepts involved in the translation and interpretation drive. It is the provision of a working taxonomy that illuminates the difficult terrain of translation and interpretations in the original language as «*intrasemiotic*» as distinct from translation into different languages which Gottlieb terms «*intersemiotic translation*». These critical tools will be deployed in the task of translating the signs from the original language into English. Gottlieb defines «*intrasemiotic translation*», as «translation within a given sign system» and the «sub-category» named «*interlingual translation*», he equally defines as «the transfer of verbal messages from one speech community to another». According to the claim, translation covers at least «two dimensions, namely time and space involved in the expression of a given message». The distinction between time and space may be seen within «the period of time involved in the translation; and the space, which includes the semiotic composition of the translational product».

No doubt, the incidence of multilingual global society requires translation of the non-verbal signs in the indigenous settings in order to open the space of knowledge from the erstwhile close nature involved as a result of the gulf surrounding the signs, and the need to transcend the limitations besetting communication across linguistic barriers. Equally constituting a critical tool of translation is Gottlieb's attempt at a «semiotically based taxonomy of translation» which the paper intends to adopt in the translation. Salient definitions and terms are brought to bear in the translation that would be critical to the success of the endeavour.

The *Ifa* script involved in the paper may be delimited through «interlingual translation» because it is a non-verbal sign which Poyatos as cited in Gottlieb considers to be «para-verbal translation».<sup>20</sup> The paper is familiar with the robust contributions of Poyatos,<sup>21</sup> Gambier and Gottlieb,<sup>22</sup> and Kourdis and Kukkonen<sup>23</sup> as cited in Gottlieb to the field of interlingual translation. The translation in this paper is from the indigenous Yoruba language to the English language in order to make the text and the signs involved accessible to global audience. It may thus be considered a «transition from one *semiotic system* (source language) to another (target language).<sup>24</sup> The translation of *Ifa* signs into the target language is «rule-governed». This is in view of the convention associated with it. The audience is well defined as it may not be read to non-members except during consultations, translation and interpretation.

Relying on Gottlieb's, the paper observes that the task involved «conventional translation». This is because the signs in the indigenous text are to be transferred wholesale from the original culture known as the «sign system» to another «sign system». The signs in the new «sign system» may not amount to any meaningful significance without the needed definitions and translation. Therefore, it is imperative that the paper retains the

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Poyatos cited *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Gambier and Gottlieb *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Kourdis and Kukkonen cited *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Kourdis (2015) cited *ibid.*

signs represented in the culture even in the «intersemiotic» analysis.<sup>25</sup> From the «intrasemiotic» and «intersemiotic» analysis, conscious efforts are made to retain the meanings and signs in the originating culture in the areas of nomenclature in the title of the text, names of the characters such as *Obuko* (He-Goat), *Agbomiyoyo* (Ram), Frog (*Opolo*), the hero of the text *Ebara Meji*, the personalities involved in the tales where necessary (*Olofin*). What may witness significant change is the language of the translation. This may not be difficult to achieve in view of the shared linguistic interrelatedness where English is the language of communication.

The discussion of the metaphysics of indigenous people in Nigeria becomes apposite to what may be termed «Peircean sign»: the «sign has been defined as something that relates to something else for someone in some respect or capacity».<sup>26</sup> The most important of the paper is the *Ifa* corpus itself. It comprises some narratives that may be realised through the prescription of the «*Iken*» which are kernels that could be beaten eight times three to form meaningful signs. It exists in the memory of adherents and tutelage in the endeavour could confer knowledge of the enterprise on people. «*Opele*» (divining shell) is made up of eight shells that could provide information when thrown three times. Of course, since the shells are eight in each throw, three such throws would be enough to confer meaning and thus a plausible link with some known signs in the cultural environment. The recording table is known as «*ate*». It is used to record the codes that might be presented. They are the signs that are recorded and interpreted.

It is imperative to note that the objects, signs and the meaning are far removed from one another. They have no similarity; and outside the arena of divination, they may not be meaningful. Ideas, attitudes and realities generally are represented through signs. Borrowing Floyd's trail, the signs have «become a convention». They are conventions because folks rely on them to unravel what may seem difficult to resolve rationally; these the signs represent, that only adepts could interpret. The signs are equally «logical» to members of the society who may and may not have had tutelage in it. The uninitiated can recognise them as signs but they may not know what they represent. Of course, conscious action is taken to ensure that there are apprentices whose knowledge would enhance the continuity of the signs and the meanings. The divining shell (*Opele*) is concrete and there is no similarity between it and the meaning. The signs that are recorded, on the dictate of the behaviour of the divining shells (*Opele*) or kernels (*Iken*), are informed by the convention that is prevalent in the environment. They may not be meaningful to the most intelligent person from other environments.

The divining objects in this regards are the shells known in local parlance as «*Opele*» and the more vibrant alternative is known as «*Iken-Ifa*». They are made of eight flat objects that are arranged in a group of four and the sixteen kernels that are deployed when serious issues are involved respectively. The «*Iken*» shells and kernels are meaningless without the interpretation. The signs that may be considered to be involved in the interpretation are dotted lines where one would be made two and two would be represented as one dot. The

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> M. FLOYD, *Charles Sadlers Peirce's concept of the signs*, in *The Routledge companion to semiotics and linguistics*, Paul Cobleyed., Routledge Taylor and Francis, London 2001, pp. 28-30.

character involved in the analysis is named *Ebara Meji*. *Meji* means two, which goes to show that the signs are two at the beginning while other realisations are one times three (1 x 3). The name of the persona may not be true to everybody. It is a mere tag to identify the required rendition that may be applicable to the original personality and to give room for easier memorisation.

The divining shells are far from being signs. They are instrumental in the production of signs. They are concrete objects and may be preserved, seen and formed through fashionable materials such as iron, wood, shells of mango fruits, and other flat objects. They are significantly meaningful to folks from the environment whenever they come across the combinations in the ritual arena. As Floyd puts it, «the semiotic object is never identical to the real object». This is because there is no semblance between the «semiotic object», «*Opele*», with the task it is meant to perform which is the suggestion of a number of signs and only two of these signs are significant to the quest for meaning. It is in the manipulation of the «*semiotic objects*» towards yielding arbitrary signs that the objects may be considered useful and such objects may be discarded without any fundamental change in the realization of the quest for which it is fashioned. Consequently, it is the behaviours of the «*semiotic objects*» that may provide signs that could be interpreted by adepts in the duty of managing the translations and interpretations.

The signs are meaningless individually without being paired with their significant others. The signs in the study comprise two groups of dotted lines. They represent the original orthography that is available to indigenous people to interpret and reveal hidden activities of individuals during consultations. Two pairs of kernels when chosen through indiscriminate shuffle among the seeds of sixteen, represent one, while one sign represents two. The representation begins from the right to the left. The shuffle is done eight times. The first attempt yields two and these are represented by one dotted line. The second effort yields two as represented below.

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The third attempt yields one kernel when thrown on the palm and removed. This single remnant is represented with two signs as shown below. It is noteworthy that three and more remnants may not be meaningful and would not be considered because they cannot be represented. The moment a kernel falls after the representation on the table that is littered with dust-like substances, it is assumed that the fall is insignificant. The mark-maker is assumed to be smarter than the kernel. The task of making the quest continues. The quest here is synonymous with a probe into a cloudy, unknown development; possibly the reason for an epidemic in the clime. The kernel that falls before it could be represented may be mandated not to change its voice during the latest attempt.

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The third throw continues. The sixteen kernels are further lubricated in wine so that they could be easily picked and whatever remain on the left palm could be represented.

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The signs may amount to «icons» when considered from the perspective of Peirce's analysis simply because they «relate with» the «semiotic object by virtue of some resemblance or similarity with it...».

This scholarly paper on *Ifa* in the indigenous Yoruba milieu thrives through signs as a means of communication. Even when the folks have a unique language which serves as a means of communication, the signs have been deployed over many hundred years in the documentation of socio-religious claims about humanity. It is a record of the knowledge and study of folks generally which may be considered relevant all through time.

The hero, *Ebara Meji*, may be associated with the deity in charge of prosperity. He is greatly troubled by the extent of the poverty on earth and decided to visit earth in order to alleviate the sufferings of human beings. This effort may be associated with the messianic figure in western religions. This may be termed «*semiotic identity*» with the original system. In other words, the figure of a messiah may be found within «intrasemiotic» translation and the target language in the «*inter semiotic*» translation.<sup>27</sup> It is not uncommon with world religions to have personalities that are claimed to be sent from the celestial realm towards redeeming some people or changing their situations. These are the Christ-figure in Christianity and Mahdi in Islam.

The text has a narrative as amply substantiated above and the claim in postmodernism which ascribes «anti-narrative» to indigenous texts may not be wholly right. The reference to the personality during a performance may be enough to spur further questioning of the character. The stage may not be enough to narrate such a tale during a dance or performance as the audience may not have the patience to listen to the complete narrative. The text becomes «*intertextual*» as the meaning may be found on a larger scale in other texts. The history of the character is stated and though may not be located in time and space; he is considered an «everyman» whose traits would be visible to humanity all through time. Every tale is an epitome of the original master narrative that transcends class, race and geographical barriers.

The intralingual translation of the tale of *Ebara Meji* involves both synchronic and diachronic recourse. The tale is first and foremost retrieved from the memories of people who are adepts in the task. They too met the tradition which falls within the realm of diachronic translation. The text is drawn from the mythical past and no one may be sure of the year of composition. Even the mode of recording the text remains unchanged as modernity has not influenced it in any way as to effect reform; the text has witnessed a record of the signs which had hitherto remained within rote memorization. The text has been recorded through the efforts of some African-American followers who would rather prefer a reading of their personalities to the tasking effort of reciting same through rote memorization. It is to this extent that a «synchronic translation» could be imputed to the text. The effort in this paper may be categorised under synchronic analysis.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> H. GOTTLIEB, *Semiotics and translation* cit., p. 46.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

The efforts of the African-Americans and the exercise in the paper fall within «dialectal translation». The «social or generational» climate when conducting an intrasemiotic translation spans several hundred years from the present. The environments are different from each other. The study too places the translation within «dialectal translation» as it involves translation from Yoruba language to English. The environments are, no doubt, different from each other. Even within «intrasemiotic translation», the semiotic objects are not easily discernible to people that are not associated with the sign system. It could be concluded that the efforts within both «intrasemiotic translation» and «intersemiotic translation» involve «diaphasic translation» which is defined as the desire to make the text compliant with the needs of the present generation or folks from a different environment or geographical settings.<sup>29</sup>

It is first and foremost an exercise in «*transliteration*» as the words are changed from the original alphabet to the English alphabet. The process of transcribing the signs into letters may amount to what Gottlieb terms «*diamesic translation*» which is described as the change from sign and verbal forms to written form. The translation from the intrasemiotic form to another language while it retains the sign and verbal forms through more meaningful interpretation is what Gottlieb calls «*isosemiotic translation*».<sup>30</sup> «*Isomesic*» refers to the original signs that are associated with the text that are «retained» through verbal renditions and may not be rendered through any other language except Yoruba, the original language of translation which Gottlieb terms «*translation proper*».

The heroes in oral tales have unique fates that are subsumed in myths. Thus, African concept of fate is a bit opposed to the antithetical and negative western concept of a hero and villain. The hero, in this context, is an exemplary individual in the vast ocean of life whose traits may be good and bad, ennobling and repulsive, natural and preternatural. The hero becomes a foil to his original personality as a result of excessive consideration of self or the society, religious dogma or political cause, love affair or ideology and lack of restraints which leads to fatal consequences. The protagonist, of course, is not without some strong points or exemplary qualities and the innate negative qualities are in apposition to the claim that no human being is without innate evil just as no one is without positive, moral or ethical attributes.

The villain, like the hero, is measured through the guided-perceptions of the people in relation to predetermined rules and yardsticks subsisting in the milieu. Consequently, the assumed frailties of the villains are weaknesses that are latent in every human being. The need, therefore, arises for a transfer of the unknown messianic figure from the «*intra semiotic system*» to the new environment which Gottlieb terms «*Isomesic*» translation. The transfer of the signs in the semiotic system to the written form as may be found in the paper is what Gottlieb terms «*isomesic*». «*Isomesic*» translation is the translation of the text (*monosemiotic*) from the original language to the language of clients from another semiotic system. What African-Americans term readings from the text may be classified under «*isomesic*» translation.

Time is considered to be ebb and flow kind of a continuum. This is tied to the fact that the time past flows into the time present and these may not be detached from time future.

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

While the relevance of man may be considered in relation to time, African indigenous concept of time ties man to time past and he is indistinguishable from that original time. Man has affinity with time past and his essence is spiritually attached to a significant time in the past as well as a carefully determined personality in the past to who the living man is a living parallel. Of course, the living man may not be limited to a single individual in the past. It is the case that the individual is a combination of different personalities whose goals and travails may be similar, but significantly peculiar.

The plausibility of an *interlingual translation* of the semiotic object to the western world may not be impossible. The need for that may not be detached from the link between the semiotic object and the meanings therefrom. It is a demonstration of «semiotic identity» with the milieu from where the text is drawn. It is fundamental to meaning that the text (non-verbal sign) be understood to be instrumental in interpretation. The character is tied to the belief system of the indigenous environment. In other words, the semiotic object or text is «*rule governed*» which makes it a «*conventional translation*».<sup>31</sup>

The uncanny inter-relatedness of the past and the present in relation to the future establishes the African concept of time as unique and which veracity is not in doubt in relation to western concept of time. Indigenous performance, under which genre festivals, folktales and myths are an offshoot, is a blend of time past, time present and time future and whatever realities may be salient to each humanly influenced demarcation. Time is a continuum that flows without a beginning or an end as it keeps rejuvenating itself. It becomes difficult to demarcate the past from the present and the present from the future except through the passage of the human elements that inhabit the earth or the cyclic movement of day and night.

Man's limited ability to evolve a link between the past, on one hand, and the present in relation to the future, on the other hand, may have informed the conclusion that time may be segmented into three compartments. Human activities are inadequate and grossly insufficient to measure time, except through the incidence of day and night and it becomes unreliable when one realises that the concept of time as a temporal unit is tied to a significant era in the stream of time. That is, the division into years, lustrums, decades, centuries and millennia was a human activity that is tied to history. The unmeasured time, for instance, is undoubtedly part of time, and the endeavour of man with the deficient scientific tools to measure time betrays the unreliability of the endeavour, as the unmeasured time cannot be accounted for.

It is possible to record the translated text in the *Ifa* script in a computer and could be retrieved and applied to clients during consultations. A festive season, for instance, is far from demarcating the season into the past and the present. It is just a celebration of the cyclic movement based on the knowledge of the fact that «what has been has come to be» and that what «has come to be will ever come to be» even when slight differences may be found in the praxis and the personas exhibiting the fulfilment of the festive script. If time is structured into past, present and future.

It becomes pertinent, therefore, to ask when does time become past? We equally have problem at measuring the time present which no sooner comes veers into the past as the present filters into the future. It becomes problematic when the past is a significant part of

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

the present just as the present is an embodiment of the future. It is not unusual for people to refer to human development in relation to the place of the eyes in the body: «when the eyes were on the knee» is a significant reference to the past within the present as the knee remains a part of the body but the position may be different as growth takes place. The expression may not be easily understood by folks from the new signs system. It is in this regard that the *Ifa* text may be considered diachronic because its foundation lays in the distant past. The *intrasemiotic* aspect of the text as well as the *intersemiotic* counterpart may amount to nothing but modern variants of the translation which Gottlieb considers to be «*dialectal translation*».<sup>32</sup>

The symbols are metaphors for the inapprehensible time. They are iconic signs that exhibit the values, and totality of the people; their religious beliefs and practices. Symbols are representations of the total essence of communal life, their time-past, time-present and time-future if one were to be permitted to fall into the same fallacy of categorisation as Eurocentric critics. Indigenous knowledge of time transcends the individual in relation to the limited time of birth, existence and death. This is because the individual is only a part of the script and an insignificant particle whose reality constitutes a dot in the artistic firmament of the setting. Submitting to the postmodernist theory, art in this context is like a unit, a segment that plays a role where human beings are mere actors that could fulfil different missions depending on the personality.

Every living being is a manifestation of a typology. The original symbols may be traced to the mythical past and may be found in the claim that what has been, will always be. The scripts and the personalities in them stimulate the same reactions as they did since the primordial era. Consequently, births and transitions, notwithstanding, the clime remains constant just as the actors remain exhibitions of the symbols and their characters are manifestations of archetypal parallels even within the computer age or the supposed globalised society. The husband, for instance, may be good or bad, just as the wife may be unruly or promiscuous as both sexes exhibit traits that define them as susceptible to the demeaning influence of the flesh.

These truths have no better fulfilment than they are in this Internet-driven society with the attendant contradictions that betray humanity as allegories. This claim is in tandem with the social and cultural realities of the original «sign system» and the translation may be classified under what Gottlieb terms «*prototypical translation*» or «*translation proper*».<sup>33</sup> Within the same intrasemiotic environment, semantic sameness is applicable. Therefore, the interpretation may not be more than identification and association of semiotic objects and related references to realities within the environment of both the artist and the client. In other words, it is «*isosemiotic*» because the translation, according to Gottlieb «uses the same communicative channels as the original».<sup>34</sup>

### *Conclusion*

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

This study investigates the wealth of meanings in an *Ifa* verse entitled *Ebara Meji*. The verse is a familiar folktale that no one may have analysed through semiotics. One wonders if these tales are not symbols, a general cover for whatever may be the repertoire of knowledge in the society. The study is a conscious interrogation of the character and the tale in order to provide further illumination on the human condition using postmodernism as a theoretical base. Using semiotics as a tool of analysis, the study attempts a conscious study of relevant codes that may be instrumental in the study of everyone who may exhibit similar traits. The African artistic firmament parades summations that are fundamental to the environment. They transcend climes and tongues and could withstand time and epochs within the religious and social fabrics of the milieu. This study represents such socio-scientific claims that tend to negate the universal claims. If it works for them over there, different approach may work for others in another environment.

The uncritical examinations of such scripts, over the years are partly responsible for the negative disposition of successive governments and policy-makers in the design of curricular, allocation of funds in the pursuit of research that may be instrumental in engendering peaceful co-existence among the ethnic groups that inhabit the continent. Chauvinism in whatever guise, whether religious or sexist, ethnic or linguistic are borne out of limitations in areas such as lack of exposure to other strengths inherent in these «others». The literary use of language, allusions and metaphorical references are vintage African oral literature within the moral and intellectual ethos of the environment through which deviations from the acceptable standards may be measured. The songs rendered during the festival reveal the conscious desire of the artists in the quest for a society devoid of rancour and whose younger generation would be familiar with the social, artistic and cultural trends of the society.