

Àrokò as a symbolic mode of communication

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Abstract

This paper examines Aroko as a symbolic means of communication within the Yoruba culture of Nigeria. Aroko is specifically associated with Yoruba culture and festivals. It involves the use of intricately carved, painted and carefully selected objects. Aroko, which carries encoded messages represented by complex symbols and patterns, was a major means of communication in early years but are equally used nowadays especially in the rural settings. The Aroko system serves as a non-verbal and secretive way of conveying information between individuals, families, and communities. Through the transmission of Aroko objects by designated messengers, messages are delivered and understood by those initiated into the symbolism. Aroko holds significant cultural, social, and spiritual value, acting as a link between the living and the ancestral realm while preserving cultural knowledge and strengthening community bonds. It showcases the importance of visual symbolism and non-verbal communication in African cultures. The theory of semiotics is employed to examine this research. This paper concludes that method of communication has grown from the use of Aroko to the use of coded symbols and images known as emoji today and the use of shortened words for informal settings

Key words: Aroko, Semiotics, Emoji, Communication, Culture, Symbolism, Tradition, Shortened Words

Introduction

Aroko is a traditional symbol of communication among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, specifically within the context of the Egungun festival. Aroko is a system of encoded messages conveyed through the use of carved wooden objects or ideograms, which are visually striking and contain complex symbols and patterns. These objects serve as a means of communication between individuals, families, and communities during the festival.

The Egungun festival is a significant cultural event where ancestral spirits are celebrated and honored. Aroko plays a crucial role in facilitating communication between the living and the ancestors. The wooden objects, often intricately carved and painted, are created by skilled artisans and are recognized as representatives of specific families or lineages.



According to Matthias Òjò (2013:40)¹, he says that “the symbols and patterns on the Aroko objects carry specific meanings that are known and understood within the community. They can represent various messages, such as requests, warnings, blessings, or instructions.” Each symbol has a distinct interpretation, and those familiar with the Aroko system can decode and understand the intended message.

To transmit a message using Aroko, the sender hands the appropriate Aroko object to a designated messenger. The messenger, who is well-versed in the symbolism and meaning of the objects, then carries the message to the intended recipient. This process ensures the secrecy and confidentiality of the communication, as only those initiated into the Aroko system can decipher the messages.

Aroko, a Tool for Non-Verbal Communications

Aroko serves as a form of non-verbal communication that transcends language barriers and allows for discreet and efficient transmission of information. It is a means of preserving and passing down cultural knowledge and traditions. The use of Aroko in the Egungun festival strengthens the connection between the living and the ancestral realm, reinforcing the community's cultural identity and spiritual beliefs.

The Aroko system is deeply embedded in Yoruba culture and carries significant cultural, social, and spiritual meaning. It reflects the Yoruba people's reverence for their ancestors and their commitment to maintaining a strong sense of community and continuity. Aroko also demonstrates the importance of visual symbolism and non-verbal communication in African cultures, where visual cues and gestures often convey messages with profound depth and complexity.

Àrokò is a form of Yorùbá non-verbal communication, which involves the use of objects and materials in varied numbers, colours or combinations with meanings understood only by members of the particular community or culturally educated members of the African society. *Àrokò* is generally accepted as Yorùbá African symbolic message or item. According to Matthias Òjò, “the use of *àrokò* among the Yorùbá touches nearly every aspect of human relations depending on the social class, purpose and how secure other media of communication are.”² *Àrokò* is widely used in economic, social, political, religious and intellectual activities.

Another term related to aroko is ‘Ale’. ‘*Àlè*’ is a form of symbolism in Yorùbá land that is normally placed on landed property. It is a form of embargo or restriction in symbolic form. This type of communication is equally referred to as a branch or form of *àrokò* in as much as people understand its purpose

¹Matthias Òjò, “Symbols of Warning, Conflict, Punishment and War and Their Meanings Among the Pre-Colonial Yorùbá Natives: A Case Study of *Àrokò*,” *Antropologija*, 13 v. 1 (2013), 39-60.

² Matthias Òjò, “Symbols of Warning, Conflict, Punishment and War and Their Meanings Among the Pre-Colonial Yorùbá Natives: A Case Study of *Àrokò*,” *Antropologija*, 13 v. 1 (2013), 39-60.

whenever it is used. The setting is usually on landed property or farm products. For instance, in a situation where one is building a house on a particular land or clearing the land for farming, while this process is on, if one sees palm fronds tied on a pole or struck to the ground, this is an indication that the person working there should stop. He is expected to see the person communicating with him or her or one should not enter the place or do anything there until the conflict over the land is resolved. This is mostly used among the Yorùbá traditional communities. Generally, the use of palm frond in àroko is an indication of danger. When palm frond is cut and placed on a parcel of land, it is a sign of embargo, that is, the encoder is requesting the decoder not to do anything on the land. Likewise, if palm fronds or leaves are placed on any property, goods or loads put in particular place, it shows embargo, that is, nobody must touch with the intension of stealing it. The picture of such 'àlè' is shown below.

Figure 1 The picture of such 'àlè'



Source : Author

The sending of one cowry shell or at times two cowry shells with black thread tied round it is to show an unfavourable or an unpleasant situation. This is illustrated in the following diagram.

Figure 2: Six Cowries



Source: Author

Six cowries tied together is a message that the sender is longing to see the receiver or 'I hope to see you soon'. Where six cowries are tied in three opposing numbers with a protruding long string, this indicates that "the distance between the two might be long, yet the encoder wants to see decoder face to face."³ The use of numbers in Yorùbá is significant. Number six in Yorùbá numerals is 'èfà', which is from the verb to draw. '*Èfàlóníké efàmímóra.*' (It is the sixth that tells you to draw me closer).⁴ Number eight 'èjọ' represents congregation while offering of food items as sacrifice in eight-'èjọ' signifies prosperity. Sending of empty calabash, parrot egg or skull to a king signifies that the king must commit suicide or join his ancestors. For example, Aólè, the Aláàfin of Ọyọ in the 19th century in Yorùbá land was presented with an empty calabash which meant that the ancestors, the land, and the people had rejected him. Therefore, he had to leave the throne. Following the rejection, as expressed through these symbolic objects, he decided to commit suicide after raining curses on Yorùbá land.

The sending of an orange-'osàn' indicates that the sender is pleased with the receiver, that is, 'I am pleased with you'. It could also indicate 'I love you'. It is a popular Yoruba saying that, '*Osàn t' ó rígbajúmòtíkòbo, eye okolómáá fi je.*' (A spinster or lady who refuses the overture of a man of integrity, will end up with a man of low dignity).⁵ The sending of traditional comb-'*Òòyà*' is an indication that the relationship between the sender and the receiver can no longer hold. *Òòyà* is from Yorùbá verb '*ya*'-to separate. According to Ajétúnmòbí (2014), "most spiritually induced marriage or social conflict leading to separation or

³Matthias Ojo, "Symbols of Warning, Conflict, Punishment and War and Their Meanings Among the Pre-Colonial Yoruba Natives: A Case Study of Aroko," p. 46.

⁴R. O. Ajetunmobi, "Indigenoous Knowledge and Communication Systems- The Case of Yoruba Aroko." A paper presented at Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ijebu-ode, Ogun State on 26th July, 2014, pp. 1-10.

⁵R. O. Ajetunmobi, "Indigenoous Knowledge and Communication Systems- The Case of Yoruba Aroko." A paper presented at Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ijebu-ode, Ogun State on 26th July, 2014, pp. 1-10.

divorce in Yorùbá have a comb as a major ingredient. Hence, people use to pray that: 'Òyàkómáyàwá o' (Comb the separator, should not separate us).⁶ This illustration is symbolically represented in the picture below.

Figure 3 : Òyàkómáyàwá o'



Source: Author

The sending of 'Ìrùkèrè' - flywhisk and cowry shells from one monarch to another is a request for either an agreement or solidarity or farewell. The Oba could waive the Ìrùkèrè to welcome or bless visitors to the palace. He could also wave it in another manner to signify rejection.

A parcel containing three (3) cowry shells symbolises rejection and unfavourable message. Traditionally, the Yorùbá abhor the giving of things or presentation of gifts in three (3). Ajétúnmòbí (2014) believes that three in Yorùbá numerology is confusing. (*OrítaMéta*- a tripartite junction is where *ÈsùÒdàrà*- the trickster deity, (the Devil) is believed to be operating and where rituals for his appeasement are placed. Despite that, number three is significant in Yorùbá land as illustrated in these Yorùbá sayings: *Àgbàméjílómoidíééta* (The two elders are the ones that understand the mystery behind three) and *Àdìròmétakòlè da obènùn* (Three cooking stands cannot upturn the soup). The sending of a piece of mat raffia especially of 'Oré' type is an indication that someone is sick in the household of the receiver and such a person is very lean. The sending of the cotton shred of 'òjá' (sash) to someone far away indicates that the person that was pregnant before the receiver left home has been delivered of the baby safely. "The sending of chewing stick to an opposite sex," according to Olárinmóyè (2013) "might indicate I love you or that the receiver should accept his proposal."⁷ In another situation, where two people agreed to meet at a point for adventure or traveling, if they intend to inform one another of their movement, they may decide to use àrokoto indicate that one has reached the spot of agreement and continued the journey, hence there is no need for the other person to keep waiting.

⁶Ibid., 5.

⁷AdéyínkáOlárinmóyè, "The Images of Women in Yorùbá Folktales," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*. Vol. 3, No. 4 (Special Issue, February, 2013) pp. 138-149.

Some objects might be tied or kept at a particular spot agreed upon to communicate to one another. The hours of the time the other person travelled across could also be indicated through tying of knots. “The number of knots could indicate the time of movement, while the dryness of the fresh leaves cut at the time might suggest the number of hours left.”⁸ The placing of stones on the junction may indicate a passage of one person. This is common among the traditional hunters. Whenever they have agreed to meet at a point, while traveling along the path each person passing through the junction will place a stone each, to indicate that he has passed. The numbers of stones at the junction will tell any member the number of people that have passed through the spot.

In a situation where two groups of related blood are in conflict or where the husband and wife engage in domestic conflict, if the head of the family or the father-in-law could not be there personally, he could send his cap – *’filà’* or staff of office, (*òpáàsẹ*), if he is a chief, to those in conflict. The message is that they should bury the hatchet and maintain peaceful atmosphere until he is able to be there or send for them. In addition, a traditional ruler could send his staff through his staff bearer to a meeting or ceremony. The receiver would not only respect the bearer, but also accord him the necessary respect the owner of the staff deserves. In case of disagreement between two individuals, “the sending of sand tied in a large leaf locally called *’ewé-eéran’* is an indication that the receiver should not be too emotional, and should allow peace to reign.”⁹ The picture of sand packed in a leaf is portrayed in figure 4 below.

Figure 4: *’ewé-eéran’*



Source: Author

The sending of three pieces of firewood in opposing direction to a person is an indication that the sender is no more in agreement with the receiver. Some aroko have to do with colours of objects. Blue colour shows love as portrayed

⁸R. O. Ajetunmobi, “Indigenous Knowledge and Communication Systems- The Case of Yoruba Aroko.”p. 7.

⁹Matthias Òjọ, “Symbols of Warning, Conflict, Punishment and War and Their Meanings Among the Pre-Colonial Yorùbá Natives: A Case Study of Aroko,” p. 51.

in the love affairs between Ìrìnkèrindò and Affection of Significance in Fagunwa's *Erinkerindo Ninu Igbo Elegbeje* translated by ¹⁰Dapo Adeniyi as *Expedition to the Mount of Thought*. Red could signify danger or death. It is always a negative sign or bad omen, which could indicate termination of life. White cloth symbolises peace, purity or harmony as seen on Helpmeet and some female characters in Fágúnwà's novels. The devotees of Ọbàtálá and Ọ̀rìsàỌ̀ko for instance, as well as most priests use white cloth. Even in the burial, white cloth is most favoured.

Some of the symbolic objects in Fágúnwà's novels like the kolanuts, the fruits, the trees, the writings, the letters and the envelope can also be regarded as *àrokò*. For instance, the meaning of the Fruit of Thought goes beyond the ordinary meaning, it has hidden meaning. The recipient of such fruit will be transformed into a better individual, and a better city if it is planted within a town. Another situation is when Àlábápàdé rescues Èsan-ńbò from a coffin and takes her to his house, they start living together as just room-partners as their love for each other grows. But it is interesting to note that Àlábápàdé cannot sleep with her on the same bed as lovers because King Okonko, Èsan-ńbò's original husband, has put an '*àlè*' in form of writing on her, sewn to one corner of her dress. It reads: "I CANNOT SHARE YOU WITH ANYBODY ON EARTH. I OWN YOU TILL DEATH. -KING OKONKO."¹¹ Immediately Àlábápàdé sees this symbol, he desists from asking Èsan-ńbò for sexual relationship for he understands the meaning of that message. In the same vein, when two knots are tied to the edge of a woman's wrapper, it equally indicates that the woman belongs to another man and nobody is expected to have sexual relationship with her without an express injunction from the husband. Both the 'knots' and the 'writing' on a woman's wrapper are '*àlè*' which forbids a man from having sexual relationship with the woman who is the carrier of that '*àlè*'. This is a form of *àrokò* – a symbolic message in Yorùbá being passed across and whosoever disobeys that will face the ugly consequences as highlighted in Yorùbá tradition. In Fagunwa's novels, this is illustrated in the story of Èsan-ńbò cum Àlábápàdé and it is represented in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5: '*àlè*'



¹⁰Dapo Adeniyi, trans. *Expedition to the Mount of Thought*. Ile Ife: Obafemi Awolowo University Press, 1994.

¹¹OlúỌ̀báfẹ̀mi, trans. *The Mysteries of God*, p. 140.

Source: Author

Figure 6: Three Cowries



Source: Author

Three cowry shells stand for an *àrokò*, which conveys the message to the recipient that the sender has rejected the proposal, offer or request.

Figure 7: Two Cowries



Source: Author

Two or four cowry shells put back to back show the breakage or termination of relationship or friendship with another person. The back to back position shows that the sender is not willing to see the recipient face to face again.

Figure 8: Three Cowries



Source: Author

When three cowry shells on a leaf are sent to someone, it is an *àrokò*, which shows that the debtor should pay up his debt or else there will be conflict.

Figure 9: *àrokò*,



Source: Author

Torn pieces of palm frond are symbolic in that the sender is breaking up the blood ties relationship with the receiver and this happens between quarrelling siblings.

Figure 10: *àrokò*,



Source: Author

A cutlass with a fresh palm frond tied to it is an *àrokò*, which shows that an attack or war is looming against the receiver's town. Cutlass and the use of '*màriwò*', a special kind of leaf, are symbolic objects associated with *Ògún*, the god of iron in Yoruba land.

Figure 11: *Odán'* leaves



Source: Author

When '*Odán'*' leaves are put in front of a particular person's house, it is an *aroko* that is meant to warn the occupant of that house that he is proud. If he fails to amend his character, he will be disgraced. The treatment of *àrokò* is of great importance to the study on symbolism and allegory. The use of *àrokò*, symbols and allegories always carry along both the literal and hidden meanings. Every *àrokò* has a hidden or coded meaning, so also every symbol. Dexterity, knowledge of the tradition of the land, wisdom and deep thinking are required to fully understand symbolism, allegory and *àrokò*. Every symbol employed in Yoruba's culture is coded with hidden meaning, likewise every *àrokò*.

Relationship Between Semiotics And African Symbolism

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and their interpretation and meaning in communication. It examines how signs, such as words, images, and gestures, convey meaning and create understanding within a cultural context. African symbolism, on the other hand, refers to the specific signs, symbols, and visual language used in African cultures to convey ideas, beliefs, and cultural values. Semiotics, also called semiology, the study of signs and sign-using behaviour. It was defined, as quoted by Brian Duignan (2021:1), by one of its founders, the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, as the study of “the life of signs within society”.¹² Although the word was used in this sense in the 17th century by the English philosopher John Locke, the idea of semiotics as an interdisciplinary field of study emerged only in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with the independent work of Saussure and of the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce.

The relationship between semiotics and African symbolism lies in the understanding and analysis of the signs and symbols used within African cultures. Semiotics provides a framework and methodology to study and interpret the meaning and significance of these symbols. It helps us understand how African societies communicate, express ideas, and construct meaning through their use of symbols.

African symbolism is rich and diverse, varying across different regions, tribes, and cultures within Africa. Symbols can take various forms, such as geometric patterns, colors, animal representations, masks, body art, and ritual objects. These symbols often carry cultural, religious, social, or political meanings and serve as a visual language for expressing and transmitting knowledge and values within the African context.

Semiotics allows us to analyze and decode African symbols by examining their form, context, and cultural significance. It helps us understand how specific symbols are employed to convey specific meanings and messages. For example, a particular animal symbol might represent strength and courage in one culture, while in another culture, it might symbolize wisdom or fertility. By applying semiotic analysis, we can uncover the underlying meanings, cultural associations, and historical contexts of these symbols.

Furthermore, semiotics also explores the broader cultural and societal systems within which symbols operate. It investigates how symbols function within a cultural framework and how they contribute to identity formation, social structures, power dynamics, and cultural heritage. It helps us understand how African symbols are used in various contexts, such as religious rituals, artistic expressions, storytelling, and everyday communication. (Brian Duignan, 2021:3)¹³

¹²Brian Duignan. *Semiotics: Study of Signs*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/science/semiotics> on 21st June, 2023.

¹³Brian Duignan. *Semiotics: Study of Signs*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/science/semiotics> on 21st June, 2023.




In summary, the relationship between semiotics and African symbolism involves the application of semiotic principles and methods to analyze, interpret, and understand the rich tapestry of signs and symbols within African cultures. It provides a deeper insight into the cultural, social, and historical dimensions of African symbolism and enhances our understanding of its significance in African societies.

EMOJIS: A Social Media Mode of Communication

An emoji is a pictogram, logogram, ideogram or smiley embedded in text and used in electronic messages and web pages. Emojis are equally use as means of communication today, especially in the social media which is prevalent among the young minds. It can also be likened to the use of aroko and ale. Once the meaning of the coded image or object is decoded, the understanding of the participants is enhanced. The primary function of emoji is to fill in emotional cues otherwise missing from typed conversation. Emoji help you express feelings and emotions beyond texts. They also bring liveliness into conversations in a fun and concise way.¹⁴





EMOJI	MEANING
	Smiling face
	Smiling face with big eyes
	Smiling face with smiling eyes
	Beaming face with smiling eyes
	Smiling face with tears
	Grinning face
	Smiling face with sunglasses

Faces with Tongue Emojis















EMOJI	MEANING
	Yummy face
	Face with tongue
	Winking face with tongue

Sleepy Faces Emojis




¹⁴Kolade Chris. *All Emojis – Emoji List for Copy and Paste*. Retrieved from <https://www.freecodecamp.org/news/all-emojis-emoji-list-for-copy-and-paste/>






EMOJI	MEANING
	Sleepy face
	Sleeping face
	Relieved face
	Pensive face

Emotion Emojis











EMOJI	MEANING
	Kiss
	Love letter
	Heart with arrow
	Heart with ribbon
	Sparkling heart
	Growing heart
	Beating heart
	Revolving heart
	Two hearts
	Heart decoration
	Heart exclamation
	Broken heart
	Heart on fire
	Bomb

Hands and other Body Parts Emojis





EMOJI	MEANING
	Waving hand
	Raised hand
	Ok

EMOJI	MEANING
	Index finger pointing left
	Index finger pointing right
	Index finger pointing up
	Index finger pointing down
	Flexed biceps

Person Emojis





EMOJI	MEANING
	Boy
	Girl
	Person with blonde hair
	Man
	Woman
	Woman health worker
	Man student
	Woman teacher
	Man farmer
	Man singer

Family Emojis

EMOJI	MEANING
	Family
	Family of man, woman and boy
	Family of man, woman and girl
	Family of man, woman, boy, and girl

Animals and Nature Emojis

EMOJI	MEANING
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EMOJI	MEANING
	Monkey face
	Monkey
	Dog face
	Dog

Food and Drinks Emojis

EMOJI	MEANING	UNICODE
	Grapes	U+1F347
	Melon	U+1F348
	Water melon	U+1F349
	Tangerine	U+1F34A
	Lime	U+1F34B
	Banana	U+1F34C
	Pineapple	U+1F34D

Shortened Words: Stress-less Mode of Communication

Shortened words concept is another means of communication employed in the social media today especially in typing on mobile phone. It reduces stress and saves time consumption. Some of the shortened words are stated below with their decoded meanings.

1. NVM..... Never Mind
2. BRB.....Be Right Back
3. BTW....By the way
4. IKR...I know Right
5. ASAP..As soon as possible
6. LOL...laughing out loud
7. LMAO...Laughing my ass out
8. SMH....shaking my head
9. LMK...let me know
10. ROFL...Rolling on the floor laughing
11. AKA...Also known as
12. AOTA...All of the above
13. BBT...Be back tomorrow
14. Bday...Birthday
15. BFF...Best friends forever

- 16.CID...consider it done
- 17.DNT...don't
- 18.IDK...I don't know
- 19.LOL...lots of love
- 20.MFI ...Mad for it
- 21. P2p...Peer to peer
- 22..Peeps...people
- 23 pls...please
- 24. QQ...quick question
- 25 PTL...praise the lord
- 26.P.T.O.....parents teacher association
- 27. PIC...picture
- 28. OYO. on your own
- 29. OO. over and out
- 30. OTB...off the boat

Conclusion

In summary, Aroko is a symbol of communication within the Yoruba culture, specifically associated with the Egungun festival. It comprises carved wooden objects with encoded symbols that convey messages between individuals, families, and communities. Aroko serves as a non-verbal means of communication, preserving cultural knowledge, and strengthening the connection between the living and ancestral realms. It highlights the significance of visual symbolism and non-verbal communication in African cultures. This paper has been able to analyse the various means of communication from the old traditional mode to the contemporary scientific methods which are emojis and shortened words.