

# African Traditional Semiotics: The Example of 'Ar'oko' in Yoruba Tradition

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## **Abstract**

*Researches in humanities, social sciences have all established the social nature of man which simply means man's ability to interact with one another through various communicative means. This paper, while advancing a semiotic maxim that "everything is a sign", cautions that since meaning is the creation of man, the (meaning) signification of a sign may vary from time to time and culture to culture. It thus examines the concept, content, form and context of "Aroko" within the Yoruba cultural setting as an effective semiotic code used either as an alternative or as a complementary communicative means.*

**Key words:** *Semiotics, Aroko, Communication*

## **Introduction**

Anthropologists, Hall and Hall (1987, p.79), for example, extend the conceptual frontier of language beyond the sound and graphic substances. To them, "language includes your postures, gestures, facial expressions, costume, and the way you walk, even your treatment of time and space and material things" (Hall & Hall, 1987, p.79). The essence of any form of language, spoken, written, non-verbal, etc, is to generate meaning once users find it communicative. However, available facts like; one, the long span of time required for the evolution of a language; two, the amount of efforts required in creating acceptable orthographic symbols and three, the widespread of illiteracy in a speech community – all lend credence to the assertion that non-verbal means like *Aroko* is one of such effective non-verbal communicative codes.

Meaning emanating from any form of language, notwithstanding, is not always and necessarily universal because meaning is mostly determined by socio-cultural factors. Therefore, as diverse as meaning of utterances and sentences can be, so also is the complexity of meaning emanating from non-verbal data. Interestingly, creating meaning from non-verbal signs further enriches people's understanding of the interdependence between language and society; that man manipulates his organs, space and things within his environment to convey different messages.

This non-verbal means of generating meaning is, on its own, a complex semiotic code which is culturally-rooted, and in vogue for many centuries before the spread of western culture in Nigeria. Based on this background, this paper has selected "Aroko", an ancient non-verbal communicative strategy in Yoruba culture (in south western Nigeria) to examine its concept, content and context using a semiotic approach, largely drawing from the Peircian tradition.

The paper shall focus on one of the Peircian trichotomies of icon, index and symbol as a triadic relation of performance to analyse few of the items that are used for Aroko, and how these components and their mode of packaging can vary the message. It shall also identify who can interpret and how the role-relation can contribute to the signification of the coded message.

## **Semiotics: Origin, Meaning and Elements**

Morris (1983) defines semiotics as the study of sign which is initially subjective, as a result of which the discipline cannot offer any universal "theoretical assumption, model and empiricity". He observes

that semiotics did not only later become publicized and conventionalized but also interspersed with syntactics, semantics and pragmatics based on their respective reflection on language rules and meanings. Semiotics is a field of study involving different theoretical stances and methodological tools and it became a major theoretical approach to cultural studies in the late 60s partially as a result of the work of Barthes (1957) titled *Mythologies*. Eco (1976) conceptualizes semiotics as a field that has come to teach that reality is a construction. That is, reality is a system of signs that cannot be taken for granted as purely objective, independent of human interpretation.

Though Saussure was actually an acclaimed founding father of semiotics, it was Peirce (1931) who really offered it a broader scope. Peirce (1931) who called his own version "semeiotic" widens the scope of semiotics beyond Saussurian conception which only recognises the linguistic signs used in human communication. Peirce (1931) observes that human beings are meaning-makers who make meanings through their creation and interpretation of signs. Man and everything in his environment are signs; thus, they are meaning potentials. Peirce (1931) even extends his philosophical semiotic position to human ideas saying that ideas are also signs.

Barthes' (1961) opinion on what is semiotics is paradoxical. He employs the Saussurean lexical term "semiology" but adopts the Peircian conceptual scope of semiotics. As he puts it:

*Semiology aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits, images, features, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all of these, which form the content of ritual convention or public entertainment; these constitute, if not language, at least systems of signification (1961, p.9).*

Danesi and Perron (1999) and Chandler (2003) also identify culture as a major factor in producing and interpreting sign. To Peirce (1931), semiotics entails a triangular relationship among sign, its object and its interpretation.

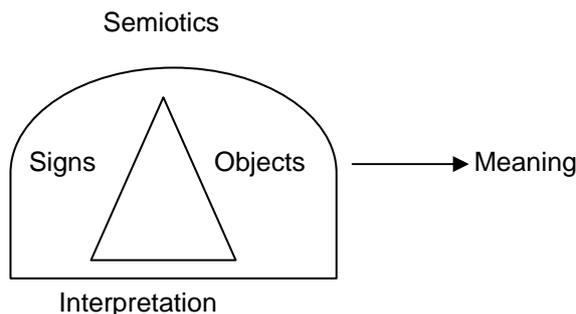


Figure 2: Peircian Conception of Semiotics

Differences in the perceptions of semiotics heavily rest on what constitute a sign, among others. This work does not set out to review semiotics in detail, but to briefly examine the primary elements in the discipline which is fundamental to the understanding of the focus of this paper-'Aroko'.

Gorlee (1994, p.50) like Peirce asserts that, "everything can be a sign, in other words, anything that is perceptible, knowable or impossible". Peirce states that signs are in forms of words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, acts or objects. He maintains that signs are what they are – ordinary, until they are invested with meaning! Peirce asserts that nothing whatsoever is a sign until it is interpreted as a sign. Interpretation therefore is a meaning-investing mechanism which relates a sign form to a familiar system of conventions or concepts. Peirce's scope is wider than Saussurian linguistic aspects of signs. This is because the former does not only subsume graphetic code but also go beyond to encompass all objects that have meaning-potentials. It is deductable therefore that "everything...can be taken as a sign, even thought could be a sign" (Eco, 1976, p.7), once it is imbued with meaning potentials.

Sign, in semiotics particularly, is seen as a subjective or an individual property. Because meaning is subjective, it thus takes time for members of a speech or cultural community to establish it. In other words, men create meaning out of the available forms of signs sometimes in an immeasurable gradual manner. Those meanings are based on how we interpret our world based on values and experience, and make them understandable to others through representation and communicative structures. Peirce opines that a sign is any communicative code system; linguistic and non-linguistic. He views signs from triadic angles. The triadic relation of performance among others is our focus in this paper,

and this entails icons, symbols and indexes. Each of these three passes through his earlier mentioned trio-semiotic processes; the sign (form) the object and the interpretation.

**Icons:** This type of sign resembles its objects in a way. It shares one or more characteristics or properties of its object. Chandler (2003, p.10) argues that icons have “qualities which resemble those of objects they represent e.g. a portrait, a cartoon, a model”. Peirce (1931) classifies icons into three and refers to them as hypo-icons. These are image, diagram and metaphor. Signs are therefore any perceptible or non-perceptible signifier shared by a community.

**Indexes:** In this type of sign, the relationship between a sign and its objects is not resemblance-based. Rather, an index shares a direct physical connection with its object. For instance, a clock is an index of time and money is an index of wealth. Indexes could be inferred or observed. Consider the following indexes:

- (i) Natural signs. (smoke, echoes, footprints) –indexes of life.
- (ii) Medical symptoms (pain, rash, pulse-rate) – indexes of disease or ill health.
- (iii) Instruments (a mace, directional signpost) – indexes of authority and existence of a place respectively.
- (iv) Personal trademarks (handwriting, catch phrase) – indexes of an individual.

**Symbols:** Unlike icons and indexes, symbols share no resemblance with the object in anyway, and are governed by rule or convention or agreement between or among the users. Here, the relationship between the sign (form) and object is arbitrary. Symbols are interpreted according to rule or convention. For instance, the Nigerian Green-White-Green coloured flag is a symbol of Nigeria. Peirce (1931, p.58) defines a symbol as a sign which refers to “*the object that it denotes by virtues of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the symbol to be interpreted as referring to that object.*”

Peirce posits further that apart from the icon, index and symbol, human ideas could be considered a sign. We think in signs. This assertion is further strengthened by Eco (1984, p.166) who says that whenever we think, we have present to the consciousness, some feeling image, conception or other representation, which serves as a sign. Morris (1938, p.20) also holds that something is a “sign” only because it is interpreted as a sign of something by some interpreter. Morris mentions four aspects of a semiotic process.

- (i) The sign vehicle – something to which attention is directed as a sign;
- (ii) Interpreter – one who proposes meanings out of sign;
- (iii) Designatum - what the refers to in the opinion of (ii);
- (iv) Interpretant – the reaction to the interpretation.

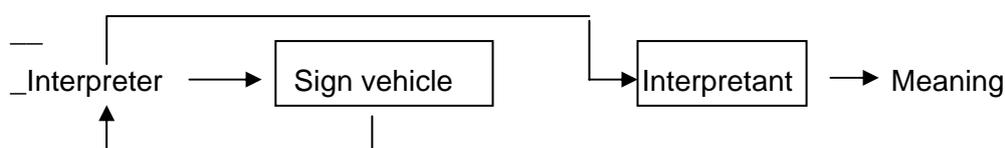


Figure 3: Morris's (1938) semiotic process

We do not intend to drag the discussion on various views on the concept, scope, type and process of semiotics much longer. What we intend to emphasise however, at this juncture, is the fundamental concept and scope as well as the significance of the interpretation in semiotic system of meaning decoding.

Eco (1976) states that interpretation enables us to know something more and what it represents. Interpretation generates reaction. A semiotic interpretation requires a shared environment or setting between the sender and the receiver which could be physical social or even spatio-temporal territories of the participants. Peirce (1931, p.58) says further that “*We interpret things by relating them to familiar systems of conventions.*”

Both the encoder and decoder of a sign require a shared knowledge of culture to aid their interpretation. The sender must have conceived and interpreted a sign in a certain way before packaging it to a receiver who must share in the encoder's knowledge to effectively interpret in turn. Otherwise, communication process will break down. At the centre of this mutual context is culture.

## Semiotics, Culture and Communication

Semiotics focuses on how meaning is made and understood, while communication accounts for that process of transferring that meaning by the sender to the receiver. Eco (1976, 1984) posits that semiotics is culture-rooted as every pattern of signification is a cultural convention. This is because signifiers like language code object, image are, to a large extent, culture-dependent. They all operate effectively and meaningfully, according to Barthes (1964), within the ambit of a specific culture. This is because semiotics is a social action and here each form of sign generates meaning either individually or collectively according to a specific setting. Wikipedia and Barthes also submit that sign must not be interpreted based on its composition but by its setting, because meaning in semiotics is a product of culturally - shared knowledge.

Culture, according to Danesi and Perron (1999, p.15), is "a collective and communal system of meaning that allows us to manage our needs, urges, instincts, desires, and so forth by translating them into representational and communicative system." With shared knowledge of setting, communication is ensured between the participants. Humans communicate verbally and non-verbally as earlier explained.

Hall and Hall (1987, p.79) are quick to point out that "*Non-verbal communication systems are much less subject to the conscious deception that often occurs in verbal systems.*" Goffman (1981, p.84) further states that non-verbal systems "*are the warp and woof of daily interactions with others and they influence how one expresses oneself.*"

All these merits in non-verbal communication, notwithstanding, are not enough reasons to discard verbal communication. The argument here is simply that non-verbal communication may prove more appropriate and effective in certain situational contexts. Alabi (1996, p.99) pushes this argument further when she argues that "*For various reasons, attempts at oral communication (especially) by motorists in motion are not usually successful. Motorists are therefore obliged to use kinesics, sound and lighting signs rather than oral signs if they must communicate with other motorists.*"

Non-verbal communication which seems to be largely a semiotic preoccupation is not only the first form of communication associated only with humans but rather peculiar to all animals. Even, a baby's sensitivity is first expressed in a non-verbal manner. Unlike verbal communication which is produced by oral organs and written by hand, the non-verbal is multi-sensory. It can be transmitted by the human organs and non-humans alike.

Hall and Hall (1987, p.56) explain why people often resort to the non-verbal system of communication: "*People don't like to spell out certain kinds of messages. We prefer to find other ways of showing our feelings.*" These two scholars argue that the non-verbal communicative system is not new since artists and psychiatrists have long been used to this. It is what one can describe as "the silent language".

In Yoruba culture, in particular, there has been a cultural practice known as AROKO, a non-verbal semiotic system of communication through which messages and information are passed from an individual to individual or to a community or from a community to an individual or to another community. Yoruba inhabit the present south-west geo-political zone of Nigeria and are described by Davidson (1981, p.118) as "another large people who took shape before A.D. 1000". What is then Aroko? What are the forms components and objects? What does it signify? How is it packaged and transmitted? Who conveys Aroko and to who? How is it interpreted, and what informs the interpretation? These are the tasks this paper seeks to achieve through a semiotic exploration.

## The Semiotics of Aroko

Yoruba is a syllable-timed language and it demonstrates a high level of consistency of sounds with spellings. As Davidson (1981, p.119) puts it, Yoruba people "were pioneering metal-workers and fine artists in baked clay ... skilled in the spinning, dyeing and weaving of cotton". They were also iron

smelters and blacksmith. In a nutshell, from the time immemorial to the present, they are the source of their Aroko items.

“Aroko” is a tri-syllabic word. The articulation of ‘Aroko’ begins with a centralized fully open vowel and this constitutes the first syllable [a]. The second syllable begins with a post-alveolar frictionless continuant which is the onset of the syllable [ro]. [o] is a centralized lip-rounding vowel and it is the nucleus of the syllable. The final syllable in the word also comprises an onset and the vowel peak. The onset is a voiceless velar plosive sound while the final [o] constitutes the syllabic peak. The tonal pattern of the word is low-mid-low [i.e. (-)]; hence, [Aroko]. The prosody of the word presents all the syllables as accented but with discernible tonal variations. The final [o] is sonorously rendered in a similar fashion of continuants.

Opadokun (1986) describes Aroko as a non-verbal traditional system of communication among the Yoruba that was in vogue before the advent of the European in Nigeria. This however does not mean that it is no longer in use at present but it is fast losing its relevance in Nigeria. Aroko involves sending an item or a combinable number of items to a person from which the decoder is expected to infer a piece of information.

Before the colonization era in Nigeria, the Yoruba people have been using various signs including parts of body to communicate to another person far and near. For instance, Yoruba use eyes (staring) to attract, accommodate or repel; nose (wrinkling/upward movement) to cheapen or rubbish; head (nodding) to indicate approval or disapproval; hand (waving) to call or bid farewell; finger nails (spreading) to castigate/insult one’s mother and lots more.

Traditional attires in Yoruba are also a means of non-verbal communication. For instance, certain clothes and costumes put on by an individual signify the identity of such people, e.g. a hunter, farmer, bride, king, chief, priest, etc. It is noteworthy, that while most of these body and dress codes are still in use, the Aroko codes are almost extinct. This is partially because of the following reasons:

- (i) The invention of modern transportation and communication facilities;
- (ii) Shortage of personals equipped with the arts of encoding and decoding the contents of an Aroko;
- (iii) Drastic reduction in the influence and power of the traditional rulers;
- (iv) Availability of conventional road signs that often make the ancient ones unpopular;
- (v) Constitutional and judicial system of regulating the power of an individual or a community or an institution.

The above factors, among many others, contributed to a drastic decline in the use of Aroko in Yoruba community.

Most if not all the Aroko items used by the Yoruba are made by them. Aroko include ‘single or combined edible or non-edible items. Some are delivered to a destination by either human or an animal like dog. Some of those items include kolanut, comb, bitter kola, pepper arrow and bow, gun etc. Aroko like a bunch of banana, a stone, an image made of mud need not be sent to anybody; they are stationed at a spot to be observed by people for possible interpretation.

Aroko, as explained by Opadokun, (1986), is used chiefly for the following purposes:

- (i) to maintain secrecy of the message. In most cases, the bearer of an Aroko might not be aware of the content let alone its interpretation. Even, the bearer might be the conveyer of his own death sentence!
- (ii) to avoid verbal message and its concomitant shortcomings features like omission, misconception, manipulation or distortion.
- (iii) to express comradeship, confidence and solidarity among various secret cult members.
- (iv) to reinforce the credibility of the message by often accompanying an Aroko with a widely known personal belonging of the sender to mark his identity.

Aroko can take any of the following forms but the choice of a particular form will strictly depend on the intent of the sender as well as his relationship with the receiver.

- The skin of a monkey;

- Comb;
- Cap or ring (known with a person);
- Whisker;
- Fruits like pineapple, orange, etc.;
- 'Esuru' (a specie of potato) and a left over, of un-hatched incubated eggs of a fowl;
- A specific number of items;
- A feather;
- Putting a stone in a junction/cross road;
- A stick of broom;
- Cam;

Sounds of a flute, whistle, horn, trumpet, drum, etc. are also forms of Aroko. This paper shall not however go into the details of sound as a non-verbal semiotic concept.

Aroko could be sent by a traditional ruler or chief, ifa priest, ogboni cult member, hunter, artisan or an ordinary person to a counterpart or any other person, group or body. This is explained in the diagram below:

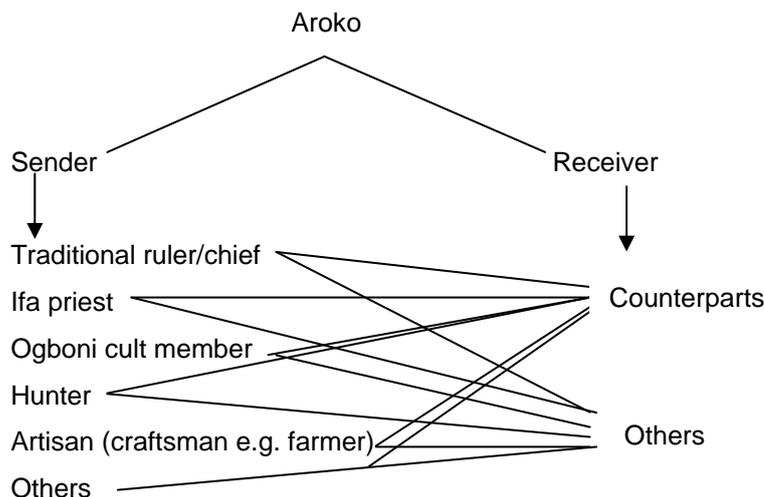


Figure 5: Aroko (discourse) participants

Opadokun (1986) further states that for convenience rather than consensus of views, Aroko could be classified into six. The classification is based on the discourse functions they each perform.

- Category one: warning to an individual or a community. Examples are leaves of an "odan" tree, a stick of broom.
- Category two: admonition/punishment: e.g. a parrot's egg, binding of an arrow and a gun
- Category three: announcement/marketing strategy: e.g. the leaves of an *Akoko* (a kind of tree) bitter kola, putting a sum amount of money beside a bunch of banana.
- Category four: indicator/directive: e.g. putting a stone at a road junction.
- Category five: expression of affection/feelings: e.g. sending a half chewed chewing stick to a widow, a feather.
- Category six: pleading: e.g. pineapple, a combined item of cam, salt and palm oil.

## The Typology of Aroko as a Semiotic Sign

Eco (1984) defines an icon as any visible procedure reproducing concrete object capable of communicating the corresponding object and concept. In Aroko, examples of such iconic signs are: An image made of mud, cam, bitter kola, a stick of broom, 'Esuru' potato, etc. It is noteworthy, at this juncture, to note that Aroko are not mostly iconic. This is because perhaps the secrecy of the message may no longer be absolutely guaranteed.

Among the Aroko that take the forms of index are half-chewed chewing stick and personal identity markers like a cap, ring or whisker. This research paper is of the view that many of these indexical signs fall within the category of personal trademarks.

Symbol seems to be in majority and the one commonly used. Examples of symbols in Aroko are parrot egg in a calabash, bound arrow and gun, an amount of money put by the side of a commodity (like a bunch of banana), fruits (e.g. pineapple) a specific number of an item, shoe, feather etc. They are symbolic not because of what they are ordinarily but because of what they are representing within the Yoruba cosmology.

## Process of Aroko as a Semiotic System

Opadokun identifies a network of three factors as being exigent and expedient to an effective Aroko. These are the sender, the receiver and the transmitter. The sender and receiver need to be skilful in the art of interpretation of an Aroko sign. This is enhanced by possessing a common knowledge on how Aroko works. For the sender, he has to be competent in encoding or packaging his Aroko message. He should be aware of the signification of a wrong or faulty packaging. The receiver on the other hand can employ the service of an expert if he cannot interpret or is not sure of his ability. This is where and why the age and knowledge of culture count. In other words, the conventionality of Aroko is not widespread; the art is confined to few, and mostly, old individuals. The transmitter is the channel through which an Aroko passes from the sender to the receiver. He is expected to be a trustworthy and honest bearer of an Aroko because if he tampers with the quality, quantity or form of the Aroko, the meaning may be affected.

Apart from the competence and trust involved among the three participants involved in Aroko discourse, role relation between the sender and receiver also plays a considerable and an integral part in whatever the interpretation an Aroko would bear. If a certain sum of money and a commodity like a bunch of banana are juxtaposed, it is an index of the cost price of such commodity. An interested passer-by buys them by putting same sum of money before he takes the fruit.

## The Semiotic Interpretation of Selected Aroko

When an iconic image of a particular man is placed in front of his house, with the man's physical identity like tribal mark on his right cheek and a different tribal mark on the left side, it signifies that a man whose identity is being camouflaged is having an illegitimate secret affair with a woman nearby whose tribal mark is on the left cheek of the displayed image. It is a warning that the two actors in the illicit act would be exposed publicly as this icon is exposed to the public, if they persist.

Similarly, "Odan" is a big tree mostly planted to provide shade and food for goats and sheep. It signifies that in spite of the size, beauty and value of this tree, it is just a mere food for goats. "Odan" leaves symbolise disrespect and disregard. Like the image earlier discussed it is also a warning signal to the person to whom the leaves of Odan tree is sent.

A comb is used to make the hair smooth. The interpretation of what a comb symbolises will depend on who sends it, to who, and the relationship between them. If it is sent by a lover to a lover, it is an indication of imminent separation between them. However, if it is sent to a hairdresser, it is an invitation to come and plait for an about-to-wed bride.

Index like a half-chewed chewing stick sent to the bridal in-law signifies that the newly wedded bride has been defiled before she wedded. On the other hand, if a half-chewed chewing stick is sent to a widow by a man, it indicates an expression of affection. The stick signifies that either or both of them

have once been married and the sender would wish a fresh union. The acceptance or rejection of the stick signifies either a positive or a negative response respectively.

Similarly, personal identity markers like a cap, ring or whisker are used to accompany an Aroko to testify or confirm the credibility of the source of such Aroko. Items used are normally iconic representations of the senders known with a particular person.

Symbols like a parrot egg covered in a calabash is a symbol of notoriety, it symbolises that such individual, usually a traditional ruler, has been rejected by his people. Such King is expected to commit suicide, or in the least, go on exile.

Arrow and gun are symbols of war. The combination of these weapons makes a sign mostly sent by and to a hunter. It means that the receiver is banned from further hunting. Failure to comply is a preparedness to go into war with the sender(s). It is used for admonition or punishment for turning deaf ears to an earlier warning.

Certain fruits like pineapple, bitter kola, etc. are also symbolic. The pineapple, for instance, has a sweet juice though its outside appearance is not smooth. It signifies perseverance and optimism. Bitter kola, on the other hand, indicates that all is not well at home and that the attention of such a receiver is urgently needed.

Numbering in Aroko is of semiotic significance because it affects the interpretation of an Aroko. In other words, certain number of Aroko items conveys certain meaning. For instance, ONE symbolises completeness, fullness and wholeness. That is why if a full keg of wine is sent to a bridal in-law, it is an indication that their newly wedded daughter is a virgin while a half means that she has been defiled before marriage.

Odd numbers like THREE and FIVE are exclusive to Ifa priests and Ogboni cult members, only the initiates could interpret the content. But if the item is FIVE, it is a form of summon, then the receiver is expected to appear personally within five days ultimatum or else face the wrath of the group. Numbers SEVEN and TEN are also used to summon though restricted to the cult or Ifa members.

Number SIX symbolises affection and love. It is commonly used to express passionate feelings and affection among admirers or lovers. Number EIGHT also indicates peace, good health and security. It is used to allay the fear of the receiver and guarantee him that all is well.

Number NINE is a symbol of a looming danger. The context and shared knowledge of the discourse participants will illuminate what the danger is all about. From the foregoing explanation, it is evident that the forms of the item as well as the quantity are very significant in encoding and decoding the meaning of Aroko as non-verbal communication in Yoruba tradition.

A sign of Aroko could have different interpretation depending on the sender, status and context. A good example of this is a handful of sand. If it is wrapped and given to a hunter's wife, it is an indication that it was a friend to that hunter who helped the former's wife to lift her luggage on her head. On the other hand, if a culprit is given a handful of sand, it indicates that he is sent to exile based on an offence committed. This same sign can be a testimony that the bearer is truly from a friend (who is the sender) to a receiver.

As earlier submitted, Aroko has been an effective communicative channel widely used by important personalities in Yoruba societies. The means of transmission could be human or even a domestic animal! As rightly observed by Goodenough (1957, cited in Eco, 1976, p.8) that "*It is not necessary that the transmitter be human provided that they (signs) emit the signal following a system of rules known by the human addressees.*"

Aroko can be delivered by a domestic animal like a dog. For instance if an item known as "Obu-o-toyo", which is a salt-like substance used as an alternative to the real salt, is wrapped and tied on the neck of a dog and the dog is sent home, the receiver gets the message that those working in farm need salt for their food. The salt is consequently wrapped and tied on the neck of the same animal transmitter for onward delivery.

## Conclusion

Aroko like any other non-verbal semiotic system, did not only make a possible alternative to verbal communication, but also proved potent during the time it was in vogue. The fact that it is rarely used

nowadays does not, in any way, undermine its communicative potentials except that the modern day means of communication is effectively superior. If Aroko, is a reminder of the transitory nature and conventionality of signs, then it keeps man to be on his toes searching for, and inventing more signs in tune with own time. After all, what is in vogue today may be vague tomorrow?

A study of signs or non-verbal communication, especially Yoruba tradition is quite revealing because it encapsulates volume of meaning. This assertion could be proved and consolidated if more researches could explore sound as a form of Aroko, the scope of which this research could not cover. In conclusion, this paper has been able to establish that semiotics is culturally-rooted because, at times, what constitute signs, their forms, and components and of course, their interpretations vary from culture to culture and from period to period.

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