

## **CULTURE, SEMIOLOGY AND MEANING IN SELECTED YORUBA PROCREATION-AIDING INCANTATIONS**

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### **Abstract**

*Culture, the shared values, beliefs, customs, traditions and practices of a people are a fertile ground for semiology which studies signs, meanings and their functionality. The Yoruba procreation-aiding incantation is replete with the deployment of signs and symbols that function to help realise the central desire of the text. Whereas previous studies on Yoruba incantations have shown very scant records of involving semiology, this study therefore, examined the cultural signs using semiology to evince the ideas communicated through Yoruba procreation-aiding incantations and how they functioned for effectiveness in the concerned texts. The selected Yoruba procreation-aiding incantations, gathered through ethnographic fieldwork, makes use of verbal codes and formulas that are believed to have magical potential because they are result oriented. These codes and formulas involve the use of the spoken word to reinforce the processes of conception, gestation and birth. Every one of these stages are represented in signs and symbols and are made to work for the purpose of reproduction based on the perception of the culture of the people. This study adopted the triadic semiotic model of C. S. Peirce which distinguishes among the iconic, indexical and symbolic signs. All of these were interpreted and harnessed to lend validity to Yoruba people's mythology, imagination and science. This study concluded that, however the magical perception of the Yoruba procreation-aiding incantation, the effects that are ascribed to it are intricately bound by the characteristics of the signs that are found therein.*

**Key Words:** *Culture, Semiology, Yoruba, Procreation-Aiding, Incantations*

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### **Introduction**

Culture is a fundamental heritage of human society (Stephenson, 2023). The culture that is found in every society is its mind and its most important mainstay. Every society, be it primitive or civilized, ancient or modern, has its own mind, which is jealously guarded and, in turn, helps to nurture everyone who claims to be the product of that society. Certain

character traits are often found to be common to people who emanate from a given society and by which they are mostly identified and which the people are themselves, proud of. This is the reason the culture of a society is considered as the people's 'shared' heritage.

Beyond that which has already been mentioned, the culture of a people also refers to the beliefs, customs, traditions

and practices through which the people are categorized and defined. The people's culture is artificial rather than natural; it is created over time, shaped by the people and the institutions they establish as determined by the environment in which they found themselves.

Culture is all-encompassing as it has within its ambience the totality of the principles upon which the determination of the perceptions, both the tangible and intangible surroundings of the society are established.

So much has been said by scholars about the complexity of the concept of culture so much that there seems to be no single definition of the concept that adequately captures the expansiveness of what the culture involves. Every definition or description of it is, at best, sectional and therefore, relative. This is to the extent that such definition and description are limited in application and could only be strictly or partially disciplinary. However, what could be regarded as an unambiguous description of the concept of culture and which seems quite relevant to this study is stated by W. B. Andah, cited in Ogunbameru Kunle and Wale Rotimi (1998), as comprising,

... all the material and non-material expression of the people as well as the processes with which the expressions are communicated. It has to do with all the social, ethical, intellectual, scientific, artistic and technological expressions and processes of a people usually ethically and, or nationally or supra-nationally related and usually living in a geographically contiguous area; what they pass

on to their successors and how they are passed on. (52)

Given the clarity of this definition, coupled with its profoundness, we may only need to add that the behavioural patterns of any people or how the people behave are all conditioned by the nature of the mind of the society. In culture, therefore, are found such elements that are peculiar to the people and which in turn distinguish them one from another.

Indeed, Africans and of course Yoruba people, oftentimes have their culture reflected in their folktales, mythologies, legends, proverbs, incantations, and so forth. In Yoruba procreation-aiding incantations which are particularly the concern of this study, there is extended deployment of signs, symbols, characters and meanings which could only be understood with a proper recourse to the culture of Yoruba people. Through these particular set of incantations, the people's perception of life, human conditions, existential challenges, psychical and psychological habituation are highlighted for the purpose of providing exemplary situations that would assist in easing journeying through life. How the signs, symbols, characters and meanings function therefore, for the purpose of bridging for man the needed existential gaps need to be closely examined.

Semiotics seems more adequately positioned to provide the needed eclectic approach which identifies, analyses and evaluates the significance of levels of cultural signs, symbols, characters and meanings in Yoruba procreation-aiding incantations. This is because it provides comprehensive templates for the explanation of signs, involving the use of concept as 'sign' to mean something that stands or something else in the mind of an

interpreter; the ‘representamen’ to mean the sign vehicle which could be word or image; ‘object’ to mean the thing or concept represented; interpretant to mean the idea or meaning evoked; and semiosis to mean the process of signification. Its further triadically typifies signs into iconic to underpin all instances where there exists any semblance between the signifier and the signified; indexical to capture cases in which there is a causal relationship signifier and the signified; and lastly, symbolic to illustration a relationship between the signifier and the signified that is arbitrary and, or conventional.

For the purpose of throwing more light on the concept of semiology, it might be necessary to consider the positions of few other theorists who, in their contributions, have attempted to broaden the scope of the subject matter.

One of such theorists is Elam (1980), cited in Adedimeji (2007), who considers semiotics as ‘...a science dedicated to the study of the production of meaning in society.’ This idea of ‘the production of meaning’ surely anticipates its completion in the fact that meaning is also exchanged. For another theorist, Peckham (1966), cited in Wittig (1974), ‘...a sign as the French says, wants to say something, yet it can hardly say something unless there exists somebody to receive and respond to what it wants to say’. This means that, to every sign, there must be a response or else, there will not exist any significance or meaning. Consequently therefore, a sign to him is ‘...any perceptual configuration to which there is a response’ (186). Umberto Eco (1979) is yet another theorist that brings a fresh insight into the study of semiotics by broadening the sign perspective. In considering semiotics as

the ‘...concern(ed) with everything that can be taken as a sign’, and a sign as ‘...anything that can be taken as significantly substituting for something else’ (: 7), Eco concludes by saying that ‘...thus semiotics is, in principle, the discipline studying everything which can be used in order to lie’ (1976: 7). thereby extending the horizon of the study to include all cultural practices, considered as communication processes that can be studied through semiotics.

In Yoruba culture, so much importance is attached to procreation as the people consider any man or woman who is unable to own a child as a failure (o waye asan). Therefore, every member of the culture invests so much in ensuring that s/he produces, at least, a progeny because of the embarrassment associated with such a failure, thus stressing the importance of the Yoruba traditional reproductive healthcare system.

The Yoruba traditional reproductive healthcare system recognizes some factors that are capable of impeding conception and birth, which may include *okọ-òrun* (familiar spirit), *ogun-òtá* (spiritual attack), *aràn kinniṣà* (worm infestation), *ṣomúròrò* (swollen breast), *èdà* (semen discharge), *ìju* (fibroid), *nṅkan ọsù tí ó dọtí tàbí tí ó lami* (dirty, watery and irregular menstruation), *ibi tí kò wálẹ* (retaining placenta), *bíbí òkúmọ* (still birth), and so forth in women, and ‘deficiencies and impotence’ (*àìpéye tàbí ìkúra*) bordering on watery sperm and low sperm count in men, all of which have their indigenous remedies.

The application of any of the following incantations is believed to have the capability for providing relief to some of the highlighted circumstances:

*Semiological Analysis of Yoruba Procreation-Aiding Incantations*

I

Line	Yoruba Incantation	Translation
1	<i>Tèlú tèlú awo Ègbá</i>	Tèlú Tèlú is the initiate of Ègbá
2	<i>Tèlú tèlú awo òde-Ijèsà</i>	Tèlú Tèlú is the initiate of Ijèsà town
3	<i>Òun nàà ní í sawo nílè Oòduà</i>	It is the same that is the initiate in the home of Oòduà
4	<i>Kèlèmbú ní í sawo Olówá</i>	Kèlèmbú is the initiate of Olówá
5	<i>Òun ló dífá fún Olówá lòde Imòrìsà</i>	It divined for Olówá in Òde's shrine of the deity
6	<i>Tí wón ní kí ó lọ fẹbọ lélè lenu ònà</i>	It instructed that he makes sacrifice at the entrance
7	<i>Kí ó sì sawo ẹnu</i>	And also enlist in the fraternity of the mouth
8	<i>Ó wá béèrè wí pé awo wo lawo ẹnu?</i>	He then asked what the fraternity of the mouth was
9	<i>Wón ní awo agbó awo atọ lawo ẹnu</i>	He was replied that it is the fraternity of aging and lasting
10	<i>Olówá wá di ẹni lómọ ó di ẹni lówó</i>	Thus, Olówá became owner of children and owner of wealth
11	<i>Torí nàà, ẹní forí balẹ fún yín, á gbó</i>	Therefore, whoever pays homage to you will age
12	<i>Ẹní forí balẹ fún yín, á tọ</i>	Whoever pays homage to you will last
13	<i>Ẹní forí balẹ fún yín á bí wéré</i>	Whoever pays homage to you will have easy delivery
14	<i>Ẹ jòwọ ẹ jẹ kí lágbájá ọmọ lágbájá bí wéré</i>	Please, do let so-so the child of so-so give birth with ease
15	<i>Tó! Tó! Tó!</i>	So shall it be! So shall it be! So shall it be!

This fifteen-line incantation helps to ensure that a woman is blessed with pregnancy. It is believed among the users to have the capacity to assist an expectant mother to be safely delivered of a pregnancy borne for the required number of months.

The strength of this verse of incantation depends on the appropriate use of metaphor, imagery and diction, all of which culminate in the heightened presence of iconic, indexical and symbolic significations, and thus, anticipate the necessary result(s) for the petitioner.

The incantation opens quite early with the phrase, *Tèlú tèlú* (literally interpreted as 'the quest to found or establish', mentioned severally in respect of three Yoruba cities in the first three lines, namely- *Ègbá*, *Ijèsà* and even, *Ilé-Ifẹ* - a settlement regarded as the cradle of

humanity, particularly, the Yoruba race, otherwise referred to as, *Ilé Oòduà* (the home of Oòduà)- a synecdochic allusion to the first ruler and founder of the Source. This phrase of intentionality, upon which the births of races and nations hinge, connects, by inference, the wish of the petitioner to give birth to her own child and begin a new generation of people. This phrase, therefore, exemplifies an instance of symbolism in the context of the incantatory verse. Moreover, there is the attempt to deploy metonyms as well as proper name and naming for the purpose of achieving the wish(es) for which the verse is meant. This could be seen in line 4 where *Kèlèmbú* is invoked. It is the 'essential' or 'secret' name of the female effigy in *Obinren-Òjòwú* cult in Ijebu-Ode. *Obinren-Òjòwú* which literally means the 'Envious Mother' is a female

cult headed by *Olówá* (line 5)- a man who must go through his entire life, plaiting his hairs regularly and often (most especially during the festival) dresses like a woman. Through the cult, the protective essence of *Ìyá-Ayé* (the Earth-Mothers) over the children and the husband, is annually celebrated during a festival with similar name. The spirit of *Obìnren-Òjòwú* is represented by a pair of male and female effigies which are carried by one male and one female dancers during the festival. Ordinarily, the female effigy goes into seclusion and comes out only once annually, that's while the festival lasts, whereas the male effigy is found outside all year round. It is what people see and associate with the spirit whenever they go for investigation at the shrine which is located at *Odò-Èṣà* (an adulteration for *Odò-Òriṣà* [the deity's enclave]) along Olisa street in Ijebu-Ode. The name, *Keḽembú* thus, illustrates an example of symbolic icon, because, apart from its being used to depict the female effigy of the deity, nothing beyond the fact of being held in the host people's convention seems to link the signifier and the signified together. Again, there seems to be something mythical about the name so much that people believe that its use is capable of some influences such as making women conceive and have children.

The historical bond between the deity and *Olówá* is symbolic as it is based on redressing the inability of the latter to have an heir and upon which he was accordingly instructed. The symbolic position held by *Olówá*, as the priest of the deity, is that he represents the human face of the deity, and of course, its living testimony. The first of the directives about where the priest should place the sacrifice,

in line 6, is at the 'entrance' (...*fi ẹbọ lélé lénu ọ̀nà*) is both indexically and symbolically signifying. The indexicality involved in the act has to do with the acceptance of the sacrificer's state of meekness and the propitiatory value of the materials presented, which is itself symbolic. As a symbol, the 'entrance' could also signify the female genitalia which, is sometimes referred to in some rituals as, *Utó bọ́lọ́bọ́lọ ọ̀gbẹ̀rì ma wọ* (The narrow alley prohibited to the non-initiate'. The other part of the instruction in line 7, which is to '...enlist in the fraternity of the mouth' (...*ṣe awo ẹnu*) is symbolic of the need to remain secretive and trusted by not revealing the secrets of encounter and success. The need for this is supported by two sayings that, *Bí iṣu ẹni bá tú, ń ṣe là ń fọwọ̀ bọ̀ ọ̀ jẹ* (If one's piece of yam is succulent, one should eat it in secret) and *Obì tí yóò bá gbó, ń ṣe ló ń fara sin* (The kolanut that will attain maturity must remain hidden). The rationale behind all these is to prevent the machination of certain unknown enemies who are bent on thwarting good fortunes from doing so. This position is further clarified in the line 8 that, ...*awo a gbó awo a tọ lawo ẹnu* (...it is the fraternity of aging and lasting), all of which have symbolic connection with the subsequent successes of owning children and wealth by *Olówá*. The lots of *Olówá*, as highlighted in line 10 as owning 'children and... wealth' (*ọ̀lọmọ àtolówó*), thus, become iconic to the extent of their being expected to reinforce the prayers of easy delivery by the petitioner. Indeed, the petitioner, like the *Olówá*, who has assumed an iconic figure in connection to her quest, is considered to have done all the needful so that she could receive all the accrued benefits therefrom.

II

List	Yoruba Incantation	Translation
1	<i>Oyíndàólá ọmọ Èrìdṣẹ̀jẹ̀! (3ce)</i>	Oyíndàólá the offspring of Èrìdṣẹ̀jẹ̀! (3)
2	<i>A gbọ pé o bímọ</i>	We learnt you gave birth to a baby
3	<i>Ó ní bẹ̀ẹ̀ ní</i>	She said it is true
4	<i>Ṣùgbọ̀n ẹnì kankan kò gbọ rírọ́bí rẹ</i>	But no one heard you were in labour
5	<i>Ó ní ọgbọ́ ló ní kí wọn máa gbọ</i>	She said it is ogbo that commands that they should not hear
6	<i>Ó ní ìmọ́ ló ní kí wọn máa mọ</i>	She said it is imo that commands that they should not know
7	<i>Èmi lámọyín ọmọ lámọyín</i>	I so-so the child of so-so (mother's name)
8	<i>Oyún tí mo ní yìí</i>	This pregnancy am carrying
9	<i>Lọ́jọ́ tí mo bá máa bímọ</i>	The day am going to be delivered of it
10	<i>Kí eku ilé kí ó má gbọ</i>	May the rat in the house not hear
11	<i>Kí aáyán ilé kí ó má mọ</i>	May the cockroach in the house not know
12	<i>Kí n bímọ kẹ̀ni roko tó dé</i>	May I give birth before those who go to the farm return
13	<i>Kí n bímọ kẹ̀ni rodò tó bọ</i>	May I give birth before those who go to the river return
14	<i>Kí wọn má fọ̀bẹ̀ gbọmọ́ jáde nínú mi</i>	May they not use the knife to deliver me of the baby
15	<i>Tí n bá ti ñ forúnkún ọ̀tún kúnlẹ̀</i>	When I kneel down with the right leg
16	<i>Kí n máa fì tò̀sì dide</i>	May I stand up with the left leg
17	<i>Kí omi má pọ̀jù</i>	May there be no excessive birth fluid
18	<i>Kí ẹ̀jẹ̀ má ṣaláitọ́ lọ́jọ́ náà</i>	May there be no blood shortage that day
19	<i>Ááṣẹ!</i>	So shall it be!

This incantatory verse, which is believed to prevent any kind of eventuality that may arise during labour, thrives on name and naming as a way of hinting at the iconic, indexical and the symbolic mechanisms for the purpose of achieving its desired expectations.

The name, *Oyíndàólá* in line1, is a metaphor and iconically refers to every woman who goes into labour and hopes to come out unscathed. As a name that is mythical, it emphasises the state of sweetness and magnificent wealth. The 'sweetness' is derived from the feeling of comfort experienced after giving birth to a baby while the 'wealth' derives from the ownership of a child which, according to a Yoruba saying, is 'impossible for money to buy' (*Ọmọ ọ̀ ṣe é fowó rà*). The name in context is that of a Yoruba quest personality, who is also an archetypal

(pregnant) female-figure, in search of the fruit of the womb. She, *Oyíndàólá ọmọ Èrìdṣẹ̀jẹ̀* (*Oyíndàólá* the offspring of *Èrìdṣẹ̀jẹ̀*!), according to a mythical verse used by Traditional Birth Attendants, *...fojojúmọ́ ñ fẹkún ṣògbèrẹ ọmọ bíbí* (...engages in ceaseless weeping bemoaning her childlessness), thus, reinforcing the symbolic significance of the name. The name of the forebear, *Èrìdṣẹ̀jẹ̀* (the dew drops no blood) also carries with it its iconic and symbolic significance. As a form of iconicity, the name correlates the desire of the cantor for moderate blood and fluid discharge during labour. Meanwhile, the mother-child relationship between the two (*Èrìdṣẹ̀jẹ̀* and *Oyíndàólá*) is explainable from the standpoint of the Yoruba mythology.

The verse's invocative mechanism logically confers the protections enjoyed

by the subject, *Oyíndàólá*, on the supplicant who is the same person as the pregnant woman who needs the protection that the incantation is believed to afford. The repetitive use of the collective pronominals as, *a* or *àwa* (we), *ẹ̀ni kankan* (no one), *wón* (they), *ẹ̀ni tó roko* (those who go to the farm), *ẹ̀ni tó rodò* (those who go to the river) in lines 2-6, are indexical reference to all manners of neighbour (both good and bad) that one (a pregnant woman) could have. The difficulty of distinguishing an enemy from a well-wisher makes it expedient to keep one's secrets well-guarded, the validity of which is proven by the common Yoruba maxim that, *Eşin Olúnlọyọ sọ̀nù, ká rí n bá wón wáa, ká má rí n bá wón wáa*, (Olúnlọyọ's horse is missing, both of those wishing its recovery are searching just as those wishing for it never to be recovered). Their further categorisation, as symbolic as it is, has its explanation in the Yoruba cultural perception of who the enemy or a friend is.

Moreover, in lines 5-6 the supplicant reveals her apprehensions by making use of certain syntactic and lexical patterning as well as appropriate iconic, indexical and symbolic configurations, all of which are believed could make the incantation fulfil her desire. The use, for example, of the correlates between the names of natural object and the sought wish of the petitioner, such as could be found in, *...ogbó ló ní kí wón máa gbó* (...it is ogbó that commands that they should not hear), *...imò ló ní kí wón máa mọ* (... it is imò that commands that they should not know), are ways of deriving specific consequential actions (t<sub>n</sub> hear; t<sub>n</sub> know), based on the second syllables of those words. The names of the items, therefore, become some iconic-symbols in

the instance. This is partly because those names bear striking semblance with the ends for which they are sought, and partly so, as their relevance, in respect of the functions they serve, can only be rationalised within the conventions of the Yoruba people.

The metaphoric references in lines 10-11, to *eku ilé* (the rat in the house) and *aáyán ilé* (the cockroach in the house), as part of those who must not hear that the plaintiff is in labour, is quite symbolic. This is to the extent of which the two referents are used to indicate extremely comparative proximity between the plaintiff and the referents. Beyond this, raising alarm over the state of a woman in labour is indexical of there being (a) life threatening issue(s), which, when they happen and have not resulted in fatality, are better kept secret. In a similar vein, the references in lines 12-13, to *ẹ̀ni tó roko* (those who go to the farm) and *ẹ̀ni tó rodò* (those who go to the river), beyond what have been said earlier, is to draw out the unfathomable number of members of such group, and, to lay emphasis on their main stock in trade, which is gossip. Sometimes also, some of them while going to farms, rivers and such other places are known to hatch evil plans against unsuspected victims. In the overall, the prayer of the supplicant is for her to put to bed as soon as she goes into labour.

In the final analysis, the concluding part of the incantation, lines 16-19, comprises what could be regarded as the cantor's personal prayers needed as supplement in her delicate state. They are all significant in the manner in which they constitute iconic, indexical as well as symbolic representations meant to drive home the intended meanings, and in turn, reinforce the purpose of the incantatory

verse. Some of the aspects of the requests to be highlighted in respect of the above include the repudiation of, ...*fòbẹ gbómọ jáde*... (...use knife to deliver...of pregnancy), which has connotative implication; it is indexical as much as it is symbolic. The indexical value of this clause is in pointing to the presence of complications and inability to go through the stress of delivery by a pregnant woman. It is known as the caesarian section in modern medicine. It is, however considered as one of the signs of 'unsuccessful birth' in Yoruba conventional birth care for a pregnant woman to be subjected to *işé abẹ* (caesarian section). The symbolic value of the clause, as it were, is fed by the primordial belief that performing surgical operation on a pregnant woman could be fraught with danger of death. It is even believed in some quarters that women taken into the operation theatre usually have their 'lives' removed and bottled up somewhere (anesthetised) and could mistakenly escape in the process of wrong handling, leading to death. Most mothers often repudiate the thought or the suggestion with the response, *Ọlórún má jẹ é* (May God forbid it). Next in the line of discussion of some significant aspects of the supplicant's prayer is the concept, ...*forúnkún ọtún kúnlẹ* (...kneel[ing] down with the right leg), and, ...*fì orúnkún tòsí dide* (...stand[ing] up with the left leg). The act of kneeling down is surely indexical as it is symbolic. It is, on one hand, generally considered an indexical gesture connoting submissiveness or in a clearer term, accepting the dominance of a superior authority. The said 'authority'

could be further inexorable or pressing if it were a situation beyond one's control such as answering the call of nature like giving birth to a baby. The act of giving birth to a baby, specifically, is what is symbolically referred to among Yoruba people as, *íkúnlẹ* (kneeling down). The Yoruba song that, *lójó ikúnlẹ, gongọ á sọ* (On the day of labouring, it promises to be near tragic), points to the magnitude of pain the woman is likely to endure. Therefore, while kneeling with the right limb is interpretable as submitting to pressure, standing up with the left limb would mean regaining one's strength and composure with the readiness to go. Both are expectedly complementary in a situation of successful birth.

Coming last among the significant aspects of the cantor's prayer is that in which certain occurrences are rejected, specifically in lines 17-18, as already cited. The two scenarios which the cantor prayed against are, for there not to be 'excessive birth fluid' (*kí omi máà pọ̀ jù*) and for there not to be 'blood shortage' (*àìtọ̀ èjẹ̀*). It should be noted that delivery process of baby requires appropriate measures of both body fluid and blood such that none is in short supply or flows excessively. While blood, represented by its red colour, possesses iconic signification, its presence in the midstream of a pregnancy period or at the early laboring stage is indexical of there being one complication or another, the presence of body fluid at the early labouring stage, on the other hand, is also of indexical signification, pointing to the fact that the baby in the womb is ready to be born.



III

Line	Yoruba Incantation	Translation
1	<i>Ọ̀tòtò n tòrò (3ce)</i>	The word acts distinctly (3ce)
2	<i>Ọ̀tòtò là á jẹ̀pà</i>	Each by each does one eat the ground nut
3	<i>Ọ̀tòtò là á jẹ̀mumu</i>	Each by each does one eat the tiger nut
4	<i>Adífá fún ọ̀rò iwásẹ̀</i>	As divined for the primeval word
5	<i>Tí ñ se ipilẹ̀ ohun gbogbo</i>	That's the foundation of creation
6	<i>Tí ñ sọ báyìí wí pé:</i>	Which thus pronounces that:
7	<i>Ká mú nńkan torí torí</i>	We take something by the head
8	<i>Ká mú nńkan tọ̀rùn tọ̀rùn</i>	We take something by the neck
9	<i>Ká mú nńkan lódìndì lódìndì</i>	We take something as a whole
10	<i>Ká rẹ̀ é fún Ọ̀bamakin tí ñ bẹ̀ lókè rọ̀jẹ̀</i>	And take it to Ọ̀bamakin on Ìrọ̀jẹ̀ hill
11	<i>KỌ̀bamakin lẹ̀ fún wa ní nńkan lódìndì lódìndì</i>	So that Ọ̀bamakin may release something to us in full
12	<i>Atóroró lorúko à ñ pokó</i>	One-long-stick is the name the penis is called
13	<i>Ìlù kan dùgbẹ̀ lorúko à ñ pòbò</i>	One-monstrous-drum is the name we call the vagina
14	<i>Èèwọ̀ òrìsà!</i>	Utterly forbidden!
15	<i>Ẹ̀mọ̀ kì í wáyé kó má bí</i>	That a rodent comes to life without procreating
16	<i>Àtọ̀lẹ̀ dọ̀lẹ̀ là á bá nínú àdán</i>	It is generations of foeti that is met in a bat's womb
17	<i>Kí ọ̀lẹ̀ ayọ̀ ó sọ nínú lágbájá ọ̀mọ̀ lágbájá</i>	May a joyful foetus spring in the womb of so-so the child of so-so
18	<i>Tó! Tó! Tó!</i>	So shall it be! So shall it be! So shall it be!

This incantatory poem is believed by traditional Yoruba people to solve identifiable cases of delayed pregnancy or inability to conceive in women. Because of the value placed on procreation in the people's culture, every Yoruba family considers the inability of its daughter to become pregnant after marriage as unacceptable.

This incantation makes use of iconicity, indexicality and symbolism for the purpose of drawing inferences, comparisons and emphases, and thereby, reinforces the purpose for which all the agents are galvanised for the purpose of fulfilling the expected desire therein. The incantation opens, in the 1<sup>st</sup> line, with a triply repeated phrase that suggests mythical/mystical deployment of terms. The phrase, *Ọ̀tòtò n tòrò* (The word acts distinctly (3ce)), seems to draw no

significant interpretation until digging further into the body of the poem. This is when the symbolic value of the phrase, which serves as the keys for accessing the secret womb of the verse, and which also makes the elements work towards meeting the desire(s) of the patient, is appreciated.

Some of the elements that are drawn upon, as to be seen in lines 2-4, include *Ẹ̀pà* (Groundnut), *Ìmumu* (Tiger nut) and *Ọ̀rò* (the word), all of which, individually and collectively, consist of several significations. Both groundnut and tiger nut, on one hand, are instances of iconic symbols in the manner they reproduce in multiples and correspond with the desire of the patient in the circumstance, to begin to count her children one after the other until she wants no more. On the other hand, the word, mostly considered in terms of its transcendental signification, is

deliberately iconic as much as it is symbolic. Generally speaking, the iconic significance of the word could be seen in the resemblance it shares with the action it elicits such that it could function emphatically, as an entreaty and the likes. As a powerful force put by nature in the service of mankind, the word could be deployed either for constructive purpose-to inspire or for disparaging purpose-to bring about futility. Essentially, the word, as it were, from the beginning to the present, carries with it the power to help, to enable, to ennoble, to heal, to enliven, to hinder, to hurt, to harm, to humiliate, to disable, to humble and to kill. In the context of this incantation, there is the exploration of the effusive quality of the word as embodied perhaps by the phallus' pushing ability for conception to be brought about. There is also a way in which the manner of manipulating the word, as a concept in the incantation, is symbolic. The word (*òrò*), in the African cultural episteme, does not only animate objects such as rocks, trees, rivers, winds, sky, moon, sun, land, forests, and so on, it in fact, speaks and instructs in the culture of Yoruba people, such that those who could recognise its voice obey its biddings and have their requests granted. This is the foundation of animist or magical realism in (African) imaginative writings and the ground on which *òrò* is connected with the potential to which the verse is ascribed.

The several ways of representing the necessity for performing sacrifices, as instructed by *òrò* (the word), are strikingly couched in synecdochic constructs, making the referents the carriers of indexical and symbolic significations. The expressions in lines 7-9 that, *Ká mú ǹ̀kan torí torí/...tòrùn tòrùn/...lódindi lódindi* (We take something by the head/ ... by the

neck/ ...in its whole form), could be taken to mean parts of birds or beasts such as pigeon, cock, guinea fowl, goat, sheep, ram, dog, pig, or the whole of any of the named. The indexical significance of the sacrificial items points to the supplicatory intentions behind sacrificial offerings in African traditional religion. Symbolically however, the size of the votive beast, especially in a substitutional sacrifice such as instructed, will likely determine the timeliness of the answer to the request(s) of the petitioner. This is the reason it is advised that the choicest of whatever items required for a sacrifice should always be made use of.

The deity's name mentioned in line 10, (*Ọbamakin*), for whom the sacrifice is meant, in the hope of returning *ǹ̀kan lódindi lódindi* (something in its fullness), is itself a symbolic-icon in the sense of which it is culturally relevant. This relevance partly lies in the hope of people, who may not necessarily be adherents, but who expect that their yearnings would be met. The yearning, in the circumstance, is the gift of a child which is also a symbolic testimony. As an iconic figure, *Ọbamakin* is exceedingly acknowledged for the great things its capable of doing. The name which partly reflects 'kingship' in Yoruba language foregrounds the greatness of its giftings.

The poem also attempts to deploy euphemisms in underscoring the two active agents or bodily organs that are involved in the act of propagation, using their 'essential' names in lines 12-13. These are, *Atótoró* (One long stick), and *Ìlù kan dùgbè* (One monstrous drum), which are used to qualify the male and the female genitals respectively. This is done in order to provoke them into functioning actively, thus, affirming the saying in

Yoruba thought: *Bí a bá perí ajá, ajá á máa gbó...bí a bá perí ikokò, ñ se ní í jáko* (When we call the essence of the dog, the dog backs... when we call the essence of the wolf, it manifests). Both names in question, individually, constitute cases of symbolic icon most especially as they deductively liken the act of copulation to drum beating. While the first signifier, *Atótoró* shares the quality of elongation with the signified, *okó* (male sexual organ or penis), the second signifier, *ilù kan dùgbè*, shares the quality of being flat with the signified *òbò* (female sexual organ or vagina), and the claim that both names are 'quintessential' to the referents has its validity in the worldview of the Yoruba people.

Some of the claims above could also be made in respect of two other iconic symbols cited in lines 15-16. The first, *emó* (Rodent) and the second, *àdán* (Bat) are mentioned towards the end of the verse. In the former is found the iconic figure for multiple births while in the latter is found the icon for multilayered gestation. The quest of the petitioner to give birth to children is paralleled by the potential found in the creatures. The icono-symbolic feature of the creatures is, on one hand, found in their collective signification as figures for production of their kinds, and on the other hand, that the acceptance of such thinking is located within the cultural milieu of the Yoruba people.

In the final analysis, the wish of the petitioner to become pregnant is emphatically expressed in line 17 as a prayer that, *...òlè ayò kó sọ* (...joyful foetus springs up) in her womb so that in a short while she becomes, by the will of the powers that be, a mother. The referent, *òlè ayò* (joyful foetus), is an iconic-index.

As an iconic sign it is replica of the host, while its indexicality is based on its being the consequence of the action(s) of its host. What could be regarded as the concluding signals of the incantation, *Too\ Too\ Too\* (So shall it be! So shall it be! So shall it be!), found in the last line are the traditional Yoruba ways of saying 'Amen'. The words have indexical signification just as they are symbolic. The indexicality in them is that the entire poetry constitutes a body of supplication for which a sanction is sought from some higher authorities in respect of a petitioner, and the expressions are, as well, symbolic because they are conventional Yoruba ways of expressing faith and seeking the approval of deities and other highly revered authorities.

### **Conclusion**

The deployment of signs in a piece of poetry could determine the depth of thought of the culture within which the poem emanates. What has therefore, been revealed through this analysis is the depth of the creative imagination of the Yoruba people through which they bring into realization those desires that would have been ordinarily unattainable. This is to the extent of which the people's culture has, through the instrumentation and manipulation of words, enabled such functionalities that keep benefiting humanity.

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