

## THE SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATION OF TIME AND PLACE IN THE INDIGENOUS HEALING SYSTEM: YORÙBÁ AS A CASE STUDY

*Oládélé Caleb Orímóògùnjé, Ph.D.*

Associate Professor of African Studies

Dept. of Linguistics, African and Asian Studies,

University of Lagos, Akoka. Nigeria

### **Abstract**

This paper studies the roles symbolism plays in the verbal arts used in Yorùbá indigenous healthcare practices. It also probes into how various scholars have employed symbolism as a critical concept and tool in their analysis of literary works to depict the relevance of symbolism to literary texts and the outside world; this makes it possible for the study to establish the fact that symbolism is unavoidable in man's daily activities among the the global world in general and the Yorùbá in particular. An attempt is also made to show how symbolism is related to time, place, object, and character in Yorùbá indigenous healthcare practices. This explanation shows how the time, place and character in their health-related verbal arts make them to be in close contact with practical and applied cultural values of their society. Furthermore, a more elaborate analysis is given on the symbolic characters in this study by suggesting various classes of characters with the ideas they symbolise in the health-related verbal arts among the Yorùbá. The symbolic analysis in this study is discussed at the meta-symbolic, meto-symbolic and phono-aesthetic levels to bring out the usefulness of the authouchtonous healthcare delivery system.

**Keywords: Healthcare, Indigenous, Symbolic, authouchtonous, Utilitarian, Time, Place.**

### **Introduction**

Various scholars have used the concept 'Symbolism' in general, and in particular, on their literary works by highlighting the relevance to literary texts. The work of Ogden and Richards (1923:9) on symbolism has really been exciting in the manner it defines symbolism as being relevant to literary texts and the outside world:

*Symbolism is the study of of the part played in human affairs by language and symbols of all kinds and especially of their influence on thought. It singles out for special inquiry the ways in which symbols help us and hinder us in reflecting on things.*

These scholars believe there is no aspect of human endeavour on which symbolism does not play a great role. The view of White (1949:35) is that man cannot, but make use of symbol in his endeavour, simply because, the device is regarded as an essential function of the human consciousness, and it is undoubtedly, basic to the people's understanding of the operations of the language, most especially in the health-related genres, as it will be shown in this section. In Preminger, etal (1965:833), Friedman, who discusses the functions of symbol sees it as being able to:

*...unite an image (the analogy) an idea or conception (subject)which that image suggests or evokes.*

The scholar above believes that symbolism comes in when an image, either concrete or abstract, leads to an idea or conception:

To buttress the opinion of Smith (1966:11), the Yoruba have symbolised all their activities in all human endeavours. This indigenous method of communication is known as **àrokò** which has been explicitly explained in Ògúndèjì (1997) who works on its communicative and semiotic contexts. Potter (1967:148) declares the importance of symbolic expression being the instrument with which man comprehends his natural environment and the thing that makes him feel elevated among other creatures. In Firth's (1973:76-77) studies on symbols of various phenomena, he asserts that, symbolism is an instrument of expression of the communication of knowledge and of control. Firth's regard to this device shows that it is an inevitable instrument in the life of man. He even explains earlier that language is an aspect of symbolism thus:

*Language is an important system of symbols through which the individual transforms physical reality into experienced reality. So giving something a name gives it recognition and status in the categories of experienced reality<sup>1</sup>*

It is through language that the interpretation of every symbol is made possible. Even when an image is used to decode another image, one still needs language to explain further. An image which is a sign of a given phenomenon is even an aspect of language. Emananjo (1977) has worked on the use of symbolism in Igbo folktales and explained that time, place, characters and number are symbolic in the genre. In this study, we borrow a leaf from this scholar, but with a little modification in the treatment of symbolism. Olátúnjí (1984:160-162), in his work, describes symbolism as applied to **ofò** as a mere symbolic word-play which is described from the belief and the assumption of a certain phenomenon being focused on or used as an instrument to get their targets. Similar to Olátúnjí's idea, we believe that symbolism, most particularly, in this study, also refers to an image apart from the verbal aspect

### **Symbolic Time.**

The time used in the health-related verbal arts is symbolic. It is usually used to symbolise a certain period, or when a certain thing happened, most especially in the era immemorial. The time is usually marked with '**Lójó tí**' (the day that), '**nígbàtí**' (when), '**ojúmó timó**' (it is dawn), '**níojókìn-ín-ní**' (in the primordial time') '**lóní**' (today) and '**àmódún**' (next year). This time symbolism is frequently used in **ofò** (incantations) and its sub-types. Let us examine some examples:

*... Òunni ó sawofún ódorikágbàgbé<sup>2</sup>*

*Nígbàtìòpòlò kóèèta*

*Póun n lẹ raèpèníjọ kìn-ín-ní ...*

*Àtẹ̀lẹ̀sẹ̀ tólọraèpèníjọ kìn-ín-ní*

*Nşenìwàrè dojúbolẹ...*

5

*Látònílọ kabuki ó báòtá mi elépè*

*...He was the one who cast Ifá for ódorikágbàgbé*

When the toad was given three pence  
 That it would buy a curse in the primordial time...  
 The foot that bought a curse in the primordial time  
 Was highly disgraced ... 5  
 Hence forth, my enemies should be disgraced

In the excerpt above, the time markers are somehow vague, because no one knows the exact time of the incidents being referred to. We may have the tendency of asking a question to clarify when the 'toad was given three pence', and 'the foot bought a curse'. Being unable to know the exact time makes the text a myth. Though, the vagueness of time in the text above has not made it lose its practical and applied cultural values. The desire of the enchanter symbolises the time when the divine powers were procured by various creatures. The aim of the enchanter is to make the current situation to represent the primordial time, so that the desired thing will be granted. Let us examine the following text in which 'time' discusses the future, as well as the cyclical events that have a place in temporal symbolism:

Èyinàgànté ẹ wásíbí  
 Tóbádàmódún ẹ ẹ gbómọ wáwòran  
 Ọmọ Erelùlà n pèyínnílé o  
 Ọmọ Erelùlà n pèyínnílé o  
 Ẹ wale *lámòdún*, ẹ wá gbàdúra<sup>3</sup> 5

You barren that came here  
 You'll come with your children *next year*  
 At home, you are known as the offspring of Erelú  
 At home, you are known as the offspring of Erelú  
 Come to the *annual* festival for blessings 5

The *àmódún* (next year) here symbolises the hope or faith they have in the divinity they worship. Furthermore, it represents the joy and happy celebration of the years to come. The time symbolism is crucial in the health-related verbal arts because it establishes the efficacy of the intended desire of the users. Through the use of time that is symbolic, the durability and timelessness of such verbal arts are revealed.

### Symbolic Places.

In most of the health-related verbal arts, the scene of the incident is real to the users in accordance to the Yorùbá belief. The idea of the places being substantial symbolises various things among the users of these genres which feature in their indigenous healthcare vocations:

... Ògúnló n şawowonl'ódeÌrè  
 Nígbàtó n báÒrúnmilàşotá  
 Òrúnmilà pa á  
 Ó fi í ránşę síwọn lode ọrun  
 Şàngóló n şawowonl'ódeỌyó... 5  
 Èşùló n şawowonl'ódeKétu...  
 Şigìdìló n şawowonl'ódeÌjèlú...  
 Èpèló n şawowonl'ódeÌjèbú...

... Ògún is the divinity being worshipped at **Ìrè**  
 When he conspired against Òrúnmilà  
 Òrúnmilà killed him  
 And sent him to heaven  
 Sango is the divinity being worshipped in **Ọyó**... 5  
 Esu is the divinity being worshipped in **Kétu**...  
 Sigidi is the divinity being worshipped in **Ìjèlú**...  
 Epe is the divinity being worshipped in **Ìjèbú**...

The venues/scenes of the incidence in the above excerpt are **Ìrè** (an **Èkìtì** town), **Ọrun** (heaven) **Ọyó** (a town in **Ọyó** State), **Kétu** (in the Republic of Benin), **Ìjèlú** (an **Èkìtì** town) and **Ìjèbú** (a district in **Ògùn** State). **Ìrè** is synonymous with technology. Blacksmiths are many there simply because the town is believed to be the abode of **Ògún**, the divinity in charge of technology. To an average Yoruba man, **Ìrè** symbolises technological advancement. As regards **ọrun** (heaven), it represents what is moribund to every physical existence on the terrestrial world. That is why, those who conspired against **Òrúnmilà** were sent there. It signifies death, that is, a point of no-return. It also symbolises a permanent home to which every creature is

bound to return. Any creature that does not enjoy health, returns ‘home’ (Òrun) untimely. Òyó is seen as the seat of administration (political seat) among the Yoruba, being the abode of Şàngó, the divinity in charge of the Ministry of Justice. In the pre-colonial era, civil and criminal cases were being referred to Òyó for final hearing. In some health-related texts, Ifè is mentioned to symbolise the cradle of life, world and every human endeavour. Let us examine the following excerpt:

*Mo jáwé olálùkẹkẹ<sup>4</sup>*  
*Olálùkẹkẹ!*  
*Òrò kanlùkẹkẹ lùkẹkẹ léyìnkùlé mi lánàà*  
*Ó şemibişnikí n dáfá*  
*Èmikòdá* 5  
*Ni mobáwípé*  
*A tidé mi mọ bàbá*  
*Bàbátidé mi máte*  
*Ó dífáfémiàjèjì*  
*Tó n telè Ifè gírìgírìlàiṃolèè tè...* 10

*I plucked the leaf of olálùkẹkẹ*  
*Olálùkẹkẹ!*  
*There was an imminent trouble in my*  
*backyard yesterday*  
*I felt like casting Ifá,*  
*But I did not* 5  
*Then, I said*  
*I’ve been wholly covered by father*  
*And father has covered me with a hat*  
*Ifa divination was performed for me, a sojourner*  
*Who behaves mannerlessly and discourteously inIfè...* 10

Ifè, in this excerpt, represents the first place where every power and knowledge was given to mankind. It is regarded as the origin of the world, all phenomena and practices. The origin of healthcare delivery system could also be traced to Ifè (see Orimóògùnjé, 1986:1-13).

Some of the Yorùbá cities are known as the seats of civilisation, as it is postulated in some texts used in their indigenous healthcare delivery system. A natal song that depicts this symbolism goes thus:

*Ọlómọ lólayé  
Baba lókèkófún mi lómọ  
Mo d'Ékòó<sup>5</sup>  
Mo dé'Baàdàn  
Dókítátó n ọmọ kòsí o... 5*

*The world is controlled by those who  
have children  
May God give me children  
I've been to Eko  
I've been to Ibadan  
No doctor is capable of creating children... 5*

In Yorùbáland, these two cities are popular and people like to sojourn there, with the belief that they are abodes of the elites. They also perceive these urban areas as where one could get an adequate healthcare delivery system. Though the excerpt above exposes the ignorance of the raconteur for thinking that a human being cannot be created by anyone in life. We are saying this, because of the cloning system that is now in practice in the Western World.

Western education has inculcated it into the Yorùbá that a place that is synonymous with learning or knowledge is schools, most especially, the University. That is why the raconteurs of natal songs make it a favourite place for their children to be:

*Yunifásítìnimofé  
Níbitáwọ̀nỌ̀jògbọ̀nwà  
Ibẹ̀ lómọ̀ mí yòò lọ  
Oríjẹ̀ kó le débẹ̀ o.*

*I love the University*

*Where the Professors are  
My children will attend  
May my destiny assist in getting them there.*

The Yorùbá cherish qualitative and quantitative education. Like their counterparts in other parts of the world, regard the University as a place of wisdom, decency, knowledge and power. This perception has a great psychological motivation that makes them endeavour to take the health of their children into consideration in order to get them in the University.

### **Conclusion**

In Conclusion, symbolism plays a great role in the indigenous healthcare delivery system in the Yorùbá traditional setting. The meaning given to each symbol in relation to the belief of the users makes the position of the Yorùbá in health-related issues clear and rational in using these genres as therapeutic indices.

### **Notes**

1. The quotation is extracted from Firth (1973:172) *Symbols: Public and Private*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.
2. Ódoríkàgbàgbé is an ancient name and it means that it is high time people forgot doing evil.
3. The excerpt was recorded during Ìyámòpó festival in Alápákó, Ifò Local Government Area, Ògùn State.
4. Olálùkẹkẹ is a primordial name
5. Èkó is also known as Lagos.



### References

- Adegbite, A. (1991). *Some Features of Languages In Yorùbá Traditional Medicine*. Ph. D Thesis, University of Ibadan.
- Delisle, J. (1988). *Translation: An Interpretive Approach*. Canada: University of Ottawa Press.
- Emananjo, E. (1977). Some Notes on Symbolism in the Igbo Folktales. *The AICE Tablets: A Literary Journal of Students' Association*, 3, 9-13.
- Evans, L. (1964). *The Crises in Medical Education*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

- Firth, R. (1973). *Symbols: Public and Private*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.
- Harley, G. (1970). *Native African Medicine*. London: Gerald Dinkworth and Co. Ltd.
- Ogden, C. and Richards, I. (1923). *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language Upon Thought*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Ògùndèjì, P. (1997). The communicative and Semiotic Contexts of Àrokò among the Yorùbá Symbol Communication Systems. *African Languages and Cultures, School of Oriental and African Studies*, 10 (2), 145-156.
- Olatunji, O (1984). *The Features of Yorùbá Oral Poetry*. Ìbàdàn: Ìbàdàn University Press.
- Orímòògùnjé, O. (1986). *Ọdún Ọsanyinni Osùn-ún Èkiti*. B.A. Project, Obáfẹmi Awólọwọ University, Ilé-Ifẹ.
- Preminger, A. et al. (1975). *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Potter, S. (1967). *Modern Linguistics*. London: Andre Deutsch.
- Smith, E. (1966). *African Ideas of God*. London: House Press.
- White, A. (1949). *The Science of Culture: A Study of man and Civilization*. New York: Grove Press.