The Element of Symbolism in non-animals featured in the Yorùbá Health-related Genres

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Abstract

This paper will attempt a study of how symbolism portrays some in-animate objects featured in the verbal arts used in the Yorùbá indigenous healthcare practices. We shall attempt to show how symbolism is related to in-animate characters in the indigenous healthcare practices. We shall analyse the texts under study at the metaphorical level taking their socio-cultural contexts into consideration. The psychological dimension on the users of health-related genres will also be investigated. Various scholars have used Symbolism as a critical concept and tool in their analysis of literary works.

Keywords: Symbolism, Genres, Health-related, metaphorical level, meta-symbolism, meto-symbolism.
Introduction

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 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.

According to the scholars cited above, it is revealed that there is hardly any aspect of human endeavour to which symbolism is not relevant. In his view on symbolism, White (1949:35) concludes that “…the key to this world and the means of participation on it is the symbol.”

From White’s perspective, man cannot but make use of symbols in his endeavour simply because the device is regarded as the essential function of human consciousness, and it is undoubtedly basic to the people’s understanding of the operations of the language. This is most especially true in the case of Yorùbá health-related genres, as it will soon be shown. In Preminger (1965:833), Friedman, who discusses the functions of symbol sees it as being able to

…unite an image (the analogy) and an idea or conception (the subject) which that image suggests or evokes

What this scholar drives at is that symbolism comes in when an image, either concrete or abstract, leads to an idea or conception. To establish the fact that symbolism is unavoidable in man’s daily activities among the Africans in general and the Yorùbá in particular, Smith (1966:11) stipulates that

Symbolism enters into the very texture of African art, religion, social custom, everyday speech.

It can in fact be rightly concluded that the Yorùbá have symbolised all their activities in all human endeavours. This indigenous method of communication is known as àrokò which has been explicitly explained in Ògúndéjí (1997) who works on its communicative and semiotic contexts. Potter (1967:148) declares the importance of symbolic expression thus:

…The essential act of thought or cognition is symbolization. It is this; above all else, that raises the mental faculties of men above those of animals. It is also this ability to use symbols that has made man the master of the world of nature.

The above quotation expresses symbol, as 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, it is asserted that, symbolism is an instrument of expression of the communication of knowledge and of control. Firth’s (1973: 172) regard to this device shows that it is an inevitable instrument in the life of man. In his earlier discussion, language is regarded as
...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.

If language itself is a symbolic system as Firth notes, then it can be regarded as the basic human symbolic system which is employed in the interpretation of other symbols. Ògundèjì (1997:156) also shows, for example that ‘…the linguistic medium…’ is ‘…the final channel of interpretation’ in ârokọ the Yorùbá symbol-communication. This we believe, is true of almost if not all other symbolic communications. 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. Òlatùnji (1984:160-162), in his work, describes symbolism as applied to òfọ as a symbolic word-play which is used as an instrument to get their targets. This is commonly found in Òs and its sub-types (àyájọ, ìwúre, òbẹ and ëpẹ). In our own view, and from the perspective of this study, symbolism in òfọ and other genres under study refers to concrete images apart from the verbal aspect.

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 the idea of this scholar, but with a little modification in the treatment of symbolism. What he refers to as symbolic time and place are changed to temporal and spatial symbolism respectively. Besides this, 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. This symbolic analysis is discussed at meta-symbolic, meto-symbolic and phono-aesthetic levels as suggested in Ògundèjì (1988:37-43).²

**Symbolic Inanimate-object-characters**

There are various inanimate object-characters found in the health-related verbal arts. Despite the fact that they are inanimate, the Yorùbá have a strong belief that they have invisible spirits that facilitate the healing system. The inanimate objects discussed in this section may appear as objects or characters in the verbal arts used for health purposes. These inanimate ingredients include omi (water), ilèkẹ (beads), òkè (hill), epo (Palm oil) adín (palm kernel oil), etc. We shall discuss the most prominent among them- Ómi (water), and òtí (alcoholic drinks)

**Ómi (Water)**

Ómi (water) is the most useful and prominent object or object-character in the Yorùbá indigenous healthcare delivery system. The Yorùbá believe that water is medicinal and it has the properties for curing ailments. The devotees of a divinity called Òsun, among the Yorùbá believe solely in the medicinal power of omi (water). Its nature being an essential commodity in mankind is demonstrated in a verse of ìwúre (supplicatory blessings):

Ômi lábùwé.
Ômi lábúmu.
Èníkan kí i bómí i sötá.

Water is used for bathing.
Water is used for drinking.
No one keeps malice with water.
The verse of *iwúre* is made up of two lines of incantatory positive assertions and a line of negative assertion based on the indispensability of *omi* (water) to mankind. Seventy five percent of humans body and indeed of the whole world is said to be made up of water. Man needs to drink a good quality of water daily to be in good health. A good number of the Yorùbá herbal preparations especially the *àgbo* (potion) type are dissolved in water or the liquid. Man also needs water for cleaning not only the body but also most other things. Hence the assertion that no one can afford to be an “enemy” of water, i.e. no one can do without it. This may be taken to imply a kind of natural love and desire for it because of its constant relevance and indispensability. This is therefore what water tends to symbolise as the chanter’s application of the assertive statements is always that people around him/her should love him/her and be interested in his/her situations and conditions to the extent that they will not be able to do without him/her just as man cannot do without water. *Omi* (water) in Yorùbá *iwúre* is also a symbol of fulfillment and an indelible foot-print in life as shown in the saying:

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Bómi bá bálẹ,
Omi a nípa.
Ká nípa sówó.
Ká nípa sómọ.
Ká nípa sákú.

If water drops on the ground,
Water usually leaves a mark.
We shall be remarkable in money.
We shall be remarkable in procreation.
We shall be endowed with longevity.
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This is another example of incantatory assertion derived from both physical truism and phono-aesthetics. When water drops on the floor, the mark it makes is always visible. This is described as *ipa*. The chanter is using their truism as a premise for his supplication that he also may live a glaring mark in the mentioned aspects of his life. The same noun *ipa* is used in Yorùbá for describing this. The association or relationship between the two marks i.e. *ipa omi* (mark made by water) and *ipa owó, omọ àtí àíkú* (remarkable success as far as the issues of money, procreation and longevity are concerned) are metaphoric, hence water in this example is a meta-symbol of remarkable success in general. It should be remembered that the issues referred to are directly or indirectly connected with health and general well-being. Water also symbolises victory, tranquility and peace. The nature of *omi* to cool down hot things, quench a fire and put an end to draught is what allows for the symbolism:

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Omi níít poró iná.
Ójó sọsọ níí poró ógbélẹ.
$mi ni k7 n r1y8n =tq mi.

Water usually quenches fire.
A rainy atmosphere neutralises the effect of draught.
I should conquer my enemies.
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The above ọgbọ (incantation) is used by a chanter who does not want any of his/her adversaries to be a clog in the wheel of his/her general well-being. He/she wishes to conquer his/her adversaries and enjoy peace and tranquility like that of an undisturbed lake. Analogical attention can also be drawn to the potential power of water as torrents and falls for the purpose of buttressing the ambivalence of the symbolism. Water, it is usually said will always find its level. As a torrent, it sweeps away obstacle on its path. It is therefore no surprise that it is seen as a meta-symbol of insurmountable power. Furthermore, ọmì (water) symbolises inexhaustibility. The concept of water as the ocean or the sea, a large lake that never dries off is what is at focus in this symbolism. The users of Yorùbá health-related genres in indigenous healthcare practices do desire to have inexhaustible wealth and health:

Àbùdị ni ọmì òkun.
Abùdị ni tomi ṣà.
Atujo ẹtẹrùn.
Ilé alákan kí è gbe.

The sea water does not dry
The lagoon water does not dry
Both in rainy and dry seasons
The hole of the crab never dries

A physical analogy drawn in this positive assertive lines of incantation are premised upon the fact that no mark is left on water whenever some of it is dropped out of the sea or ocean and the fact that the crab’s hole is always wet, even during the dry season. By implication, the chanter’s desire is that his/her course of health and wealth will be inexhaustible. This idea of inexhaustibility of water is given another meaning, when the chanter desires that nothing should tamper with his/her health in the following lines of incantative assertions.

A kí i ọmì lọgbé.
A kí i ta ẹjúfú láfù.
A kí i rójù ṣe gbé áná làra omi.

No one machetes the water.
No one shoots the wind with an arrow.
No one can find wounds of machete-cut of the previous day on the water.

The emphasis in these three lines of negative assertion is that it is impossible to harm water. The chanter in this case extends this to him/herself through some metaphysical associations. By implication it will be impossible for the chanter to be harmed. These lines of incantation is used for protection against attackers who might want to wound and maim him/her. The lines are usually used to accompany a charm called ọkígbé (anti-machete-cut).

Ọtì (alcoholic drink)
Ọtì (alcoholic drink) is a popular drinks in the Yorùbá traditional setting. This liquid substance symbolises various things. It plays a prominent role in the Yorùbá indigenous healthcare delivery
system, as shall be explained in this section. Ṙtí is an antedote of amnesia (loss of memory). Ṙúnunílág used Ṙtí to heal amnesia he was suffering from according to a verse in Òdú Òdí Méjí as it is presented in Abímbólá (1968:57-58) thus:

Ó tábá lákun
Ó tákítí lóṣá
Akán ló gbénu ódó
Ó ń sebo iṣuruṣuru Òlófin

A diá’fún Ṙúnunílág,
Nígbà tí Ófá ń mu bábá,
Tí Ófá ń mu șékéité.
Ófá ń niyè nínú mó.
Nwọn ń ń káakí mílè,

Ó jàre

Ebọ ń ni ọ șẹ.
Nwọn ń ń rú ọpọlọpò ọtì;
Nwọn ń kí ńṣẹ́ ńwá ló ń bù mu nifẹ.
Ijó ń ńjó

Ayọ ń nyọ

Ó ń yín awọ rẹ,
Awọ ń awọ rẹ ń yín’Fá.
Ó ń ńṣẹ́ kótó
Orin ńwọ ń ni ńkọ
Ó ń niṣẹ́ aladé ńgba ọtì ń ńkan
Ịyé Ẹdù lā wáà

It stretches out its leg in the sea
It stretches out its leg in the lagoon
The crab is usually in the stream
Performing sacrifice persistently for Òlófin.

Ifá divination was performed for Ṙúnunílág,

When Ifá did not take bábá drinks,
Ifá did not take șékéité drinks.
Ifá was suffering from amnesia.
He was advised to adore the spirits
He should please,
Perform a sacrifice.
He should sacrifice with some alcohol drinks;
He was advised to take out of it.
He was dancing.
He was happy.
He was eulogising his priests,
His priests in turn were eulogising Ifá.
He opened his mouth
Singing the cultic songs
He said the crowned king took a cup of alcohol
He became conscious.

The Yorùbá have the cultural belief that alcoholic intake aids being mentally active. Ṙtí (alcoholic drink) is regarded as the embodiment of quintessence, that is, it is a commodity that mankind cannot do without. This cultural fact makes people take it, so that they will gain physical and mental fitness that will make the society be in need of them. This symbolic fact is stipulated in Òdú Ogbè-
alára³ where ọtì (alcoholic drink) was banished from Ifẹ-Akẹlúbẹ̀̀bẹ̀̀ (see Orímọ̀gùn̄jẹ 2004:198-202 and 266-269). Thereafter, there were chaos and pandemonium to the extent that the whole society lost her consciousness and mental stability. It was when ọtì was granted an amnesty that the whole society was able to regain her consciousness. Ọtì also represents anxiety reliever and trouble shooter. It has its own peculiar nature that gets rid of any trouble that can make one nervous. This is concomitant with the saying of the Yorùbá: ‘ọtì parí ọjọ́’ meaning that alcoholic drink dismisses cases that can demoralise one. This fact is also depicted in ọfọ̀ aforán (case-dismissing incantations) used to quell the effect of serious cases in the court of justice. This method of getting one discharged and acquitted has been among the Yorùbá from time immemorial through the use of the type of incantation presented below:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ọrọ́ tẹ̀ọ̀ tọ̀ kẹ̀kẹ̀ si} \\
\text{Alé àna ni mo fì sòtì,} \\
\text{Mo tì fì mu.} \\
\text{Mo mòmò fì mògùrọ.} \\
\text{Mo fì sòtì,} \\
\text{Mo fì mu.}
\end{align*}
\]

5

The trouble you were nervous for.
I had put it in the alcoholic drink yesterday.
I had drunk it.
I had drunk it along with ọgùrọ.
I put it in the alcoholic drink,
I had drunk it.

The belief of the chanter in the potency of ọtì and other alcoholic drinks to make man trouble-free and to dismiss one’s existing civil and criminal cases, is connected to his/her nervous system. This thereby gets him/her relieved. Also, another saying that reads thus:

\[
\text{Enì ọtì kí i tì.} \\
\text{Enì bàbà kí i bà.}
\]

One who is fond of alcohol never fades
One who is fond of guinea-corn liquor never spoils

The phono-aesthetic symbolism that features in the above iwúre (supplicatory blessing) adds literary dexterity to the saying. The verb tì (fade) drawn from the noun ọtì and the verb bà (to lose taste/get spoilt) drawn from bàbà are to give the user confidence that heath wise he/she will not lose natural and physical strengths.

**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.
Endnotes

1. Meta-symbolism and meto-symbolism explain how metaphor and metonymy are respectively used as literary devices in this study, while phono-aesthetic symbolism is used as pun and could be likened to what Ṣolá dúnlú (1984:160) refers to as symbolic word-play. Meta-symbolism explains how signs are motivated based on the cultural belief of the users. Though these signs are not physically apparent but their process of derivation is logical. In the case of meto-symbolism, there is an obvious communicable relationship between the signifier and the signified.

2. Other liquid alcoholic substances are bàbà (alcohol made from guinea corn), ògòrò (wine, tapped from the raffia palm), ọtì àgàdàngídì (alcohol made from plantain), èmu-àran (wine tapped from palm tree) ṣèkètè (alcohol made from maize).

3. Ogbé-alárá is one of the minor Odù, a combination of Ogbé and Otúrá. It is otherwise known as Ogbétúrá and Ogbéyónú:

1 1
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1 1

Ìwọ lọwọ sọ e mèe bọ ọ wí.
Ọrọ isiyi wọn ọ tójā.
Ìjà lọ dé lorin dòwè.
A diá f’óti tíi ọmọ wọn lọde Ìlărè.
Ìwọ lọwọ sọ e mèe bọ ọ wí.
Ọrọ isiyi wọn ọ tójā.
Ìjà lọ dé lorin dòwè.
A diá f’”ògùrò títì ọmọ wọn lọde ìlódè.
Ìwọ lọwọ sọ e mèe bọ ọ wí.
Ọrọ isiyi wọn ọ tójā.
Ìjà lọ dé lorin dòwè.
A diá f’”òjììtì tutì ọmọ wọn lọde Ọtúnmòbà
Wón wáá pètè pèrò
Wón lótì lọ nífè Akèlùbèbè
Lisò Òpè.
A wá ń sòlójọ,
A ǹ gbóhùn apé.
A ń sòwàrò,
A ń gbóhùn abèbè.
A ń sjójnnjàmòdùn o,
A ń gbóhùn alágogo
Ọgèèdè-pagbo-májó, ɔrè ọtì
Ọun lọ lọ rẹ̀ rẹ̀ mimí wàlè
La ń sòlójọ,
A n gbôhin apê.
A n sòwàrò.
A n gbôhin abèbè.
A n sjànjìjàmòdàn ọ,
A n gbôhin alàgogo.
Ọ n ọtì lamúwàgùn òwò ọ,
Ọgèdè-pagbo-má-jòó,
ọtì lamúwàgùn òwò ẹni.

I scolded you because you were found guilty
The matter is not worth fighting for
Proverbial songs ensue when a fight is on
Ifá divination was performed for Òtí who hails from Ìlàrà
I scolded you because you were found guilty
The matter is not worth fighting for
Proverbial songs ensue when a fight is on
Ifá divination was performed for Ògùrò who hails from Ìlòdè
I scolded you because you were found guilty
The matter is not worth fighting for
Proverbial songs ensue when a fight is on
Ifá divination was performed for cold water who hails from Òtúnmòbà
They conspired
To banish Òtí from Ìfè-Akèlùbèbè
Lísò Òpè
We celebrated Òlójò festival,
We did not hear people clapping
We celebrated Òwàrò
Without enjoying the sound of local fans
We celebrated the end of the year
Without enjoying the traditional gong
Ọgèdè-pagbo-má-jòó, the friend of Òtí
Went to bring Òtí back home
We now celebrated Òlójò,
With clapping.
We now celebrated Òwàrò,
With local fans.
We now celebrated the end of the year,
With traditional gong.
He said the initiates drink ọtì to make them vigorous
Ọgèdè-pagbo-má-jòó,
The intake of alcohol makes people strong.
References


