# African Art and Symbols: Adding Meaning to Global Advertising Design Trends.

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**Abstract**
Modern advertising berthed in Nigeria in 1960. Locating graphic designers knowledgeable in producing identity based designs suitable for the burgeoning mixed economy clienteles was a herculean task. Earlier, Identity issue was driven home and hard by the emerging Pan African political class. The importance attached to creating such big idea based on African value along the line necessitated exploration into the store house of folklore and other cultural values leading to semiotics. This paper proves that it was applied to Seaman Schnnaps, a product advertising since 1970s. By 1980s the design African Continental Bank, a "Continental House" congratulatory Institutional message explored semiotics in combined text and image. Recently, "Omoluabi' a public communication campaign opened up the vistas of reinventing values from Yoruba past to propose solutions akin to social problems signified by vices. It proposes cultural framework along with institutional advertising within public communication anchored by the ACB and Lydoline paint messages among others to project new meanings. Every visual communication message as the engine room of advertising has a function at the marketplace. Symbols, signs and gestures were decoded and encoded with new meanings by deconstruction to situate new designs beyond the stereotypes. These messages are publicity designs, a dictate of current globalization Integrated Marketing Communications.

**Keywords:** Institutional message, public communication, semiotics, symbols and meanings

## Introduction

When advertising finally debuted in Nigeria in 1960, as Amifor (2016) asserts "the search to locate an African graphic artist knowledgeable in African oriented design production was difficult. Earlier, the company that metamorphosed to be known as Lintas West Africa Limited existed as West African Publicity (WAP)" The publicity company constructed sites and posted outdoor poster bills gradually across the nation, having started from railway lines, the travel links to parts of northern Nigeria, then considered vintage sites. Meanwhile, the poster designs were produced in faraway London. The information in the publication *Lintas fifty years still growing* reveals that "There were no agencies no creative facilities. Ads were knocked with the help of local printers and appeared in local newspapers whose circulation rarely exceeded a thousand copies". The era of West African Publicity 1928-1960 witnessed tremendous Pan African activities centered on Identity issues and agitation for independence for African countries including Nigeria. Most articulated was Negritude, a concept espoused on African beauty by Leopold Senghor of Senegal. Notable Pan Africanists were: Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria, Leopold Senghor of Senegal, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Milton Obote of Uganda, Houphart Boughny of Ivory Coast, William Tubman of Liberia, Emperor Haile Sallasie of Ethiopia and Habib Borguiba of Tunisia. Identity issue influenced the works of early Nigeria artists such as Aina Onabolu, Akinola Lasekan Ben Enweonwu among others. But such creative effort was in the areas of painting and sculpture.

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The first Nigerian graphic artist found, Erhabor Emokpai was recruited only in 1961.In pursuit of Identity issue, the new nationalist government in Africa provided patronage to emerging young artists across Africa in addition to promoting art schools; in accordance with Identity focused professional art training; the department of fine arts, University of Ife espoused its philosophy as based on the followings: (1) a reorientation in art education towards functionalism, (2) the adaptation of indigenous design resources to meet the needs and requirements of modern times: and (3) the evolution of an identity for contemporary Nigerian art. Imoukhuede (1984). In fact, the progenitor of that departmental creative philosophy, Professor Babatunde Lawal mentored this author in his graphic design classes. As a result, what is reflected on both the ACB, Lydoline Paints and Guinness designs produced by this author as an advertising practitioner in later years signified Ife Art School revolution as the department is referenced. Most appreciative was the establishment of Enwonwu College of Fine Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka by Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nigeria's Pan Africanist and foremost nationalist in 1961. Significantly, both Nsukka and Ife art schools developed identity orientation from the onset as ideology.

Today we see advertising and promotion designs as integral part of our social and economic systems with global connectivity. As a result, practitioners in visual communication are constantly searching for new methods advertising message delivery. The growth of graphics as it metamorphosed into visual communication in advertising has been based on exploration to situate identity based designs for the local markets. This could be discerned in similar vein from Belch and Belch (2012). "The ability of advertising and other promotional methods to deliver carefully, prepared messages to target audiences has given them a major role in the marketing programs of most organizations "Implicitly, in Nigeria's based market economy advertising graphics end products accelerates the movement of products from the manufactures factories to consumer homes in unprecedented manner. But there is more to advertising than products; other sides are services and ideas predicated by creative glut, media clutter, and differentiation in design engagement.

From a brief description, Moriarty, Mitchell, and Wells (2009) defines advertising as "a paid persuasive communication that uses mass and interactive media to reach broad audiences in other to connect an identified sponsor with buyers (a target audience) and to provide information about products (goods, services and ideas)" In the process, modern advertising aspires to create impact leaning on creative differentiation to generate strategies in an attempt to locate the Big ideas. In this vein, the storehouse of value located in Kwa language past is identified as integral part of design literacy explored in advertising based on semiotics in continuation of the identity issue. Unfortunately, graphic design is hardly recorded by Nigerian art historians, most who base their research on self-reflexed or formal construction rather than context in approach.

Today, that graphic communication is rarely articulated by African scholars resonate from the limited definition of art and its practice in modern times influenced by anthropology. In fact, an anthropologist, Kottack (2004) on art, asserts that "Many cultures lack terms that can be translated easily as 'art or the art' and goes further to situate that "People express themselves creatively in dance, music, song, painting, sculpture, pottery, cloth, storytelling, verse, prose, drama, and comedy. Further definition attempt by another scholar was Aniakor (2002) in limited referencing argues that, Igbo art could be a piece of sculpture, pottery, like a mask head or an ancestral figure, a woven structure, metal pendant, or anklet, a wall painting, a horse leather trapping, painting on canvass" Appropriations from these repertoire of African arts sites described by these writers today reflect in Uli associated with Nsukka

School and Ona associated with Ife School and the Eye from Zaria School. Translations from these group styles pervade Nigerian scene and are well documented but, lacking foray into advertising design or graphic communications.

**In retrospect**

However, appropriation has been on going in the advertising practice similar to Szarkowsky (in Burgin 1986), a postmodern photographer who attest that "New pictures derive first of all from old pictures. What an artist brings to his work that is new – special to his life and his own eyes – is used to challenge and revise his tradition" Potent creative possibilities are inherent in past values as advertisement Institutional designs positioned in this paper reveal. These works are reflections of semiotic ambiance. Extant history and observed cultural symbols, signs and codes provide retrieve tendency fulcrum as bedrock of knowledge.. For example, and according to Achulonu (2009)"All said, the monolith of Ikom and other pre - historic Rock Art of Africa, the Igbo Ukwu Serpent Science Writings and hosts of other symbols, writings yet to be taken seriously by Igbo and African scholars are written Scripture of the Hamite/Idu/Old Ife civilizations"

From the Kwa language family, it is interesting to note that Yoruba Ifa tradition espouses much of Igbo identity within Moremi myth, Beninn myth, as well as Kwa language group considered the earliest people in the universe. Arguably, Black African culture that created Nok culture of the Niger Benue confluence and by extension the Bantu migration towards the South Africa had similar creative prowess. Among the Yoruba, it was recorded that "In his own Age, Obatala, the founder of Igbo nation was the highest of all the sons of God who descended into the world to save from an evil deity" Acholonu (2009,a)

In its wider dispensation, culture is sum total of people's way of life as it resonates from religion, education, arts, science, commerce, economics, and overall attitudinal engagement of man. In visual arts given expressive culture, it is in the area of visual communication that has used symbols and signs most for information dissemination since its graphics exploits text, image, music, performance, photography, (still and movie) in creating designs. The practice demands text in typographical form and image, sound and verbal for informational messages in Nigeria over the years. Invariably, design perfection exploits language to infer meaning. Such reasons remind us of Mukarovsky (in Burgin 1986,a) who "in 1934 saw among the pitfalls awaiting the art theorist with no grasp of semiology, that is , the temptation to treat the work of art as purely formal construction. Given its trends, from linguistic model displaced in 1970s Burgin (1986,b) reiterates that "The word 'semiotics' is now used to designate the ever changing field of cross- disciplinary studies whose common focus is on the general phenomenon of meaning in the society which of course include deconstruction analysis.

Dictates of globalization today tends to present culture as integrated system of a world without border through the media which invariably influences behavioral change in attitudinal pattern. Aptly, these tendencies impacts on individual culture as they borrow and discard values from external sources. This paper since 1980 to date; navigates the use of semiotics expended in symbols, signs and gestures to decipher meanings in design exposed to Nigerian consumers so far. Symbioses of past values are unearthed from Africa, mostly the Kwa language group linked to Igbo, Yoruba and Ekoi area of Cross river state. Modern Nigeria's art historical constructs have been restrictive as narrative are limited to fine arts areas notably, drawing, painting, sculpture, ceramics and textiles as earlier noted. Perhaps that prompted Picton (n.d) to proffer suggestions. "How do we assess the apparent continuities? Equally, as part of this (expanded?) discourse, we need to take up and explore the relationship

between art and advertising, including graphics and so called popular art"

As a result, design dispensation exploits language to infer meanings. Globalization today seems to present culture as integrated system through the media. This is as a result of behavioral changes that affect pattern of individual culture exposed through the visual communication design and photography as the engine room of modern advertising message construct in terms of use of semiotics expended in symbols, sign and gesture. Symbiosis of retrieved essence of culture are unearthed from Africa's past and present, mostly the Kwa language group linked to Igbo, Yoruba and Ekoi area of Cross River State.

The paper addresses the narrative need for semiotics ambiance woven from image and text in advertising so far to decipher meanings; significantly semiotics as the language of signs and symbols in designs have become means by which communication in advertising experts employ beyond technical sophistication outside known skills. African culture as some total of peoples' way of life hosts them in abundance and have been in use even before Roland Barthes and other scholarly works assumed authority on it in 1980s. Semiotics as the language of signs and key indicator is considered a major essence in design because it demands visual literacy from design interface, including prospective consumers of the message.

In retrospect, given the current globalization dictates located in integration marketing communication, conditioned by extension, its variants or variables have expanded scope of advertising principles and practice. Such variants are traditional advertising, sponsorship, event marketing, direct marketing, particularly the 5 Ps meant to reduce media clutter and to attain brand equity between the marketers and consumers. The use of semiotics has become imperative as designs negotiate recall tendency from the consumers at the marketplace. The benefits from such recall tendency could be assessed from 'Links' that justifies the message penetration in the first place.

**Significance of Symbols**

At a time Barthes as McDermott (1993) situates "found popular culture interesting not from a visual design point of view, but because it reveals the underlying frame of contemporary society. As a result he made attempt in his mythologies of imagery and produced structuralism point of view to align with his concept of design as a series of cultural signs that informed semiotics as a new discipline in 1980s". Also, Baudrillard (in McDermott 1993,a) adopted method of sociology and deconstruction to situate new design syndrome derived from existed ideas as grounded on originality in advertising impact; consumer culture became located to new terrain and climate, as images and text encoded with new meanings delivered messages effectively. Recourse to theoretical groundings by these scholars among others ensured extensive exploration. Toys and images were freely deconstructed from their original sites and consequently refreshing messages now works to sustain the advertising industry. However, whatever new theories evolved by the Western authors African culture grounded them earlier in their cultural repository as resort to Kwa language values in this work validates.

Therefore what is required is not condemnation of western theorist as fad but engagement with such espouse to prove that African thoughts and value were there before. *Sankofa*, the Asante bird that reverses its flight to pick titbits it flew past evidenced postmodern thoughts not known to the Western authors, but impacted on modern African arts works by the African contemporary artists as El Aantsui and some artists and designers prove to the world. Given the philosophy of *Sankofa*, this paper reveals exploration into the past African history, retrieved values repositioned by Nigerian 'designers' with reliance on semiotics to situate advertising message delivery along the global highway

in consonance with deconstruction architecture. The exercise is grounded from functional participation of graphic arts as an engine room of advertising which itself functions as integral part of marketing in Nigeria's market economy. Aptly the narrative on good margin aside from adding visual communication design to the repertoire of modern Nigerian art history opens up a given meaning to oral literature and transmission of same to consumers in simple hypothesis often overlooked.

Simple hypothesis: rests on how we can reinvent African art as essential part of positioning advertising uniqueness in our moving world for obvious reasons:

(1) Advertising is a legitimate business when used effectively as the study of designs positioned could increase demand for a specific advertisers goods, services and ideas as definition of advertising situates. Implicitly, the result of this reflects in the economy wholly in form of higher levels of growth, employment general vitality and stability.
(2) As the message content positioned in the study, consumers could receive and benefit from commercial information, with basic comparative option about new and improved products as they apply option of examining the benefit these messages offer.
(3) The most desirable of graphical input to advertising in Nigeria has been its contribution to manufacturing innovation in positioning the country as a developing nation. Thus, helps manufacturers move products services or ideas from factories, organizational bodies and agencies to consumer homes.

In its wider dispensation, culture as sum total of people's way of life resonates from religion, education, arts, science, commerce, industry economics and overall attitude of man. Visual communication exploits image, music, performance, and photography in the creation of design for several decades in Nigeria as it used text and image in print, as well as text image, sound and verbal in electronic and web media to situate environmentally coded messages. Often the major concept is translated into various media channels. As a result, design dispensation exploits language along the line to infer meaning. Inspiration could be drawn from traditional art forms as (Plate4) Guinness congratulations message reveals. Lines inherent in facial scarifications from Ife bronze heads as well as popular 'ichi' among the Igbo of Nigeria host traditional line appropriation as they could be straightened. There are also, leather work designs among the Kano Hausas and both Leather and Kalabash designers among Oyo people of Oshun state on which Professor Rom Kalilu's PhD. Thesis on African art history was grounded. In fact, the names Otunisona and Osiisona with suffix 'ona' refer to Yoruba leather craftsmen. Their designs are now sources for creative exploration and adaptation by contemporary Nigerian artists.

To find space for individual based art in Nigeria, there is shift from utility to non-utility and upgrading of craft to the level of art such as Textile -Sculpture, mixed media -painting, and ceramic- sculpture in apparent denial of what they represent: either, mixed media, collage, appliqué among others. Further to the issues raised by Picton, it is imperative to document graphic communication design end structural growth over the years as it transits from commercial art, its' earlier referencing to graphic design and now visual communication design, an accommodation in absorbed areas of specialization and technological advancement granted. It's end product usage results in wide referencing in visual culture; tracing the trends in creative advertising message constructs predicated by semiotics, expanded in theory and ideas in symbols, signs and gesture which dates back to 1960s in our modern times, and beyond given civilizations in Africa and elsewhere.

**At the beginning**

Significantly, communication and transfer of information is an important activity in our daily life and dates back several centuries ago. According to Broekhuizen (1995) "People developed graphic (drawn) symbols that represented specific sounds in tribal language. These symbols became alphabets. In some areas, messages were carved in stones tablets, a task that was quite difficult and painstaking. History informs us that the early Egyptians wrote on papyrus with ink made from cuttlefish, while writing were derived from hollow read bamboo, or feathers". Meanwhile the Chinese were reputed to have developed paper for writing in 5,000BC. These were pre historic practice of communication.

Since the invention of printing press by Johannes Gutenbergin 1450 communication production evolved over the years which culminated in technological leverage positioned in print, electronic and the internet media today. Along the line symbolic coding and decoding started from the ancient world. Trends in history reveal that semiotics; the science and language of sign had been with man from primordial time but developed into contention by 1960 as McDermott (1993) situates "During the 1960s designers began to be interested in semiotics which provided analytical tool with which to "explore the visual world".

Further to studies in language as universal system of sign experienced in 20th century, ideas was not analyzed then as recorded in history, McDermott (1993,a) further stated that, ,"Umberto Eco used semiotics to analyze architecture but in 1980s. Roland Barthes applied it to photography". At that primordial time designers could not reconcile with semiotic application or of its theoretical issues to design but until recently. Recent studies in 1980s before it was concerned to postmodernism by Baudrillard, among some French scholars including Roland Barthes explored deconstruction strategies that challenged the ideas of originality. As a result designers from 1980s began to exploit and appropriate images including toys by decoding their meanings and encoding them with new meanings including functions in totally new context: Invariably, originality of design now depend on their process simulation and ability of consumers to decode latent meanings.

**Text image and message**

With regards to various collections of symbols, signs and meanings as well as operative boundaries of codes, pinning of featheron a capas in (Pate1) the 'ACB Continental House' means the value Igbos of Nigeria attach to achievement by an individual. The performance is a signifier in the sense that Azikiwe was considered worthy of the adornment. However, the act of wearing it issignified when it is supposedly meant to celebrate his numerous achievements: He was a Pan Africanist, a premier of eastern region of Nigeria, a President of the Senate, first governor general of Nigeria, first President of Nigeria among others. When viewed against the backdrop of these attainments and underlining discourse linked with ideology and representation it is apparent that the design signified Azikiwe as a great Icon. Most importantly, as the premier of old eastern Nigeria, he established the African Continental Bank (ACB) in 1955 purposely to grant Africans soft loan for businesses. At that time the two foreign banks Barclays bank and Standard bank denied Africans without good collateral loans to set up business.

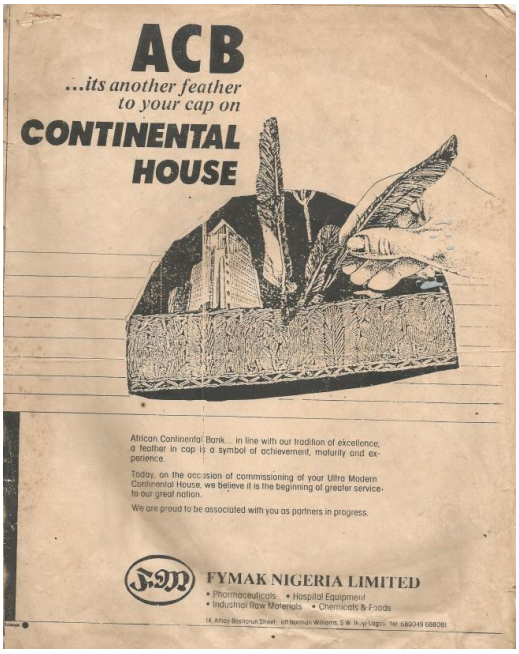



Plate 1 ACB Congratulatory Ad. Illustration: John Amifor , Agency Rubicon communication Ltd




Plate 2, Congratulatory Ad. Illustration: John Amifor Agency: Rubicon Communication Ltd

Most important is harmony the design exudes as Burton (2005,a) in similar vein alludes "Our communication is full of discourses which shape how we understand our world, how we deal with others, how we make sense of every day experience" In fact, the design reflects in totality, how we appreciate attainment of greatness, particularly an Icon such as Azikiwe in African world view. Aesthetically, text is deployed to tell the story as it functions as integral part of a whole visual expression, particularly the anticipation of how the entire design works on the reader. In other sense, positioning of the message and how the reader is expected to receive it is validated by the body copy. The most instructive is that corporate advertising is linked with goodwill. Most significant is the feather which must be Eagle's and its numerical attachment to values. Sequel to narrative feature in Acholonu (2009,a) significance of number is meaningful in Igbo world view because "four and eight are sacred Igbo numbers. Four represents the number of Igbo week days and it is the number of non-initiates. Igbo symbol language includes four pointed stars. As a matter of fact, the Eze Nri, (Nri King) wears eight feathered crowns" In the publication *Among the Ibos of Nigeria* Basden (1982) narrative show that any lucky man whose case was decided in his favour 'Awala' (the god that is arbiter of judgment), who cleared him of guilt is presented him with an Eagle feather symbolically as "A badge of his innocence" That which he celebrates as he got home dancing and chanting




Plate 3 Omoluabi Public Communication Campaign

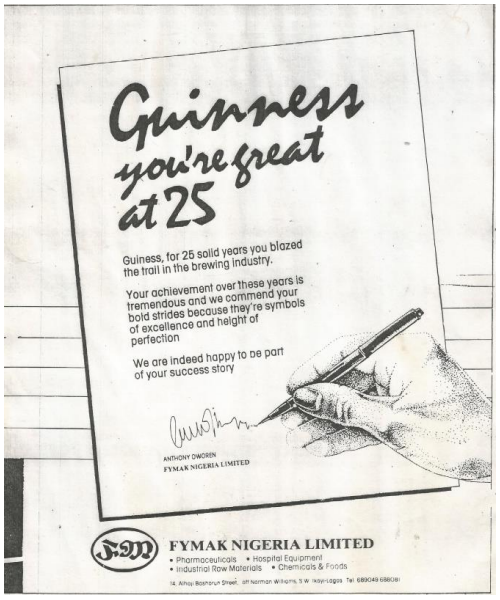



Plate 4 Guinness Congratulation Ad. Illustration: John Amifor – Agency Rubicon Communication Ltd

"Awala nyelum Ugo- Ugo- ugo, meaning Ahas given me the Eagle feather" this vindicates his innocence, an equity on the beholder who must come with clean hands.
Another design with semiotic ambiance is (Plate2). The headline read "Our wishes to Champion Newspapers" Production was an illustration realized in pointillism and definitive lines as well as secured Kolanut and gin; (Cola acuminate);these were articles of propitiation required for blessing from Almighty God in seeking fruitful venture on behalf of *Champion* newspapers by the client Theo and Theo paints limited. In any new endeavor, such as situations of marriage, child birth including naming or christening ceremony, among others, Kolanut and gin are used for prayers to God and other lesser gods among the Igbos and Yorubas as well as the Niger Delta people. From 1970s the brand Seaman Schnapps was constantly positioned in the media as requirement for prayers to God soliciting for blissful marriages along with Kolanut. The body copy of Lydoline paints which narrates the benefit emphasizes this important factor reads: "In line with our tradition he who brings kola brings life. This special occasion calls for felicitation and clinking of glasses" Aptly, The message is corporate advertising tied to goodwill and good cause through prayer and it is outside the emphasis on selling Lydoline Paints directly.

**Gesture and realism**

The notion of value attached to life is measured among the Yoruba of Nigeria, as well as sizable portion of Kwa language group of Africa as important essence of life. The philosophy of Omoluabi in Yoruba, Ezigbo mmadu in Igbo, (complete gentleman) or honorable gentleman in English tradition and Andakkah in Ibibio exemplify such virtue. What is illustrated in (Plate3) represents symbol of dignity and attainment, an insignia from the Oba who bestows it on a respectable achiever in the society illustrates such. It is ideological and signifies recognition and appreciation from the leader and the led. Put succinctly, Nnamdi Azikiwe Nigeria's foremost nationalist referred to it as "Respect for human dignity" Omoluabi has two messages and meaning in this design which is encompassing as the copy emphasize: (1) An Omoluabi commands respect derived from his moral authority and the discharge of civic responsibilities" (2) The cliché summarizes the solution with an interrogation What can we do to revive this attitude? Again recourse to Szarkowsky (1986,a) earlier noted is imperative. "New pictures derive first of all from old pictures. What an artist brings to his work that is new – special to his own life and his own eyes – is used to challenge and revise his tradition as he knows it"

Omoluabi is a Public communication campaign aimed at recreating great people, healthy lifestyles and choices between the good the bad the ugly. That is the meaning to be deciphered from the campaign. Many scholars of visual communication in Nigeria hardly see graphics from the lenses of advertising also and since Nigeria is a cross cultural nation and advertising works differently across the divide; in spite of that "Culture influences how we communicate, both in interpersonal communication and mass communication because the role of advertising collectivistic culture transcends information provided, but creates emotional

bonding". Mooij (in Moriarty, Mitchell and Wells,2009,c) In addition to such facts, body copy, a factor of language works to facilitate understanding of Omoluabi message decoded from the past. It also worked in similar vein as Moriarty, Mitchel and Wells (2009,c) argue that "Effective marketing and advertising technique are not only important for business, but also for nonprofit organizations involved in community issues, public policy and good causes" particularly, partnership, and adaptation of past values for attitudinal change.

This takes us to (Plate 4) Guinness Institutional advertising grounded on significance of signature as both sign, symbol of authority and gesture that signified authenticity dating back to pre-colonial period. While chiefs appended their signature with thumbprints the colonial authorities appended their signature with ink to seal deals with the local people. Again text was used in the design to locate meaning. During the colonial era, there were professional letter writers stationed at court premises; they listened to and wrote letters or statements as the case might be on behalf of illiterate clients. Authentication of such written work was by thumb print as earlier noted. In Guinness design equity as shared benefit between the global manufacturers of the famous brand and Fymark, a supplier appreciated and authenticated gesture symbolically with signature.

**Conclusion**

This work focused on approaches to collection of signs from nucleus of African values for signified African message constructs within Institutional advertising message constructs. It positions concrete value as signifier with potential meaning of feather pinned on a cap, kola nut, text in both ACB and Omoluabi designs as signifier as well as collective images and meanings as signified with potential meanings. The ACB message with its collection of text and images are bound by various codes within contexts put together as reminder to value attached to holistic attainment in greater heights.

Meanwhile, Omoluabi a public communication message assumes a new role and challenges; comparatively, from the past it attempts to reinvent ethical behavior lost to current vices in Nigeria's society. In all, within the traditional art and values could be located, myriads of veritable creative sources for reinvented semiotic oriented designs to rejig Nigeria's fading values. Finally, this work proves that the past cultural values, which in context such as written language, spoken language, non-verbal language, and visual language through perception, reinvention, exploration and exploitation constitute semiotics required to enrich effective advertising messages. For good reasons, what is discernible from the illustrations used in this research is simply deconstruction of stereotypes replaced with images and texts to proffer meanings. Even as Nigeria celebrates 57 independent anniversaries this 2017, messages in the media are still stereotyped with copy that read Congratulations! Nigeria at 57, or Felicitations! Nigeria is 57. What recourse to the past provides us in this research is refreshing message constructs to overcome stereotypes modes.

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