

Semiotics of Identity Construction and Communicative Function in Selected Tattoos in Oyo Town

Joel Olatunde Ayodabo

*Department of English, Faculty of Humanities,
Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo, Nigeria
Email: ayodabolatunde@yahoo.com
Phone Number: +2348033604983*

Ojo Akinleye Ayinuola

*Department of English, Faculty of Humanities,
Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo, Nigeria
Email: ayinuolaojo2@gmail.com/oa.ayinuola@acu.edu.ng
Phone Numbers: [+2347069306990/+2347015204306](tel:+2347069306990/+2347015204306)*

Funmilayo Florence Amole

*Department of English, Faculty of Humanities
Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo Nigeria
Email: amolefunmilayo77@gmail.com
Phone number: +2348100189967*

Abstract

Extant studies have investigated tattoos from ethnographic, historical and medical points of view with inadequate scholarly attention paid to how identities and communicative functions are explored semiotically in selected tattoos in Oyo Town. This study was, therefore, designed to investigate semiotic resources in the tattoos with a view to identifying identities and communicative functions inherent in the tattoos. Roland Barthes' semiotic theory of structuralism and communication theory served as theoretical framework. Seven (7) tattoos which were gathered using snowball sampling technique were purposively selected. Both structured and unstructured interviews, which were recorded and transcribed, were used for data collection. The analysis shows that both linguistic and non-linguistic semiotic resources are features of tattoos that imbibe traditionalist, Eurocentrist, hedonist, cultist, optimist and religionist identities. Unity, pride, pretense, rebellion, edginess, stability endurance and remembrance are communicative functions that are inherent in the tattoos.

Keywords: tattoos, identity construction, communicative functions, semiotic resources

Introduction

From the time immemorial, communication takes different forms, and people of different cultures have diverse ways of expressing their feelings ranging from spoken words to other forms of body language. Signs, symbols and images are conventionally imbibed by different

social groups as means of communication and one of the most common ways of communicating these marks of identity or keeping the memory of these groups is through body tattoos. Tattoos are body inscriptions that are concerned with placing permanent marks on the skin. These marks are determined by the tattoo wearers and they may be in linguistic, non-linguistic and paralinguistic forms.

Velliquette, Murray and Creyer (1998) submit that, in all cultures, irreversible forms of body inscriptions are used as a vehicle for human expression. Different cultures view tattoos from different perspectives depending on what appeals to them. Many cultures see tattoos as symbols of purity, while some see them as marks of identification and beautification. According to Bohannon (1988), people put marks on their body to signify symbols of fulfillment, group social status, or willingness to endure pain in order to please a lover. In the olden days, people wear tattoos for fun and they are usually seen as part of fashion. The mark once inscribed cannot be easily removed and because of permanent nature of tattoo, many people have chosen to wear it in order to keep a memory of pain or a loved one permanent. Tribal marks of different types, piercings, scarification, and tattoos are made on the body to communicate identity; they may signify a wide array of meanings. Some wear tattoos to denote their past experiences like holocaust, civil wars and so on. On the other hand, there are those who wear it mainly for identification rather than beautification.

In some areas in Nigeria, tattoos practice was a fashion that was highly cherished and embraced in the time past. Tattoos were placed in the forehead, chin, cheeks, arms as well as stomach and other parts of the body. Palmer (2015) affirms that tattoo is used in South-Western Nigeria as tribal identification symbol that gives information about the individual. A child was tattooed at birth for the purpose of identification and keeping memory. The date of the child's birth, the grandfather's name and the name of the compound which the child belongs to would all be inscribed in the child's stomach. Elderly men have always been saddled with the responsibility of administering tattoos on babies and young people; they are professionals, who inherited the professions.

There came a period of silence for this practice in the history of fashion in Nigeria as Olusanya (1983) confirms that tattoo marks which were initially a thing of pride, suddenly turned to a symbol of idolatry and shame. This period might be as a result of influence of religion or what

Olukayode (2018) refers to as 'youth culture' which poses a threat to the accepted norms of adult society. As observed by DeMello (2007) that facial tattoos were viewed as extreme and socially unacceptable in any context, the custom and culture of facial tattoo in form of tribal marks is also being suppressed till today in South-Western Nigeria, though some local areas are still into the practices.

The practice of tattoo did not attract the attention of scholars for decades ago until recently when it is becoming a common phenomenon in different cultures of the world especially among the youths. Different schools have come up with different opinions about this practice. Effects of tattoos have been properly investigated by different researchers from medical lines; ethnographers have also done much on cultural value of tattoos. Language researchers are not left out in exploring the linguistic significance of tattoos. It is therefore pertinent to examine some of these works from semiotic viewpoints. The purpose of this study therefore is to explore the identities and the communicative functions hidden in signs and symbols of selected tattoos.

Literature Review/Statement of the Problem

Research on tattoos from a socio-cultural perspective has yielded various findings. Howard (2017) explores how individuals construct their identities through tattoos, shedding light on intercultural communication and subcultures within society. Zambrano (2018) conducted a mixed-methods study, revealing that individuals with tattoos wear them to convey meaningful identities and construct different meanings. These findings suggest that tattoos play a significant role in identity construction and self-expression.

Martin (2018) investigates the growing trend of tattooing in his book "Tattooed Lives: The Indelible Experience of Meaning and Identity Body Art", examining the experiences of both tattoo enthusiasts and artists. By integrating symbolic interactionism, social semiotics, and Bauman's concept of liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000), Martin provides a comprehensive understanding of how tattoos serve as a means of meaning-making and semiotic expression for individuals within their broader social and cultural contexts (Martin, 2018). This thesis draws on extensive qualitative research, including over a year of ethnographic fieldwork in a tattoo studio and semi-structured interviews with enthusiasts. The findings indicate that, despite the fluidity of modern life, individuals continue to use tattoos as a means of self-expression, identity formation, and emotional connection. Moreover, the research reveals that tattoo artists must possess a high

level of dramaturgical discipline and symbolic interaction skills to navigate the evolving cultural landscape of their practice. This shift has led to tattooists being recognized as tattoo artists, and the art form has become more artistically demanding and aesthetically sophisticated. The study highlights the ways in which tattoo enthusiasts and artists co-construct meaning and identity through the tattooing process.

Lionberger (2021) examined the performative aspect of tattoos through the lens of semiotics, revealing how tattoos function as tangible signs that people use to express trauma. His research shows that tattoos serve as a means of communication, allowing individuals to convey their experiences and emotions through a visible symbol. Moreover, Lionberger argues that the performance of tattoos can elicit an ethical response from others, whether individuals or society at large, to acknowledge and address the trauma that others have endured. In this way, tattoos become a powerful tool for storytelling, healing, and social connection.

While all these scholars and some others have explored tattoos from different perspectives, sufficient attention has not been given to communicative function inherent in tattoos. Communication theory of identity by Hecht (1993) and Barthe's theory are not also sufficiently adopted in exploring tattoos. This work is therefore presented to fill this vacuum in the previous studies.

Theoretical Framework:

The theoretical frameworks adopted for this study are communication theory of identity and an aspect of Roland Barthe Semiotic theory. Hecht (1993) proposed a communication theory of identity, positing that identity is shaped through interaction and communication. According to this theory, identity is not solely defined by individual or societal constructs, but also emerges through interactions with others. Hecht identifies four interconnected frames of identity: personal, enacted, relational, and communal. These frames represent different perspectives on identity, which intersect and influence one another. The personal frame focuses on individual identity and self-concept, while the enacted frame considers how identity is performed and presented to others. The relational frame examines identity in the context of relationships and interactions, and the communal frame looks at identity as shaped by group membership and community. These frames offer a nuanced understanding of identity as a dynamic and communicative process (Hecht, 1993).

According to Hecht (1993), there are four frames of identity that shape our understanding of self. The personal frame refers to the internal sense of self, encompassing self-cognitions, emotions, and spiritual identity. The enacted frame emerges through social interactions, where identity is performed and communicated to others. The relational frame highlights the mutual construction of identity within relationships, while the communal frame emphasizes the role of group membership in shaping identity. These frames are interconnected and influence one another, offering a nuanced understanding of identity as a complex and multifaceted construct.

Barthes' semiotic theory of structuralism explains two types of sign system: the denotative sign system and the connotative sign system. Signs and symbols create value and meaning in culture and community through signification. Semiotics is closely tied to visual semiotic analysis, which represents ideologies through images and symbols (Barthes, 1964). Mostafalou (2016) builds on this theory, identifying three levels of semiotic signification: denotation, connotation, and myth or mythology. The denotative level refers to the literal meaning of images and photographs, while the connotative level involves the deeper meanings associated with words, images, and photographs. The myth or mythology level represents the cultural values and beliefs that underlie the connotative meaning, shaping societal norms and perspectives (Mostafalou, 2016).

Methodology

Population for this study consists of tattoo wearers in Oyo town. Seven of these tattoo wearers were sourced, using snowball sampling method. Snowball sampling method is used when the population of research is not easy to reach. It is a form of non-probability sampling technique which can be used to recruit participants via other participants. The participants in this study are tattoo wearers. The researcher therefore adopted snowball sampling technique. An access to a respondent paved way to others.

The study is qualitative in nature and as a result, both semi-structured and unstructured interviews were adopted for data gathering from the selected respondents in this study. The semi-structured interview consisted of a set of premeditated questions by the researcher in order to collect information related to the objectives of this study. The unstructured interviews were included to cater for some other information that was later discovered during the researcher-respondents' interaction which was later useful in this study. Seven respondents were

interviewed using iPhone camera in recording the interactions and capturing the images of the tattoos.

Data Analysis and Discussion of Findings

4.1 Tattoo 1



Tattoo 1 is an image of local drum and guitar inscribed in the shoulder.

The identity created in Tattoo 1 is traditionalist and Eurocentric. Traditionalist identity has to do with cultural heritage and preservation; it imbibes family values and community ties, historical legacy and ancestral roots. Eurocentric identity as it is portrayed in this tattoo is related to Christian values and religious superiority. The tattooed managed personal cum relational frames of identity (Hecht 1993). According to the tattooed, peer pressure lured him into having tattoos and that the young adults may be affected by peer pressure to get tattoos. The tattooed professed that he followed his friends to visit tattoos shop where they wanted to have the symbol of knife as tattoo on their body. The intension of these friends was primarily to create a sense of belonging or to communicate threat to some group of enemies somewhere. It was further discovered that that young adult may employ tattooing to build upon existing desires to be valuable, unique and stand out. The tattooed participant was, however, overruled with self-cognition, self-feeling and self-devotion to his lineage interest and religion.

The tattooed decided to have images of a local drum and a guitar. According to the tattooed himself, he is from drummers' family (Alayan) where drumming has become their profession. He was trained in his family to become a professional drummer. On the other hand, he had interest in playing guitar. The passion he had for playing these musical instruments was so strong

that he needed to express it through the tattoo symbols of the two musical instruments instead of the idea of the image of knife from his friends. From the tattoo symbols, the tattooed was able to express his personal identity as a drummer, a lover of music, a Christian, a lover of his culture and a Yoruba man. Also, it is discovered that tattoos as non-verbal signs and symbols are parts of discursive mix used to communicate individual and group identity.

A local drum in a general sense is a double-headed hour-glass drum with one end larger than the other. It is an important drum in the culture of Yoruba people. It is used for traditional and religious activities. Connotatively, the *bata* drum serves as a symbol of cultural heritage and identity within the Yoruba tradition of Nigeria. The distinct sound of *bata* drum evokes a sense of cultural pride, identity assertion and cultural affirmation. Bata drum can serve as a vehicle for oral tradition, preserving cultural ideas and transferring history to future generations. The image of the local drum can represent connection to tradition, culture, history and ancestral roots. It connotes that the tattooed is connected with his ancestral root; he is knowledgeable about his culture and traditions. The tattoo (local drum) suggests that the tattooed is a traditionalist and he gives a special regard to the profession (drumming).

A guitar in denotative sense is a stringed musical instrument usually made of wood with six strings and a long neck played with the fingers or a plectrum. It is commonly used in Christian religious activities. The guitar can connote personal expression and emotional communication. It can also stand as a symbol in Christianity. The image of guitar on the left shoulder of the tattooed depicts connection with Christianity. In one way or the other, the tattooed has something to do with Christianity. Shoulder in denotative sense is part of human body located at the upper part of the body. Connotatively, placing tattoo on the shoulder indicates a form of personal expression. It is a show of burden, responsibility and passion for something. It can be an indicator of pride or ego.

Generally, the images of the two musical instruments indicate that the tattooed is a lover of music. It connotes that he is not being driven by any religious sentiment, the tattooed freely relates with both traditional and Christian religions. The symbols can still be observed as a representation of unity between traditional and modern cultures. The shoulders where the tattoos are placed are significant. Putting something on shoulder can figuratively mean being responsible or obligated for something. Having the tattoos on the shoulders connotes tremendous

responsibility or passionateness of the tattooed for both religions and for local and modern music. This is affirmed by the tattooed himself that he had a great passion for beating drum and playing guitar in churches and also performing his traditional rites as a local professional drummer. The image of *bata* on the tattooed serves as an agent of transforming historical narratives of his lineage to future generations.

4.2. Tattoo 2



Iconic Statue of Liberty, 'Richtalk'

The tattoo 2 is United States of America symbol of freedom, which portrays Eurocentric identity through the linguistic form of *richtalk* that reveals the innermost identity of the tattooed of his desire for riches. The logo is an identity of a personal journey towards freedom and new opportunities; it shows the tattooed pride in American values. The tattoo is a Eurocentric identity which depicts the western cultural dominance, European history and achievements.

The Statue of Liberty is an iconic symbol of the United States. It features Lady Liberty holding a torch in one hand and a tablet inscribed with the date of the American Declaration of Independence in the other. Therefore, the tattoo communicates a strong sense of American national identity, patriotism and cultural pride. The tattoo wearer is not an American but a Nigerian, therefore, his affinity for American ideas and his pursuit for opportunities can be clearly viewed in the tattoo. Not only that, the linguistic form *richtalk* that accompanies the USA logo in his tattoo can also suggest that the tattooed desires travelling abroad in search for greener pasture especially in time like this in Nigeria when people see travelling abroad as a means of

getting rich. Having the tattoo on the shoulder also connotes the passion of the tattooed for travelling to USA.

4.3 Tattoo 3



Tattoo 3 is a snake, star symbol, “T money”, “my god and my prayer I want to be a Billionaire”

The identity created is hedonist. The tattooed is a young boy who chose to express his desire for money through his tattoo. The 'T' in 'T Money' is the first letter of the tattooed name which is 'Tobi'. He tried to associate his name with money. The prayer of the tattooed is also on money begging God to answer his prayer of becoming a billionaire. The tattooed actually did not give his total attention in this interview. He was restless and could not respond to some of the questions posed to him by the researcher. Nevertheless, a close study of the tattoos helped to understand the identity of the tattooed as somebody whose consistent desire is to get money and not even in naira but in dollar. The snake symbol also portrays the identity of this young tattooed as a dangerous or wicked person. Going about with snake tattoo speaks of the tattooed identity as being venomous, powerful, troublesome, rebellious and edgy.

A snake is a venomous animal; it is a limbless reptile with venomous elongated body. A snake can connote evil or danger; it can be attributed to cunning or deceitful behaviour. The position of the snake on the tattooed suggests danger or harm. The snake is with its mouth wide open meaning that it is ready to bite. The tattooed may be viewed as troublesome fellow, who always wants to harm others. In another way round; Yoruba describes somebody who is too conscious of money as a person who does not mind getting money from a snake's mouth. Considering the

linguistic content of the tattoos with the image of snake can therefore suggest the inordinate ambition of the young tattooed for riches. The ambition of the tattoo wearers should not also have been tagged inordinate if he is not a small boy who is not expected at that age to acquire riches but rather to be in school for learning. The words 'MONEY', Billionaire, Dollar, in his prayer and his name suggest that the tattooed desire for money is questionable.

The tattoo of star may communicate fame or popularity. You need to say something on star identity.

4.4 Tattoo 4



Tattoo 4 shows anchor, 'I refuse to sink'

The identity constructed here is optimist. The tattooed is a man of thirty-seven years. He got his tattoo ten years ago and he still admires it till now. The linguistic inscription is *I refuse to sink* and it is attached with image of an anchor. The tattoo is an identity of an enthusiast, a survivor and an optimist. According to him, I have faced a lot in life and I believe I will not be overcome by any of the problems of life. An anchor is an identity of a sailor, according to the tattooed; it is a sign of security. The tattoos are expression of the tattooed positive mind to life challenges.

A tattoo with the linguistic inscription *I refuse to sink* communicates a lot to the viewers. The statement connotes positivity. It can suggest hope in difficult situation, stability in the face of life challenges and determination to overcome problems. An anchor is a device used to hold a ship or a boat in place. From connotative lens, an anchor tattoo can be viewed as a symbol of stability, steadfastness, and security. Considering the linguistic side of the tattoo with the image of anchor, it can be deduced that the linguistic inscription is the interpretation of the image. The tattoos can

also depict that the tattooed is connected to something (may be a greater power) that makes him unshakeable. The tattoos also suggest that the tattooed is being faced with many difficulties and which he believes that none of them can overcome him. Nobody sinks from the head but from the leg, therefore, the placement of the tattoo at the ankle is of great significant.

4.5 Tattoo 5



Tattoo 5 has 16 ; 8; 08, AMUNDA, ILE ; OLORIOSO, OYO

The tattoo is Yoruba local tattoo and it is imposed on the tattooed; it is placed on her by her parents for identification. The surname of the child which is the grandfather's name, the compound name and the birthdate of the tattooed are inscribed on the abdomen of the tattooed. The child can be easily identified, traced or located if she gets missed and if there is a wrong father's claim over the child. Names are very important especially in Africa culture; they reveal one's ethnic group, religious belief, parental belief and others (Ayinuola, 2020). The name "Amunda" is an Islamic religious mark of identity; it is the tattooed grandfather's name which depicts that the tattooed is a Muslim. The birthday of the tattooed is inscribed to keep the memory of when she was born. The idea of keeping record white and blue was not common in those days. The best method for them then was to write on the wall with chalk or to inscribe on the body for the purpose of remembrance or keeping record. The numbers "15: 8: 2008" show familial identity, they are symbols of the day, the month and the year the tattooed was born, by implication, the tattooed was born on fifteenth day of August in the year 2008. "Ile:Olori Oso" is a marker of ancestral identity, it is the name of the clan from where the tattooed has come.

Generally, the tattoo is familial identity where there is a wrong claim of ownership over the child (the tattooed). The sign ‘*Amuda*’ is one of the praise names given to male children in Yoruba culture; it is the grandfather’s name of the tattooed which has become the tattooed surname. The sign “*Ile Olori Oso*” is a compound name in Oyo town. It connotatively means a house or compound that belongs to a leader of wizards. The tattooed date of birth is 16th August, 2008.

From connotative sense, different meanings can be inferred from the tattoo marks imposed on the tattooed. Yoruba people give special regard to grandfathers and it is one of the reasons the grandfathers’ names are taken as surnames. The direct father of the tattooed might not be popular as such but the grandfather being an elderly man has been popularly known by many people. If the child gets lost, those that find her can easily locate the family where she comes from. Names influence people psychologically. The name of the tattooed’s clan “*Olori-Oso*” can terrify anyone who may make attempts to kidnap the tattooed. The name ‘*Olori-Oso*’ (leader of wizards) sounds scary and nobody will want to trespass. The abdomen where the tattoo is located is a meaningful signal. Having the tattoo at that location (abdomen) implies that the parents of the tattooed keep people in suspense on the ownership of the child. If there is any wrong claim of the child’s ownership, the right owner of the child can gently and surprisingly reveal the marks of identification.

4.5 Tattoo 6



Tattoo 6 has the inscription *FILA, 777*

The identity is cultist. Fila is a well-known sports apparel brand, according to the tattooed, it is just an indication of fondness and appreciation for the brand's values. For the numbers 777, the tattooed explained that it is the date that has been unanimously fixed by his group (unnamed) all

over the nation Nigeria to celebrate. He added that the celebration is observed July 7 of every year. From this explanation, it can be deduced that the symbolic numerals is cultist identity. There is another symbol on the tattooed which he refused to disclose what it stands for, he said 'don't go near that area'

The number 777 may communicate various meanings across cultures and beliefs. The numbers can symbolise perfection or completion. In gambling context, the number is associated with good fortune and wealth. All these meanings are just interpretive possibilities but the real meanings of these particular tattoo symbols were properly explored during the interaction of the researcher with the tattoo wearer. The 777 stands for July 7 of every year which is the date the group members have picked for their celebration. The inscription of the number serves as a reminder. Only the group members can actually attach correct meaning to the tattoo except for those who the tattooed has chosen to explain it to. The inscription of FILA may communicate fame or popularity as the tattooed would want to identify with the popular Italian brand. Having the tattoos at the dorsum (top of the hand) can suggest that the tattooed is rebellious, intentionally defying norms around socially-acceptable bodily inscriptions.

4.7 Tattoo 7



Tattoo 7: Rosary, Clapped hands, 'Let Christ lead you, get the path to follow'

Religionist identity was created in tattoo 7. The tattoo wearer is heavily tattooed with different symbols, clapped hands, rosary and some Bible verses. The symbol of clapped hands tied with a

rosary is a religion identity; it is an identity that the tattooed is a Christian from Catholic denomination. The symbols are identities of a praying fellow. The Bible verses 'Let Christ lead you, get the path to follow', according to the tattooed are expression of faith in God's guidance and direction. The tattooed also did it for aesthetic purpose and the heaviness of the tattoo according to the tattooed himself is a sign of subjection to endurance and ability to bear pain.

Literarily, the rosary and clasped hands tattoos denote religiosity; the symbols are used in both Islam and Christianity especially in catholic denomination. In connotative sense, when the linguistic aspect of the tattoos is considered along with the images of rosary and clasped hands, it suggests that the tattooed is a Christian from catholic denomination, it suggest that the tattooed believed in the Supreme Being (God). Having the tattoos on the shoulder depicts that the tattooed is passionate about his denomination; it suggests the tattooed is a prayerful man that depends on God's guidance.

Conclusion

It is essential to recognise that people have their unique experiences, beliefs and reasons for their actions, tattoo wearers do not just decide to hurt their bodies for no reason, their tattoos speak volume of their identities. These identities are Eurocentrism, traditionalism, theism, cultism, hedonism, and optimism. The symbols and images of tattoos are also embedded not only with literal meanings but also with cultural meanings which are their (tattoos) communicative functions identified in this paper, they are, unity, pride, pretence, rebellion, edginess, endurance and remembrance. Tattoo practice therefore is a greener pasture for language researchers where they could further investigate pragmatic intentions and strategies of tattoo wearers.

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