

# Proverbs as Cultural Semiotics in Soyinka's *Death and The King's Horseman*

by

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## Abstract

The paper examines proverbs used as cultural semiotics in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* (DKH) by adopting Sander Pierce's (1931) concept of semiotic, Bach and Harnish's (1979) "Mutual Contextual Beliefs" and Crystal's (1987) context as our theoretical framework. This research is significant because it will fill the existing vacuum in both semiotic and linguistic studies. Our findings revealed that proverbs in DKH contain both verbal and non-verbal cues. These signals are sent either by Elesin to Iyaloja and Olohun-Iyo, or by Olohun-Iyo and Iyaloja to Elesin. It was also discovered that proverbs in DKH have the indexical signs of warning, eulogizing and condemning Elesin. They equally have the indexical signs of showing Elesin hubris and also reminding him of his role. Besides, proverbs in DKH have the indexical sign of boasting. The paper concludes that without understanding the symbols, icons and indices used in the text of proverbs in "DKH", audience will not grasp the significations of the play.

**Key words:** indexical sign, symbols, icons, and proverbs.

## **Introduction**

Proverb has been defined in different ways by scholars. Examples of such are: Mieder (1985), Alster (1993) and Benhard (1995). The explication of the significations in proverbs has been shown through the perspectives of literature, anthropology and linguistics. According to Yusuf and Muthangwane (2003:48) “Proverbs are relatively short expression which are usually associated with wisdom and are used to perform varieties of social functions. For instance, among the Yorubas, proverbs are employed to condemn indecorums, to encourage virtues, to reprimand people with questionable characters, besides others (Yusuf, 1994) in the view of Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, among the Igbos (in Nigeria) ‘proverbs is the palm-oil with which words are eaten’. That is, proverbs are utilized in discourse as meta-language to enrich our speech. Few linguistic analysis of proverbs have been focused on pragmatics (e.g. Norrick, 1994), discourse analysis (e.g. Seitel, 1994), semantics (e.g. Yusuf, 2001), pragmatic acting (e.g. Odebunmi (2006), and pragmatic presupposition (Aremu, 2008).

## **Significance of the Study**

The study is significant in filling the existing vacuum in the linguistic research into the use of proverbs in Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman* (henceforth DKH). Apart from Aremu (2008) which studied the pragmatic presuppositions in DKH and Dasyuva not much work that are specific has been done on the analysis of cultural semiotics in proverbs employed by Wole Soyinka in DKH. This work is also the playwright (Wole Soyinka) in significant in understanding the language of Soyinka’s poetic dramaturgy.

## **The Plot of the Play ‘DKH’**

The play is a slice of Oyo history. The event in the text of Soyinka’s *Horseman* revolves round Elesin (the King’s horseman) who refused to commit the necessary ritual suicide as tradition demands. This event occurred in 1946 in Oyo (Nigeria). Epicureanism and egocentricism made Elesin to footdrag in performing his role as the “life sustaining tank” of the Oyos. Despite the pleas and warnings of Olohun-Iyo and Iyaloja, pride and stubbornness made Elesin to keep on with his carnal lust, and then caused a doom on himself and the entire Oyo people. Elesin’s hubris led to the unnecessary death of Olunde (his son), and also, his belated suicide could not save the situation. Besides the flaws of this tragic hero not only made him to fall from grace to grass; but it also led to the desecration of ancestral cults by the District Officer (Mr. Pilkings) and the destruction of traditionalism.

## Theoretical Framework

Under this sub-heading, we shall review the existing literature on semiotics, context and mutual contextual beliefs before bringing out a theoretical framework for the study. First, we define semiotics.

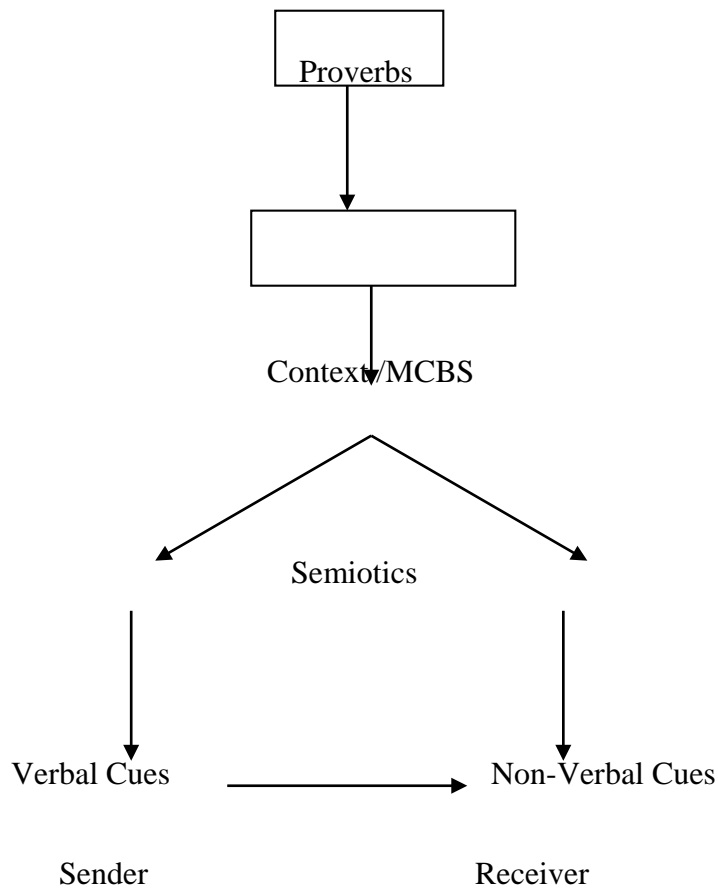
Semiotics, according to Eco (1976) is concerned with “everything that can be taken as a sign”. It involves the study of not only what we refer to as “signs” in everyday speech, but also of anything that stands for something else. In the view of Morris (1983), semiotics is the study of sign. Eco (1976) posits that semiotics is a branch of linguistics is not only a theoretical approach to cultural studies but it also teaches that reality is a system of signs which cannot be taken for granted as purely objective but also independent of human interpretations. This linguistic concept was started by Saussure (a French linguist) before it was popularized by Sander Pierce (1931). According to Pierce (1931), human beings are meaning-makers who make meanings through their creation and interpretation of signs. Man and everything in his environs are meaning potentials. In the opinion of Danes and Perron (199) and Chandler (2003), culture is a major factor in producing and interpreting signs.

Besides, semiotics is also “a branch of study which investigates the properties of signaling systems both natural and artificial, especially with regard to the meanings or messages that they convey. It focuses on communication through verbal and non-verbal signals / signs. “Sign” in a language has two broad compartments which are: (i) “Signifier” and the “Signified”. The “Signifier” expresses the sign, while the “signified” is the idea which the signifier evokes. In the view of Pierce (1931), there are three classifications of sign. These are icon, index and symbol. Iconic sign imitates and resembles its referent. Identical sign is that which can be employed to represent its object because it usually occurs in close relations to it. In the view of Eco (1976:115), it is a type of sign casually connected with its object. Eco (196) states that the relation between an indexical sign and its referent is that of “contiguity”. The indexical signs also point to something else by virtue of their relationship. For instance, “the smoke” is an index of “fire”, while “dark cloud” is an index of impending rain, there is no consensus on what constitute an indexical relation, for instance, connotation varies from one language to another since the interpreter of a language interprets an index with his experience and knowledge.

Symbolic sign, on the other hand, exists where the connection between the sign and its object is based purely on convention. In the view of Eco (1976:178), symbols are: arbitrarily linked to their objects: since a ring can serve as a symbol of marriage and an index of love, this demonstrates that there can be an overlap of meaning indexical, iconic and symbolic signs Eco (1976).

Idiagbon (2010) posits that ‘aroko’ is a Yoruba traditional semiotics used by hunters, artisans, traditional chiefs, adherents to ancestral cults, Ifa priests, etc to serve as non-verbal signals for warning, pleading, admonition, making announcement, etc. for instance, objects like parrot egg, akoko leaf, leaf of baobab tree, feather, black cloth, red cloth, etc are used by Yorubas to send non-verbal signs and signals to an intended audience to understand significations and meaning of Soyinka’s “DKH” one needs to understand this form of semiotic system.

In the same vein, participants in the semiotic system often have the shared backgrounds and situational context. ‘Context’ and ‘mutual contextual belief’ are analogous in locution. According to Bach and Harnish (1979), mutual contextual belief refers to the knowledge about the world which is often retained in the brain and mind of both the speaker and the hearer(s). This mental structure of retaining the world knowledge is termed “schema”, while its plural is “sckemata”. The world knowledge and knowledge about the linguistic codes is retained in the participants’ mind in a structural form called “speech act Schemata”. Participants in both verbal and non-verbal sign signals often have the shared social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. This shared knowledge refers to “MCBs.” Also, participants in signaling systems engage in verbal and non-verbal cues in a particular context. Crystal (1987:48) opines that context is the environment in which communication (verbal or non-verbal) often takes place. It is the “pith” of explicating any communicative utterance (Odebunmi, 2006). To understand the semiotics in proverbs employed in “DKH”, one must understand the “MCBS” in context of the use of those metalanguages. Hence, the theoretical framework of this study revolves round Sander Pierce’s (1931) concept of semiotics, context, and mutual contextual beliefs (MCBS). This is represented in the following chart.



**Fig 1:** Semiotics in the Proverbs used in *Death and the King's Horseman*

In the above chart, it is revealed that proverbs in Soyinka's "DKH" are used with participants shared contextual beliefs; while the semiotics employed in the text include both verbal and non-verbal cues. Also, there is always a sender and receiver(s) of the verbal and non-verbal signaling systems in the text of the proverbs used in this drama.

## Methodology

This researcher has painstakingly read the text of Soyinka's 'DKH' and brought out the proverbs used in the text. Random sampling technique was employed in selecting fourteen (14) out of the twenty-six (26) proverbs used in the play. The participants' shared mutual contextual beliefs were used in carrying out the semiotic interpretations of the proverbs used in this dramatic discourse.

## Presentation of Data

The following are the select text of proverbs in 'DKH' used for our analysis:

Text i: "Elesin Oba o! ... What tryst is this cockerel goes to keep with such haste that he must leave his tail behind (p. 9).

Text ii: "Because the man approaches a brand new bride he forgets the long faithful mother of his children" (p. 9).

Text iii: "A dog does not outrun the hand that fees it meat." (p. 42).

Text iv: "The Seven-way crossroads confuses only the stranger" (P.42)

Text v: "It is the death of war that kills valiant death of water is how the swimmer goes. It is the death of markets that kills the trader; and death of indecision takes the idle away, The trade of cutlass blunts its edge." (P. 43).

Text vi: "How boldly the lizard struts before the pigeon when it was the eagle... he promised us he would confront." (P. 67).

Text vii: "That king is not yet crowned who will peg an elephant" (p. 42).

Text viii: "The elephant deserves better than we say: 'I have caught a glimpse of something; if we see the tamer of the forest let us say plainly we have seen an elephant.'" (p. 43).

Text ix: "When the wind blows cold from behind, that's when the fowl knows his true friend" (p. 9).

Text x: "The leaf nibbling grub lives on the leaf; the kola-chewing beetle lives on the kolanut" (p. 19).

Text xi: "There is only one home to the life of a river-mussel; there is only one home to the life of a tortoise, there is only one shell to the soul of man." (p. 11).

Text xii: "The river is never so high that the eyes of fish are covered; the night is never so dark that the albino fails to find its way." (p. 43).

Text xiii: "Life is honour; it ends when honour ends." (p. 15).

Text xiv: "The bush-rat fled his rightful cause, reached the market and set up a lamentation; 'Please save me!'—are these fitting words to hear from an ancestral mask" there is a wild beast on my heels' is not becoming language from a hunter." (p. 69).

## **Analysis and Discussion of findings**

In the text of proverbs used in Soyinka's "DKH", Elesin is described with different damning epithets by employing varied symbolic and iconic signs. For instance, proverbs are employed as indexical signs of warning, condemnation, rebuke, among other things. First, we explain the discourse signification of warning.

### **Indexical sign of Warning:**

In text 1, Elesin is the symbol of a cockerel that forgets its tail as a result of its zest of a tryst (or celebration). In this proverb, Elesin is the careless cockerel who left his most treasured tail behind as a result of enjoyment of a tryst. This text contains the indexical sign of warning or rebuking Elesin to beware of his hedonistic attitude, carnal lust and Epicureanism. Elesin's marriage to Iyaloja's daughter is a proof that he is really a cockerel who has left or forgotten his tail (his role). Elesin's role as the life sustaining tank of Oyo people has been neglected.

Also, in "Text ii", Elesin is described as symbol of irresponsible man who has neglected the long faithful mother of his children as a result of his marriage to a new bride. Elesin in this text is also an icon of a careless husband who could not take care of his wives. This statement has the indexical sign of warning Elesin to stop his irresponsible attitude. The praise-singer has used this statement not only to warn Elesin but also to reprimand him. The proverbs in DKH most especially those in Texts i, ii, iii, xi, xii and xiii are employed as indexical signs of warning Elesin to stop his foot-dragging attitude.

In text iii, Elesin is the symbol of a dog that outruns its owner (finger that feeds him). Elesin as dog is owned by the Oyo's. Elesin is also the boulder inside which peace, harmony and prosperity in Oyo is kept. Elesin as an estranged dog is neglecting his role as the tank-sustaining tank of the Oyos. The signification discourse of this proverb (in Text iii) is that Elesin is an irresponsible man who has neglected his duty. The text also has the indexical sign of warning Elesin to stop his promiscuous and egocentric habits which have made him to neglect his role.

### **Indexical Sign of Condemnation**

Secondly, the proverbs used by Iyaloja and Olohun-Iyo (Praise-singer) in the discourse of Soyinka's "DKH" are 'garnished' with indexical sign of condemnation. For instance, in Text iv, Elesin is the symbol of a confused man who stays at a "Seven-cross-roads." The statement in Text iv is a dramatic irony since Elesin has spoken' against himself the praise-singer asks Elesin that if Elesin had got lost his dog" will track the hidden path" to him (the praise-singer).

This makes Elesin to boast that he knows what to do since ‘the seven-cross roads confuses only the strangers’ (p. 42). The indexical sign in this statement is that Elesin is indirectly speaking against himself. Elesin in this context is an icon of a confused man. He is ‘pinned down’ by his Epicureanism, egocentricity and carnal lust and has forgotten to perform his necessary ritual suicide.

Coupled with this, Elesin is the icon of a swimmer who must die in water, a symbol of the valiant who should die in the war front and the idle who is killed by indecision. Elesin is reprimanded and condemned by Iyaloja that indecision, sexual promiscuity and geocentricism will make him to fall from grace to grass. In “Text v”, Iyaloja employs proverbs as the indexical sign to condemn Elesin’s hubris”- carnal lust, pride, geocentricism, Epicureanism and stubbornness.

In text vi, Elesin is the symbol of a lizard which boasts (struts) before the pigeon (symbol of an innocuous and weak creature) when it was the eagle (symbol of a strong and dangerous creature) that he promised he would confront in this discourse, Elesin has been condemned by Iyaloja that he (Elesin) had forgotten his role as the horseman of Alaafin and the symbol of safety and prosperity for Oyo people. Iyaloja employed this text as an indexical sign to showcase Elesin’s irresponsibility. Elesin as the lizard signified in confronting with or focusing on mundane things of life like carnal lust for the betrothed wife of Iyaloja’s son instead confronting “the eagle” (i.e. committing the necessary ritual suicide).

### **Indexical Sign of Boasting**

Proverbs in Soyinka’s DKH are also used as indexical sign of boasting or strutting. For instance, in Text vii above Elesin is the symbol and icon of an elephant that cannot be pegged by any crowned king. The signification in this utterance is that Elesin has become a person whose actions cannot be checked by anybody. The indexical sign in this utterance is that Elesin is boasting that his actions as the king’s horseman cannot be challenged. The statement also has the signification that Elesin is a proud person. And, this pride, besides other tragic flaws led to his fall.

### **Indexical sign of showing Elesin’s Failure**

The discourse of proverbs used in “DKH” equally has the indexical sign of portraying or showing Elesin’s failure. This can be examined in Text xiv. Elesin is the icon of the bush rat that fled its right cause and reached the market before shouting “Please, save me.” Elesin is also the symbol of a hunter who says “There is a wild beast oh my heel”. The signification in the utterance is to showcase Elesin’s shrinking of his responsibility. The statement also has an indexical sign of showcasing Elesin’s irresponsibility and unseriousness.



## **Indexical sign of Eulogy**

The praise-singer (Olohun-Iyo) describes Elesin's role in Oyo with the symbol of Ajanaku (the elephant). Elesin's role is Herculean as well as portraying the indexical sign been dangerous, tasking and terrible. Elesin is also described as the symbol of elephant (ajanaku). This statement has the signification of eulogizing Elesin whose role reflects the icon of a great elephant (ajanaku).

## **Indexical Sign of Reminding His Role As Elesin**

The proverbs employed in the text of "DKH" also serve as indexical sign of reminding identified in Texts i, ii, x, and xi. In text i, Elesin is an icon of a cockerel who has forgotten its tail as a result of a tryst (or celebration). In this discourse, Elesin is reminded of his role by the praise-singer. Elesin's shirking of his responsibility is condemned in Text ii where he serves as a symbol of an irresponsible husband that neglected his old wife as a result of his marriage to a new wife. Text iii has the indexical sign of reminding Elesin not to shirk in his responsibility of the horseman of Alaafin.

In Text x, Elesin symbolizes a leaf-nibbling grub (that lives on the leaf) as well as a kola-chewing beetle (which lives on kolanut). In this text, Iyaloja is indirectly reminding Elesin of his role and also condemning Elesin's promiscuous and egocentric attitude. Also, in Text xi, Elesin is the icon of the shell inside which the river-morsel lives and also a symbol of the shell where the tortoise lives. The signification in this statement is that Elesin serves as the symbol of the shell which contains the peace, tranquility and prosperity of the people of Oyo. The praise-singer in this text is trying to remind Elesin of his role as the shell, inside which lives, the success and harmony of the entire people of Old Oyo. Elesin is told that he (Elesin) as the shell that guards, the Oyos must not be smashed on boulders. This signifies that if the horseman of Alaafin (Elesin Oba) fails to perform the necessary ritual suicide peace, harmony and prosperity will elude the entire people of Old Oyo.

## **Conclusion**

By and large, to grasp the significations in Soyinka's DKH one must understand the iconic, symbolic and indexical signaling system employed in not only the proverbs but in all other metalanguage (e.g euphemisms, metaphors etc) used in the play Soyinka's poetic language has made "DKH" one of the most African dramaturgy where the sublime language of the gods has been richly employed. Since "DKH" is a ritual drama, metalanguage has been used in it in order to showcase the interactions among acolytes of the gods.

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