

An Anthroposemiotic Reading of John Pepper Clark's 'Abiku'

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Abstract

In semiotics exists signs for suggestive identification and decoding of multi-modal meanings and ideologies. Language is viewed by the linguist as a signaling system. That is, it communicates meanings through linguistic signs (words) that have arbitrary affinity with some cultural objects and ideas (supra-linguistic reference). Critics have barely subjected many culturally – revealing poems to semiotic investigation. For this, a critical attempt is made to interrogate J.P. Clark's 'Abiku' seen in this work as microcosmic of culturally - held belief about the intractable spirit child myth of African weltanschauung. This recalcitrant spirit being dies and is given birth to repeatedly. The anthropomorphic phenomenon is what J.P. Clark deploys in his poem. A semiotic reading of the poem becomes the favoured theoretical perspective through which a detailed examination of various iconic, indexical and symbolical signs can reveal the signature of the society that projects this concept. We deploy in our attempt at analysis, index and icons as introduced by Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure semiotic theories as well as Nelson Fashina's modified structural semiotic reading model. Consequent upon our analytical foray, it is revealed that signs, point to culturally identifiable Abiku, the spirit child phenomenon in the African context. It as well, relates its semiotic system of meaning to socio-political instability from Military coup and counter coups that form parts of dictatorial military regimes in Nigeria.

Keywords: Anthroposemiotics, African poetry, J.P Clark, Abiku, Military Coup

INTRODUCTION

Most African theorists do not feel easily disposed to the deployment of western reading strategies to African literary works. This notion of theirs, perhaps, stems from the perceptual aesthetic complexion of foreign works. These scholars hold that the foreign anvil for critical excavation of meanings cannot be cultivated in the utilitarian firmament of African literature. This is as a result of the non- synthetic ideas contained in culturally-coded garbs that such aesthetic sole textual strategies cannot 'unbury.' Northrop Frye in his text based critical orientation, says that literature is an "autonomous verbal structure' quite cut off from any reference beyond itself, a sealed and inward-looking real which 'contain(s) life and reality in a system of verbal relationships" (122). Northrop Frye's assertion seals the reason African literature is less receptive to reductionist attempts of foreign theorists to predicate literary productions on the platform of form because of the 'impermeable' hedge built around it. This is to sustain in it, the socio-cultural propositions embedded in African artifices and the perceived inappropriateness such reading strategies lend to culturally-steeped African works. It is on this backdrop, that Fashina (2009) pontificates:

the domain of African literary interpretation and theory has often resisted the approaches such as formalism, new criticism, scrutiny, and deconstruction in the sense that they do not create infrastructure for the African specific flavor of cultural and aesthetic meanings of works.(134)

The western critical canons –formalism, new criticism, scrutiny, deconstruction in Fashina's revelatory enunciation, mainly privilege intrinsic interpretation of texts without the 'perceived' appropriate recourse to the exteriorizing factors that give artistic lives to such texts. It becomes apparent that many Africana scholars are of the absolute conviction that African literary corpus are reflective of African socio-political vicissitudes and so such relative 'un-universalistic' ideological leanings cannot lend themselves to only textual interpretative formats. Semiotics as advanced by Ferdinand De Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce which simply put, is a science of signs, becomes the most admissible in that it accommodates the varying character of the automated text and the de-automated one which had been deemed inappropriate for basically, theories, and in that regard, do not take cognizance of worldly influence. The dexterity of semiotics within and across texts, again resonates in Fashina's opinion, "...semiotics as a sign of sign system offers a robust technology of textual interpretation which annexes both the intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of communication..."(134)

To this end, one finds in Fashina's explication, the ambivalent dentition of semiotics with which an adventurous exercise into its critical plane can be sustained. It is further exigent to elucidate that the concept of semiotics as a proper background, will facilitate perhaps, a substantial critical interrogation of Abiku, a poem by J.P Clark.

Semiotics: Nature and Scope.

Semiotics as a scientific study of signs, tries to examine all the symbolic interpretants in the contexts cultural communication. This is largely in consonance with what many scholars view it to mean. Semiotics, the study of

signs, seeks to know how meaning is possible by examining the conditions which allow language and meaning to arise in the first place (Davis and Schlefer, 1989:143). Every language has in it, the totality of the cultural experiences of the people to whom it serves. There are contextual factors upon which interpretive exercises can suffice. If semiotics does regard signs as its linguistic core, what the signs refer to are deeply ingrained in the context and not the text.

Morse Peckham, (1983) posits that “signs are said to have something called significance or meaning.” (185). In signs inhere relationships that point to a whole connection- in which there are perceptions responded to and shared by people whose patterns of communication are either similar or they show absolute understanding in codes, signs, icons etc. Corroborating this, Peckham submits that “a sign then, is any perceptual configuration to which there is a response.”(186)

From various scholarly viewpoints, there is a rather suggestive acceptance by scholars that semiotics operates in/ with and around these few ideas- cultural context, interconnected systems, communication, sign response or reactions. The development of semiotics is traceable to the foundational efforts of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) while the more conspicuous modern portrait of socio-semiotics would be specifically credited to American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). These two are considered the brains behind modern semiotics. It is upon their models, that such theorists and scholars like Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Mikhail Bakhtin, Olu Obafemi, Ropo Sekoni, Victoria Alabi, Nelson Fashina, Obododimma Oha and the rest predicate their theories of reading.

Saussure researched on the dual nature of the sign, however his work fixated on the verbal sign. This idea is also reiterated in Lodge, (1988:19-27). The sign establishes a linguistic and supra –linguistic connection between Saussurean ideas of the signifier (the sound image, text image) and the signified (the inferred or referent). It is however noted that there is no straight jacket connection shared by these two. Their relationship can best be described as arbitrary. For example, there is no natural relationship between chair (signification) and its English sequence of sounds (signifier) as the same word could be supplanted by other sound representations. Through Saussure’s clarification we observe that the same English language, which signify that the sound ‘chair’ refers to the concept of a chair and not the sounds themselves. To this end, the term ‘arbitrary’, does not suggest that individuals can associate certain references in the external world with signs or even altering a sign once the linguistic community has confirmed it associational to its referents. The rather abstract and mentalistic approach of Saussure perspective privileges philosophical dissonance between the study of language and its historical development.

Pierce model becomes much more favoured on the premise of context he adopts in his semiotic model. (Savan, 1987-1988, Hawkes, 1977 and Alabi, 1995) all agree to this notion. As illustrated by Pierce, a sign is something (object) which stands to somebody (interpretant) in some respect (ground). By this Peirce, connects to the mind of the perceiver by pointing out the varied perceptions of the interpretant of the association between the sign, its object and context. Therefore, we will essentially involve in our interpretation of the focus poem, ‘Abiku’, the connection that holds among, signs, object and contexts as they are believed to reveal connected clues as icon, index and symbol brought about by Pierce and deployed mostly in semiotic analysis of sign system. Pierce demonstrates that upon achieving a definite space for a sign, it lends itself to further elucidation. It is on this note that he distinguishes between three types of signs-icon, index, and symbol. As Stephen Eyeh through Pierce’s insight, espouses; “the first is the ‘iconic’ (where sign resemble the referent e.g. a road sign. Second is the ‘indexical’ where the sign is associated with its referent e.g. smoke equals fire. The third is the symbolic where the sign and its referent bear an arbitrary relationship as language.

With this conceptual revelation in semiotics, by Pierce, a guiding framework towards the adumbration of significations can produce a worthwhile semiotic interpretation not only for African poetry but also for other literary forms, adjudged African.

The Semiotic Triads and Context

The connection that exists between the icon, index and symbol is nevertheless, intricate. In this sense they are mutually exclusive. This behoves that it is not impossible to have iconic symbols or symbolic icons. Therefore, the context in which a sign is used normally suggests its meaning.

Barthes in his work on non-linguistic systems points to the influence of context (Hawkes, 1977:131). He reveals that the signifier with signification is a combination of the thought import of the producer of the sign and the nature of society’s conventional modes and channels. He uses the term ‘myths’ to foreground this claim. To him, ‘myths’ are ‘the very fabric of its (a society’s) system of ‘meaning’ (Hawkes, 1977:131). Myth facilitates here the process of signification to go further because it has the capacity to transform a sign in the initial system of language into a signifier in the second order. Barthes then espouses the first order to assume the angle of the literal, which is the use of language to mean what it says. The second order (where myth is employed) becomes the province of the literary, as it is a depiction of figurative aspect of language (aesthetics)

Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian philosopher also makes his impression on socio- semiotics. He contends

that the sign cannot be a pure, fixed unit (Eagleton, 1983:116). He further argues that the sign cannot but refer to the real world because the sign does not refer to itself or does not have a nature. It is the different social elements that make up a particular social unit which invest the sign with its meaning.

Obafemi (1994) corroborates this Bakhtin's argument as he considers semiotics a centric discourse, in which context is a macro-sign (37). This macro sign is a cultural system of communication. Invariably in a particular society this occupies a significant point in semiotic analysis. Fashina deploys 'macro code' in his semiotic analysis of Ngugi's play. This is what equates the macro sign Obafemi discusses as macro signs. We shall attempt an eclectic method drawing from Saussurean, Piercean and Fashinanean semiotic templates in our anthropomorphic interrogation of J. P Clark's Abiku.

Semiotics and African Poetry

Unlike other western text-based critical canons, semiotics provides sufficient footstool. It is in other words, a cultural reading facility deployed most appropriately to critical examination of African literary works like drama, prose and poetry which is the genre of our focus in this paper.

Semiosis deals with signs especially as they relate to supra-textual world of reference. Poetry on the other end, communicates significant ideas through sign medium. For poetry, these signs with which it communicates are figurative devices and so meanings are super-imposed on what may appear in the surface, as without deeper communicational values. For example, the deployment of a 'bat' in a poem on a denotative level would suggest an animal that flies on air; a bird to simply describe it. This is a meaning possibly arrived at in a foreign sense but for, most Africans, the meaning transcends just bird but evil omen, especially when seen in one's abode at night. Meanings in semiotics are culturally correlates and therefore they are ingrained in that experience, in that culture which brings about such semantic affectation. If meanings are culturally bound in semiosis and African poetry communicates extended meanings subsumed in aesthetics of African culture, then semiotics offers African poetry a very much suitable canon for its reading. This is the guiding notion through which an attempt will be made to interpret Clark's Abiku using some semiotic paradigms.

Anthroposemiotics in J.P Clark's 'Abiku'

Its superficial simplicity of diction apart, Clark's 'Abiku,' exemplify "complex structural semiotic geography" to borrow Fashinian parlance that reveals its very adventitious foregrounding of the intractable myth of Abiku as reflective of the quagmire fronted in the postcolonial and the socio-cultural space of a society. The analysis will involve structural discussion; it will also feature different relevant codes as exemplified by scholars like Pierce, Saussure, Fashina and Olu Obafemi who have deployed them in informed analyses of various corpuses. An attempt will be made too, to devise some codes imperative to our task here.

Structure of the poem

The poem mainly evinces a truly structural delineation into five and the last (sixth phase) -a conclusion marking anaphoric and cataphoric referencing signs. At every level, the poem is couched in sign -suggestive punctuation patterns which serve to hint at some-graphetics and also perceived as vital contributors to meaning and thus give clues to the discursive breaths (levels, phases, mappings, movements). The internal mechanics-comma, (eight occurrences) in this poem exhibit sub-structured meaning that would be fully grasped when placed against the main graphetics: end punctuation character, (five full stops) are significations of the most crucial six phases of the poem discursive mappings in the poem.

The first phase typifies 'conditioned proposition' which run from lines 1-4 struts with the constative "coming and going" establishes the phase of conditioned proposition (C.P) made to Abiku (+/- male objective force index) to pitch its tent with the dwellers (objective natural voice index) in the poem or stay permanently with other (supernatural force indexes) if it Abiku, would not hearken to stay indoors (+/- comfort abode). Some codes used here are derivatives of linguistic conjecturing, mostly deployed for analytical exigency.

Lines 5-12, mark the second level which again is categorized as 'unpleasant resignatory condition and contentment' this level suggests through visual iconography, auditory and tactile indexes. Visual iconographs here include such signs-"leaks" "thatch" "floods" "banks" and the rest found in the poem. Tactile and visual indexical icons here may include "fire and dries." All are quantum of signifiers within the larger semiotic abode of meanings metamorphosed from the hardship wrought on the society by instability in socio-political life of the society signified by the constative-"coming and going" at the beginning of the poem.

The third level is firmly reinforced contentment, here, the sign 'still' - a grammatical coordinator finds its balance as a signification for contentment in the resignatory condition geared off by "True"- a subordinator in the second phase of the poem. 'True' which as a signifier inheres in the admittance of the obvious discomfiture expressed in the "indoors"

The fourth phase is exactly built on stifled supplication to the same Abiku, the passive object appealed to. Here, a voice appeals to Abiku through phono-semantic code indicated through voice modulation. The first tone

is ‘adversary’ –“No longer then bestride the threshold” this is followed by an ‘appealatory’ tone- “then step in and stay for good.” The signifiers here show stifled/subtle supplication as that might enhance the possibility of staying. Again in many cultures where such myths hold, intractable children through some ritual sacrifices are made to stay. In this poem, this ‘appealatory’ tone is predicated on the context of ritual pleading.

In the fifth phase, the fourth stage which is indexical of appeal is more profound. The sign of the repeatedly ‘born to die child’ can be construed. This stage is mapped ‘frustrating-subtle supplication.’

That the structure of the poem is cyclic is attested to, in the recourse to the supplicatory tone that is conspicuous in the fourth discursive breath. There is in the concluding part of this poem, the re-iteration of “step in” step in and stay.” Viewed also against the background of anaphoric (backward) and cataphoric (forward) referencing, it is also instructive to note that the dominant signifier for supplication is the literary device identified as repetition

Unfolding cultural codes of the poem

An attempt will be made to reveal some culturally-coded signs which will help in critical orchestration and semiotic unfolding of referentials. The poem which begins with the constative ‘coming and going’ is aptly iconographic of kinesic operation. The poetic visual signs like baobab ‘tree,’ thatch,” ‘flood,’ ‘banks,’ ‘bats,’ ‘bamboo walls,’ ‘thatch’ ‘floods’ all signify the rural and riverine spatial details of the setting of the poem.

Coming and going these several seasons do stay out in the baobab tree

Here, the unabated locomotion is symbolic of restlessness in the institutionalised instability in political life of the Nigerian, and indeed most African societies. The post-independent Nigerian society between 1966 and 1999 was marked by coups and counter-coups that made the society a protest ground. The whole protest and disturbances came as result of tepid corruption and mismanagement of funds. The stage was set then for poets to explore in poetry, events within their society. This is the antecedent to the poem ‘Abiku’

The political situation of the Nigerian military leadership experience is extrinsically imposed on the sign ‘Abiku’- the Yoruba word for a child who is born to die young and to be reborn by the same woman over and over again... (Senanu and Vincent, 205)

‘Baobab’ a mammoth tree is a symbolic icon of the threshold of ghommids, witches and spirits in the African cultural context. This baobab in the political realities of military rulership, connotatively signifies ‘army barracks’ where like baobab, is also the abode of the military from where they come into the civilian society to wrench power from the civilian and perpetuate their tyrannical tendencies like Abiku.

Follow where you please your kindred spirits

If indoors is not enough for you.

‘Follow’ which is a signification that Abiku is advised to permanently reside in his world- the baobab tree where he is happy with other spirit children. Kindred spirits can be described as indexical to ties with supernatural forces among which life can be more comfortable.

This particular sub-coded unit, extends to the rejection of military leadership marked by hardship. The choice made available in these lines signifies may be, people’s call on the military to either go back to the barracks or develop humane attributes to stay in the society. Follow where you please your kindred spirit (go back to the barracks) a place of regimental practices which signifies the anachronistic difference between ‘indoors’ lived by civilians and ‘baobab’ by soldiers.’

True it leaks through the thatch

When floods brim the banks

And the bats and owls

Often tear in at night through the eaves

And at harmattan, the bamboo walls

Are ready tinder for the fire

That dries the fresh fish up on the rack fingers

In this second stage are resonating visual iconographs- ‘leaks,’ ‘thatch,’ ‘floods’ ‘brim’ ‘banks’ ‘bats’ ‘owls,’ ‘eaves,’ bamboo walls’ ‘fish’ ‘rack’ and ‘sun.’ They all signify the cultural building, physical elements that are found in the cultural life of the setting of the poem.

‘True’ is a sign of admittance in the unpleasant and impoverished life lived by the dwellers of the thatched house. Thatch is also symbolic of economic hardship and vulnerability to all forms of hazards that the dwellers are exposed to in the event of natural disasters ‘floods’ besetting the remote village. ‘Floods’ give a signification of the dominant” riverine attribute of the culture in which the poem is primarily derived.

‘Bat’ and ‘owl’ are culturally detested animals. In the cultural sense, they are symbolic of evil or ominous signs of death and sorrow. These share evil connotations in some African societies not exclusive of the cultural context of the poem. ‘Tear’ signifies violent incursions of these evil elements in the cultural context

Night is simply iconic of a period of the day where everywhere is dark. Night stands as an iconic symbol for fear and apprehension especially of the unknown. The lexical “the eaves” semiotically reinforces the

fragility of the architectural infrastructure available to the dwellers of the rural abode in the poem.

Harmattan is indexical to dryness and infertility. It signifies a period marked by unproductiveness. It most aptly signifies vulnerability to fire outbreak and that is why it becomes reinforced with the sign 'fire' which foregrounds the period of the year as unique to African climate, particularly, the sub-saharan Africa/Nigerian. Dry season (harmattan) is marked with a time when normally, lips crack, the body dry and pale. Harmattan is juxtaposed with Autumn one of the four seasons in Europe others are winter, Spring and Summer. 'Fish' is the sign depicting the prevalence of this means of food in the riverine cultural context of this poem; a pointer to it as the most frequently consumed food and 'Fresh'. Fish is a semiotic typification of fish not readily smoked when not, may be boiled. The sign is also a subtle reference to the vitality in fresh food found in such rural riverine abodes as against chemically canned food of the urban ones.

Still, it's been the healthy stock

To several fingers, to many more will we who reach to the sun.

'Still', is graphetically suspect in its conveyor of a co-extensive meaning with 'True' as the precursor and another graphetical signage in the poem. It signifies the capability of the 'house' to stay in health in spite of the auguries informed by unforeseen and regular invasion of pests and exposure to natural hazards.

'Healthy stock' is indexical to the state of health of the dwellers of the rural abode. Still here is a reiterative sign of the fecundity of the house in spite of its occasional glimpses of hardship mentioned in 'True' earlier in the poem.

'Several fingers' is iconic of those who the little resources keep healthy. 'Many more' is a signification of the expected children to be born who will 'reach to the sun' this is interpretant of visitors who come to this abode or assume inhabitants.

No longer then bestride the threshold

But step in and stay

For good, we know the knife scars

Serrating down your back and front

Like beak of the sword-fish,

As a bondsman to this house,

Are all relics of your first comings.

'No longer then bestride the threshold' is a significant reinforcer of the now intolerable continued and never ceasing locomotion of Abiku. This is the situation the appellant demands an abrupt end. This marks, a shift from plaintiff mood to assertive one. This shift is a sign of frustration felt by the appellant.

For good 'we know' the knife scars serrating your back and front like beak of the sword fish. This succinctly is a signification of the practice in some African countries where 'Abiku children' are identified by some incision for suspected spirit child, protection and identification in the case of human peril or just a marker of identity for a given family or social groups. This is a reflection of the belief in signs by the culture that the poem foregrounds. The 'scars' 'ineffable' marks are therefore compared to the serrating 'signs of the beak of the sword-fish'

And both your ears, noticed.

As or bondsman to this house,

Are all relics of your first coming bondsman house are all signs that show cultural efforts previously done to identify Abiku in subsequent comings. 'ears, notched' specifically, can be seen as a signification in which pre-modernist societies deploy in cultural identification of their 'bondsman' occupant or one affined to the culture or the specific abode. These signs 'backs and fronts' and notched ear' are relics symbolic of reminders of a pre-existing object or person. 'first coming' assumes relics that intensify the ideational proposition in the first four lines of the poem.

Then step in and stay

For her body is tired

Tired, her milk going sons

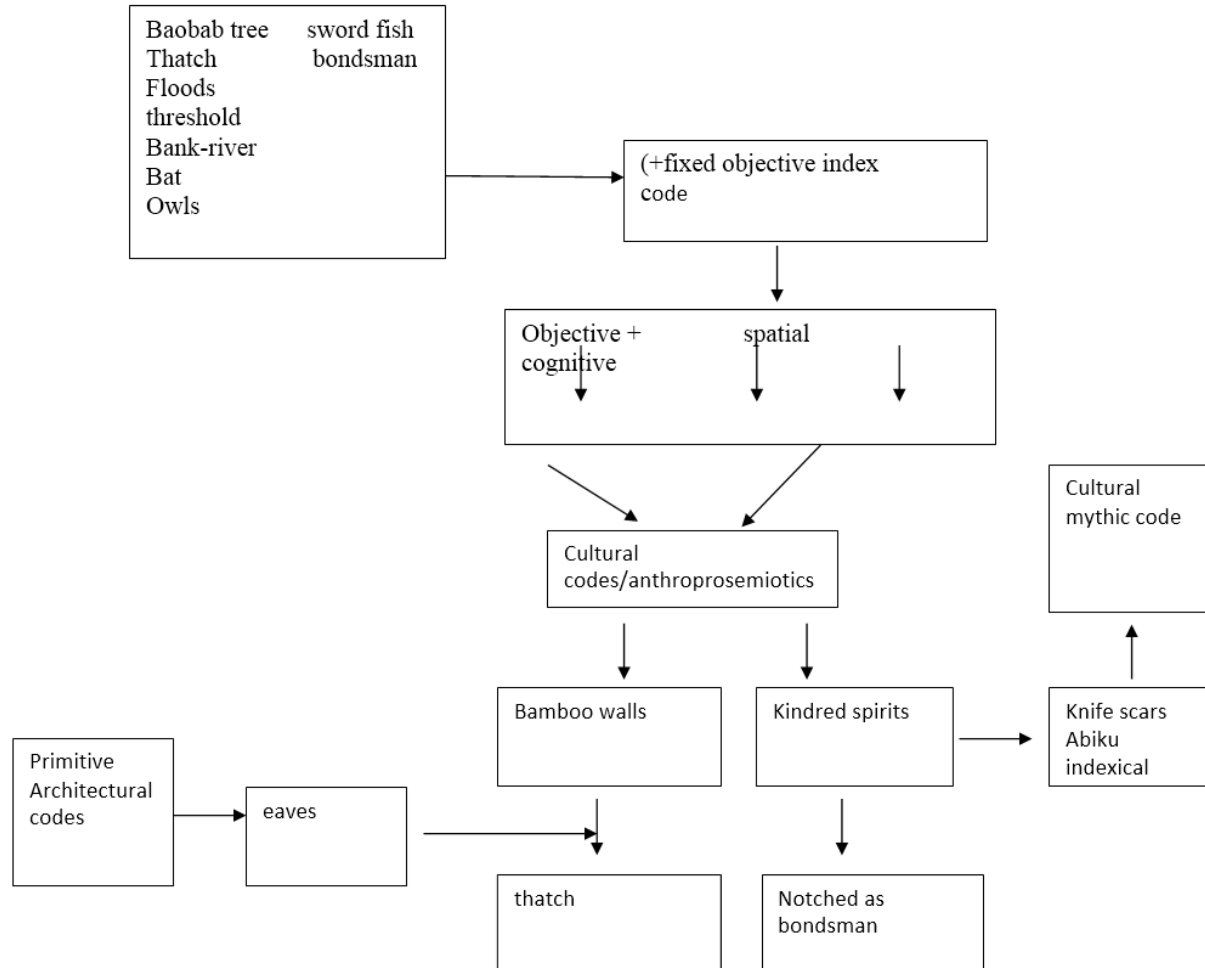
Where many months gladden the heart:

'Then step in, stop in and stay' as a reiteration of the appeal, serves to signify a desire for rest over 'her' the objective pronoun for human, adult – male) who goes through mental torture on account of the constant birth and death of the same child dozens of times. The appeal here is impelled by such restless and monotonous birth and death which makes for economic and psychological woes on the home and the larger cultural sphere. 'Her' is indexical to care, love, warmth and fertility. With the effect of the repeated comings of the child, she is bound to lose these attributes. In the socio-political context, 'her' is symbolic of Nigeria, (the people) that suffers from the anguish wrought on her citizenry by tyrannical forces – the same military ruthlessness but perpetuated by different regimes led by the Heads of State.

In Fashina (2009), we find various codes – the spatial code, the kinetic/gestural code the linguistic or speech code. Other identifiable codes in the play are grapho-semi code and phonosemic codes (136). In Clark's Abiku

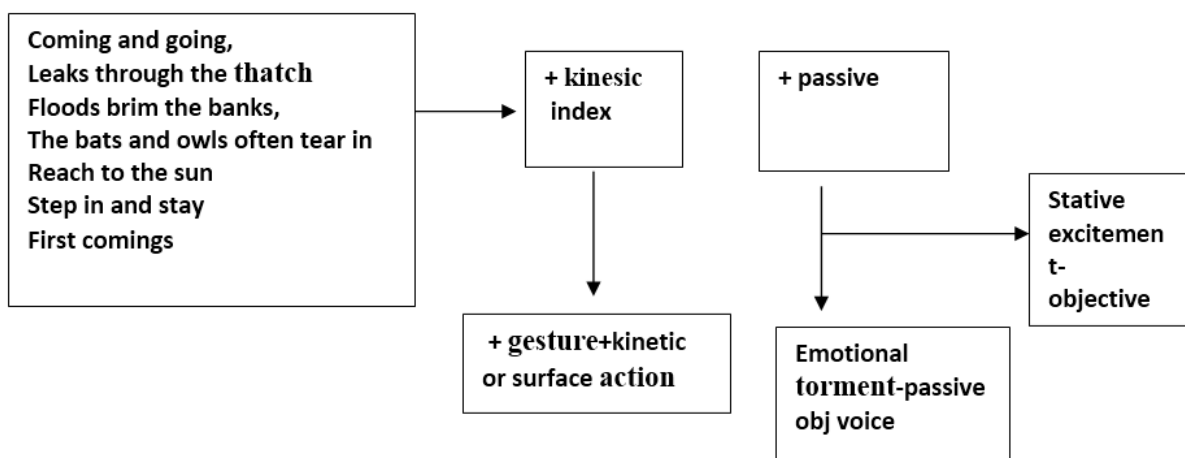
lies symmetry of subsets of content-revealing signs. We will limit our notational illustrations to cultural code, kinetic/gestural code and the linguistic code for constraints of time and resources. These can be viewed in the graphical illustrations below:

FIG 1A



The cultural codes as illustrated here constitute concrete nouns-bamboo walls, thatch, eaves, bat owls and rack. They operate in this semiotic field as cultural imperatives of identity.

FIG 1B



BBBDGGHHHH

As posited by Fashina (2009) Macro codes and signifiers are concrete nouns which occupy cognitive space as

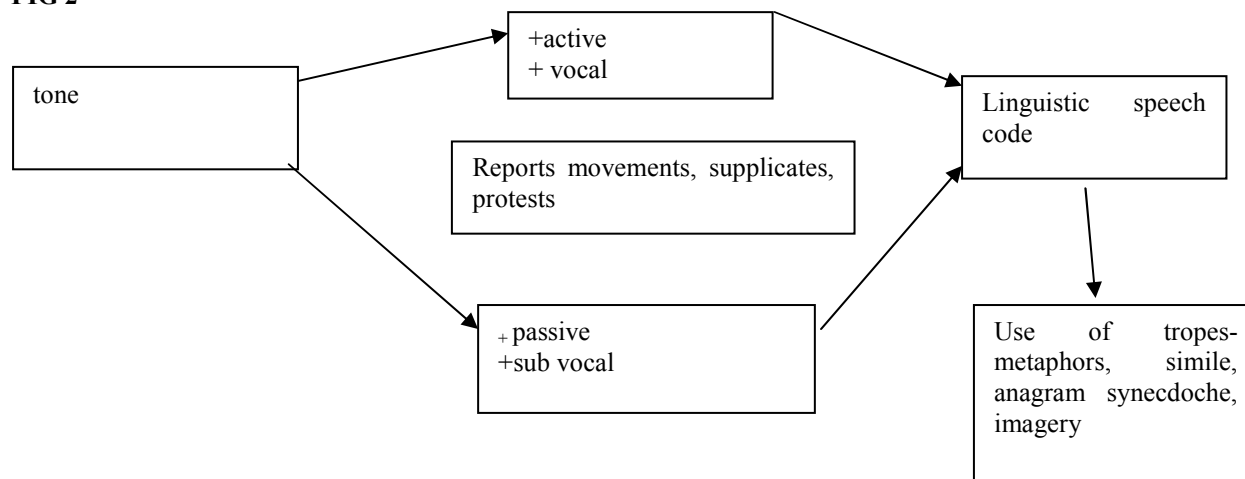
Fixed Object – Index (FB – 1). He adds that these codes do not have just denotational meanings rather they are loaded with semiotico-semantic extensions of meanings that help to situate and to locate the cultural origins...” Inferring from the above, suffice it to consider these macro codes cultural idioms through which meanings can be communicated in the performance context of the poem.

As signs that go beyond the base meanings, these codes have undercurrents of meanings.

‘Bamboo walls’, ‘thatch’

‘eaves’ etc are codified impoverishment of the riverine part of a traditional society.

FIG 2



Here is a graphic notation of kinetic codes and index. All locomotive signs indicated in the notations show + kinesics. These kinesics are reported by the ‘cultural coded voice. Therefore progressions (motions) are inferred they are only described for their verb-framed signals. While active movement present itself through verb clues from the voice (+ cultural – objective voice in the poem),

Passive voice are inferred from – kinesis, feelings of both the active objective voice index (Abiku) and the passive objective voice index).

For the Active voice, motion as reported continues without emotion but for the passive objective voice there is passive response only reported emotional psychological trauma of repeated (pregnancies, births and deaths although these are not stated in panorama they are deduced from the (appealing cultural voice index).

Fig 2, depicts the semiotic connections of the prosodic features of the language. + Active + Vocal tone, structure and mood to the + passive + subvocal elements as associated nodes of phonemic elements. Part of the former encapsulates signs of disenchantment at constant movements (birth death and rebirth), supplication. Subvocal embraces the tropes deployed in the poem.

Conclusion

Our analysis so far, has revealed Clark’s ‘Abiku’ as a cultural communication system. Through inter and intra-linguistics, the macro codes approach is used for illustrations of signs in the poem. The macro codes approach embraces nouns that are concrete. We have kinesic codes which indicate motion-oriented signs in semiotics – analytical framework. Moreover, we have deployed linguistic code which concerns the prosodic or the super-imposed segmentals in linguistic studies. The semiotic infrastructure of the poem has yielded a comprehensive code premised on the phenomenon of the spirit child, born to die and given birth to repeatedly. This ultimately has some connotative constitutions hinged on the tortuous political instability that characterise the post-independent period of Nigeria, with perhaps, particular reference to the incessant coup and counter coups of telling consequences to the nation.

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