

Cultural Symbols and African Symbolism: The Efficacy in Product Advertisement

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ABSTRACT

Although there are lots of African or Nigerian cultural symbols used in advertisement across the continent and indeed in the world over, there, however, are still some major ones that are prominent and to which people readily relate. However, only little has been written about the significance of these indigenous African symbols. This study sought to establish the significance and application of African cultural symbols in advertising. Adopting a descriptive approach, a sample size of 137 respondents was taken randomly in Lagos state, Nigeria and sampled with a 100% return rate. The study revealed that kola-nuts, head crown, cowries, beads, calabash, horsewhips, cocoa pod and seeds and the talking drum are some of the most important African symbols used in advertisement with cowries and kola-nuts ranking as the most important. The study also shows that the application of indigenous African symbols and symbolism, with which people can readily relate, to product advertisement will help improve advertising of products and communication.

Keywords: African symbols, Advertising, Communication, Culture, Symbolism.

INTRODUCTION

Sometimes, the best way to capture people's attention is to use something they are already familiar with. People tend to give attention to stimuli they can relate with. Previous studies indicate that people tend to assimilate judgments and make decisions in line with already existing knowledge or experiences (Allen, Gupta and Monnier, 2008). Consumers tend to possess presumed thinking patterns, knowledge structures or perception mechanisms that influence their tastes and choices. Allen et al (2008), in a similar vein, referred to this as 'schemes'. Such schemes are cultivated by factors such as culture and culturally congruent experiences. Hence, it may be safe to conclude that cultural congruency of product advertisements play major roles in acceptability. According to Zhang and Gelb (1996), culturally consistent appeals are more effective than culturally non-consistent ones even though individualism and individualistic values also have effect on eventual choices of consumers (Diehl, Terlutter and Weinberg, 2003). Hence, it might be safe to surmise that culture plays a major role in consumer taste perception, advertisement and product communication.

Communication is the process by which we share our ideas and feelings (NICD, 2005). It is a complex process involving several elements; an act of conveying intended meaning from one entity or group to another through the use of mutually understood signs and semiotic rules. But it is this complexity that explains the connection between communication and culture. Our customs, the way we dress, how we eat, how we greet, all these behaviours are also part of how individuals communicate. Communication and culture are inseparable, and when the elements of communication change, the elements of culture change and vice versa (Larry, 1995). Most of our human communication is done through symbolic means (words, signs, and symbols) that we have learned through culture (Arthur, 1989).

Nwagbara (2002) states that once it captures attention, it tends to hold it long enough to induce patronage of the advertised product. Although, advertising directly or indirectly makes an attempt to manipulate social values and attitudes, which has subjected it to several criticisms, it is no doubt a veritable tool for expanding the customer base of organizations. Anyacho (2007) notes that advertising is a form of communication which attempts to interpret

the qualities of products, services and ideas in terms of consumers' needs and wants. It is a communication channel through which facts about products, services or ideas paid for by an identified sponsor, are presented to the society.

Advertising generally aims at promoting and selling goods, services, and ideas. These include tangible items such as beauty products, drinks, toiletries, and intangible services like banking, medical care, and interior decoration, repairing works, fashion and designing. Ideas such as political, economic, religious and cultural among others are placed in the media to inform, educate and call for patronage (Nwagbara, 2010). For this persuasive communication strategy to achieve its goal, the packaging of the message is paramount. That is, a basic consideration in the conceptualization of the advertising message is how acceptable the 'final copy' will be. To the advertiser and the mass media, saddled with the responsibility of relaying the message to the audience, it is not just the creation of the message with the best concept that is important, but that the message is capable of selling the product, idea, or service and that it is acceptable to the consumer or potential consumer. To achieve this, advertisers must recognize the fact that advertising should take place within a specific cultural context. Cultural norms and values should provide direction and guidance to all members of society in all aspects of their lives including their consumption patterns. Understanding how this works is necessary in designing meaningful advertising copies (Nwagbara, 2010).

Similarly, Mboho (1991) argues that when an advertiser, the producer, or even the graphic designer shows concern about the content of his message, he is in fact, recognizing that information has potential persuasive powers on any audience, and he knows also that the audience's reaction to information is not only dependent on content, but also on several factors that may be psychological, social or environmental. The media is entrusted with the role of informing, educating and entertaining the society. Advertising messages are tailored towards mass communication and as such are directed at large towards heterogeneous and scattered audiences. The mass media audience is made up of a variety of persons who are different in social class, educational attainment, values, norms, economic status and cultural beliefs. Individual's level of exposure to technology and their acceptance of media messages present a segregation that calls for attention by virtue of

the goal of advertising. The effectiveness of advertising can be enhanced if advertisers ensure that messages are created to reflect the cultural symbols associated with their target audience using any chosen media of mass communication or any other media so decided. This is because "the influence that culture has on individual's consumption pattern is strong enough to affect their choice of goods and services and by extension, their response to advertisements" (Nwagbara, 2002). Therefore, it will be less effective, this study posits, without the use of cultural symbols in visual communication of print and electronic advertisement.

Culture has been viewed in several ways by different scholars. It is referred to as the way of life of a people which encompasses their beliefs, music, art, and social organization (Anidobe & Uzoalor, 2010). Gonzalez (2018) describes it as an accumulation of the beliefs, traditions, language and values of a particular group of people. To some, culture has to do with the opera, art, ballad, dances, food, dressing and values, while some conceive culture as an all-encompassing phenomenon identifiable with a group of people. Nwagbara (2006) sees culture as the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, meanings, beliefs, values, attitudes, religion, concepts of self, the universe and self-universe, relationships, hierarchies of status, role expectations, spatial relations and time concepts acquired by a large group of people in the course of generations through individual and group strivings. Every culture has symbols that are unique to them commonly referred to as cultural symbols.

Cultural symbols are 'signs' that stand for something else, and are conventionally accepted as such. They are used extensively by advertisers to sell products, services and concepts, among other goals. Bearing in mind the selling points of the subject under consideration, as well as the fact that some symbols lend themselves to better interpretations and understanding than others, especially when put alongside what is being advertised in a specific context, advertisers capitalize greatly on the potentials of such symbols to meet their marketing objectives. These types of symbols were identified, isolated and appraised in local advertisements selected in this study.

Given the nature of man as a cultural symbol, man is able to make representations of his cultural identity through symbols in the form of

arts, language, myth, rituals, names, to mention but a few. Based on the importance of cultural symbols in advertisements, there is need to investigate the uses in visual communication of print and electronic advertisement in order to promote our cultural heritage. According to Fisher (2003), there is an awakening sense of symbolism, but it is not completely realized yet. This study is, therefore, explored symbolism, especially in the African context, and how it reflects in product advertising in Nigeria.

African Signs and Symbols in Advertising

Traditional signs and symbols are dynamic human activities which touches every domain of living for meaningful development and peaceful co-existence in the African society (Ushe, 2012). The essence of symbols are the sharing and understanding of the meaning of messages advertising. This is only possible if there is an understanding between the senders and receivers of their backgrounds, otherwise commonly referred to as field of experience. Dunn et al (2002) made us to understand that signs transmitted through words or even pictures have many meanings, the most common being denotative, connotative and contextual. The denotation of a sign is the reality that involves the literal association of signs with what they represent.

The connotation of a sign pertains to secondary and subjective realities designated by the sign, as well as eventual (favourable or unfavourable) evaluations, which are associated with primary or secondary realities, depending on the society. The contextual meaning (mental, visual or oral), is influenced by the context in which the advertisement appears, and more often than not, the factors determining the understanding of the sender's message are rooted in cultural signs and symbols. Gonzalez (2018) describes cultural symbol as a physical manifestation that signifies the ideology of a particular culture or that merely has meaning within a culture. Christianity as a cultural example has the cultural symbol of the cross. Islam has the moon and star, while the Jewish culture has the Star of David as a cultural symbol. Cultural symbols don't have to be actual symbols or signs; they may also be animals, fruits, plants, gestures such as hand signals and handshakes (Gonzalez, 2018).

Advertisers capture the interest of (potential) customers or maintain the loyalty of those who already patronize their products by the use of symbols which, through time, sometimes mentally represent what they are supposed to

signify. The most common of them as stated in Dunn et al (2002) are trademarks, brand names, trade names, logotypes, licensed names, trade characters, slogans and headlines. They all help to build product and brand efficacy, recognition and communication, thereby, promoting consumer loyalty. However, the most effective signs and symbols will be those that the consumers can easily culturally relate with since a familiarity bond has previously been created already. Hence, this study is aimed at determining some of the most prominent African cultural symbols and symbolism with Nigeria, which share some cultural similarities with other African countries, as the major study area.

Some common examples of African cultural symbols include:

- Kola nuts
- Head Crown
- Cowries
- Beads
- Calabash
- Horsewhips
- Cocoa pod or seeds and
- The talking drum, etc.

Usually, these symbols are not often used in their crude forms as they may not readily possess much appeal, especially to the younger generation. In fact, the new generation will only accept culture and cultural symbols which they consider fit and relevant to their lifestyle (Khosa, 2009). Some of these cultural African symbols are discussed briefly below.



Figure 1. Kola Nut

Source: Your Health Remedy, 2018.

Kola-Nut as an African Symbol

Kolanut is one of the most common African, and especially Nigerian, widely accepted and recognized cultural symbols. It is the fruit of the kola tree, a genus (Cola) of trees that are native

to the tropical rainforests of Africa. It is considered among some Nigerian tribes to be the first tree on Earth (Your Health Remedy, 2018).

Kola nut is a very important aspect of the tradition in Nigeria, which holds great social significance for many ethnic groups (Mayaki, 2011). It is neither the biggest nor the sweetest fruit in Igbo land; the nuts have tremendous cultural significance (Chidume, Osisioma and Echem, 2015). The “traditional kolanut is regarded as a sacred nut, which is used to communicate with the gods being that it was chosen by the elders as the head or king of all seeds” (Nnenne, 2013). Nnenne (2013) expressed the heart of Africans when stated that “he who brings kola brings life.” It readily appeals to the heart of the traditional Nigerian and or African, who is familiar with its cultural significance, when adapted in product advertisement (see figure 2).



Figure2. Sample Application of Kola Nut as an African symbol in product advertisement

Source: Ijalana, 2018.

Tradition and religion play major roles in Africa especially in determining our ideologies and characteristic way of thinking and kolanut helps to shape Nigerians’ philosophical ideology especially in relation to religion (Chidume et al, 2015). This draws the hearts of consumers exposed to advertisements such as the one depicted in figure 2 closer to the advertised product(s). Kolanuts symbolize solemnity, reverence, communion, hospitality and tradition (Nnenne, 2013; Chidume et al, 2015).

Calabash as an African Symbol

Calabash is one of the symbols of rural African life (Tekel, Akbarishahabi, Yildirim & Bande, 2016). It appears, according to Arango-Ulloa, Bohórquez, Duque & Maass (2009) in different forms and shapes (see figure 3) such as:

- Flattened
- Oblong
- Cuneate
- Elongated
- Globular
- Rounded-drop-shaped
- Oblong-drop-shaped and
- kidney-shaped

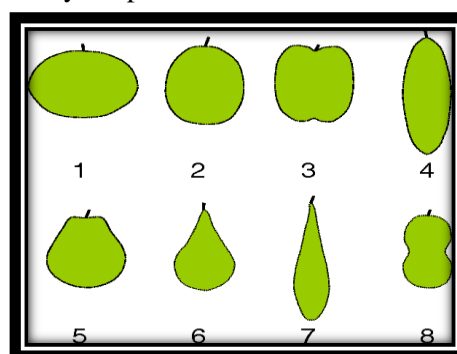


Figure3. Shapes of the calabash fruit

Source: Arango-Ulloa et al (2009).



Figure4. Shapes of the calabash fruit

Source: Usvat (2014).

It is a vine used as a vegetable, or harvested mature, dried, and used as a bottle, utensil or pipe (Tekel et al, 2016). It is an object that was commonly used in most regions of Africa as basic household utensil and musical instruments e.g. the ‘Shekere’ (the African-Yoruba beaded rattle) which is adopted in product advertisements and other forms of graphic designs (e.g. figure 5). Hence, the average African can relate with it, especially those of the older age range. It is grown commonly, for example, in both southern and western Africa (see figure 4).

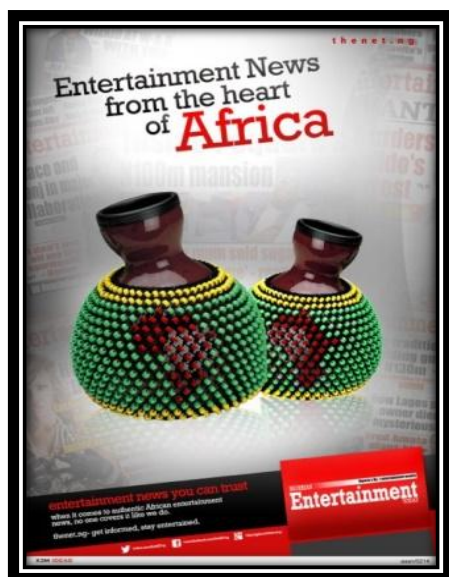


Figure5. The adoption of the 'shekere', made from the African calabash fruit, in communicative graphic design

Source: Shekere (2014) (Retrieved from: <http://thenet.ng/shekere/> 11/06/2018)



Figure6. The African talking drum

Source: Femi, 2017.

The African talking Drum as an African Symbol

This is one of Western Africa's most common cultural symbols. The African talking drum (see figure 6) appears in different African sub-cultures and languages as follow:

- Akan - Dondo
- Fante - Odonodo
- Twi - Dondo
- Hausa - Kalangu
- Igbo - Ekwe
- Yoruba - Gangan or Dundun
- Songhai - Doodo
- Mandinka - Tamma
- Gurunsi - Donno

The talking drum is another prominent part of the Nigerian culture. It is a culturally significant

instrument of communication in traditional African society that serves as the voice of the whole community and it communicates the sum of their desires (Ushe, 2012). According to Femi (2017), the talking drum is one of the oldest musical instruments used by leading drummers. It has its origin in the West African regions of Africa. The drum can be found in most West African countries including Senegal, Nigeria, Ghana, and Cameroon (Femi, 2017). Hence, it is a symbol the average Western African may readily relate and empathise with, hence promoting affective communication in product advertisement if appropriately applied (see figure 7).

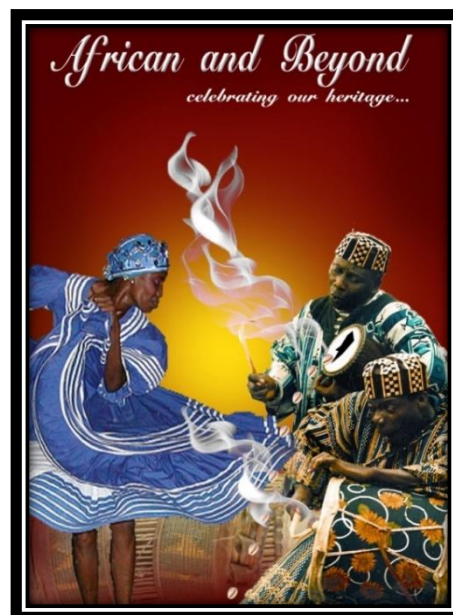


Figure7. Sample Application of the talking drum as an African symbol

Source: Ijalana, 2018.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research question guided both the theoretical and survey aspects of this study:

- What cultural African symbols are used or useable in product advertisement?
- Which African symbols are most prominent or acceptable?

RESEARCH METHOD

Descriptive survey research method was adopted for the purpose of eliciting the opinion of respondents. 137 respondents were sampled. Purposive sampling method was adopted. Only respondents who had been exposed to considerable level of advertisements, both local and foreign, were sampled. Descriptive statistics was adopted in this study. Data was collected with the use of structured questionnaires. Data collected was analysed using frequency

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distribution table, percentage and mean. Relative importance index (RII) was used to assess the level of importance of selected cultural symbols used for visual communication in print and electronic advertisements. Relative importance index (RII) = $\sum [w/(AxN)] \dots \dots (0 \leq \text{index} \leq 1)$

Where w = weighting given to each factor by the respondents and ranges from 1 to 5 where 1 is not significant and 5 is extremely significant. A = highest weight (5 in the case), and N = total number of respondents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The opinions of respondents regarding the types of cultural symbols used for product advertisement are presented in Table 1. The result reveals that

respondents strongly opined that cowries, horse whip, beads, crown, talking drum, gong, calabash, kola-nut, cocoa and picture/words/illustrations are used for visual communication in both print and electronic advertisement. The estimated mean response score for each of the symbols are 4.7, 4.6, 4.5, 4.5, 4.5, 4.5, 4.7, 4.7 and 4.6 respectively. While they agreed that native cutting comb, rattles, baby dolls and traditional sword may be used for product/brand advertisement and communication with the estimated mean response score of 4.4, 4.3, 4.4 and 4.4 respectively, they however disagreed with the use of cupboards and wrist watches as indicated by the mean response score of 2.2 and 2.2 respectively (see table 1).

Table1. Cultural Symbols Used for Visual Communication Product Advertisement

S/N	Variables	SA	A	U	D	SD	X	R	RII
1	Application of Native cutting comb as an indigenous symbol	68(49.6)	63(46.0)	3(2.2)	3(2.2)	00 (0.0)	4.4	A	0.89
2	Application of Horse whip as an indigenous symbol in advertising	90(65.7)	39(28.5)	7(5.1)	1(0.7)	00 (0.0)	4.6	SA	0.92
3	Application of Beads as an indigenous symbol in advertising	83(60.6)	47(34.3)	5(3.6)	1(0.7)	1(0.7)	4.5	SA	0.91
4	Application of Head Crown as an indigenous cultural symbol in advertising depicting royalty	72(52.5)	62(45.3)	2(1.6)	1(0.7)	00 (0.0)	4.5	SA	0.90
5	Application of Cocoa as an indigenous cultural symbol	99(72.3)	34(24.8)	1(0.7)	2(1.5)	1(0.7)	4.7	SA	0.93
6	Application of the African Talking drum as an indigenous cultural object that can be used in advertising	77(56.2)	56(40.9)	4(2.9)	00 (0.0)	00 (0.0)	4.5	SA	0.91
7	Application of Rattles as an indigenous cultural object and symbol	64(46.7)	58(42.3)	12(8.8)	2(1.5)	1(0.7)	4.3	A	0.87
8	Application of Gong as an indigenous cultural object and symbol	75(54.7)	57(41.6)	4(2.9)	1(0.7)	00 (0.0)	4.5	SA	0.90
9	Application of pictures, words, illustrations and African dressings may be used as cultural symbols in product advertising	89(65.0)	45(32.8)	3(2.2)	00 (0.0)	00 (0.0)	4.6	SA	0.93
10	Application of as a cultural symbol in product advertisement	74(54.0)	61(44.5)	2(1.5)	00 (0.0)	00 (0.0)	4.5	SA	0.91
11	Application of Baby dolls as indigenous cultural symbols	64(46.7)	70(51.1)	2(1.5)	00 (0.0)	1(0.7)	4.4	A	0.89
12	Application of traditional swords cultural symbols depicting power and strength	65(47.4)	67(48.9)	4(2.9)	1(0.7)	00 (0.0)	4.4	A	0.89
13	Application of Kola-nut as one of the indigenous cultural symbols in advertising	100(73.0)	36(26.3)	1(0.7)	00 (0.0)	00 (0.0)	4.7	SA	0.94
14	Application of Cupboards can be classified as indigenous cultural symbols	11(8.0)	8(5.8)	14(10.2)	68(49.6)	36(26.3)	2.2	D	0.44
15	Application of Wrist watch as African cultural symbol	10(7.3)	9(6.6)	15(10.9)	64(46.7)	39(28.5)	2.2	D	0.44
16	Application of Cowries as an indigenous cultural symbol	99(72.3)	38(27.7)	00 (0.0)	00 (0.0)	00 (0.0)	4.7	SA	0.94

Source: Author's work, 2018.

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As shown in table 2, on the basis of relative importance index, cowries and kola-nut ranked most significant by respondents as cultural symbols used for advertisement while cocoa and any picture/words/illustrations/dressing depicting African scenes or culture were ranked second. The horsewhip was ranked third while beads, talking drum and calabash were ranked the

fourth. Head crown and gong were ranked fifth while native cutting comb, traditional sword and baby dolls were ranked sixth. The use of rattles as African symbols was ranked seventh while respondents strongly disagreed with the use of cupboards and wrist watches in African symbolism (See table 1).

Table2. Importance ranking of African cultural symbols

S/N	Cultural Symbols	Rank Of Importance
1.	Cowries & Kola-Nuts	1ST
2.	Cocoa & Picture/Words/Illustrations/Dressing	2ND
3.	Horsewhip	3RD
4.	Beads, Talking Drum And Calabash	4TH
5.	Head Crown And Gong	5TH
6.	Native Cutting Comb, Traditional Sword And Baby Dolls	6TH
7.	Rattles	7TH
8.	Cupboard And Wrist Watches	8TH

Source: Author's work, 2018.

With the exception of cupboards and wrist watches, this study established the use of African objects such as cowries, kolanuts, cocoa, horsewhip, the royal crown, the talking drum, beads, African dresses/dressings, traditional swords and so on as important cultural symbols that can be used in product advertisement as people will communicate more with symbols and signs that they are culturally affiliated to, as indicated by respondents.

CONCLUSION

Although there are lots of African or Nigerian cultural symbols used in advertisement across the continent and indeed in the world over, there, however, are still some major ones that are prominent and to which people readily relate. Although the results presented in this study are not exhaustive, it has however established the significance of some selected African symbols and symbolism in indigenous product advertisements in Nigeria including: cowries, kolanuts, cocoa, horsewhip, the royal crown, the talking drum and so on. People communicate better with advertisements embedded with objects and symbols they culturally relate with most easily. Hence, to better reach Africans and lovers or followers of the African culture world over, this paper recommends the effective application of African symbols and symbolism in product advertisement, especially the ones herein enumerated and discussed.

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