

## The Element of Symbolism in non-animals featured in the Yorùbá Health-related Genres

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### Abstract

*This paper will attempt a study of how symbolism portrays some in-animate objects featured in the verbal arts used in the Yorùbá indigenous healthcare practices. We shall attempt to show how symbolism is related to in-animate characters in indigenous healthcare practices. We shall analyse the texts under study at the metaphorical level considering their sociocultural contexts. The psychological dimension of the users of health-related genres will also be investigated. Various scholars have used Symbolism as a critical concept and tool in their analysis of literary works.*

**Keywords:** Symbolism, Genres, Health-related, metaphorical level, meta-symbolism, meto-symbolism.

## Introduction

The work of Ogden and Richards (1923:9) on symbolism has really been exciting in the manner it defines symbolism as being relevant to literary texts and the outside world.

Symbolism is the study of the part played in human affairs by language and symbols of all kinds and especially of their influence on thought. It singles out for special inquiry the ways in which symbols help us and hinder us in reflecting on things.

According to the scholars cited above, it is revealed that there is hardly any aspect of human endeavour to which symbolism is not relevant. In his view on symbolism, White (1949:35) concludes that "...the key to this world and the means of participation on it is the symbol."

From White's perspective, man cannot but make use of symbols in his endeavour simply because the device is regarded as the essential function of human consciousness, and it is undoubtedly basic to the people's understanding of the operations of the language. This is most especially true in the case of Yorùbá health-related genres, as it will soon be shown. In Preminger (1965:833), Friedman, who discusses the functions of symbols sees them as being able to

...unite an image (the analogy) and an idea or conception (the subject) which that image suggests or evokes

What this scholar derives is that symbolism comes in when an image, either concrete or abstract, leads to an idea or conception. To establish the fact that symbolism is unavoidable in man's daily activities among the Africans in general and the Yorùbá in particular, Smith (1966:11) stipulates that

Symbolism enters into the very texture of African art, religion, social custom, and everyday speech.

It can in fact be rightly concluded that the Yorùbá has symbolised all their activities in all human endeavours. This indigenous method of communication is known as **àrokò** which has been explicitly explained in Ògúndèjì (1997) who works on its communicative and semiotic contexts. Potter (1967:148) declares the importance of symbolic expression thus:

...The essential act of thought or cognition is symbolization. It is this; above all else, that raises the mental faculties of men above those of animals. It is also this ability to use symbols that has made man the master of the world of nature.

The above quotation expresses symbol, as being the instrument with which man comprehends his natural environment and the thing that makes him feel elevated among other creatures. In Firth's (1973:76-77) studies on symbols of various phenomena, it is asserted that, symbolism is an instrument of expression of the communication of knowledge and of control. Firth's (1973: 172) regard to this device shows that it is an inevitable instrument in the life of man. In his earlier discussion, language is regarded as

...an important system of symbols through which the individual transforms physical reality into experienced reality. So giving something a name gives it recognition and status in the categories of experienced reality

If language itself is a symbolic system as Firth notes, then it can be regarded as the basic human symbolic system which is employed in the interpretation of other symbols. Ògúndèjì (1997:156) also shows, for example that '...the linguistic medium...' is '...the final channel of interpretation' in àrokò the Yorùbá symbol-communication. This we believe, is true of almost if not all other symbolic communications. Even when an image is used to decode another image, one still needs language to explain further. An image which is a sign of a given phenomenon is even an aspect of language. Olátúnjí (1984:160-162), in his work, describes symbolism as applied to **ofò** as a symbolic word-play that is used as an instrument to get their targets. This is commonly found in [f= and its sub-types (**àyájó**, **ìwúre**, **èbè** and **èpè**). In our own view, and from the perspective of this study, symbolism in **ofò** and other genres under study refers to concrete images apart from the verbal aspect.

Emananjo (1977) has worked on the use of symbolism in Igbo folktales and explained that time, place, characters and number are symbolic in the genre. In this study, we borrow the idea of this scholar, but with a little modification in the treatment of symbolism. What he refers to as symbolic time and place are changed to temporal and spatial symbolism respectively. Besides this, a more elaborate analysis is given on the symbolic characters in this study by suggesting various classes of characters with the ideas they symbolise in the health-related verbal arts among the Yorùbá. This symbolic analysis is discussed at meta-symbolic, meto-symbolic and phono-aesthetic levels as suggested in Ògúndèjì (1988:37-43)<sup>1</sup>

### Symbolic Inanimate-object-characters

There are various inanimate object-characters found in the health-related verbal arts. Despite the fact that they are inanimate, the Yorùbá have a strong belief that they have invisible spirits that facilitate the healing system. The inanimate objects discussed in this section may appear as objects or characters in the verbal arts used for health purposes. These inanimate ingredients includes **omi** (water), **ilèkè** (beads), **òkè** (hill), **epo** (Palm oil) **àdín** (palm kernel oil), etc. We shall discuss the most prominent among them- **Omi** (water), and **otí** (alcoholic drinks)

#### **Omi** (Water)

**Omi** (water) is the most useful and prominent object or object-character in the Yorùbá indigenous healthcare delivery system. The Yorùbá believe that water is medicinal and it has the properties for curing ailments. The devotees of a divinity called **Ọṣun**, among the Yorùbá believe solely in the medicinal power of **omi** (water). Its nature being an essential commodity in mankind is demonstrated in a verse of **ìwúre** (supplicatory blessings):

Omi làbùwè.  
Omi làbùmu.  
Ènikan kì í bómí í ọ̀tá.

Water is used for bathing.  
Water is used for drinking.  
No one keeps malice with water.

The verse of **iwúre** is made up of two lines of incantatory positive assertions and a line of negative assertions based on the indispensability of **omi** (water) to mankind. Seventy-five percent of the human body and indeed of the whole world is said to be made up of water. Man needs to drink a good quantity of water daily to be in good health. A good number of the Yorùbá herbal preparations especially the **àgbo** (potion) type are dissolved in water or liquid. Man also needs water for cleaning not only the body but also most other things. Hence the assertion that no one can afford to be an “enemy” of water, i.e. no one can do without it. This may be taken to imply a kind of natural love and desire for it because of its constant relevance and indispensability. This is therefore what water tends to symbolise as the chanter’s application of the assertive statements is always that people around him/her should love him/her and be interested in his/her situations and conditions to the extent that they will not be able to do without him/her just as a man cannot do without water. **Omi** (water) in Yorùbá **iwúre** is also a symbol of fulfillment and an indelible footprint in life as shown in the saying:

Bómi bá balẹ,  
Omi a nípa.  
Ká nípa sówó.  
Ká nípa sòmọ.  
Ká nípa sàikú.

If water drops on the ground,  
Water usually leaves a mark.  
We shall be remarkable in money.  
We shall be remarkable in procreation.  
We shall be endowed with longevity.

This is another example of incantatory assertion derived from both physical truism and phonological aesthetics. When water drops on the floor, the mark it makes is always visible. This is described as **ipa**. The chanter is using their truism as a premise for his supplication that he also may live a glaring mark in the mentioned aspects of his life. The same noun **ipa** is used in Yorùbá for describing this. The association or relationship between the two marks i.e. **ipa omi** (mark made by water) and **ipa owó, omọ àti àikú** (remarkable success as far as the issues of money, procreation and longevity are concerned) are metaphoric, hence water in this example is a meta-symbol of remarkable success in general. It should be remembered that the issues referred to are directly or indirectly connected with health and general well-being. Water also symbolises victory, tranquility and peace. The nature of **omi** to cool down hot things, quench a fire and put an end to draught is what allows for the symbolism:

Omi níí7 poró iná.  
Òjò sọsọ níí poró ògbelẹ.  
\$mi ni k7 n r1y8n =tq mi.

Water usually quenches fire.  
A rainy atmosphere neutralises the effect of draught.  
I should conquer my enemies.

The above **ofò** (incantation) is used by a chanter who does not want any of his/her adversaries to be a clog in the wheel of his/her general well-being. He/she wishes to conquer his/her adversaries and enjoy peace and tranquility like that of an undisturbed lake. Analogical attention can also be drawn to the potential power of water as torrents and falls for the purpose of buttressing the ambivalence of the symbolism. Water, it is usually said will always find its level. As a torrent, it sweeps away obstacle on its path. It is therefore no surprise that it is seen as a meta-symbol of insurmountable power. Furthermore, **omi** (water) symbolises inexhaustibility. The concept of water as the ocean or the sea, a large lake that never dries off is what is at focus in this symbolism. The users of Yorùbá health-related genres in indigenous healthcare practices do desire to have inexhaustible wealth and health:

Àbùdì ní ní tomí òkùn.  
Àbùdì ní tomí ọ̀sà.  
Àtòjò àtẹ̀ẹ̀rùn.  
Ilé alákan kí í gbẹ.

The sea water does not dry  
The lagoon water does not dry  
Both in rainy and dry seasons  
The hole of the crab never dries

A physical analogy drawn in this positive assertive lines of incantation are premised upon the fact that no mark is left on water whenever some of it is dropped out of the sea or ocean and the fact that the crab's hole is always wet, even during the dry season. By implication, the chanter desires that his/her course of health and wealth will be inexhaustible. This idea of the inexhaustibility of water is given another meaning, when the chanter desires that nothing should tamper with his/her health in the following lines of incantatory assertions.

A kí í sá omi lógbẹ.  
A kí í ta ẹ̀fúfú lófà.  
A kí í rọ̀jú ogbẹ àná lára omi.

No one machetes the water.  
No one shoots the wind with an arrow.  
No one can find wounds of machete-cut of the  
previous day on the water.

The emphasis in these three lines of negative assertion is that it is impossible to harm water. The chanter in this case extends this to him/herself through some metaphysical associations. By implication, it will be impossible for the chanter to be harmed. These lines of incantation is used for protection against attackers who might want to wound and maim him/her. The lines are usually used to accompany a charm called **òkígbẹ** (anti-machete-cut).

#### **Qtí** (alcoholic drink)

**Qtí** (alcoholic drink) is a popular drink in the Yorùbá traditional setting. This liquid substance symbolizes various things<sup>2</sup>. It plays a prominent role in the Yorùbá indigenous healthcare delivery

system, as shall be explained in this section. **Ọtí** is an antidote for amnesia (loss of memory). Ọrúnmilà used **ọtí** to heal amnesia he was suffering from according to a verse in **Odù Òdí Méjì** as it is presented in Abimbólá (1968:57-58) thus:

	Ó tàpá lókun	
	Ó tàkítì lósà	
	Akàn ló gbénú odò	
	Ó n ẹ̀bọ̀ ẹ̀sùrùrù f'Ọlọ́fín	
A díá' fún Ọrúnmilà,		5
	Nígbà tí Ifá ò mu bàbà,	
	Tí Ifá ò mu ẹ̀kẹ̀tẹ̀.	
	Ifá ò níyè nínú mọ̀.	
	Nwọn ní ó káakí mọ̀lẹ̀,	
Ó jàre		10
	Ẹ̀bọ̀ ní ó ẹ̀.	
	Nwọn ní ó rú ọ̀pọ̀lọ̀pọ̀ ọ̀tí;	
	Nwọn ní kí òun náà ó bù mu níbẹ̀.	
	Ijó ní ñjọ̀	
Ayọ̀ ní ñyọ̀		15
	Ó n yin awoo rẹ̀,	
	Àwọn awo rẹ̀ n yin'Fá.	
	Ó ya ẹ̀nu kótó	
	Orin awo ní ñkọ̀	
Ó ní ọ̀ba aladé gbagbá ọ̀tí kan		20
	Ìyè Ẹ̀dú là wàà	
	It stretches out its leg in the sea	
	It stretches out its leg in the lagoon	
	The crab is usually in the stream	
	Performing sacrifice persistently for Ọlọ́fín.	
Ifá divination was performed for ọ̀rúnmilà,		5
When Ifá did not take bàbà drinks,		
Ifá did not take ẹ̀kẹ̀tẹ̀ drinks.		
Ifá was suffering from amnesia.		
He was advised to adore the spirits		
He should please,		10
	Perform a sacrifice,	
He should sacrifice with some alcohol drinks;		
He was advised to take out of it.		
He was dancing.		
He was happy.		15
	He was eulogising his priests,	
His priests in turn were eulogising Ifá.		
He opened his mouth		
Singing the cultic songs		
He said the crowned king took a cup of alcohol		20
He became conscious.		

The Yorùbá have the cultural belief that alcoholic intake aids being mentally active. **Ọtí** (alcoholic drink) is regarded as the embodiment of quintessence, that is, it is a commodity that mankind cannot do without. This cultural fact makes people take it, so that they will gain physical and mental fitness that will make the society be in need of them. This symbolic fact is stipulated in **Odù Ogbè-**

**alára**<sup>3</sup> where **otí** (alcoholic drink) was banished from **Ifẹ-Akẹ̀lúbẹ̀bẹ̀** (see Orímóògùnjẹ 2004:198-202 and 266-269). Thereafter, there were chaos and pandemonium to the extent that the whole society lost her consciousness and mental stability. It was when **otí** was granted an amnesty that the whole society was able to regain her consciousness. **otí** also represents anxiety reliever and trouble shooter. It has its own peculiar nature that gets rid of any trouble that can make one nervous. This is concomitant with the saying of the Yorùbá: ‘**otí parí ejó**’ meaning that alcoholic drink dismisses cases that can demoralise one. This fact is also depicted in **ofò afòràn** (case-dismissing incantations) used to quell the effect of serious cases in the court of justice. This method of getting one discharged and acquitted has been among the Yorùbá from time immemorial through the use of the type of incantation presented below:

Òrò tẹẹ rọ kẹẹ sí  
Alẹ àna ni mo fi sọtí,  
Mo ti fi mu.  
Mo mọmọ fi mọgùrọ.  
Mo fi sọtí, 5  
Mo fi mu.  
The trouble you were nervous for.  
I had put it in the alcoholic drink yesterday.  
I had drunk it.  
I had drunk it along with ògùrọ.  
I put it in the alcoholic drink, 5  
I had drunk it.

The belief of the chanter in the potency of **otí** and other alcoholic drinks to make man trouble-free and to dismiss one’s existing civil and criminal cases, is connected to his/her nervous system. This thereby gets him/her relieved. Also, another saying that reads thus:

Eni otí kí í tí.  
Eni bàbà kí í bà.  
One who is fond of alcohol never fades  
One who is fond of guinea-corn liquor never spoils

The phono-aesthetic symbolism that features in the above **iwúre** (supplicatory blessing) adds literary dexterity to the saying. The verb **tí** (fade) drawn from the noun **otí** and the verb **bà** (to lose taste/get spoilt) drawn from **bàbà** are to give the user confidence that health wise he/she will not lose natural and physical strengths.

## Conclusion

Symbolism plays a great role in the indigenous healthcare delivery system in the Yorùbá traditional setting. The meaning given to each symbol in relation to the belief of the users makes the position of the Yorùbá in health-related issues clear and rational in using these genres as therapeutic indices.

### Endnotes

1. Meta-symbolism and meto-symbolism explain how metaphor and metonymy are respectively used as literary devices in this study, while phono-aesthetic symbolism is used as a pun and could be likened to what Olatúnjì (1984:160) refers to as symbolic word-play. Meta-symbolism explains how signs are motivated based on the cultural belief of the users. Though these signs are not physically apparent but their process of derivation is logical. In the case of meto-symbolism, there is an obvious communicable relationship between the signifier and the signified.

2. Other liquid alcoholic substances are **bàbà** (alcohol made from guinea corn), **ògòrò** (wine, tapped from the raffia palm), **otí àgàdàngídí** (alcohol made from plantain), **emu-àran** (wine tapped from palm tree) **şèkèté** (alcohol made from maize).

3. **Ogbè-alára** is one of the minor **Odù**, a combination of **Ogbè** and **Otúra**. It is otherwise known as **Ogbètúra** and **Ogbèyónú**:

1 1  
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1 1  
1 1

*Ìwo loo şe é mee bọ ọ wí.  
Òrò isiyí wọn ò tójà.  
Ìjà ló dé lorin dọwe.  
A díá f'ótí tí şomọ wọn lóde Ìlàré.  
Ìwo loo şe é mee bọ ọ wí.  
Òrò isiyí wọn ò tójà.  
Ìjà ló dé lorin dọwe.  
A díá f''ògùrò tí şomọ wọn lóde Ìlódè.  
Ìwo loo şe é mee bọ ọ wí.  
Òrò isiyí wọn ò tójà.  
Ìjà ló dé lorin dọwe.  
A díá f''ómi tutu tí şomọ wọn lóde Òtùnmòbà  
Wọn wáá pète pèrò  
Wọn lóti lọ nÍfẹ Akèlúbébé  
Lisọ Òpẹ.  
A wá n şolójó,  
A à gbóhùn apé.  
A n şowàrò,  
A à gbóhùn abèbè.  
A n şàjòníjàmódún o,  
A à gbóhùn alágo  
Ògèdè-pagbo-má-jòó, òrẹ otí  
Òun ló lọ rée mótí wálé  
La n şolójó,*

15

20



<i>A ñ gbóhùn apé.</i>	25
<i>A ñ sòwàrò.</i>	
<i>A ñ gbóhùn abèbè.</i>	
<i>A ñ sàjòníjàmódún o,</i>	
<i>A ñ gbóhùn alágo.</i>	
<i>Ó ñ sọtí lamúwàgún awo ò,</i>	30
<i>Ògèdè-pagbo-má-jòó,</i>	
<i>otí lamúwàgún awo ẹni.</i>	
<i>I scolded you because you were found guilty</i>	
<i>The matter is not worth fighting for</i>	
<i>Proverbial songs ensue when a fight is on</i>	
<i>Ifá divination was performed for Otí who hails from Ilàrè</i>	
<i>I scolded you because you were found guilty</i>	5
<i>The matter is not worth fighting for</i>	
<i>Proverbial songs ensue when a fight is on</i>	
<i>Ifá divination was performed for Ògùrò who hails from Ilódè</i>	
<i>I scolded you because you were found guilty</i>	
<i>The matter is not worth fighting for</i>	10
<i>Proverbial songs ensue when fight is on</i>	
<i>Ifá divination was performed for cold water who hails</i>	
<i>from Òtùnmòbà</i>	
<i>They conspired</i>	
<i>To banish Otí from Ifè-Akèlúbébé</i>	
<i>Lisò Òpè</i>	15
<i>We celebrated Olójò festival,</i>	
<i>We did not hear people clapping</i>	
<i>We celebrated Òwàrò</i>	
<i>Without enjoying the sound of local fans</i>	
<i>We celebrated the end of the year</i>	20
<i>Without enjoying the traditional gong</i>	
<i>Ògèdè-pagbo-má-jòó, the friend of Otí</i>	
<i>Went to bring Otí back home</i>	
<i>We now celebrated Olójó,</i>	
<i>With clapping.</i>	25
<i>We now celebrated Òwàrò,</i>	
<i>With local fans.</i>	
<i>We now celebrated the end of the year,</i>	
<i>With traditional gong.</i>	
<i>He said the initiates drink otí to make them vigorous</i>	30
<i>Ògèdè-pagbo-má-jòó,</i>	
<i>The intake of alcohol makes people strong.</i>	

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