

ACHIEVING NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THE INTERPRETATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF SEMIOTICS

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Abstract

*In the last few years in Nigeria, several unsavouring incidents, pronouncements, and exchange of words along ethnic and sectarian divides abundantly point to an inexorable conflict of monumental proportions but quite unfortunately, these signs are not seen, recognized or attended to by the leadership of this nation. This failure, it is feared, could ignite a conflagration that could affect the very existence of the nation or least, its proper development. This paper, *Achieving National Development through the Deployment of the Engine of Semiotics*, seeks to address the above concern by identifying some of the regrettable indices with negative effect on the nation, within the lens of visual and social semiotics. The data for this study are numbered cartoons, selected through random sampling of some of our National Dailies, and adopted as references which are not to be further expanded but for emphasis. Also, some cogent headlines and comments in these Newspapers, which are relevant to buttress the stance of the researcher, are highlighted as excerpts to lend credence to the work since the researcher is not alone. Findings are that Nigeria have continued to view the signs identified in this paper naively, even at the highest levels of government, as teething problems in nation building process rather than the terminal disease they constitute to national development. The paper concludes, amidst some recommendations, that an in-depth knowledge of Semiotics would enable our national leaders to identify and interpreting these humongous signs with a view to finding solutions to them.*

Keywords: National Development and Semiotics

Introduction

According to the opinion of Morris (1964), human and national development is dependent upon signs and systems of signs. He further opines that, 'From cradle to the grave, from awakening until sleep, the contemporary individual is subject to an unending barrage of signs through which other persons seek to advance their goals' (p.178). Unfortunately, these signs come and go unnoticed and uninvestigated since fewer studies have focused on the subject and its importance and implications in human relations and national development.

There are things happening in Nigeria that are capable of causing a conflagration but they are not seen, recognized or attended to in a manner that will ensure that the inexorable consequence they are likely to generate does not come to fruition. There are lots of stops and caution signs but Nigerian leaders (both past and present) are neither taking cognizance of nor giving heed to them. Langrerhr (2003) is of the view that people need to understand that the whole of human experience, without exception, is an interpretive structure mediated and sustained by signs and that it is a viable means to analyze the logical process, by which we create inferences and make sense of things. Danner (2011) submits that to participate in daily life, people require communicative skills, ability

to critically analyze, make use of information and make sound decisions that exert greater control over life events and situations. Hence, the crux of this paper is to identify and analyze some semiotic signs hitherto left unrecognized and unattended to, by Nigeria's leaders with reckless abandon and their adverse effect on nation building and national development.

Theoretical Approach

Semiotics, as the study of signs and sign-using behaviour, especially in language, was propounded by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce in the late 19th and 20th centuries. It is a theory that concerns itself with the production and interpretation of meaning. Its basic principle is that meaning is made by the deployment of acts and objects which function as 'signs' in relation to other signs. Semiotics study how meaning is formed – how first we interpret a sign, how the signs draw on cultural or personal experiences, that is the context in which they appear.

On the other hand, Ndimele (2001, p.12) opines that 'language, whether verbal or non-verbal, is often described as a semiotic system because it entails the use of certain agreed-upon symbols or signals to convey meaning from one person to another'. Cartoons, as signs, are a central part of our mass communication systems. Thus, systems of meaning are analysed and conclusions drawn by looking at the cultural and communication products and events as signs and their relationship with one another (Eco, 1976, p.14; Nnamdi and Ikoro, 2014, p.275).

Signs themselves, according to Eka and Inyang (1996, p.31) are deployed in space and time to produce 'texts' which use language in context. They further observe that one of the popular mediums of language is the visual medium. Signs can be any system of representations - words, ideas, concepts, carvings, paintings, graffiti, sounds, gestures (body language) and context (paralinguistic and extra-linguistic features) – all of which combine to create a visual language which aids understanding (McGregor, 2009).

Visual semiotics is a sub domain of semiotics that analyzes visual signs. Visual semiotics, therefore, has to do with turning from the spoken, face-to-face discourses to representations of same in the form of images and signs. Social semiotics, on the other hand, examines semiotic practice, specific to a culture and community, for the making of various kinds of texts and meanings in various situational contexts and contexts of culturally meaningful activity (Eco, 1976; Irvine, 2004)). It deals with the origin, uses, and effects of signs within the behaviour in which they occur (Morris, 1946). Thus, this research examines how visual communication (words and graffiti) operates to create meaning.

Data Presentation, Analysis and Discussion of Findings

In this section of the study, the researcher identifies some of the regrettable indices hampering national development and analysed under sub-headings. Also, some cartoons, randomly selected from some our national dailies, are also attached, where necessary, to buttress the points raised by the researcher. Cartoons in this research are adopted as part of the work; referential/quotations and as such needed not to be expanded again. They fall in line with the points already made and are merely used for emphasis and further show the objectivity of the researcher since we are not the only voice raising the same issues.

(a) Insecurity

One of the regrettable indices with negative effect on the nation and or its national development is the state of insecurity. Serious as it is, it had tended to be seen or tackled as problems of particular parts of the country where they emanate. For instance, the Islamic insurgence in the North East of this country is not handled or responded to appropriately as a national concern but it is somewhat seen as a favour being done to the peoples of the affected area. Such headlines like “Again, B’Haram raids Borno military base, kills 30 soldiers” as captured in Sunday Punch of September 2, 2018, Page 8, by Adelani Adepegba, is a big shame to this nation.

In the same vein, militancy in the Niger Delta areas is not tackled with a view to identifying and solving the root cause of the problem. It is usually seen as being generated by irresponsible, greedy and indolent criminals who seek to deprive the country of its resources.

It is our view that if the insurgents by Islamists and the consequent effect on the people is seen as a national problem, the approach to the matter by the generality of those responsible for security matters would have been different. A comprehensive attention to the issue would have included a discussion with the insurgents, the overall Islamic body in Nigeria, headed by the Sultan of Sokoto, the Islamic leaders of the affected areas, leaders of the Christian minority, political leaders of thought, all heads of security agencies and representatives of the State and Federal governments. This expanded forum will articulate the grievances or objectives of the insurgents. A superior argument or response from other members of the forum presented in an atmosphere of calm and mutual respect would most likely dissuade the insurgents from the ungodly course they have chosen.

Also, since their course is based on a misguided understanding of the Islamic religion, it would not have been out of place to seek the assistance of known world Islamic clerics to help in persuading the fundamentalists against negatively portraying Islam.

Another security threat to the existence and development of Nigeria is the herdsmen menace. There is not yet a total understanding or agreement as to the true character of the problem. While some posit that it results from economic pursuits of Fulani cattle rearers, others think that it is a Jihadist agenda being pursued by Moslems in Nigeria. However, whatever force that actually drives it, the consequences in human and material loss is colossal. Unfortunately, again, this monumental waste of human lives is being treated with near levity. It is seen as a localized problem of the Middle Belt of Nigeria, particularly Benue, Nasarawa and Plateau States. A concentrated and concerted response by the Army, Police and myriads of other security agencies is lacking. This had led to outright accusations, insinuations and suspicion that the herdsmen are being sponsored, or at least, covertly encouraged by powerful and untouchable forces.

However, whatever is the root cause of the problem, the seemingly lack of will or ideas by the Federal Government and the security agencies have occasioned discontent in the affected areas and there is no gainsaying that there can be no development under such an atmosphere. As long as this situation is allowed to foster, it poses a threat to the wellbeing of the country. It is, therefore our view that the inability of the government to attend to such an obvious red flag is unpardonable. Benue State, in particular, and the two other States where this menace is endemic, constitute a large chunk of the food basin of Nigeria. Apart from the direct threat to the lives and properties of the

people where this menace preponderates, the inability of farmers, of those areas, to carry out their activities threatens the food security of the entire nation. It will be a shame for Nigerians to die of starvation at a time that the country is not at war and when there is no natural occurrence occasioning famine since the situation is as a result of the inability of the government to respond to a matter that it has ordinarily or ought to have the capacity to nip in the bud. In the Sunday Guardian of September 2, 2018, Page 15, the headline, “Don, APRNet Raise Alarm Over Threat to Food Security: Tasks FG on Proper Policy Implementation to Tackle Food Shortage” by Michael Egbejule, Benin City and Sodliq Omolaoye, Abuja, will still fall on deaf ears. Also, the President of Agricultural Policy Research Network (APRNet), Anthony Onoja observes, from the same source quoted above, that “without appropriate policy implementation, the worsening problem of food shortage and hunger in the country might not end soon”.

(b) Ethnicism/Tribalism

From its inception, as an independent nation, Nigeria has always sacrificed its development on the altar of ethnicism or ethnic balancing. Development of any sort is not an accident. It is achieved by a process of conscious and conscientious application of one’s will to the achievement of a defined purpose or determined goal. It is arguable whether Nigeria had at any time had a well defined goal or objective. It is, however, without doubt that there has never been a determination to achieve national development by merit. That is why even in the constitution, there is a provision for the reflection of federal character in every aspect of national life.

This is contrary to what happened prior to independence when the colonial masters allowed merit to thrive and individual development had free reign. A situation where a graduate with a First Class degree would be denied a position for which he is eminently qualified in order to accommodate a person from another part of the country who probably does not have a university degree at all cannot foster development. While the grossly unqualified person will hinder development, the First Class candidate will be frustrated into seeking greener pastures outside of the shores of Nigeria where his acumen will enrich another nation.

Tribalism and ethnicism are leeches that are draining the blood of the nation and thereby stagnating its development. Nigeria needs a strong leader that can stamp out these cankerworms which are basically at the root of Nigeria’s under development. This is so because myopically, Nigerian leaders have always tended to see themselves as ‘saviours’ of their ethnic stock before considering the interest of the nation.

Stamping out tribalism and ethnicism in our national life will give a sense of belonging to every Nigerian and the nation will derive the best from every of her citizen. It is common knowledge that the principal instrument of development is the human resource, not the natural resources or other endowment(s). Therefore, continuous failure to recognize, galvanize and exploit this invaluable resource has in no small measure negatively affected national development.

(c) Religious Influence

Closely related to tribalism and ethnicism is divisive influence of religion. It must be pointed out, however, that religion on its own does not breed rancor but the acrimonious manner, Nigerians, generally uphold their faith does not conduce to observance of respect for other religions or faith

of divergent peoples of Nigeria. This breeds conflicts that the nation perennially seeks to resolve to the detriment of a concerted effort towards development.

Tribalism and religion combine to, again, breed political acrimony. Politicians are constantly skimming for the formulation and implementation of policies that will favour either their tribe or religion or both. This myopic attitude to politics is one of the immature behaviours that is detrimental to national development. There is a dearth of statesmanship in Nigeria which makes the nation an orphan.

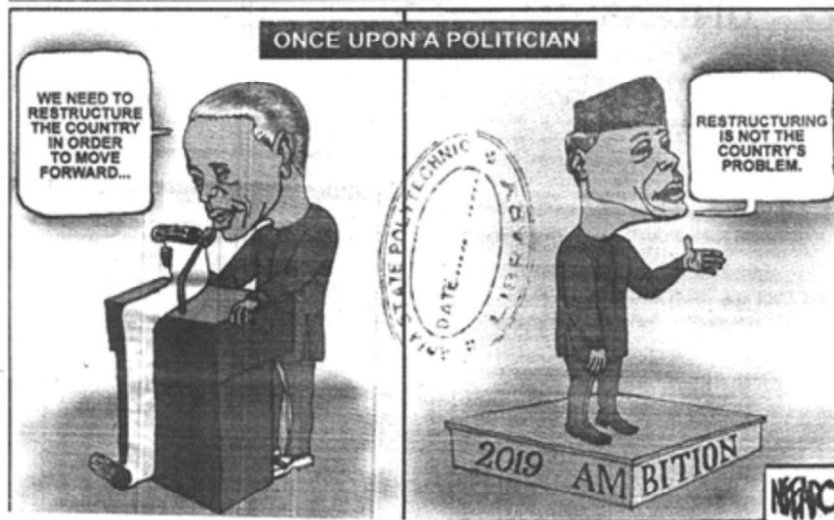
Every Nigerian sees himself as a member of his/her tribe while allegiance to the country takes a distant second place. Perhaps, the country would have benefited from the rivalry among the tribes or ethnic nationalities comprised therein if each of the tribes or ethnic segment is being developed. However, scarcity of resources in the nation has not permitted that this form of development should evolve. If the resources of the nation are not being scattered or frittered away lawlessly and if there is a central planning arrangement, these limited resources could still have been utilized to structure development in an ordered manner which would still touch or reach or extend to every part thereof. The absence of ideology in the Nigerian political space brings about unwarranted disagreement and vehement attacks, verbal and physical, towards each other. Men who presumably are political soul mates in one day can translate to brutal enemies in the next day. In such circumstances, issues or matters affecting national development; which were previously agreed upon, are jettisoned due to constant changing of positions and camps to the effect that there are no implementation or effective implementation of vital developmental policies.

The Guardian Cartoon of Friday, August 31, 2018, Page 9, enclosed herein as Fig. 1, humorously portrays our politics as based on selfish interest which basically translates to personal financial gains. This is the reason for party harlotry where politicians and why politicians sell themselves to the higher bidder.



Fig. 1

Because of selfish interest of politicians, this results in speaking from two sides of the mouth as encapsulated in the Punch Cartoon of Thursday, August 30, 2018, Page 20, enclosed herein as Fig. 2 below.



The Punch, Thursday, August 30, 2018

Fig. 2

The Sunday Sun of August 26, 2018, Page 14, enclosed herein as Fig. 3 below portrays that politicians can be friends today, enemies tomorrow depending from what side of the bed they woke up. Given the bitterness presently between the Senate President, Senator Bukola Saraki and the former governor of Edo State, now the Chairman of Apc, Adams Oshiomole, one would never believe that they were political chummies less than few months ago.



Sunday Sun, August 26, 2018

Fig. 3

(d) Corruption and Poverty

The twin problems of corruption and poverty are areas which have the capacity to destroy the nation or stunt its development. These are signs which the perpetrators and victims of their effects do not seem to see, much less tackle. While the perpetrators of corruption believe that they have obligations to provide for themselves and their generations unborn, the victims, who at the moment are wallowing in abject poverty, admire those who impose the poverty upon them and at the same time, dream of such a time as they would have the opportunity to loot the public treasury.

Corruption perpetuates poverty because the resources that would ordinarily have been applied to lift the standard of living of the citizenry are left dormant in the hands of a few individuals. Corruption is the major reason the majority of Nigerian States fail or neglect civil servants for upwards of ten months; even when state resources are not applied towards infrastructural development. The varying state of civil servants in Nigeria is aptly depicted in the Sunday Sun Cartoon of September 2, 2018, Page 14, enclosed herein as Fig.4 below.



Fig. 4

Poverty, on its own, ensures that the generality of the citizenry is not equipped to individually help themselves through meaningful enterprise. This is a vicious cycle that have held national development hostage for as long as this country had lasted as an independent entity. The poorer the people, the easier they are for politicians to manipulate even to the extent of buying their conscience and their rights to determine who their leaders should be, for a pittance. This much the Guardian Cartoons of Sunday and Monday, September 2 and 3, 2018 respectively, Pages 16/16, adequately captured, tagged Fig. 6 & Fig. 6a below respectively.



The Guardian, Sunday, September 2, 2018 P. 16

Fig. 6



The Guardian, Monday, September 3, 2018 P. 16

Fig. 6a

(e) Institutional Weakness

Generally speaking, institutional weakness is a major cause of under development in Nigeria. Perhaps, it affects development more than all the others put together. The absence of a viral and reliable judiciary, electoral agency, security outfits, particularly the Police and related agencies, etc, is a major reason why skepticism in investing in Nigeria by the International Community

abounds. It is frustrating not to know what to expect in any particular circumstance because these institutions cannot be relied upon for justice, fairness, and equity in given circumstances. This is the reason for the comment attributed to the then President of America, Mr. Barack Obama, that Africa does not need strong men but strong institutions.

The Police and her sister security is a major hindrance to national development. It has constituted itself as an instrument of operation against the people and a willing tool in the hands of the Federal Government. This is exemplified in their ignoble roles in the conduct of elections, extortion at check points, etc. This is exactly what the Punch Cartoon of Wednesday August 29, 2018, Page 20, enclosed herein as Fig.5 below reflects.



The Punch, Wednesday, August 29, 2018

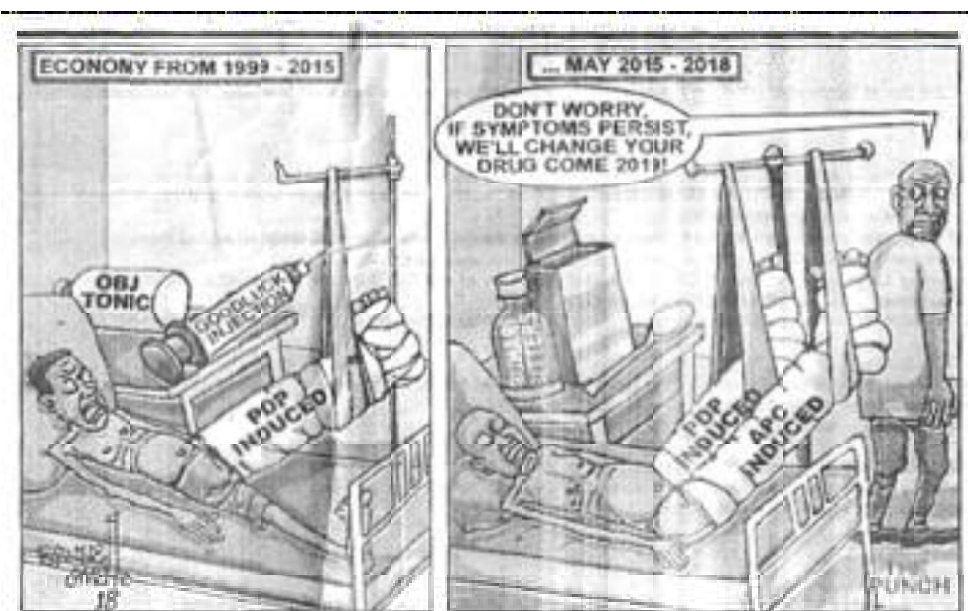
Fig. 5

The volume of injustice that emanates from it has made it the most hated establishment in Nigeria, by far. This is compounded by the fact that it is seen as being grossly deficient in the performance of its customary duties. Its failure is the reason human life is wasted on a daily basis in Nigeria without repercussion by perpetrators. It is also the reason for loss of property arising from criminal activities. In a situation of acute insecurity, as is prevalent in Nigeria, there can be little wonder why the country suffers from underdevelopment.

In the case of the judiciary, for instance, the cliché that “the judiciary is the hope of the common man” does not hold true of Nigeria. The pronouncements of our courts of law are usually discordant even on the same issue, therefore making predictability, of what the law is elusive. A maxim of law says “It is better that the law be certain than that it should necessarily be just”. This in effect means that the law in a given society ought to be known, ascertainable, or easily determined. If the law is in a state of flux or is interpreted or administered according to the whims and caprices of Judges and or political leaders, development will severely be impeded. This is because every facet of natural life is driven by law.

Again, the measure of a nation's maturity is gauged by the stability of its electoral process and the seamlessness of its political leadership succession. The state of this aspect of a nation's life will either endanger confidence or fear in both local and international investors. In Nigeria, the electoral body is independent in name only. It is a known fact that interference with, its duties, by the executive, with a view to achieving a determined favorable outcome, is rife. The result of this is that elections, almost always, are not won by deserving candidates. A corollary of this nepherious attitude is that the populace develop aparty towards elections.

National development is actually meaningless without a viable economy. In other words, a viral economy is a trigger for development. In the last eighteen years, a number of inconsistent economic policies have been formulated by different governments, to revive or strengthen the economy. These inconsistencies have, in fact, had the opposite of the purposes they are designed for and have inebriated same. This state of things is what the Punch Cartoon of Friday, August 31, 2018, P.20, enclosed herein as Fig. 7 below, seeks to emphasize.



Punch, Friday, August 31, 2018 P. 20

Fig. 7

These issues raised above are naively being viewed even at the highest levels of government as teething problems in nation-building process rather than the terminal diseases they constitute to nation building and national development. Nineteen years of democratic rule in Nigeria yet our leaders call it “nascent democracy”. This ignorance is as a result of lack of understanding which semioticism will cure, if assimilated.

Conclusion

Communication relies on using something to represent something else (Saeed, 2009; O'Grady, Archibald and Kambata, 2011). An understanding of signs is essential for understanding how messages are transmitted. And when signs in a nation are decoded, they can help fix 'a floating chain' of signified, according to Roland Barthes (cited in Frank, 1983, p. 3). These signs (words and graffiti) identified in the pages of newspapers are images of something used to illustrate and support the meanings and information provided by this research.

Semiotics can serve as a counter force because when a nation meets these signs with which she is confronted, with knowledge of how signs work, such a nation is better positioned to co-operate with others when cooperation is justified.

Our attraction to using the engines of semiotics in solving societal problems is that semiotics parallels human freedom by calling language (Verbal or non-verbal) into question; by opening texts to new readings and new interpretations. Semiotics keeps us current and the writer relevant at all times since there is nothing final about life. It is, therefore, posited that an in-depth knowledge of semiotics would enable our national leaders to identify and analyze the several conflicts plaguing the nation and that a composite understanding of semiotics would equip them to interpret these humongous signs within the social context with a view to finding solutions to them.

Without the knowledge and understanding of semiotics, this nation would indefinitely continue to wallow in the abyss of disjointed unity, which is the bane of her under-development. This paper, therefore, advocates for a national colloquium by experts in these areas for purposes of producing a workable guide, based on the benefits of semiotics for present and future leaders.

Without being equipped with the knowledge of semiotics, it is impossible for national policy makers and decision takers to understand the debilitating and even terminal effects of the issues identified herein. Whenever issues are even noticed by them, the authorities ignorantly believe that they would try to curb them with brute force, which never works.

Recommendation

It is our advice that present and future Nigerian leaders should be sensitive enough to recognize signs, others in the past overlooked, ignored or believed to be trivial or considered inconsequential. Our malady has been that we failed to reason from what we see and too timid in drawing inferences via inductive reasoning processes. Also, these signs may even be non-linguistic in nature and requiring greater alertness from our leaders so that they do not interpret them just at the peripheral or surface level. These signs are not always evident but have to be elicited. How often have we, as a nation, passed over vital information by not recognizing them for what they were? A failure to recognize the signs found for what they were will always not aid national development

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