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Shortcut in Communication: A Case of *Àrokò* in Information and Communications Technology (ICT)

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Abstract- Scholars have always discussed *Àrokò* in relation to the use of symbols, signs and material objects. These include salt, snail shells, horse tales, sword or cutlass, and gun, among others. Each of these symbols has its own interpretation. This present paper looks beyond the aforementioned symbols. While such symbols have to do with Yorùbá cultural way of communication, this paper discusses *Àrokò* in relation to Information and Communications Technology (ICT). *Àrokò* as one of the Yorùbá cultural ways of communication is encapsulated in symbols and signs. This cultural practice is a branch of Semiotics studied within the purview of Linguistic Anthropology. However, we are going to show in this paper that Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has brought into being new forms of *Àrokò* which have made the old ones to give way to the modern ones. And that these modern ones which is the focus of this paper are related to the use of Global System of Mobile Communications (GSM) and are prevalent among the youth.

I. INTRODUCTION

Communication is very germane to human existence. Communication through human language is what makes life easy because it is a tool of interaction among humanity. If there were no communication, human interaction would be boring and uneventful. But with communication, every community is made alive and vibrant. The major tool of communication is language. And it is language that makes human species different from other species in the animal world. Communication can be in form of verbal language, body language, signs and symbols and other semiotic devices; it can also be in form of graphemes, figures and other such devices that can only be understood among people within the same cultural setting.

Ajetomobi (2014) asserts that “communication involves a wide range of activities. It is in a sense a means by which thought, ideas, facts, knowledge and intentions are transmitted, shared or imparted to one person or a group of persons for knowledge, understanding and behavioural adjustment”. However, it is not only the use of language that serves as medium of communication; there are other ways by which human

beings communicate among themselves. And when they communicate in such other ways, they understand themselves. In every community, there are signs and symbols through which communication is carried out. For instance, in Yorùbá community, there are symbols, objects and signs that they use in communicating with one another. These symbols, objects and signs are known as *Àrokò*. *Àrokò*, as Abdulahi-Idiagbon (2010:1) puts it is an ancient non-verbal communicative strategy in Yorùbá culture. *Àrokò* is an age long way of communication by the Yorùbá people; therefore, it forms part of their cultural heritage. *Àrokò* is used as a symbol of warning, admonition, conflict, war, and punishment. It can also be used for announcements, marketing strategy, indicator, directive, expression of affection, and pleading (cf. Akanbi and Aladesanmi *ms*). Afolabi (2004) as quoted in Ojo (2013:43) describes *Àrokò* as a social symbol used for communicating among Yorùbá natives before the coming of western culture. He goes further to say that “it is the use of material objects (social objects) packaged together in a specific way, which was the traditional system of sending messages to people among the Yorùbá natives in the past”. According to Opadokun (1986) as it appears in Abdulahi-Idiagbon (2010:5) explains the purposes of *Àrokò* usage in the following ways:

1. To maintain secrecy of the message.
2. To avoid verbal message and its concomitant shortcoming features like omission, misconception, manipulation or distortion.
3. To express comradeship, confidence and solidarity among various secret cult members.
4. To reinforce the credibility of the message by often accompanying an *Àrokò* with a widely known personal belonging of the sender to mark his identity. (cf. Ojò (2013:43-44).

In this paper, we are going to look at *Àrokò* in a different perspective. We will discuss this phenomenon in line with the changes that have taken place on the traditional *Àrokò* as a result of the advent of Information and Telecommunications Technology (ICT). There is no doubt that the advent of ICT has had some impacts on the Yorùbá traditional *Àrokò* symbols. In fact, not many children of nowadays know what *Àrokò* is all about in the Yorùbá culture. We can boldly say today that *Àrokò*

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codes are almost extinct. The vestiges of it can only be seen in the interior where we still have old people within the community. The reason for the extinction of *Árokò* in the cultural setting of Yorubá can be traced to the following.

1. The invention of modern transportation and communication facilities.
2. Reduction in the popularity and power of the traditional rulers as a result of modern system of government (democracy).
3. Shortage of people who are equipped with the arts of encoding and decoding the contents of an *Árokò*.
4. Availability of conventional road signs which render the traditional ones unpopular.
5. Constitutional and judiciary modern systems of regulating the power of an individual or a community or an institution.
6. The refusal of the aged and the priests from making *Árokò* knowledge universal. (cf. Abdulahi-Idiagbon 2010:5, Ojo 2013:44).

Coupled with the above reasons for the near extinction of *Árokò* tradition is the invention of Global System for Mobile Communications (GSM), advancement in education, and peer group language among others. Therefore, we shall explore the use of *Árokò* in relation to graphic representation in this paper. The issue in this paper will be addressed in five sections. Section one is the introduction. In section two, we will discuss the brief history of writing. We are going to do this in order to show that writing itself was based on *Árokò* at the beginning of its invention. Section three deals with data presentation and analysis. We shall look at the educational implication of modern day *Árokò* in section four. Section five will be the conclusion.

II. THE ADVENT OF WRITING

In their narration on the advent of writing, Fromkin, et.al. (2011: 541 - 542) say that:

The roots of writing were the early drawings made by ancient humans. Cave art, called petroglyphs, such as those found in the Altamira cave in northern Spain, created by humans living more than 20,000 years ago, can be “read” today. They are literal portrayals of life at that time. We don’t know why they were reproduced; they may be aesthetic expressions rather than pictorial communications. Later drawings, however, are clearly “picture writings,” or pictograms. Unlike modern writing systems, each picture or pictogram is a direct image of the object it represents. There is a non-arbitrary relationship between the form and meaning of the symbol. Comic strips minus captions are pictographic—literal representations of the ideas to be communicated. This early form of writing represented objects in the world directly rather than through the linguistic names given to these

objects. Thus they did not represent the words and sounds of spoken language.

The above quotation from Fromkin et.al. (2011:541-542) is to show that writing started with the inscription of symbols. Therefore, unlike the type of alphabetic writing we have today, writing at the beginning was in the form of *Árokò*. Of course, those who will read this *Árokò* at that time and even now must also be within the system.

Because in the earlier times writing is more of symbols than of graphemes inform the reason it is studied under semiotics which is a branch of anthropology. Semiotics is defined as the study of sign which is initially subjective as a result of which the discipline cannot offer any universal theoretical assumption, mode and empiricity (Moris 1983).

As we have already mentioned, this paper is focused on the shortcut that youths make use of on GSM handsets to communicate with each other. This type of *Árokò* which advent is hinged on the ICT is a peer language which is understood among the circle of the youths in various settings. Therefore, somebody who is outside the circle of the youths may not be able to give interpretation to the shortcut signs that they are sending to themselves. This confirms the opinion of Hall and Hall (1987:79) that “people don’t like to spell out certain kinds of messages; they prefer to find other ways of showing their feelings”. Explaining the issue of interpretation of *Árokò*, Eco (1976) taken from Abdulahi-Idiagbon (2010:3) states that

Interpretation enables us to know something more and what it represents. Interpretation generates reaction. A semiotic interpretation requires a shared environment of setting between the sender and the receiver which could be physical social event or even spatio-temporal territories of the participants.

Before *Árokò* can be correctly interpreted, both the encoder and the decoder must have a shared knowledge. Abdulahi-Idiagbon (2010:4) puts it in this way:

Both the encoder and decoder of a sign require a shared knowledge of culture to aid their interpretation. The sender must have conceived and interpreted a sign in a certain way before packaging it to a receiver who must share in the encoder’s knowledge to effectively interpret in turn. Otherwise, communication process will break down.

In the following section, we are going to present our data and give the analysis of the *Árokò* as being used in the sending of messages from one youth to the other.

III. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

One characteristic of the modern day *Árokò* is that most of them are born out of slangs. And one thing

with slangs is that they are predominantly common among peer groups.

Youths, both male and female are fond of showing a kind of infatuation which they believe to be love or intimacy among themselves. When they show this infatuation, they normally don't want others to be party to their communication. And since their GSM handset can fall into the 'wrong hands', they go for a kind of *Árokò* in their conversations which is in form of text messages (SMS). The following data show some of the symbols they normally make use of in line with this issue.

1	urs 4eva mluv swthrt/sh luyva/u md mh	yours for ever my love sweet heart love you my dear my heart
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The various symbols they use are not limited to the above. The data above are just few out of many. Each of the data in (1), which are used among the young folks is an expression of love. And since the receiver also is a party to the use of such *Árokò*, he or she would easily decode what the encoder is saying. One important thing to note on the issue of GSM *Árokò* is that they are normally engaged in order to reduce the amount the encoder is to pay, since Short Message Service (SMS) is not done for free.

The data in (2) below are expressing some other things different from those in (1) above.

2	taayad badt sorrie jjust	tired bad sorry just
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This type of *Árokò* unlike the one in (1) above has no economic consideration because, the symbols used are even longer than the real words in some cases. The intention here is not to economise but to confuse a neophyte who would not be able to decode what is encoded even if he or she has access to such message/messages. Yet another data in (3) below is used for some other purposes.

3	brb t tyl ur u tnx d ow av 4 ppl btw smtin ish	be right back talk to you later your you thanks the how have for people between something issue
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cos dis/dat/dos l8 2l8 143 2c4u 2h2h 4info yst apprec8 apibd 4n gfn g2tu gtg fawc bw lml hru ihy ic imo ptl kk	because this/that/those late too late I love you too cool for you too hot to handles for (your) information yesterday appreciate happy birthday foreign gone for now got to tell you good to go for anyone who cares best wishes love my life how are you I hate you I see in my opinion praise the Lord okay
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The data in (3) and many more like them are the most common GSM *Árokò* used by the youths in their communication with each other in form of text messages (SMS). Looking at the data, there are many things brought to the fore that need to be explained. In the first instance, all the contents of the data hinge on abbreviation. But the abbreviation is done in such a way that those who are not within the circle of the users may not be able to decode every *Árokò* in the data. This is in line with the assertion of Ajetunmobi (2014) that "...On the other hand, it is a process involving the passing of messages through the use of symbols which all parties in the communication media understand". It can also be observed that there is a mixture between letters and figures. Another significant thing in this data is that there is no regard for phonetics. The codes in the data are not based on the proper pronunciation of the words intended. One other thing pertaining to the data in (3) above is that some of them are based on the initial letters of the words intended by the encoder. This has a very serious implication on the youth of today. We shall talk on this in the section below. The next data presented below is different from the ones that have been presented. The data is neither an acronym nor an abbreviation.

4	lol asap btw xoxo ijn wie rn	laugh out loud/lots of love as soon as possible by the way kiss, hug, kiss, hug (kiss and hug) In Jesus name with immediate effect right now
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ayc	are you coming?
aamof	as a matter of fact
afayc	as far as you are concerned
magl	my angel
aml	all my love
bbc	barbecue
aisi	as I see it
burf	bring your friend
bd	big deal
bno	boys night out
btwityly	by the way I think I love you
bw	best wishes
bion	believe it or not
nfn	not for now
ei	everyone
fbc	facebook chat
cto	check this out
fyf	from your friend
mfh/w	my future husband/wife
gby	God bless you
fml	for my life
gtg	good to go
imy	I miss you
ilylc	I love you like crazy
ilmm	I love my man
ilyl	I love you a lot
khyf	want to know how you feel
ltr	long-time relationship
tay	thinking about you

These are just few of the *Àrokò* prevalent among the youth. As we have mentioned, these types of *Àrokò* are neither acronyms nor abbreviations. They are just formed and agreed upon by those who use them. The *Àrokò* in this data (4) are peculiar to the users of Blackberry (BBM). They do this when they are pinging with each other. As could be observed, this type of *Àrokò* as presented normally forms a conversation between two different sexes i.e. a boy and a girl. This is why most of the *Àrokò* in the data is love based. Again, one will notice that the *Àrokò* in this data is more complex than those we have presented so far. While in the earlier data, there are words that could easily be decoded, it is not so with those in (4) above. However, it should be understood that what we have put in the data presented are signs. It means then that the *Àrokò* in this modern day era resemble those in the Yorùbá cultural practice in that both use signs as communication tool. This is in confirmation of Peirce (1931) that "everything can be a sign, in other words, anything that is perceptible, knowable or impossible". He goes further to say that "signs are in forms of words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, acts or objects". We also need to say that the meaning given to the symbols in the data presented may be subjective. It may be subjective in the sense that how an individual who is not part of the system would interpret it may be different

from the way those that are in the system understand it. On this fact, Abdulahi-Idiagbon (2010:2) says that:

Sign... is seen as a subjective or an individual property. Because meaning is subjective, it thus takes time for members of a speech or cultural community to establish it. In other words, men create meaning out of the available forms of signs sometimes in an immeasurable gradual manner. Those meanings are based on how we interpret our world based on values and experience and make them understandable to others through representation and communicative structures.

What semiotics entails then, is not based on material objects alone, it could also be in the form of graphemes, once it is a sign.

IV. EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATION OF MODERN DAY *ÀROKÒ*

Considering the signs used in these modern day *Àrokò*, it will be discovered that they have serious negative implication on the educational impact on the students in the secondary and tertiary institutions. One significant implication is the negative effect the use of the signs we have presented in our various data has on the spelling ability of the students. The type of spelling and symbols they use on the various internet and computer based facilities have encroached into their real life academic situations; so that many of the students in the schools do not know the spelling of many of the English words any longer. Not only this, the implication also includes a kind of interference between what they write when they are chatting or pinging and when they are writing their notes or even during examinations. The advice one can give to the students in particular and our youths in general is that they should have the awareness of when they are pinging or chatting and when they are doing their academic works.

V. CONCLUSION

We have discussed, in this paper, *Àrokò* in the modern day technological world. We have been able to point out that the purpose served by *Àrokò* in the olden days and probably today in the interior among the Yorùbá people is the same purpose today's *Àrokò* serves. It has also been pointed out in the paper the differences between the *Àrokò* in the Yorùbá culture and those of today. While in the Yorùbá culture communication in *Àrokò* is mainly done through the use of objects and materials, those of today are mainly carried out through the used of signs based of graphemes. The paper has also pointed out the negative implication that the use of today's *Àrokò* has on the educational ability of students in both secondary and tertiary institutions.

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