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A SOCIO SEMIOTIC READING OF AMA ATA AIDOO'S ANOWA

FOLUKE R. ALIYU IBRAHIM

Abstract

This article explores Ama Ata Aidoo's Anowa using the semiotic method. The paper proposes that such an exploration of the formal and theatrical features ought to be done in relation to context. To contribute to meaning in the play text therefore, the paper proposes that the analysis be situated within a context. For Anowa, this is the Ghanaian socio-cultural and ideological contexts. By ideology, we mean gender. Any analysis must take these into consideration; hence the choice of socio-semiotics as the tool for analysis. The paper proposes that certain objects, actions, dialogue including stage management have semiotic values crucial to meaning in the play text.

Introduction

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). It thus assists in the process of communication (Hawkes, 1977:124). Although early communities had signifying systems, Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914) are considered to be the founding fathers of modern semiotics. Interpreters of the theories of these two founding fathers include Roman Jakobson, Roland Barthes, Umberto Eco, Mikhail Bakhtin, Olu Obafemi, Ropo Sekoni, Victoria Alabi, etc.

A sign is something that stands for something else. It could be an object, a picture, a word, gesture, or mark. Semiotics is thus useful for both verbal and non-verbal communication. A sign suggests the presence or existence of a fact, condition or quality immediately evident, so long as it is used to convey meaning. Semiotics encompasses kinesics, proxemics, pragmatics, and all forms of communication. This paper is limited to kinesics, and proxemics.

Socio-semiotics

Saussure worked on the dual nature of the sign, although his work focused more on the verbal sign (cited in Lodge, 1988:19-27). The sign consists of the signifier (that which is immediately perceptible) and the signified (that which is inferred). The relationship between the two is however arbitrary. For example, there is no natural connection between the idea of a tree (signification) and its English sequence of sounds (signifier) as the same idea can be represented by other sounds. According to Saussure, it is the rules of the English language, which signify that the sound 'tree' refers to the concept of a tree and not the sounds themselves. The term 'arbitrary', does not however give a speaker the free choice of altering a sign once it has become established in a linguistic community. However, Saussure's theory ceases to be useful from this point on because he rejects the role context plays in meaning by favouring studies on the abstract system of language rather than on the actual utterances. Saussure sees the sign as a fixed unit by discarding the study of language through its historical development.

On the other hand Peirce, in proposing the different sets of relationships possible between the signifier and the signified, lays the foundation for the importance of context in semiotics (Savan, 1987-1988, Hawkes, 1977 and Alabi, 1995). According to Peirce, a sign is something (object) which stands to somebody (interpretant) in some respect (ground). Peirce draws attention to the mind of the perceiver by pointing out the different perception of the interpretant, of the various relationships between the sign, its object and ground.

The second of these relations, i.e. that between the sign and the object, is of relevance to this paper. It produces the icon, index and symbol. The icon functions as a sign because of its resemblance to its object. For instance, a painting, which resembles its subject, is said to have an iconic relationship to it. An index is a sign whose relationship to its object is of a sequential or causal kind. A knock on the door, for example is a sign that somebody is at the door. The symbol functions as a sign because of a rule that associates it with its object. The relationship here is arbitrary as is seen in language where the meaning of an utterance is determined by the

interpretant through the structure or rules of the language in which it occurs. The relationship between the icon, index and symbol is not mutually exclusive. Thus, it is possible to have iconic symbols or symbolic icons. It is the context in which a sign is used which determines its ultimate characteristic.

Barthes in his work on non-linguistic systems discusses the place of context (Hawkes, 1977:131). According to him what fills the signifier with signification is a combination of the intent of the producer of the sign and the nature of society's conventional modes and channels. He uses the term 'myths' to describe these and says 'myths' are 'the very fabric of its (a society's) system of 'meaning' (Hawkes, 1977:131). Myth enables the process of signification to go further as it has the ability of turning a sign in the previous system of language into a mere signifier in the second order. Barthes then equates the first order to the plane of denotation, which is the use of language to mean what it says. The second order (where myth is employed) becomes the plane of connotation, which he says is the aesthetic use of language.

Eco (1985) also places some emphasis on context. He stresses the existence of certain underlying rules (codes) which enable both the emitter/producer and the addressee to understand the manifestation of the sign in the same way, or else communication would be said to have failed.

However both Barthes and Eco deny that the sign is connected to the real world; that semiotics cannot be used to analyze the real world. While asserting that the meaning of an utterance, for example, is determined by the semiotic relationship the linguistic expression and the meaning or content culturally correlated to it, Eco however rejects the reality of the sign in his definition of content:

What is content? Not the external world. Expressions do not signify things as states of the world. At most they are used to communicate with somebody *about* states of the world... The content of a signification system depends on our cultural organization of the

World into categories. By world I do not necessarily mean physical world.(p.162) (emphasis mine)

Here, Eco denies the reality of the sign when he says that the sign cannot be used to signify the real world (states of the world). In an earlier work, Eco (1976) had said that a theory of codes should not be concerned with the truth value of statements. This position is not acceptable, especially in the analysis of African texts. The works of African writers is an attempt to pass onto another person his thoughts, experiences and viewpoints about some aspects of his, or another's, life in Africa. To say that such experiences cannot be real, as Eco implies, is unacceptable. For Amuta (1989), the nature of all art, especially literature demands that a writer be committed because in life, 'non-alignment is an impossible position' (p.105). For the African writer this commitment must be defined by the challenges of life in his/her society so that the writer's work becomes a product of social experience which would in turn lend to African literature the definition of an active producer of meanings, values and aesthetic effects which have great implications for the historical development of society. For the African writer therefore, what s/he writes about are real

Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin led the incursion into studies on socio-semiotics. He maintains that the sign cannot be a pure, fixed unit (Eagleton, 1983:116). He says that the sign cannot but refer to the real world because the sign, by itself does not have a nature. It is the different social groups that make up a particular society that imbue the sign with meaning.

Obafemi (1994) aligns himself with Bakhtin's views when he says that in employing semiotics as a centric discourse, context is a macro-sign (p.37). Also, Lawal (1997: 15), in an improvement of Vestergaard and Schroder's model of communication, identifies the crucial role context plays in communication. He sees context as the pre determiner of all the other ingredients that make up his semiotic model of communication: the other ingredients being receiver, sender, purpose, code, channel, sign, and message.

This article adopts Obafemi's definition of context as 'the situation in which dramatic action takes place' (p.38). We situate the context of

Anowa within the Ghanaian (and subsequently, African) socio-cultural milieu.

Semiotics and the Theatre (Literary and Performance)

Of all the genres, theatre is the one where the sign shows itself in the richest, most dense and varied way. This is because it uses both the word and non-linguistic systems of signification for communication. These non-linguistic systems include facial mime and other gestures, make-up including costumes, décor, lighting, music and other sound effects. (Kowzan, 1968:56).

The functions of signs in the theatre are to characterize as effectively as possible the agents and the context of the action, and to advance the action. There are some signs whose meanings are fixed by convention and those which play no representational function beyond signifying that this is a play (Gossman, 1976:5).

Kinesics

Kinesics is the interpretation of body language related to body movement of either one, or more parts of the body (e.g. the arms or legs) or the body as a whole including facial expressions. The term was first used by Ray Birdwistell, a ballet dancer who later became an anthropologist. He asserts that movements of the body are not accidental but convey specific meanings. The interpretation of these movements may be culture bound (Wikipedia, 2007:1).

Our reading of *Anowa* interprets some body movements as signs significant to the story/action of the play.

Proxemics

This is the study of man's perception/appreciation and use of space. This implies that the use of space conveys meaning. The way man handles space is determined by his culture. The term was first introduced by American anthropologist Edward Hall between the 1950s and 1960s. It is a study of how man unconsciously organizes space-the physical distance between men in their daily interactions, the organization of space in his houses and buildings including the layout of towns and cities.

Hall (Wikipedia: 2007, Heath: 2000 and Arias: 1996) identifies three types of spatial organization namely fixed feature, semi-fixed feature

and informal space.

Fixed feature space refers to the arrangement of houses, buildings, rooms and cities. This is relevant in our reading of the stage management in *Anowa*.

Semi-fixed feature refers to the arrangement of movable objects such as chairs and tables. Hall identifies two types of the semi-fixed feature. The first is the socio-petal space which helps to bring people together. Then there is the socio-fugal space which keeps people apart. This feature is equally emphasized in our reading of *Anowa*.

Informal space refers to the physical distance people unconsciously maintain when they interact. Hall identifies four types of distances people use. These are intimate (1.5 feet), personal (4 feet), social (12 feet), public (25 feet). This is equally culture bound as the distance that may be physically comfortable in one culture may be offensive in another. Informal space as defined by Hall would be more relevant for a performance of *Anowa* than an analysis of the written text.

From the explanation above, we infer that Hall's definition of informal space is physical i.e. how we place objects to create space. It would be useful in our analysis of the management of the physical stage.

According to Hall, (Heath, 2000:2 and Arias, 1996:3) informal spatial violations could occur if there is a misunderstanding of its significance. This could lead to a breakdown in communication and possibly, disaster. It is only when the roles of individuals are properly identified that this breach of space can be avoided.

We are able to situate the three levels of conflicts generated in *Anowa*; namely society versus the female individual, husband versus wife and mother/father versus daughter. These arise from the different perceptions of *Anowa*, the heroine, by the heroine herself, by her mother, and by the larger (Yebi) society as *Anowa* interacts with other characters on stage. Our position is that the conflict in *Anowa* is central to the understanding of the play text and any method that is able to situate this conflict is valid. The conflict in *Anowa* is generated by the perception of the role *Anowa* the heroine is meant to play in the society represented by Old Man and Old Woman, The-Mouth-That-Eats-Salt-And-Pepper and the

heroine's perception of herself.

AMA ATA AIDOO'S *ANOWA*

Ama Ata Aidoo draws from oral literature to tell the story of a girl, Anowa, who defies tradition to choose a husband for herself and also attempts to live a life that she thinks suits her. These bring her into conflict with her society and her husband. Her life becomes a tragedy she marries a man who is impotent while society accuses her for being responsible for her husband's impotence. Her husband also defies her wish and desire by going into an 'abominable' (slave) trade. Anowa's life is ruined in the end. In one ending, she runs mad and in the other, she commits suicide. (Aidoo: 1970).¹

As Behrent (2007:1) points out, Aidoo also tells a story which reflects contemporary social issues. The play is set in the late 1880s and describes the beginning of the colonization of Ghana. When Anowa and her husband, Kofi Ako, leave home, they begin a business by trading in skins with white foreigners and later added slaves, against Anowa's wish for she has seen in a dream the disastrous consequences of such a liason with the white foreigners.

Analysis of Text

The Attenteben The Production Notes (p.2) describes the Attenteben, a single, delicate but wild wind instrument as a symbol for Anowa, the heroine. For this paper, the Attenteben is a symbolic index pointing to the nature of the heroine.

Perceiving the Attenteben as a symbolic index, we are not surprised that Anowa rejects societal norms to choose a husband for herself and also attempts to live a life she thinks suits her; thus fitting the description 'wild'. Such pioneering and daring efforts usually lack societal support; hence the apt description of 'single'. She is delicate because she is not strong enough to withstand the consequences of her action. She thus runs mad, or commits suicide in the face of a failed marriage and possible return home.

Old Man describes Anowa as 'A child of several incarnations' (p.7) bringing to mind Soyinka and Clark-Bekederemo's theme of their different poems titled '*Abiku*'. This suggests restlessness and fits the description 'wind'. Anowa herself confesses to her restless personality when in answer

to her husband, Kofi Ako's suggestion that they settle down, she answers 'I like being on the roads' (p.28). Kofi Ako's attempt to 'tie down the wind' by settling down makes Anowa's life miserable as seen in her costume which gets more tattered as her husband's business grows.

The Water-Pot Water occupies a strategic position in African cosmology. It is akin to life. The two times Anowa appears with a water-pot (pp 9 and 13), the water-pot is empty. This has a semiotic value as it symbolizes Anowa's inability to reproduce life. Although it is Kofi Ako who we learn later has sacrificed his manhood for wealth, the reader / audience remembers that it is Anowa herself who goes against 'the advice of grey-haired cows' (p.21) to choose Kofi Ako as husband.

Gesture/ Movement as Sign(Kinesics) The empty waterspot has a semiotic value when Anowa 'overthrows the waterpot and sits on it...'. (Stage directions: p.9). The water-pot, as a container in the African socio-cultural milieu, is not meant to be sat on. Rather, it is the stool that is designed for that purpose. Anowa's action signifies her intention to overturn the tradition of her people by choosing a life of her own and with whom and where to share it.

The Gilded Chair - As an iconic symbol, the gilded chair symbolizes wealth, but the kind of wealth which the heroine, Anowa abhors. It represents things which Anowa has vowed to reject in her life and which are alien to her nature. It represents 'stillness', a settled way of life. These are alien to the restless nature of Anowa. Her rejection of an idle life supported by the enslavement of other men is captured in her reply to Kofi Ako thus:

But my husband, is there a time when there is no need for a human being to work? After all, our elders said that one never stops wearing a hat on a head which still stands on its shoulders.(p.53)

Proximically, this is emphasized by the placement of the gilded chair 'in the centre of the room' (stage directions: p.43); thereby showing its importance

to meaning in the play. This positioning draws attention to it as the most important prop on stage.

When, at the end of the play text, Anowa sits on the gilded chair (p.62), it is not a gesture of acceptance of the wealth it represents; neither is it a realization that she has changed her philosophy of wealth creation/generation. It is rather a helpless gesture-that of defeat, culminating in madness in one version of the end of the story and suicide in the other. She realizes that she has lost the fight to live her life the way she wants. It is thus appropriate in the second version of the end of the story, that in mourning the deaths of Kofi Ako and Anowa, the women 'sit around the gilded chair as though it is the funeral bed' (p.63). The chair thus serves to unite Anowa, after death, with the society which had rejected her while she was alive. (Hall's socio-petal space.)

Costumes The Production Notes (p.1) specify that Anowa's costume should be the same pair of cloths throughout the play. Kofi Ako's costume on the other hand changes with his increased wealth. Their costumes are iconic indices. As the play progresses, Anowa's costume becomes tattered, in contrast to her husband's increasing wealth. This points to her unhappiness with her husband's way of life. In fact she remains barefoot throughout the play as well.

Proxemics

a). **Fixed Feature Space** An analysis of the stage arrangement vis a vis the actions and mood of the heroine in the text exudes semiotic reading. From the Production Notes (p.1) the producer is advised that 'it is necessary for the stage to have parts to it, either adjacent angles (right stage, left stage) or perpendicularly (upper stage, lower stage'. The edition used for this analysis uses the 'upper stage, lower stage' arrangement.

The lower stage represents the road (see Production Notes), or the path on which we see Kofi Ako and Anowa start their married life. This is also symbolic. The road in African cosmology is not a home. Anowa however prefers life on the road thus foregrounding her restless nature. As she says of herself, 'I am only a wayfarer, with no belongings either here or there (p.36). As Kofi Ako progresses in wealth with the implications of a settled life,

Anowa's physique and costume degenerate such that by the time she appears in a 'settled home' in Oguaa (Upper stage), 'she looks aged and forlorn in her old clothes' (p.44).

The upper stage therefore symbolizes, for Anowa, the beginning of a miserable life. Whenever Anowa appears on the lower stage (the road) we see her at her happiest. The two places in the play text where it appears this claim could be disputed namely Phase 1 pp 13-14 and Phase 2 pp 22 - 30 are explained below:

Phase 1:13-14: This scene opens with Anowa running into her parents' discussion through the lower right stage. That scene ends with Anowa announcing her choice of Kofi Ako as husband, to the shock of her parents who show their disapproval. However just before making that announcement, the stage direction says Anowa moves a step or two forward. This should be enough to take Anowa up to the upper stage where her parents are, to deliver her shocking news.

Phase 2:22-30: The whole stage in this scene is designated as the Highway irrespective of where some actions take place (see the second stage direction, p.22)

b). Informal Space We learn from *The-Mouth-That-Eats-Salt-And-Pepper* in the Prologue that Anowa is considered strange by her society. First, Old Man says:

"Kofi was, is and shall always be
One of us.
But what shall we say about our child,
The unfortunate Anowa? let us say that
Anowa is not a girl to meet every day." (p.7)

We learn later, in Old Woman's speech, that 'the gods will punish Abena Badua for refusing to let a born priestess dance!' (p.8). In other words, Anowa has been designated to be a priestess. The dream Anowa has becomes an index of her "spiritual" role and expected position in the society (p.46 - 47). This becomes clearer in the conversation between Anowa's parents Abena Badua (mother) and Osam (father) where the father accuses Anowa's mother of not apprenticing her to a priestess because her society has seen in her, someone who could see into the future, to foretell

the subsequent, (though as at then, unknown) consequences of their relationship with the white men. This is the interpretation that her society gives Anowa's ability to have such a dream. This is however a sign that Anowa is a visionary leader, someone who has been questioning the status quo from when she was a child (pp 44-46). It is for this reason that she abhors the slave trade that Kofi decides to venture into, including the attendant wealth. Kofi himself accuses her of 'too fond of looking for the common pain and the general wrong.' (p. 38).

In her society however, such a girl is expected to be a priestess. This is however not to Badua or Anowa's liking.

In spite of the fact that priestesses 'have so much glory and dignity' (p.12), Badua however says, 'they are not people. They become too much like the gods they interpret. (p.12). She has her own idea of what she wants her daughter to be in life. Badua captures it thus:

"I want my child
To be a human woman
Marry a man,
Tend a farm
And be happy to see her
Peppers and her onions grow.
A woman like her
Should bear children
Many children,
So she can afford to have
One or two die.
Should she not take
Her place at meetings
Among the men and women of the clan?
And sit on my chair when I am gone?..." (pp.12-13)

But as Osam says, '...people with better vision than yours or mine have seen that Anowa is not like you or me...' (p. 13).

Unfortunately for Badua and the larger Yebe society, Anowa does not want to be a priestess or your 'ordinary' Ghanaian woman. She disregards her society, tradition and her mother's wish and chooses a

husband for herself. These bring her into conflict with firstly, her society as, among other things, she is accused of being responsible for her own barrenness; secondly, with her parents; and then with her chosen husband. The tragedy of Anowa is captured by Osam thus: "And a prophet with a locked mouth is neither a Prophet nor a man. Besides, the yam that will burn, shall burn, boiled or roasted." (p.13)

She is unable to play the role of a wife in a husband's life. Hence Kofi complains about her assertiveness in their marriage, especially her disapproval of his proposed slave business. He fumes, 'Anowa, do you think I am your son? ...I know I could not have started without you, but after all, we all know you are a woman and I am a man... I know you think you are the wise one of the two of us' (pp.29 & 30).

The major sign of leadership in the heroine Anowa include the dream she says she has which foretells the evil that accompanies the coming of the white man to Africa (p.46). and her subsequent wildness and restlessness. These are occasioned by her discomfort with contemporary happenings in her society, namely the slave trade. These signs are seen by her husband and her society. Kofi tells her: 'Shamelessly, you rake up the dirt of life. You bare our wounds' (p.38). Old Man who symbolizes a section of the society that recognizes Anowa's gift (but misinterprets it) asserts: "But certainly it is not too much to think that the heavens might show something to children of a latter day which was hidden from them of old?" (p.41)

It is because of this 'heaven-appointed' role that she is considered 'wild' and 'restless'. On the other hand, Old Woman who represents the other part of the society, sees her as a 'witch, devil everything that is evil' (p.41). Anowa's rejection of the physical space of Yebi by choosing to run away from home is a rejection of her role as a priestess. Anowa has been chosen to be a priestess, the conscience of the community. She cannot thus function as a wife, hence Kofi's irritation with some of her 'dictatorial' tendencies. Her barrenness is thus a symbol of her non-functionality as a wife. Her choice of Kofi also is symbolic. Her mother, Badua derisively asks Anowa of Kofi thus: "What was he able to make of the plantation of palm-trees his grandfather gave him? And the virgin land his uncles gave

him, what did he do with it?"(p.18).

Palm-trees are one the most fruitful trees as virtually every part of the trees are useful. His non-utilization of the virgin-land becomes an iconic index of his impotence with Anowa, a virgin. Even Anowa's society sees Kofi's impotence and eventual death as being caused by her: "Old Woman: ...What man prospers married to a woman like Anowa?...Was it not that Anowa who made him shoot himself? Old Man: Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps..." (P.63-64).

When her basic character as a leader, the conscience of her community manifests, (first as a girl with the right to choose her own husband and later as a wife and adult opposed to the slave trade), she is rejected by all. Anowa's life ends tragically. Her innate characteristics include restlessness, wildness, and a concern for the common good and the common pain. We have identified these as leadership qualities which her society saw as signs of priesthood. This is in conflict with the desire of her mother that she lives an ordinary maternal life. Anowa herself is unable to fully comprehend her role; for in answer to Kofi on why she could not be an ordinary submissive wife, she says, 'It seems this is how they created me'(p.38) But she is determined to live her life the way she wants it until the realization that cannot do this hits her and she runs mad in one version of the ending to the play. In the other, she commits suicide.

At the end of the play however her society recognizes that the individual has a right to choose a life for him/herself. Old Man says:

"Who knows if Anowa would have been a better woman, a better person if we had not been what we are?"

Conclusion

This paper has used socio-semiotics to reveal the several meanings in the objects, actions and dialogue of the text. We applied Peirce's dichotomy of, and relationship between, the icon, index and symbol to certain objects which widened the scope of meaning for us. It also used the theory of kinesics to interpret some gestures and actions in the play which added to

the theatricality and meaning of the text. We used Hall's initial definition of proxemics. The analysis was done within the social/cultural and ideological Ghanaian (African) contexts. Socio-semiotics has thus been used to reveal a wealth of meanings in the formal structures in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa*.

Notes

1. Ama Ata Aidoo, *Anowa* (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1970). All page references are to this edition and are cited immediately after quotations.

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