

## Football as a Semiotic Site of Ideologies and Identities

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**ABSTRACT:** *As a sporting performance, football reveals its semiotic architecture to popular cultural discourses that typify the generic modes and sensations underpinning it, with significations extending the game into a site of ideologies and identities. Within these ideologies are foundations that signal literary imaginings, while identities encompass convolutions of the signifier and the signified. Although football as a sport has attracted scholarly interest in commerce, psychology, health, and sociology, critics have often overlooked it as a semiotic space where individual and collective identities are expressed and where ideologies underpin interactions and responses. This paper, therefore, seeks to examine the semiotic significance of football by highlighting the elements that intersect ideologies, identities, and cultures, using the final match of the 2023 AFCON tournament involving Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire as a focal point. The study focuses on tracing iconicity, indexicality, symbols, and other semiotic codes, such as representamen, object, and interpretant, to underscore the literary implications of football, mapped semantically to demonstrate the nexus between the sport and literature. The contributions from this study are expected to provide valuable insights and prompt further inquiry into the extra-field reception of the game.*

**KEYWORDS:** Semiotics, Ideologies, Identities, AFCON 2023, Football, Literature

### Introduction

#### Popular Culture and Ideology

Popular culture encapsulates two essential notions—culture and ideology (John Storey, 2009). Raymond Williams (1983:90) suggests that culture can represent ‘works and practices of intellectual and particularly artistic activities.’ This suggests that culture can be perceived as the enactments and rituals that primarily serve to denote, construct, or provide the context for the creation of meaning. On the other hand, ideology is the volatile material substance that configures the reception and interpretation of phenomena. In cultural analysis, ideology is often used interchangeably with culture (Storey, 2009). Storey interfaces with ideology in terms of ‘ideological forms’—a ‘usage intended to draw attention to the way in which texts (television fiction, pop songs, novels, feature films, etc.) always present a particular image of the world’ (4).

Conclusively, Stuart Hall (2009) views popular culture as a space where ‘collective social understandings are created,’ a landscape in which ‘the politics of signification’ are recalled in efforts to persuade people towards particular ways of understanding the world (122–23). Football, as a genre of popular culture, is a space where collective social understandings are created; however, popular culture is regarded as an inferior form of culture due to the invidious influence of literary critics who assert that it is possible to assign value to a culture based on its form. Classical music, fine art, and canonical literature are all considered to be high culture. Canonical literature, as highlighted by Italo Calvino (1991), is that which is regarded as engaging with questions of universal morality. However, ideas about what is universal are arguably contingent upon value judgments, which indicate a quantitative index, much like popular culture.

#### 1. Text System and Reception

It is tempting to view the text as being confined to written language—a concern of early modern scholars in literature and linguistics. Primarily, a text must convey meaning; however, the communication of meaning is not restricted to language. Language, as a human system, is one of the agencies that produce meaning, and

while it may play a primary role in the expression of a text, it does not dismiss the functions of other communicative modes. It is on this note that Walter Ong (1982) distinguishes between primary and secondary orality as inherently different; primary orality pertains to the spoken word, whereas secondary orality relates to documented works. Both forms of text serve the same purposes of participatory mystique, fostering a sense of community, focusing on the present moment, and even employing the use of formulas.

## **2. The Semiotics of Literature and Football**

Semiotics is a theory that recognises texts as systems of codes and signs. The science of semiotics, which studies signs, emerged from the early efforts of Western physicians to understand the interaction between the body and mind within specific cultural contexts (Thomas A. Sebeok, 2001). Semiotics evolved into a linguistic and cultural analytical tool through the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1916). Saussure argues that meaning arises from the relationships within a system rather than from the inherent properties of signs. His framework of *langue* (the abstract system) and *parole* (actual speech) applies to football, where rules (*langue*) facilitate individual gameplay (*parole*). He identifies the sign as comprising the signifier (sound/image) and signified (concept), a relationship that is arbitrary and based on convention (Peter Barry, 2002:37). Semiotics provides a framework for analysing football as a coded system. Semiotic categories—icon (resemblance-based), index (causal connection), and symbol (conventional meaning)—further illuminate the textuality of football. For example, a team's colours and sobriquets serve as symbols of identity, while props such as cards and whistles conflate to create a meaningful text. These semiotic layers enhance the narrative and ideological dimensions of football.

Specifically, the Peircean sign [after Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914)] fundamentally consists of three components—representamen, object, and interpretant. The representamen 'usually refers to a sign in everyday discourse'. The object 'is that to which the sign relates' (Floyd Merrell, 2001:28). This means that the representamen collaborates with its object. The interpretant, as the third component, represents what might be regarded as the meaning of the sign, as it relates to and mediates between the representamen and the 'semiotic object,' creating an interrelation among these elements in a unified manner (Merrell, 2001). This indicates that a relationship of interdependency exists among the three components of a sign. The representamen directs our focus to the semiotic object, from which we derive an interpretant, a form of meaning. At all times, each sign must begin with a representamen, which subsequently becomes interconnected with its semiotic object. As a result, the semiotic object changes into a representamen. Moreover, the interpretant itself develops into a representamen that subsequently assumes both its semiotic object and interpretant.

For example, a representamen can be a picture of Serge Aurier, the captain of the Ivorian side, lifting the trophy; the semiotic object can be another picture of the same player in action against Nigeria in the final match. The match serves as the context for the interpretant—that the Ivorians defeated Nigeria to lift the AFCON trophy. Correspondingly, the semiotic object, Aurier, as a somatic proof of humanity, can become a representamen whose semiotic object is his trophy-lifting pose in the picture. The interpretant, a meditative interrelationship between the player and his pose, manifests as pride and a sense of joy at becoming the champion of the continent, especially following a terrible run at the group stage for a host nation.

Additionally, players do not perceive spaces on the pitch in the same way that casual viewers of football might. Spaces behind opponents become semiotic objects, signalling an interpretant that can be exploited. Each space is recognised as an opportunity to be maximised in order to initiate an attack against opponents. This is why players move into pockets of space among opponents and signal to receive the ball.

## **3. Nigeria versus Côte d'Ivoire in Semiosis**

### **3.1 Match synopsis**

The final match of the AFCON 2023 tournament took place at the Alassane Ouattara Ebimpe Stadium between Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire. Nigeria scored first with a header from their captain, Troost-Ekong, while

Côte d'Ivoire equalised and then took the lead with goals from Kessié and Haller respectively, ultimately winning the tournament.

### **3.2. Football: A Semiotic site of Identities and ideologies**

Football is a system of codes, and 'a text bears no meaning unless the receiver of the text knows the code(s) from which it was constructed and unless the text refers to, occurs in, or entails some specific context' (Sebeok, 2001:8). According to Derrida (1967), semiotics helps us make sense of signs, as a sign is whatever represents something for someone in some capacity or regard. Therefore, every reading is a semiotic reading, because each text is a display of codes, and reading is an interaction with these codes for the extraction of meaning. As a semiotic site of identity and ideology, football reflects the primary signification of its hosts. In the AFCON tournament, the participating countries don their representative national colours. Focusing on Nigeria versus Côte d'Ivoire, the primary national colours of both countries are green and orange, respectively, and on the occasion of a game of such magnitude as the final, only the chief colours will suffice. Other colours on the spectrums include white for Nigeria and white and green for Côte d'Ivoire, which they donned in several of the previous matches.

The colours symbolise cardinal ethos and ideologies in their respective countries, representing each nation's history, aspirations, and identity. In Nigeria, the green represents the country's natural wealth, while the white signifies peace and unity. Together, these two colours symbolise Nigeria's hope for a peaceful and prosperous future (Olugbenga Lawrence Martins, 2015). Conversely, the orange of Côte d'Ivoire represents the nation's land, particularly the savannas in the north and the land's fertility, indicating dynamic national growth. The white symbolises peace, unity, and purity, while the green represents hope for the future and the forests in the south (Whitney Smith, 2018).

National football teams are often identified by sobriquets, typically derived from a prominent feature of their coat of arms. The Nigerian national team is known as the Super Eagles, while the Ivorians are referred to as the Elephants of Côte d'Ivoire, named after their respective national animals. These animals appear on the country's coat of arms and carry extended symbolism. The eagle on Nigeria's coat of arms signifies strength, dignity, and pride. In contrast, the national animal of Côte d'Ivoire is the African elephant (*Loxodonta africana*), which is also featured on the country's coat of arms and represents national pride, and resilience.

Tactics and formations also carry ideological weight. Football exemplifies strategies in motion aimed at outplaying an opponent and securing victory in a match. The ideologies of the coaches and technical teams shape the tactics employed. For instance, both teams utilised the 4-3-3 formation, and the player selection featured the most tactically adept players to labour through the pitch in a final match for glory. Nigeria, having scored an early goal, adopted deep play to exploit counter-attacks, stationing Osimhen where he could receive the ball and advance with it. The Ivorian team, on the other hand, preferred to press on until they equalised and ultimately won the tournament. The Nigerian team, having previously defeated the Ivorians in the group stage, perhaps approached the final match with the ideological configuration from their earlier victory and a similar tactical plan. However, the Ivorians had evolved since changing their coach mid-tournament. Thus, they pressed harder, maintained greater possession of the ball, and despite falling behind, persisted to equalise and then took the lead, signalling the symbolic underpinning of their sobriquet, which is resilience. This shift in strategy exemplifies how ideology—whether in the form of national football philosophy or coaching decisions—translates into tactical expressions on the pitch.

Ideology and identity are closely intertwined, as each reflects the other. In this sense, identity serves as an icon of ideology, while ideology acts as an index of identity. Nevertheless, all three principal categories of signs interact within semiotics, as the interpretation of identity and ideology as icons and indexes of one another is inherently symbolic.

The icon, index, and symbol are also understood in terms of firstness, secondness, and thirdness. In his explanation, Merrell (2019) considers firstness to be a quality, secondness an effect, and thirdness a product in its process of becoming. Therefore, the icon is the most authentic semiotic example of firstness because it does

not engage in interrelated interaction with any other sign, object, or interpretant. This means the icon remains merely that until it interacts with something else, at which point it transforms into a sign other than iconic. Merrell (2019) asserts that it is possible to depict firstness as the ‘central “node” or “vortex” plus one of three possible lines [of the sign component] leading to a representamen’. In this context, the icon transitions from ‘nothingness’ to signify something as a ‘representamen’. The diagram of falling rocks serves only as a representation of falling rocks until it is installed on the road, at which point road users interpret it as a warning of danger ahead. Similarly, the colours green or orange are simply colours until they interact with Nigerian or Côte d'Ivoire players, and they come to represent an identity; therefore, we can trace where the allegiance of the fans lies by the colours they don in the context of a game. In semiology, this is known as binary oppositions, and it refers to ‘pairs of mutually-exclusive signifiers in a paradigm set representing categories which are logically opposed and which together define a complete universe of discourse’ (Daniel Chandler, 2000: 185). Therefore, Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire become analogue oppositions with each side considering the other an antagonist.

#### 4. The descriptive system

The descriptive system is a concept that denotes a group of words, expressions and ideas that are employed in the text to signify the parts of the whole that the author intends to represent (Bahador & Lashkarian, 2014). In other words, a descriptive system is an asterism of words linked to a concept or thought, or what Michael Riffaterre (the concept’s proponent) refers to as a nuclear word or nucleus. In the descriptive system, ‘each component of the system functions as a metonym of the nucleus’ (Riffaterre, 39). Metonymy involves naming a part to represent the whole. In other words, something closely related to an entity is employed to characterise that entity. This metonymic relationship encompasses all the words in the descriptive system linked to the core word, establishing a set of interconnected words so that if the nucleus is used metaphorically in the poem, its descriptive system becomes a metaphor as well. The descriptive system typically consists of stereotypes and conventional ideas associated with the word.

In football, a player may directly be qualified by his representative country because he becomes a metonym of the nucleus. Hence, each player becomes a satellite entity in the asterism of the country he represents and can, therefore, be identified by the nucleic epithet.

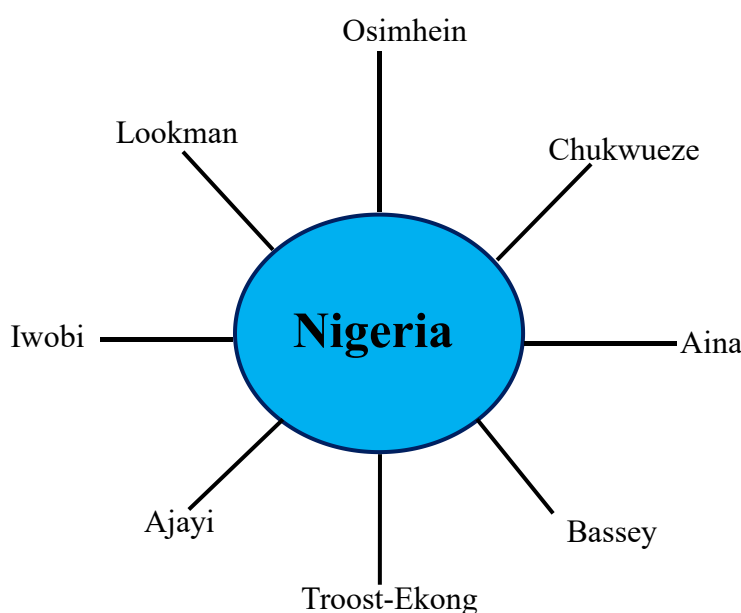


**Figure 1: A descriptive system of team Nigeria**

The descriptive system above showcases some of the Nigerian players in the starting eleven against Côte d'Ivoire. The implication of the diagram is that a player on the Nigerian team may be referred to as Nigeria, just as Nigeria signifies the player as a sign. Hence, when Troost-Ekong scores, it indicates that Nigeria has scored, and when Kessié and Haller score for Côte d'Ivoire, it shows that the country is in the lead.

## 5. Semantic Mapping

Ferdinand de Haan (2004) asserts that the semantic map is a valuable tool for engaging with the intricate interplay of semantic meanings across world languages. He posits that the semantic map represents the totality of the semantic possibilities of a given category. In simpler terms, a semantic map encompasses a variety of grammatical functions and outlines a method to appropriately connect these functions. Conversely, rather than focusing on linguistic codes, football and literary elements are mapped and interpreted as semiotic codes. Additionally, Haan (2004) suggests that there is currently no universally accepted procedure for creating semantic maps, but a common feature central to the model is its adaptation of concept definition mapping, which relies on the analyst's prior knowledge; it identifies key components and illustrates their relationships. A semantic map considers the entirety of all semantic possibilities and is also referred to as semantic webbing.

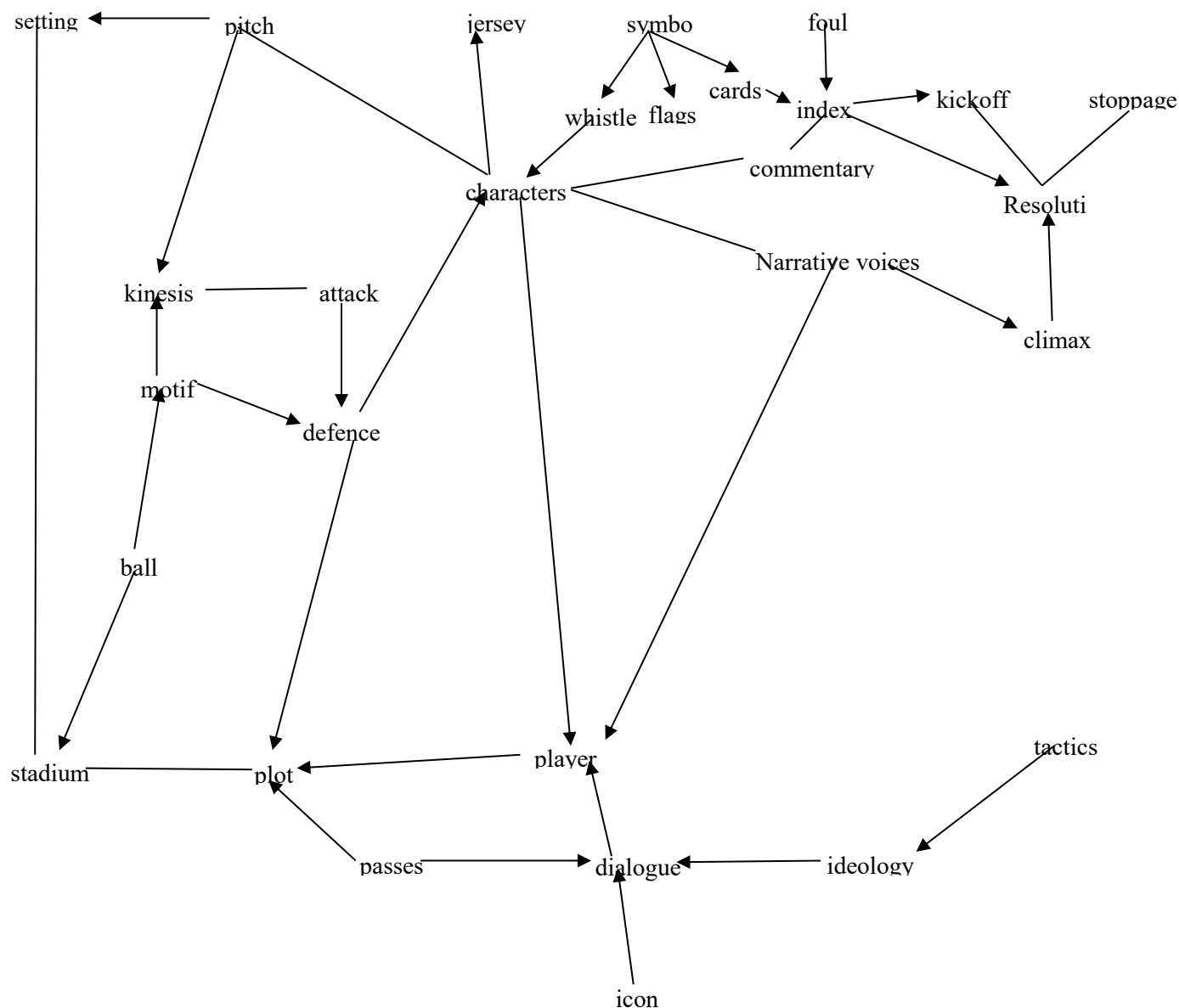


Figure 2: A spider's web of the semiotics of football and literature

The semantic map above (Utibe Hanson, 2020) is a graphic representation of the semiotics of football as literature. The players are characters defined by their distinctiveness, represented by their jerseys—colours symbolic of national identities and numbers serving a conventional purpose. The ideology of competing teams lies in their identity, reflected in the tactics employed by the players to navigate the story to its conclusion. This thickens the plot and drives the game to a climax that begins building with the first whistle, signalling kick-off, and can only be resolved by the indexicality of the whistle that indicates match stoppage.

Other symbolic indexical motifs include the card, which signifies a foul as indicated by the whistle and signalled by the linesmen's flags waved in accordance with the conventions understood by the participants in the narrative. The participants in the narrative bear an iconic resemblance to their characters off the pitch. No longer defined solely by their distinctive attire and the ideological foundations of the tactics required in a match, they cease to antagonise one another; however, the physical resemblance endures. The commentary provides us with ample insight into players beyond the distinctive markers of the jersey. The commentary acts as the narrative voice, as we may only recall the imagery of their narration without seeing them directly.

The ball, much like dialogue, passes among players. This serves as a kinematic motif used to express and actualise the ideologies and tactics in play. This kinesis encompasses the movement of players within the plot, arising from their offensive or defensive actions. Furthermore, the plot's kinesis mirrors the kinesis of the pitch, involving players switching sides to attack the posts they had previously defended and vice versa. Such dynamics can only occur within a stadium or a similar setting.

## Conclusion

Football functions as a semiotic system, generating meaning through the interplay of signs and symbols. The 2023 AFCON final between Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire exemplifies this phenomenon, demonstrating how national identity, cultural ideology, and tactical strategy converge within the sport. Employing Saussurean and Peircean semiotic frameworks, this study highlights how football encodes and communicates meaning—whether through visual symbols like team colours, tactical formations that reflect ideological stances, spatial perceptions, or the narrative arcs of victory and defeat. By analysing football as a cultural text, this paper expands the discourse on sports semiotics and situates the game within broader discussions of literature, identity, and ideology. Football transcends mere sporting competition; it serves as a space where collective meanings are constructed, contested, and reimaged.

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