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SYMBOLISM, IDENTITY, AND IDEOLOGICAL NARRATIVES**

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**SEMIOTIC INTERPRETATIONS OF THE NIGERIAN COAT OF ARMS:
SYMBOLISM, IDENTITY, AND IDEOLOGICAL NARRATIVES**

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Abstract

This paper presents a semiotic and visual-semiotic interpretation of the Nigerian Coat of Arms, reading the emblem as a structured visual text that encodes national identity, ideological narratives, and postcolonial aspirations. Drawing on Saussure's dyadic model, Peirce's triadic categories, Barthes's theory of myth, and Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design, the analysis demonstrates how the emblem's constituent elements—black shield, silver wavy bands, red eagle, white horses, *Costus spectabilis*, green base, and motto—function as signs that project unity, sovereignty, dignity, and renewal. The paper argues that the emblem is not a mimetic reflection of national reality but a strategic construction that stabilises preferred meanings and naturalises contested values. Situated within the historical arc from colonial rule to independence, the Coat of Arms is shown to operate as a hybrid postcolonial artefact that simultaneously borrows from European heraldry and indigenises meaning through local flora, geography, and colour codes. The discussion, encompassing salience, hierarchy, framing, and symmetry, highlights how it performs ideological work by positioning citizens within a narrative of 'Unity and Faith, Peace and Progress.' The paper concludes that the Coat of Arms endures not because it mirrors reality, but because it organises hope and legitimises authority in a visual form that is continually reinterpreted by its audiences.

Keywords: Semiotics; Visual semiotics; Nigerian Coat of Arms; National identity; Symbolism; Myth; Postcolonialism; Ideology

Introduction

National symbols are among the most condensed and portable forms of political communication. They travel on currency and passports, preside over courtrooms and classrooms, and punctuate the rhythm of civic life during ceremonies, elections, and commemorations. Far from being merely decorative, they are instruments of semiotic labour: they select, prioritise, and stabilise meanings about who ‘we’ are. The Nigerian Coat of Arms is a rich and vibrant example. Adopted at independence in 1960, it presents a compact arrangement of heraldic and indigenous motifs—shield, rivers, eagle, horses, flora—whose meanings are both obvious and contested. On the surface, the emblem announces unity, strength, purity, and natural abundance. At deeper levels, it performs ideological work: it naturalises aspiration as common sense, glosses over fracture with the language of harmony, and projects sovereignty through stylised visual codes.

This paper takes the Coat of Arms seriously as a visual text. It asks: how do the emblem’s elements signify? What kinds of identities and values do they encode and privilege? Which histories and material conditions are amplified, and which are muted or erased? To answer these questions, the study integrates classical semiotics (Saussure, Peirce), cultural/semiotic theory (Barthes), and visual grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen), supplemented by postcolonial perspectives (Fanon, Bhabha) that situate the emblem within the ambivalence of decolonisation. The analysis proceeds from the premise that national symbols do not merely reflect a nation; they help to produce it by scripting the terms through which citizens imagine themselves as a collective.

The argument unfolds in six parts. First, a review of relevant literature establishes how semiotics and visual semiotics have been mobilised to interpret national symbols. Second, a theoretical framework clarifies the analytical lenses used in the study. Third, a methodological note outlines the procedure for analysing the Coat of Arms as a multimodal image. Fourth, the semiotic and visual analysis offers a rigorous interpretation of each emblematic element and the overall

composition. Fifth, a comparative discussion situates the Nigerian emblem within a broader African postcolonial symbolic ecology. Finally, the discussion, limitations, and conclusion draw out the implications for understanding how national emblems function as ideological devices in everyday life.

Literature Review

Semiotics emerged from linguistics but has long since become a transdisciplinary method for decoding cultural artefacts. Saussure's (1916/1983) dyadic model of the sign posits a relationship between signifier (form) and signified (concept), emphasising the arbitrariness of the link and the role of convention. Peirce's (1955) triadic model expands the terrain, distinguishing icons (resemblance), indices (causal or existential connection), and symbols (convention). Barthes (1972) extended semiotics to popular culture and mass communication, demonstrating how signs operate at the levels of denotation and connotation and how these can congeal into 'myth'—those taken-for-granted narratives that make ideology feel natural.

Visual semiotics systematises image analysis. Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996/2006) grammar of visual design identifies three metafunctions—representational, interactive, and compositional—through which images produce meaning. Their framework enables analysis of how layout, salience, framing, colour, and gaze organise viewer relations and encode hierarchies of value. Related work in multimodal discourse analysis (Machin, 2016; van Leeuwen, 2005) demonstrates that images are not ancillary to text but are themselves grammatical, historically situated, and ideologically potent.

Studies of national symbols underline their power to bind communities and legitimise states. Anderson (2006) describes nations as 'imagined communities' sustained by shared symbols, rituals, and media. Smith (1991) underscores the mnemonic and mythic functions of national

symbols in reproducing identity across generations. Hobsbawm and Ranger's edited volume, *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), shows how ostensibly ancient symbols are often modern constructions that lend an air of antiquity to new political orders. Billig (1995) introduces the concept of 'banal nationalism' to describe how everyday cues—such as flags on public buildings and coats of arms on documents—habitually interpellate citizens.

Within African scholarship, national emblems have been read as sites of hybridisation and contestation. Falola and Heaton (2008) narrate Nigeria's modern history as a negotiation between competing regional and ethnic projects, a context in which a unifying symbol becomes politically necessary. Nwauwa (2005) interrogates the tensions between traditional symbolism and modern nationhood in postcolonial Africa. Nigerian-focused analyses (Oguibe, 1993; Taiwo, 2010; Chilwa, 2012; Uzoigwe, 2019) explore how official imagery and political discourse mobilise identity while eliding social contradictions. Despite this body of work, few studies apply a comprehensive visual-semiotic framework to the Nigerian Coat of Arms, a gap this paper addresses.

Theoretical Framework

This analysis is anchored by four semiotic theories, applied with a postcolonial inflexion to address the specific context of the Nigerian emblem.

First, **Saussure's dyadic model** provides the fundamental insight that the relationship between a signifier (e.g., the image of a white horse) and its signified (e.g., dignity) is arbitrary and sustained by social convention. This allows us to question why certain symbols were chosen and what conventions they rely upon.

Second, **Peirce's triadic taxonomy** offers a more granular tool. It allows us to classify elements of the coat of arms as:

Icons: Signs that resemble their object (e.g., the wavy bands iconically represent rivers).

Indices: Signs connected to their object by cause or contiguity (e.g., the black shield indexically points to the Nigerian soil).

Symbols: Signs whose meaning is purely based on convention (e.g., the eagle as a symbol of power).

Most elements operate on multiple levels, and Peirce's framework helps unpack this complexity.

Third, **Barthes's orders of signification** are crucial for moving beyond basic meaning to ideological analysis. The first order is **denotation** (the literal description of the elements). The second order is **connotation** (the cultural and associative meanings, such as purity for the colour white). Barthes argues that connotation can solidify into **myth**, a second-order semiological system that naturalises history and ideology as timeless truth. This concept is vital for analysing how the Coat of Arms makes contested ideals like 'unity' and 'progress' appear as natural and inevitable goals. Furthermore, this process of myth-making aligns with Althusser's (1971) concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). The emblem functions as a tool of the state ISA, hailing individuals into subjecthood and reinforcing a national ideology not through force, but through the seemingly apolitical realm of symbolism.

Fourth, **Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design** provides a systematic method for analysing composition. Key concepts include:

Salience: How elements are made to attract the viewer's attention through size, colour contrast, or placement.

Framing: How connections or disconnections are created between elements.

Information Value: The meaning attributed to the placement of elements (e.g., what is placed in the centre vs. the margins, or the top 'Ideal' vs. the bottom 'Real').

A **postcolonial perspective**, drawing on Bhabha (1994), frames the emblem as a site of **hybridity**. Its European heraldic structure is infused with indigenous meanings, creating a ‘third space’ where colonial forms are appropriated and transformed. This lens prevents a simplistic reading of the emblem as either purely colonial or purely indigenous, instead highlighting its negotiated character. Fanon’s (1963) work on the need for a national culture after liberation informs the analysis of how the emblem attempts to forge a new consciousness.

Methodological Note: Reading the Emblem as Image

The study treats the official Nigerian Coat of Arms as a multimodal text for close visual reading. The analysis follows a structured, three-stage procedure informed by the theoretical framework:

Denotative Inventory: A precise, non-interpretative description of all visual elements: the black shield, silver Y-shaped bands, red eagle, white horses, green wreath, *Costus spectabilis* flowers, green base, and the textual motto.

Connotative and Mythological Analysis: Each element is analysed for its cultural and symbolic meanings (connotations) using Saussurean and Peircean concepts. This stage asks what values and ideas each sign evokes. Subsequently, a Barthesian analysis identifies how these connotations combine to form larger **myths** (e.g., the myth of natural unity, the myth of incorruptible authority).

Compositional Analysis: Applying Kress and van Leeuwen’s grammar, the analysis examines the image’s layout. This involves assessing:

The **salience** of elements (e.g., the eye-catching red eagle).

The **information value** of zones (e.g., the eagle in the ‘Ideal’ position, the base in the ‘Real’ position).

Framing and **vectorality** (e.g., how the symmetrical horses frame the shield to create a sense of balance and containment).

This multi-layered method ensures a rigorous examination of both the parts and the whole of the emblem as a semiotic and ideological construct.

Semiotic and Visual Analysis of the Nigerian Coat of Arms

Denotative

Inventory

The emblem consists of a central black shield with two silver wavy bands arranged in a pallium (Y-shape). Supporting the shield are two identical white horses, standing on a green ground. On top of the shield stands a red eagle, perched upon a wreath of green and white twists. The ground is strewn with the yellow flowers of *Costus spectabilis*. At the bottom, a scroll bears the national motto: “Unity and Faith, Peace and Progress.”

Connotative, Mythological, and Compositional Analysis

The Black Shield: The shield is the central nucleus of the composition, given high **salience** through its size and dark contrast. Saussureanly, the signifier ‘black shield’ signifies protection and the nation’s land. Primarily, it is a **symbol** of defence and an **index** of the Nigerian soil. However, the choice of black is key. It is a deliberate re-signification; in heraldry, black (sable) can denote grief, but here it is mythologised (Barthes) to connote fertility, abundance, and resilience. This creates a powerful myth of the land as inherently and inexhaustibly productive, an ideological narrative that can obscure the realities of ecological challenges and land disputes. Compositionally, its central position marks it as the core of the national idea—the entity to be protected.

The Silver Wavy Bands: These bands are **iconic** of rivers. They are strongly **indexical** of the Niger and Benue rivers, whose confluence at Lokoja is geographically central to the nation. The Y-shape is a powerful visual metaphor for convergence and unity. Compositionally, they are the primary **vector** that structures the shield, simultaneously dividing it and connecting its parts. Barthesian analysis reveals that this naturalises political unity—it makes a hard-won, political achievement appear as a pre-ordained, geographical fact. The myth is that unity is as natural as rivers flowing together. The silver (argent) colour adds a connotation of purity and hope to the waters, cleansing them of any historical or political turbulence.

The Red Eagle: Placed in the most prominent ‘**Ideal**’ position (top) according to Kress and van Leeuwen, the eagle is the focal point of **salience**, amplified by its striking red colour against the background. It is a conventional **symbol** of power, vigilance, and sovereignty. The non-naturalistic red colour intensifies this, connoting courage and sacrifice while displacing potential negative connotations of predation. Mythologically, it represents the overseeing authority of the state, crowning the nation with aspiration and control. Its gaze is forward, towards the future, directing the nation's outlook. In the Althusserian sense, the eagle is the ultimate interpellating agent in the image, representing the sovereign power that "calls" the nation into being.

The White Horses: The horses serve as symmetrical **framing** devices, creating a sense of balance and order. Their whiteness is a **symbol** of purity, dignity, and loyalty. Their mirrored stance **frames** the central shield, containing it and visually preventing dispersion—a powerful metaphor for the containment of regional and ethnic diversity within a unified whole. The choice of horses, a European heraldic staple, is hybridised; they are not represented realistically but as abstracted symbols of virtue, their colonial origins subsumed into a new national narrative of incorruptibility. They are static, vigilant, and disciplined, modelling the ideal attitude of the citizenry towards the state.

The Base, Wreath, and *Costus Spectabilis*: The green base occupies the ‘**Real**’ position, grounding the emblem and **indexically** pointing to agriculture and the material foundation of the nation. The *Costus spectabilis* flowers are **icons** of a specific indigenous species, functioning as an **index** of local flora and a **symbol** of beauty and vitality. Together, they soften the martial tone of the shield and eagle, adding a layer of natural promise and indigeneity. The green-and-white wreath provides a colour-coded **symbolic** platform that echoes the national flag, reinforcing national identity and serving as a crown of honour for the polity.

The Motto: The textual motto, “Unity and Faith, Peace and Progress,” acts as an explicit, linguistic **symbol** that anchors the visual narrative. Each term is an abstract, aspirational Barthesian **myth**. “Unity” is presented as an uncontestable goal, masking the history of conflict. “Progress” invokes a linear, modernist development myth. The motto translates the complex visual semiotics into a direct ideological programme for citizens to internalise. It functions as a speech act, a performative declaration of the state's intentions and the citizens' duties.

Chromatic Semiotics: The Politics of Colour

Beyond the forms of the emblem, its colour scheme performs crucial ideological work. Each hue is a signifier loaded with historical and cultural meanings that are strategically mobilised.

The Re-Signification of Black: In Western heraldry, black (sable) often denotes grief, darkness, or penitence. The Nigerian emblem performs a decisive act of re-signification. Here, black is transformed into a symbol of fertility, strength, and the richness of the soil. This chromatic shift is a profoundly postcolonial gesture, reclaiming a term often burdened with negative connotations in colonial discourse and centring it as the foundation of the nation. It mythologises the land itself as the source of national wealth and resilience.

The Ambiguity of White: The white of the horses and the bands in the wreath draws directly from heraldic conventions where it (argent) signifies purity, peace, and sincerity. However, in a Nigerian context, this whiteness can be read polyvalently. It upholds the ideal of incorruptibility and peace, but it also serves as a stark, abstract ideal—a constant reminder of a virtue that remains aspirational. The purity of the white horses is perpetually contrasted with the complex, often messy, reality of governance, creating a visual benchmark for civic conduct.

Green and the Agrarian Myth: The dominant green of the base and wreath is indexical of Nigeria's agricultural wealth and natural vegetation. It reinforces an agrarian mythos, presenting the nation as fundamentally rooted in the land and its bounty. This narrative, while powerful, can also be seen as eliding the rapid urbanisation and oil-based economy that would come to define modern Nigeria. The green base projects an identity of natural, self-sufficient abundance, potentially overlooking the complexities of a globalised economic reality.

Red as Sacrificial Sovereignty: The striking red of the eagle is a powerful focal point. In heraldry, red (gules) signifies courage, martyrdom, and military strength. The choice of red for the eagle elevates sovereignty beyond mere authority into the realm of sacrifice and bloodshed. It connects the state's vigilance to the sacrifices made for independence and national unity, implicitly calling for continued patriotism and sacrifice from the citizenry.

The Semiotics of Absence: A Critical Reading

A comprehensive semiotic analysis must also consider what the emblem omits. These absences are as significant as their presences, revealing the ideological boundaries of the official national narrative.

The Absence of the Human Figure: Unlike the coats of arms of South Africa or Kenya, which incorporate human figures, the Nigerian emblem is entirely anthropomorphic but not human. Authority is vested in animals (eagle, horses) and abstract nature (rivers, flowers). This absence of specific human forms can be read as a strategy to avoid representing the country's ethnic diversity directly, thereby sidestepping the potentially contentious issue of which group(s) to foreground. The human citizen is implied but not depicted, interpellated by the symbols rather than represented within them. This creates a universal, but also abstract, citizen-subject.

The Absence of Modernity and Industry: The emblem is resolutely pre-modern and agrarian. There are no symbols of industry, technology, education, or urban life. The narrative is one of natural endowment (land, rivers, flora) and traditional values (dignity, strength). This projects a vision of nationhood grounded in timeless, natural virtues, potentially obscuring the modernising ambitions and complex political economy of the state it represents. The motto's mention of "Progress" is not visualised, remaining a textual aspiration against a visual backdrop of nature and tradition. This disconnect between the visual and the textual is a key site of ideological tension.

Table 1: Summary of Semiotic Analysis

Element	Saussure (Signifier → Signified)	Peirce (Category)	Barthes (Myth/Connotation)	Visual Grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen)
Black Shield	Black colour → fertility/strength	Symbol, Index	Myth of inexhaustible land	Central nucleus; high salience via contrast
Silver Bands	Wavy lines → rivers/confluence	Icon, Index	Unity as natural inevitability	Structural vector: divides/unifies shield
Red Eagle	Eagle → vigilance/sovereignty	Symbol	State power as courageous and sacrificial	Top 'Ideal' position; focal salience
White Horses	Horses → dignity/purity	Symbol	Myth of incorruptible guardianship	Symmetrical framing creates balance
Green Base/Floral	Green/flowers → agriculture/beauty	Index (base),	Myth of agrarian promise and indigenous beauty	Bottom 'Real' position;

Element	Saussure (Signifier → Signified)	Peirce (Category)	Barthes (Myth/Connotation)	Visual
				Grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen)
Motto	Words → civic ideals	Icon (flower)	Unity, faith, peace, and progress as natural	grounding effect
				Textual anchor; clarifies ideology

Historical Context: The Invention of a National Symbol

The adoption of the Coat of Arms in 1960 was not an organic evolution but a deliberate act of symbolic invention, squarely situated within the process of nation-building that followed independence. The transition from colonial insignia, which centred British imperial authority (e.g., the emblem of the Colony and Protectorate of Nigeria), required a new visual language that could command legitimacy both domestically and internationally. Historical records indicate a collaborative process between Nigerian political leaders and British heraldic authorities, a negotiation that itself reflects the hybridity of the postcolonial moment.

The final design reflects a series of strategic compromises. The retention of the heraldic format—shield, supporters, crest, motto—ensured international legibility and a sense of established statehood. However, the indigenisation of its content was paramount. The choice of the Niger-Benue confluence was a geographically astute symbol of unity that avoided privileging any

specific ethnic group. The *Costus spectabilis* provided a uniquely Nigerian botanical reference. This process of selection involved silencing alternative narratives; the emblem does not, for instance, reference the coastal regions, the northern savannahs, or the specific cultural artefacts of any of Nigeria's numerous ethnic groups. Its power lies in this very abstraction, forging a new, supra-ethnic identity rooted in geography and nature rather than in the contested terrain of culture and history. Its stability through subsequent civil war and political upheavals points to its success as a container for national aspiration, however contested that aspiration may be.

Visual Semiotics and Comparative Perspectives

The Nigerian emblem's grammar can be illuminated through comparison with other postcolonial symbols. Ghana's Coat of Arms (1957), the first in sub-Saharan Africa, also employs a heraldic structure but incorporates the black star of African freedom and indigenous Akans symbols like the linguist's staff and the ceremonial sword, creating a different balance between Pan-Africanism, local tradition, and heraldic convention.

Kenya's emblem (1963) represents a more radical departure. It centres a Maasai shield and two spears, explicitly valorising indigenous martial resistance to colonialism. The rooster holding an axe symbolises a new dawn and the power of the people. This iconography is far more confrontational and less abstract than Nigeria's, directly visualising the struggle for freedom.

Post-apartheid South Africa's (2000) coat of arms represents the most decisive break from European heraldry. It replaces the shield with an indigenous rock art motif, features the secretary bird as a uniquely African symbol of protection, and includes San human figures. Its motto is in the Khoisan language, semiotically repudiating the apartheid past and centring indigenous identity.

Nigeria's emblem occupies a conservative, hybrid middle ground. Its adherence to classical heraldry projects stability and order, while its internal significations are indigenized. A comparison

with a non-heraldic national symbol, such as India's Lion Capital of Ashoka (adopted 1950), further highlights this choice. India's symbol draws from an ancient, pre-colonial imperial symbol, asserting civilizational continuity. Nigeria, a modern construct of colonialism, lacked such a unifying pre-colonial symbol, making the adapted heraldic form a pragmatic vehicle for a new identity. In Bhabha's terms, the Nigerian Coat of Arms is a quintessential 'third space,' where the colonial form is inhabited and subverted by local meaning.

Discussion: Ideology, Reception, and Contestation

The rigorous semiotic analysis demonstrates that the Coat of Arms is a potent ideological vehicle. Its power lies in its ability to naturalise historical constructs and political aspirations through a seemingly neutral visual language. The myths of natural unity, inexhaustible land, and incorruptible authority function to legitimise the state and interpellate citizens into a shared national narrative, effectively operating as an Althusserian Ideological State Apparatus.

This symbolism is perpetuated through what Billig (1995) terms 'banal nationalism.' The emblem's ubiquitous presence on currency, official documents, and public buildings ensures a constant, low-level flagging of nationhood. Citizens are habituated to its meanings through repetition, making the ideological programme feel ordinary and common-sensical.

However, the emblem is not a closed text. Its reception is negotiated against lived experiences, and its meanings can be contested. For citizens in regions affected by resource conflict or environmental degradation, the myth of the fertile, unifying land may be received with scepticism. The symbol of the incorruptible white horse may ring hollow in a context where corruption is a daily concern. This gap between symbol and reality often becomes the subject of public discourse, exemplified in political cartoons that parody the emblem or in social media memes that replace

the horses with images of poverty, thereby engaging in a semiotic struggle over the national narrative.

Thus, the emblem exists in a dynamic tension between its intended, hegemonic meanings and the actual, often divergent, interpretations of the public. It is a site of continuous semiotic struggle, not just a tool of domination. Its endurance depends on its flexibility—its ability to be a vessel for hope and aspiration even when the reality it is supposed to represent remains elusive.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The present study offers an in-depth interpretive analysis grounded in established semiotic frameworks. Its limitation is that it focuses on the text itself and its intended meanings, without empirical data on audience reception. Future research could productively combine this type of visual-semiotic analysis with qualitative methods like focus groups or interviews across different demographic segments (age, ethnicity, region) to investigate how the emblem is actually decoded by Nigerians. A longitudinal study could also trace how the teaching and public presentation of the Coat of Arms has evolved in civic education curricula, revealing shifts in its ideological deployment over time. Furthermore, research could explore the emblem's usage in digital spaces, analysing how it is appropriated, memefied, or contested online, providing a dynamic view of its contemporary significance.

Conclusion

Through a rigorous, multi-layered semiotic and visual analysis, the Nigerian Coat of Arms emerges as a dense and strategic communication device. Its elements are not arbitrary decorations but carefully chosen signs whose meanings are orchestrated through composition, colour, and absence to naturalise a specific ideological programme. The emblem's hybrid genealogy exemplifies the

postcolonial negotiation of identity, where inherited European heraldic forms are refashioned with indigenous significations to stage new national narratives. Its persistence is evidence that symbols are powerful not because they perfectly mirror reality, but because they organise hope, legitimate authority, and provide a visual grammar for imagining the nation. As a living text, the Coat of Arms remains open to reinterpretation and contestation, its ultimate power residing in the disciplined yet flexible language of its design, which continues to frame the ongoing project of Nigerian nationhood.

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