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Arts, Communication, and Education: Beyond the Letters in Sociopolitical Landscape in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

In the sociopolitical landscape of Ghana, communication transcends mere words and speeches, embodying a rich tapestry of symbols, images, and visual rhetoric. This study examines the work of "Tilapia da Cartoonist," a satirical cartoonist whose illustrations provide a critical lens on Ghana's social and political issues. By applying Gunther Kress' social semiotics framework, the analysis delves into how visual elements such as signs, signifiers, and the signified are employed to convey powerful messages. The study highlights how these multimodal forms of communication challenge traditional discourse, shedding light on themes of power, governance, and societal values in Ghana. Through five selected cartoons, the research uncovers the nuanced ways in which images can articulate complex sociopolitical critiques, often resonating more deeply than words alone. This exploration of multimodality not only enhances our understanding of contemporary communication practices but also underscores the critical role of visual semiotics in shaping public perception and discourse in Ghana.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Gunther Kress is one of the proponents of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Amoussou & Allagbe, 2018). Kress is of the view that communication goes beyond text and speech. He argued that there should be diverse ways like pictures, videos, signs, etc. which communicate ideas other than text and speech (Liu, 2013). As a linguist, Kress contributed to CDA by emphasizing the concept of multimodality which was marginalized by challenging readers to consider varied forms of meaning that extend beyond language to enhance the semiotic process. This was to enhance meaning using different modes in the analysis of text rather than the traditional way of analyzing text linguistically.

Social semiotics is an approach to communication that seeks to understand how people communicate by a variety of means in particular social settings (Harrison, 2003; Kress & Mavers, 2005). Modes of communication are what they are not because of a fixed set of rules and structures, but because of what they can accomplish socially in everyday instantiation. With this emphasis, a key question is how people make signs in the context of interpersonal and institutional power relations to achieve specific aims. This is fundamentally important since semiotic systems can shape social relations and society itself. One essential aspect of the social semiotic theory is the principle that modes of communication offer historically specific and socially and culturally shared options for communicating (Kress, 2015; Vannini, 2007). The study of communication from this perspective seeks to identify and inventory the semiotic options that are available to communicators and that they choose to make. These options should be seen not as fixed but as having meaning potential that is realized in context and a combination of other choices. In this sense, the meanings associated with these selections are always in a process of ongoing flux as they are continually adapted to social encounters. In the context of multimodality, the implication is that all modes should be studied with a view to the underlying choices available to communicators, the meaning potential of sources, and the purpose for which they are chosen. From a social semiotic perspective, this includes the study of how communicators create texts (including the role of technology) and how people interpret texts. Social semiotics has been greatly influenced by the work of Robert, Hodge, and Kress (1979, 1993) in the seminal text *Language as Ideology* (Engelbert, 2012). While this classic volume pioneered the critical analysis of language and laid out much of what was to later be called critical discourse analysis, it made several key contributions to social semiotics that later translated into approaches in multimodality.

A shift from the emphasis on language to other semiotic systems was pioneered by Hodge & Kress in 1998 in *social semiotics* and by Kress & Van (1996, 2006) in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. In these volumes, which have led to the subsequent emergence of multimodality itself, the principles developed about language were applied to different communication modes. With a focus on visual design, they examine the text about power.

Semiotics (semiology) is the study of signs, symbols, and signification (Dole, 1991; Ibrahim & Sulaiman, 2020; Berger, 2014). It explores how humans use and interpret signs and symbols to communicate, to learn, and to develop knowledge.

2. METHODS

In this work, Gunther Kress' social semiotics approach to the analysis of five posts of "Tilapia da Cartoonist" was used. The five posts were selected at random. He is a cartoonist who uses his works to talk about social issues in the country in a satirical way. He uses his platform on 3news to get the masses. He has produced various types of cartoons to highlight some of the concerns in our society. He used his cartoon illustrations to express some of the

country's social and political issues. In the analysis of his posts, I would look at three keys in arriving at the interpretation of the drawings. These are sign, signifier, and signified, as explained in the following:

- (i) Signifier: any material thing that signifies e.g. words on a page, a facial expression, an image, or color.
- (ii) Signified: the concept that a signifier refers to e.g. the color red may signify danger in a certain environment or cultural context.
- (iii) Sign: the smallest unit of meaning. Anything that can be used to communicate. The signifier and signified make up the sign.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 shows the analysis of the figure from Tilapia da Cartoonist:

- (i) Signifier: The facial expression of President Nana Addo, the image portrayed in the form of King Pharaoh, the attire of Professor Martey, and his image portrayed as Moses, the phone in his hand, and the font of the writing.
- (ii) Signified: The president portrayed as king signified dictatorship and the facial expression shows he is arrogant with the book under his feet as a person who has no respect for the rule of law. The size of the pillars tells us that the clergy in the picture is a leader of a big congregation.

According to Gunther Kress, history is a key component in making an analysis and interpretation of a text. The President and the Rev. Professor Martey portrayed as King Pharaoh and Moses respectively alluded to biblical history. King Pharaoh is known as being wicked with a hardened heart and had no regard for anyone not even God. Moses is regarded as a man of God with a message from God to Pharaoh but Pharaoh would not listen.

These signs give us the hint that our president though in a democratic country is ruling as a dictator. A book which is the constitution by which the country must be ruled is under his feet. In other words, he has no respect for the rule of law. The snake in this context is a symbol of corruption and deception and its proximity is near to the image of the president. What this tells us is that there is a high level of corruption in the seat of government. The fang of the snake shows vindictiveness; therefore, anyone who talks against him will be victimized and consequently, the culture of silence is being imposed. That also means there is an abuse of power and human rights.

Previously, Professor Martey publicly criticized the previous government administration but now has resorted to mobile phone texting. Due to the culture of silence or fear of being victimized, he cannot publicly talk about the new administration. Having access to the president's contact means he is an ally to the president. But as Pharaoh will not listen to Moses President Nana Addo is not listening to him. The font size of the text on the drawing is in lowercase letters also affirming the man of God is afraid to criticize the president as he used to do to the previous government boldly.

Figure 2 shows the analysis of the figure from Tilapia da Cartoonist:

- (i) Signifier: Cow, the skeletal images of ECG and GWWCL, the bucket under the cow, and the green grass around.
- (ii) Signified: Cow is a beast that stands for a workforce and the workforce of a country is the people in the country. The ECG and the GWWCL images signified high utility bills. The green grasses around show an abundance of resources that the people of the country are not benefiting from.

The cow which signified the people of the country in bodily appearance has grown lean. This talks about the state of the people in the country. The people are suffering and are

burdened with killer utility bills. The percentage increments of the bills are abnormal. After having to deal with all this hardship with the hope that the government led by President Nana Addo will give them relief rather is imposing additional levies on the citizens. In the portrayal of the cow, it is mute which signifies that in all this hardship the citizens are going through they cannot complain because there is a culture of silence in the country. Freedom of speech is being curtailed.



Figure 1. Tilapia da Cartoonist.



Figure 2. Tilapia da Cartoonist.

Figure 3 shows the analysis of the figure from Tilapia da Cartoonist:

- (i) Signifier: The wheelbarrow with SWAT inscription and masked people sitting in it, the president, Mr. Short, and the whip he is handing to the president.
- (ii) Signified: The wheelbarrow with the inscription signified SWAT unit vehicle, the people with the masks on are unknown people, and the president in the same uniform as the masked people reveals his relation with them. Mr. Short giving a whip to the president signifies punishing the wrongdoers or demanding justice and fairness.

The wheelbarrow with the inscription SWAT signified the vehicle used by the special unit force of the police called SWAT. The people in this vehicle have masked up and cannot be recognized and this is not a true identity of the SWAT. It shows that these people are invisible forces disguised as police officers and then operating in police vehicles. The background of this story is about what happened in the Ayawaso West parliamentary re-election after the death of the incumbent member. These invisible forces engaged in unlawful, indiscriminate shooting and vandalism. The president being in the same color of the shirt as them confirms that they are the people of the president and were sent by the president." Birds of a feather flock together". The whip Mr. Short in the picture could be seen giving to the president signifies the recommendation or report of the commission set up by the president to investigate what went on during the Ayawaso West election. The president's hands are stretched backward towards the invisible forces instead of stretching his hands to take the whip. This shows that he is in support of what the invisible forces did and he is not ready to apply the recommendations of the report. This is an abuse of power, using state apparatus to engage in unlawful activities.

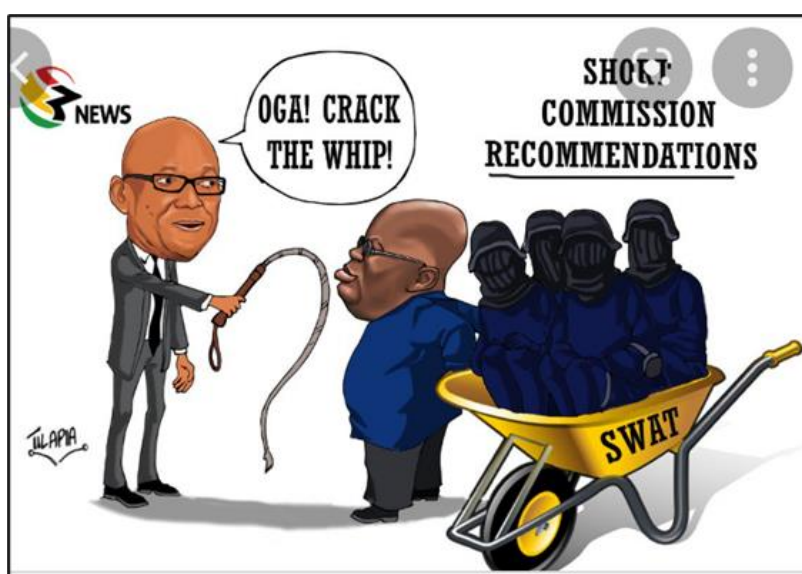


Figure 3. Tilapia da Cartoonist.

Figure 4 shows the analysis of the figure from Tilapia da Cartoonist:

- (i) Signifier: The serpent, fruit-bearing tree, an African woman clothed in the Ghana flag, and the writings in upper case letters.
- (ii) Signified: The serpent in literature or history represents knowledge, good, and evil and this stands for those advocating for the LGBTQ. The tree represents those involved in the act and the fruits are the good things they gained as members.

The background colors; red, yellow, and green show that the setting is in Ghana. The legalization of the LGBTQ in Ghana has generated a lot of arguments and debates. Some people are for it and others are against it. The serpent represented those advocating for it. Such people are highly intellectual in various fields of science and technology. Most of the scientific things and the technologies that have made life easier for us have been made possible by them. The serpent which also stands for deception means the advocators are trying to deceive us using the means of science. A nation is represented by a woman. With this in mind, the woman clothed in the Ghana flag represents Ghana. So those advocating for the LGBTQ are trying to deceive the country with aid for the country to embrace the ideology of the LGBTQ. The facial expression of the woman shows surprise, to them it is unbelievable

so they are asking if what the advocators are saying is natural. This is a positive rhetorical question with a negative assertion. In other words, the people of Ghana are religious and uphold high moral standards. The woman did not stretch her hand to receive the fruit which signifies that Ghanaians are not ready to accept the ideology and legalization of the LGBTQ.

The LGBTQ is in capital letters which means the members are bold, they are people of great minds and are bold to share their ideology and beliefs about it. That is why EMBRACE SCIENCE! Upper case letters with an exclamation mark. The question from Ghanaians "NATURAL LAW"?, shows their strong abhorrence to the LGBTQ ideology.

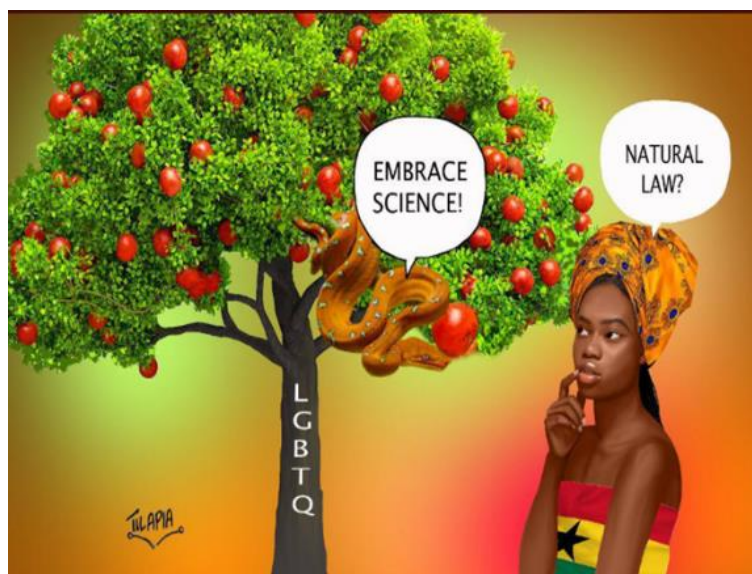


Figure 4. *Tilapia da Cartoonist.*

Figure 5 shows the analysis of the figure from Tilapia da Cartoonist:

- (i) Signifier: The Ghana Broadcasting Corporation tower, a heap of sand, Ghana flag, a drowning hand up the font size of the letters, and the dark background color.
- (ii) Signified: The GBC tower and the Ghana flag signified Ghana, the hand up shows desperation for help and the heap of sand shows how huge the debt of the country is.

The drowning hand representing the economy of the country shows the economy of Ghana is heading into a ditch. And help is urgently needed either from the International Monitoring Fund (IMF) or from the electronic levy which bill has been massively protested against by the populace and finally rejected in parliament. Why would a person who is drowning try to find out who is coming first to rescue him? This raised a suspicion and there are a lot of reasons to be suspicious. In the picture the person is getting drowned in a heap of sand, it should rather be water. The heap of sand depicts deception. The Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC) stands for the media and the government is using the media to trumpet the economic woes of the country so that we will see the need to accept the e-levy. It is an agenda set to throw dust into our eyes. The drowning hand is asking who is coming first to rescue him and it is unheard of. The IMF is called to threaten or scare Ghanaians to accept the e-levy because of the bitter experience the citizens went through when the then government went to solicit help from them. The dark background color buttresses the point of deception where there is a lack of transparency in the dealings of the government. Just as we can recall the government could not account for the COVID-19 funds received from individuals and other donor groups and nations.



Figure 5. *Tilapia da Cartoonist.*

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis of the cartoons by Tilapia da Cartoonist revealed a critical commentary on the current political and social climate in Ghana. The imagery and symbolism employed in each cartoon offered a deep critique of governance, societal norms, and public perception. President Nana Addo is portrayed as a dictator with little regard for the rule of law, reflecting widespread concerns about corruption, abuse of power, and the suppression of free speech. The cartoons also highlight the economic struggles of the citizens burdened by high utility bills and an ineffective government response. Additionally, the depictions of debates surrounding LGBTQ rights and economic policies such as the e-levy underscore the cultural and ideological conflicts within the country. Through these vivid illustrations, Tilapia da Cartoonist presents a powerful narrative on the state of democracy, social justice, and economic fairness in Ghana, calling into question the leadership's commitment to its people and principles.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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