POETRY AS SOCIAL SIGNIFICATION IN IME IKIDDEH'S *THE VULTURE'S FUNERAL AND REINCARNATION*

By

Eyoh Etim
Department of English
Akwa Ibom State University
eyohetim29@gmail.com
+2348027898705

Abstract

In this paper, I read selected poems in Ime Ikiddeh's *The Vulture's Funeral and Reincarnation* as social signifiers based on the theoretical constructs drawn from Cultural Semiotics. As social signifiers, the poems studied are signs whose referents reflect the socio-political and cultural ethos of its milieu, and form a good part of the Akwa Ibom and Nigerian signification system. Ikiddeh's poetics has profited from the rich oral tradition of Akwa Ibom cultural space which are deployed to make important statements on the realities of the society from which the poems emanate. Ikiddeh's poems are unique in the sense that they are folktales rendered in verse forms, thus giving the poems their allegorical texture and signifying orders. This way, Ikiddeh's arts are read beyond their surface meaning of birds and their aerial cultural values to take into accounts the recent human experiences in the poet's political and socio-cultural spaces. His poems reflect a rich array of cultural mnemonics which represent the lived experiences of modern Akwa Ibom peoples in the Nigerian political space, and can be read as at once a personal and collective response to all the moments that sum up the existential dynamics of contemporary society.

How to cite this paper:

Etim, E. (2025). "Poetry as Social Signification in Ime Ikiddeh's *The Vulture's Funeral and Reincarnation*".*Planeyo Journal of Arts and Humanities (PLANJAH).* Volume 2, Number 3, 92-108.

Introduction

Has it ever occurred to you that meaning is what makes life and arts enjoyable? Without the ability of human beings to decipher meaning in any event or situation, it would be difficult for them to appreciate the import or significance of the event. Meaning lurks in all of life's circumstances, including arts and literature. There are many ways, methods and theories deployed by critics of arts and literature in accounting for meaning in art objects. In recent times, I have been fascinated by some of the linguistic theories of literature, especially given the increasing propensity of critics in our time to advocate the combination of literature and language-based theories in the interpretation of texts in order to make up for the perceived deficiencies in content-only and form-only approaches to literary criticism. For instance, in my 2023 paper entitled, 'The Poetics of Rivers and the Intertextual Practices in Joe Ushie's 'Bekwang River' and Gabriel Okara's 'The Call of the River Nun', I coined the term 'postcolonial formalism' to account for how content (postcolonialism) and form (formalism) can at once be appreciated in the selected poems of Ushie and Osundare (E. Etim, 2023, pp. 83-95). However, among the linguistic theories that allow for a more robust interpretation of content and form in literature is cultural semiotics, which is deployed as the theoretical framework for this study.

Semiotics is among the most recent linguistic theories that can be deployed in the interpretation of literature and other cultural objects. The word semiotics has a Greek root, semeiotikos, which means 'an interpreter of signs' (Paul Cobley and Litza Jansz, 1999, p.4). This means that semiotics, often described as the science of signs, is a theory that is interested in the study of signs and how they function in the art of meaning realisation. A sign, within the context of language and semiotics, can be defined as a word, an object or an element that realises its semantic significance in another word, object or element. According to Bengu Batu, 'a sign can be a word. . . a work of art, a text or a collection of different rules that govern societal life' (Batu, 2012, p. 465). Going by this definition, I propose to analyse the poems selected from Ikiddeh's *The Vulture's Funeral* as signs that point to the sociocultural denotations and connotations of the Akwa Ibom milieu.

Cultural semiotics has its parental sheltering in semiotics; hence it is important to, first of all, expound on semiotics before we discuss the tenets of cultural semiotics. Semiotics is usually construed as a modernist/postmodernist theoretical tool which began with proponents such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, Roland Barthes, Algirdas Julien Greimas and Umberto Eco, among others. However, it should be noted that semiotics has its roots traced back to ancient times with Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and the Epicureans, St Augustine and John Locke, among others. These proto-semioticians laid the foundation for the field by philosophising on the ontology of signs. For instance, the classical sign scholars argued over the existence of natural and conventional signs, giving rise to the perennial debate between the naturalists and the conventionalist, with the

naturalists believing that the referents for signs were natural while the conventionalists believed that the relationship between signs and their referents was arbitrary, based on the agreement of the members of a speech community (David Eka, 2008, p.13). Another aspect of pre-Saussurean semiotics was practised by Hippocrates and his contemporaries in the field of medicine. For them, the symptoms in their patients were seen as signs because they stood for certain ailments (Marcel Danes and Paul Peron, 1999, p.5).

The Medieval study of signs was based on hermeneutics as practised by Clement of Alexandria, Peter Abelard, Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus and William of Ockam, among others. Among the proto-semiotic views that existed in the medieval period included scholasticism and nominalism. In scholasticism, the signs deployed in the representation of religious beliefs were seen to be independent, while nominalists inferred that signs were not the direct referents of the beliefs they were used to represent. For Thomas Aquinas, signs functioned to aid reasoning concerning scientific and philosophical truths. As far as William of Ockam was concerned, signs were used to infer other signs based on the Platonic model of ideal forms.

Among the Renaissance and post-Renaissance scholars and philosophers interested in the study of signs were Nicolaus Copernicus, Francis Bacon, Galilei Galileo, Thomas Hobbes, Rene Descartes, Benedict Spinoza, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and David Hume, John Locke, Giambattista Vico, Immanuel Kant and George Berkeley. During the Renaissance, signs functioned in the analysis of iconography and in the interpretation of symbols in literature and the arts. Renaissance philosophers laid the foundation for the mental and abstract conceptualisation of signs in the semiotic studies of the modern period.

The modern sign scholars are Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, Charles Morris, Roman Jakobson, Vladimir Propp, Louis Hjelmslev, Tahsin Yucel, Roland Barthes, A. J. Greimas, Thomas Sebeok and Umberto Eco, among others. Saussure construed semiotics as semiology based on the theoretical outcomes of his synchronic study of language. Thus, the first modern theorisation of signs came with Saussure's structuralism which perceives language as a code that embodies a system structured in the form of signifiers and signifieds (Charles Bressler, 1994). For Saussure, the sign is a dyad of signifier-signified relations, where the signifier stands for the verbal image and the signified refers to the mental concept linked to the verbal image. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is at once arbitrary and based on difference, which are the bases upon which meaning is realised. It should be noted that modern semiotics rests on the structuralist foundation laid by Saussure and that semiotics remains basically a structuralist science.

Unlike Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce has a triad construction or conceptualisation of

sign, which is made up of representamen, object and interpretant. The representamen is the sign itself, the object is the referent, while the interpretant is the mind sign (Cobley and Jansz, 1999, p.22). Specifically, the representamen as a sign is something that stands for another thing often referred to as the form of the sign and as the physical manifestation of the sign. The representamen can be a word, an image, a text, a physical object or even an abstract concept. In this study, the selected poems of Ikiddeh are depicted as representamen that contains cultural signifiers. The object is what the representamen stands for. It can be a thing, an event or a concept that the representamen points to. The interpretant is a meaning field in the triad and is construed as what happens in the mind after one has encountered the sign. Peirce typifies the object into immediate object and dynamic object. Immediate object is the object as it is represented by the sign, while the dynamic object is seen to be independent of the sign and refers to the actual concept or thing that the sign refers to. It is the object as it really is, often referred to as the ultimate referent. It can be safely asserted that the immediate object is the sign in denotation, while the dynamic object is the sign in connotation (Cobley and Jansz, 1999, p.24).

In Peirce's semiotics, the interpretant also has three types which are immediate interpretant, dynamic interpretant and final interpretant. Immediate interpretant is seen in the correct interpretation of the sign, the dynamic interpretant is the direct result of the sign, while the final interpretant is the result of a sign which functions fully in every instance of its use. In other words, the immediate interpretant denotes the initial meaning of the sign in the mind of the subject. The dynamic interpretant refers to the concrete or actual perception of the sign in the mind of the subject, while the final interpretant is the ideal effect that the sign has in the mind of the individual encountering it.

It should be noted that Peirce's semiotics is anchored on pragmatics and shares with Saussure's conception of semantics as a coded access to meaning. In addition, Peirce codes into his semiotic's in-built system the idea of phenomenon which he categorises as Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness, and which are understood as fundamental categories which describe the relationship among sign, object and interpretant. Firstness is the sign seen in terms of its feeling and possibility. It is the inherent potential of the sign. Secondness describes the relationship that exists between the sign and its object, often acted out in the realm of facts; while Thirdness operates in the realm of general laws and constitutes the mental elements which connect Firstness and Secondness. Thirdness is marked by mediation and interpretation.

It should also be noted that the triad of Sign/Representamen, Object and Interpretant has three formal aspects of Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness, respectively. For the Sign/Representamen level, which is Firstness, there are corresponding Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness called Qualisign, Sinsign and Legisign, respectively. For the

Object which is Secondness, there are corresponding Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness named Icon, Index and Symbol, respectively. For the Interpretant which is Thirdness, there are corresponding Firstness, Secondness and Thirdness known as Rheme, Dicent and Argument.

The Qualisign designates a quality in the Representamen, the Sinsign designates an existing physical entity in the Representamen, while the Legisign represents a rule or law in the Representamen. The Icon refers to the semblance relationship between the sign and its object, the Index designates the causation principle that links the sign to its object, while the symbol is the sign that relates to its object based on convention. The Rheme stands for possibility, like a concept at the level of the Interpretant. The Dicent is the sign that designates a fact often found in declarative expressions, while Argument stands for the reason in the sign. In the course of the study, aspects of each of the framework discussed will be explained and applied to the selected poems where necessary and linked to their cultural implications in the art object.

Built on the principles of Saussure's structuralism, Roland Barthes' semiotics centres around the operationality of signs in the popular culture, paying particular attention to the analysis of advertisement texts and symbols. For Barthes, signs have dual qualities designated as denotative and connotative, with meaning steeped in societal ideologies and cultural values. Barthes segregated ads into three messages which are the linguistic message, the coded iconic message and the non-coded iconic message. The linguistic message refers to the words in the art object or advert which can be understood both denotatively and connotatively. The linguistic message can form the anchorage for the image in the arts/ads, where anchorage refers to the text that attempts to guide the viewer's understanding of the arts/ads. The coded iconic message refers to symbolic or connotative meaning of the visual object in the sign system of the art being studied. It is important to note that at this level, connotative meaning is made possible through the agency of the viewer or reader; and in Barthes' semiotics, to read is to decode ideological and cultural signs. The non-coded iconic message refers to the decontextualised semantic understanding of the image(s) in the art/ad being studied (Cobley and Jansz, 1999, p.50). In Barthes' signs map, there are six categories of signification which are the signifier, signified, denotative sign, connotative signifier, connotative signified and connotative sign.

Algirdas Julien Greimas' semiotics is at once interesting and complicated, as it attempts to analyse all forms of discourses, based on the assumption that language embodies structures of signification anchored on the agency of the speaker. Among the concepts necessary for the understanding of Greimas' semiotics are seme, the minimal meaning unit; contextual seme, also known as classeme or anaphora, which links utterances and paragraphs. Greimas views meaning as a process of signification often situated within a given discourse.

Greimas proposes the Actantial Model of Discourse, thus replacing the notion of subject with actants, where the subject or actant and *actantiality* denote the act of discourse. The actantial model has six roles namely subject, object, helper, opponent, sender and receiver (Eero Tarasti, 2017, pp. 33-53).

Subject and object operate in the axis of desire, where the main actor, subject, desires the object which can be a person, a concept or any form of achievement. Junction is a term used to describe the relation that exists between the subject and the object in relation to the desired outcomes. There are two possible outcomes; conjunction and disjunction. Conjunction occurs based on positive desire, while a disjunction occurs based on negative desire outcomes. Helper and opponent operate in the axis of power, whereby the helper assists in achieving the subject's desire while the opponent resists it. At the axis of transmission operate sender and receiver, whereby the sender initiates the action to achieve the desired object, while the receiver is the beneficiary of the action's outcome (Tarasti, 2017, pp. 33-53).

Greimas fashioned the semiotic square as part of his narrative schema which can be deployed in the mapping of a discourse. The semiotic square works by designating the oppositional logic in a narrative at all levels of discourses. The operation of the square is based on the binarisation of semes or semantic terms from their basic or primary level to the most complex and ideological or ontological levels. According to Greimas, to present a seme for a discussion is to imply its opposite or contrary element. For instance, the mention of Good invokes Evil which can be symbolically represented as S_1 and S_2, hence Good (S_1) and Evil (S_2). The contrary pair for each of the semes, as fashioned by Greimas, are Not Good and Not Evil and are symbolically rendered as ($-S_1$) and ($-S_2$). According to Dino Felluga (2002), the semiotic square functions to aid in the conceptualisation of narratives as well as creating ideologies from discourses (online).

Other important terms linked to Greimas' semiotics are isotopy and modalities. According to Tarasti (2017), 'isotopy is a deep level of meaning inherent in any text, based empirically on contextual semes and their recurrence, but cognitively, as a mental category, making even the most fragmentary text coherent. . .' (p.40). Isotopy accounts for the repetition of words associated with a text in a discourse in order to highlight coherence and help in the interpretation of the text. Tarasti (2017) defines modalities as 'the ways whereby the speaker animates his/her speech according to his/her wishes, hopes, certainties, uncertainties, abilities. . .' (p.44).

Having so far dwelled on the major semiotic practices and theories from Saussure to Greimas in order to provide quality background theoretical context for the study, I would now zero in on the core theoretical framework of the research, which is cultural semiotics.

Cultural semiotics is a branch of semiotics which studies culture as a symbol and as a semiotic system. Proposed by Max Weber, Clifford Geertz, Stuart Hall, Yuri Lotman and Moscow-Tartu, among others, cultural semiotics 'draws on semiotic viewpoints and methods to analyse all kinds of physical, mental and behavioural phenomena, including popular culture, arts, architecture, cinema, television, musicology, advertising and visual media' (Jun He and Jinshun Long, 2021, p.1269). This means that in cultural semiotics any object or action that has meaning for a person or group in a given culture is construed as a cultural symbol and examined systematically in order to get at its semantic value within the existing cultural frameworks. This is based on the understanding that the various cultures navigate their understanding of the world through symbols, whereby a symbol can be defined in its broadest sense as 'anything which signifies something else' (M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham, 2005, p.393). It should, however, be noted that in cultural semiotics, all symbols are perceived as cultural signifiers. This explains why, in our study of Ikiddeh's *The Vulture's Funeral and Reincarnation*, the poems are analysed as signifiers of Akwa Ibom and Nigerian cultural signification system in relation to the larger cultural dynamics of postcolonial Africa.

For Danes and Perron (1999), 'cultural semiotics is an applied interdisciplinary science that enlists the tools in theoretical semiotics in the investigation of cultural forms of expressions, as well as drawing insights from cognate fields such as psychoanalysis, psychology, anthropology, archeology, linguistics and neuroscience' (p. 20). The interdisciplinary nature of semiotics is what makes the field at once challenging and interesting, as the critic grapples with the interpretation of cultural signifiers across a wide range of subjects and competing frames of signification. It should be noted that a cultural semiotic reading of an art object takes off with the semiotic process and goes on to study the cultural process in relation to the structured universe of meaning in the work. The cultural semiotic reading of a work operates at two levels; the level of denotation and connotation, which are then deployed to account for the relations between signifier and signified in the work. It should also be noted that symbols are analysed in relation to their denotational and connotational meanings. Even signifieds are understood to exist at both the denotative and connotative levels. Hence, there are three levels of signification. The first level signals denotation which consists of the symbol being made up of signifier and signified. Connotation is the second level of signification which deploys signifier and signified as denotative symbols in its interpretation of a work of arts. The third level of signification generates ideology through the combination of the first two levels. The ideology discoursed in cultural semiotics operates at the level of myth, which has deep cultural significance.

Among the key concepts in cultural semiotics are the semiosphere, second-order mode, cultural text and group memory. The term semiosphere was coined by Yuri Lotman and denotes the semiotic ecosystem and the cultural semiotic continuum (He and Long, 2021,

p.1270), a semantic space for a comprehensive understanding of a text in relation to human culture. The semiosphere is complex in structure and interdisciplinary in nature, with multiple layers of meanings defined by their own levels of signification, semiotic continuum and patterns. The second-order mode of signification signals the level of semiotic analysis beyond the literal meaning, as it accounts for the implied and connotative meaning of cultural signs interpreted based on suitable cultural and social contexts. In this paper, Ikiddeh's *The Vulture's Funeral and Reincarnation* are interpreted as cultural texts since they convey meaning and valuable information about their milieu and detain the group memory of Akwa Ibom people in postcolonial Nigeria.

In the next section of the paper, I attempt a cultural semiotic analysis of the primary data sources selected for the study. Specifically, I deploy tools and concepts drawn from semiotics earlier accounted for in the study to carry out a discursive analysis of cultural signifiers contained in the selected poems found in Ikiddeh's *The Vulture's Funeral and Reincarnation*.

A Cultural Semiotic Analysis of Ikiddeh's *The Vulture's Funeral and Reincarnation*
Semiotics provides us with the multidisciplinary interpretive tools to make meaning out of myriads of varied discourses and situations. Semiotics also creates what can be called a socio-text whereby society itself can be studied as a site of meanings. For instance, Obododimma Oha (2000, pp.33-47) deploys semiotic principles to discourse city monuments as signs that are packed with meaning at the level of culture and politics. In this paper, Ikiddeh's *The Vulture's Funeral and Reincarnation* is read from the perspectives of cultural semiotics. We assume then that the poems selected for study are cultural sites whose signification system can unravel the ethnographic dynamics of Akwa Ibom people and their culture in relation to the other cultural forces in modern Nigeria and Africa. Tonia Umoren (2003, pp.119-128) describes Ikiddeh's *The Vulture's Funeral and Reincarnation* as an allegorical work that captures the cultural ethos of the Ibibio through folktales rendered in the form of poetry which speaks not only to the rich oral tradition of the Ibibio, but also interrogates the modern Nigerian political history, especially poor leadership and dictatorship.

In our cultural semiotic reading of the poems in Ikiddeh's *The Vulture's Funeral and Reincarnation*, we deploy the tools in semiotics as reviewed in the introductory section of the paper to present a discursive reading of the poems as cultural signifiers. Structurally, Ikiddeh's *The Vulture's Funeral and Reincarnation* is organised in two parts. The first part is entitled The Vulture's Funeral, while the second part is tagged The Vulture's Reincarnation. The surface structure of the narrative in *The Vulture's Funeral* is the gathering of the bird society for the funeral of a matriarch, the vulture's mother, who passed away recently. From this gathering, it is seen that the bird kind lives in a highly structured and cultured space, as

can be seen in the orderliness and principles (legisign) that guide the funeral ceremonies. The deep structure of the story told in *The Vulture's Funeral* arising from allegorical principles is that it mirrors the human society. This is where the semiotic interpretation of the collection takes off. It is then seen that Ikiddeh's story is steeped in the Ibibio orature and folklore, and exemplifies how oral literature functions as raw materials for the Akwa Ibom modern literature. It is the deployment of these oral materials in our written stories that define the authenticity of Akwa Ibom indigenous literature.

The first part of Ikiddeh's *The Vulture's Funeral* has the following poems: 'Arrivals', 'Beginnings', 'Ballads of the Birds', 'Preparation for Reception', 'Fruits of the Forest', 'Congress', 'The Botched Libation', 'Battle of the Bat', 'Cry of the Crow', 'Egret and Woodpecker', 'Hen and Hawk', 'A Message Stopped Short', 'Raid', 'The Falcon', 'The Eagle', 'The Dove', 'Tale of the Vulture', 'Rain', 'The Bird's Lament', 'Feud and Fury' and 'Epilogue'. The second part of the collection, The Vulture's Reincarnation, has the following poems: 'Prologue', 'The Reincarnation', 'The Emergency Congress', 'The Proclamation', 'Lament of the Night Jar', 'The Splutter of the Croaker', 'Woman', 'Man', 'The Cockerel Creed', 'The Crunch', and 'Epilogue'.

The narrative limned in Ikiddeh's The *Vulture's Funeral and Reincarnation* is that the bird society has gathered at the instance of the demise of the matriarch of the vultures. The occasion reveals that the birds live in a highly organised and functional society, though plagued by its own existential challenges. The burial event coincides with the congress of the birds, an occasion that affords the birds the opportunity to listen to and address the concerns of members, settle disputes, revise and formalise rules, where necessary, for members to live by, in order to sustain a harmonious society. It is seen that identity issues mostly are what bring about grievances, segregation and oppression among the birds, apart from the perennial issue of some birds preying on other birds arising from self-preservation or *bird nature*. The congress goes on smoothly until a group of vultures invade the venue and unleash terror on the birds, resulting in brutality, cruelty, killing and maiming of some of the birds, especially those perceived to have resisted the invaders. It would take the force of nature through the instrumentality of the storm that comes with rain to intervene in the tragic situation and save the bird kind from the already disgruntled invaders who prey on themselves after devouring the carcass of the vulture's mother.

In the second part of the collection, the post-destruction world of the birds is characterised by a long lull until a great event takes place; which is the reincarnation of the murdered leader of the vultures as a hybrid, Vultrich, a being whose biological constitution is a combination of the features of a vulture and an ostrich. However, the dominant image of the reincarnated being is that of an ostrich. The process of reincarnation is dramatic as the ostrich literally emerges from the earth to become the leader of the birds, who, until that

moment, lacks leadership following the unruly vultures' attack at the congress. The reincarnated Vultrich, having informed the birds of the divine source of his leadership, leads them to the beach where a meeting is held in order to form a government and announce new alliances with the fish kind. The first sign that all is not well with the new government is seen in the notorious character of those appointed by Vultrich to serve in the dispensation. Vultrich also decrees that birds should not fly above a certain height. He equally presents a proposal on the alliance between birds and fish in order to secure their future and security against the predatory activities of human beings. The birds voice their disapproval on the new flying limits, as well as the proposed alliance with the fish folk. It is soon realised that the flying height ceiling is ordered for selfish reasons since Vultrich lacks the ability to fly like the other birds. Hence, he needs an excuse to be able to control the birds. The representatives of the fish community at the meeting are also doubtful of the workability of the proposed alliance.

Human beings, represented by Man and Woman, are gripped by fear following the proposed alliance between the fish and the birds. However, before the alliance is sealed, the meeting is suddenly disrupted by protests among the birds. This causes confusion and a stampede that scatters the whole gathering. The fish flee into the sea and the birds fly away in the confusion that ensues, thus bringing the gathering and the proposed alliance to a disharmonious end. Human beings, seeing the birds flying towards them, run to hide in their houses, fearing that the birds have come to attack them. Some of the birds fly into an aircraft and its engines, causing serious discomfort to the passengers.

A cultural semiotic critique of the narrative begins when we appreciate its allegorical texture. In Saussure's semiological viewpoint, the story is a signifier that points us to a deeper story, which is its signified. This way, the birds are the signifiers and they represent human beings who constitute the signified in the narrative. In Peirce's semiotics, the birds are the representamen and their objects are human beings. In Barthes' semiotics, the story at the level of the birds can be read denotatively, while the connotative level of the reading applies if we substitute birds for human beings. At that point, the story graduates from merely talking about birds to discoursing important issues in human society. In all this, a key element that holds the deep structure narrative together is anthropomorphism, which is a trope that assigns human characteristics to non-human entities. A good instance of anthropomorphism in the collection is the assignation of human pronominals to animal characters, seen in the following excerpt culled from 'Arrivals': 'No surprise, Kite arrived late/muttering **he** just had to pick up/ a small fowl for a snack. . .' (emphasis mine) (Ikiddeh 2005, p.3). Another device through which human culture is built into the narrative structure of the collection is through the capitalisation of the initial letters of animal names, thus making them proper nouns. For instance, in the excerpt above, Kite is elevated to the status of proper noun through the capitalisation of the initial letter K.

Analysed based on Greimas' actantial model of discourse, the subject of the discourse is the burial of vulture's mother. The occasion itself is at the instance of the vulture, who is now an orphan, having lost his father some months earlier. Hence, the vulture can be seen as the human subject of the discourse who desires his mother to be buried. The object of the discourse is the body of the matriarch meant to be buried. This is because the desire of the vulture's son gravitates towards having the mother interred in a dignified manner. The vulture's son also doubles as sender in the story because he is the requesting agent in the funeral ceremony. All the animals who gather at the event to pay their last respects to the matriarch can be described as helpers, especially those birds who have made one contribution or the other to make the event a success. The receiver in the story is supposed to be the dead matriarch, but she is not a positive receiver owing to the disjunction in the burial's axis of desire. The opponent in the discourse is constituted by the invading vultures who disrupt the burial ceremony, including all the activities carried out by them and other birds that impede the success of the event.

The actantial model of discourse equally applies to the second part of the story, where the subject of the discourse is the birds' desire for good leadership after the violence that ended the last congress. The object of the discourse is the forming of a new governmental order and a new alliance with the fish folk. The discourse map of this particular story is plagued by ironies and contradictions because Vultrich who poses as the helper is soon revealed to be the opponent in the sense that he does not really desire the freedom of the birds. The receiver in the discourse is made up of the birds and the fish who would have benefitted from the new government and the proposed alliances. However, the receivership paradigm in the discourse is plagued by disjunction, as the meeting is suddenly disrupted, apart from the insincerity of the sender(s). The opponent in the story is made up of the birds and fish who protest the new order proposed by Vultrich, as well as the disruption of the event.

The discourse detained in Ikiddeh's *The Vulture's Funeral and Reincarnation* can also be interpreted based on Greimas semiotic square, which is predicated on the binarisation of discourses. I would like to deploy the semiotic square schema to discourse the identity issues in the work. The major identity issue raised in the poems is the segregation between the birds and human beings, whereby some of the birds see themselves as not only different from human beings, but also opposed to human beings. Another level of identity issue in the work is seen in the segregation among the birds themselves, whereby some of the birds are discriminated against in what might be termed the racism among birds. Going by this story, we can design a semiotic square schema thus:

Birds (S_1)   Humans (S_2)
Not birds (-S_1)   Not Humans (-S_2)

The above schema is a highly structured discourse on the binarised issues in Ikiddeh's *The Vulture's Funeral and Reincarnation*. In the work, the birds present themselves as at once different and opposed to human beings and their principles. The birds then constitute the Self while human beings constitute the 'Other'. Human beings are represented as predatory race that preys on the birds. For instance, in the poem entitled 'Preparation for Reception', the narrator states: '. . . far from the prowls of lions/and the lesser beasts of terror, /far from the haunts of hunters/belonging to that haughty race/of two-legged mammals/who dress and carry themselves as/some super homo sapiens' (Ikiddeh, 2005, p.9). Throughout the semiosphere of *The Vulture's Funeral and Reincarnation*, the birds pride themselves as aerial beings blessed with wings to soar above the clouds compared to human beings who walk on land. They see themselves as better civilised than human beings whom they describe as barbaric and oppressive because they antagonise birds. The irony here is that the idea of civilisation is perspectival, as human beings do consider themselves to be civilised compared to animals. However, when perceived from the perspective that the birds signify human beings, the ideological outcome is that it amounts to self-criticism also noted in works like George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, in which human civilisation is called to question through the depiction of creatures other than human beings with which they are compared to.

The human characters in the story are Man and Woman, and it is through them that we glean the human perspectives. This means that the dominant perspective throughout the discourse is that of the birds. Woman observes the sudden absence of the birds in the environment, implying that though human beings perceive the birds as lower creatures, they are actually part of their ecosystem. Through the device of rhetorical question, Woman wonders at the sudden disappearance of the birds, thus: 'Where have all the birds gone/that in coteries of fancy dress/spread variety on the greenness of trees/Where have all the birds gone/whose hearty exchange of greetings/keeps the air all day alive with song?' (Ikiddeh, 2005, p.101). From the poem, it is seen that human beings have an ambivalent view of the birds. Their songs beautify or decorate the human world, but at the same time, the birds can also be a nuisance in the environment because they can destroy the crops which is an indirect attack on human beings. Yet it does not appear as if the birds realise the havoc they are capable of wreaking on human beings; they simply pass it off as survival acts. For instance, when the birds fly into the aircraft towards the end of the collection, they do so as a way of escaping the carnage at the meeting with Vultrich, without knowing that the human beings perceive their actions as an attack.

The schema Not birds ($-S_1$) presents a discourse on the segregation among the birds. It is seen in the text that some birds are discriminated against by other birds because they lack certain features to qualify them to join birdhood. Apart from this, there is the theme of bird cannibalism, whereby some birds prey on other birds. This act can be described as un-birdly

or *in-bird* [as per inhuman] acts. These are among the important issues raised at the congress in the first part of the text when the birds gather for the funeral rites of the vulture. For instance, in a poem entitled 'The Battle of the Bat', the narrator reports how the bat appeals to the congress to reconsider admitting his identity as a bird. The narrator calls it 'a sad case of mixed identity' because the bat is 'rejected in the animal kingdom' and so he now 'insisted he was a bird' (Ikiddeh 2005, p.20). The congress has a set of criteria to determine birdhood, as can be seen in the following lines: 'Did he have a spinal column/like all birds, from the skull,/and could he wag a tail;/could he show his feathers/and the barbules of his wings;/produce evidence to prove/that his wife had her children/all by the laying of eggs?' (Ikiddeh, 2005, p.20). The excerpt, though characterised by humour, speaks to the theme of discrimination which, when applied to Peirce's intepretant, also signifies discrimination among human beings, especially racism which is based on the difference in skin pigmentation. The criteria to determine birdhood operates as a legisign in the world of the birds. In the end, the bat is denied birdhood because he does not pass the birdhood test and other criteria set by the birds.

Another dimension of the Not birds ($-S_1$) semiospheric continuum is seen in how some birds oppress and prey on other birds. This takes up a good part of the text as congress devotes quality time to addressing conflicts among the birds. A good example is the dispute between the Egret and the Woodpecker. It is seen that the Egret is not happy that Woodpecker wants to disrupt and destroy the symbiotic (economic) relation he has with the cow and replace it with a parasitic one that only benefits the Woodpecker. The current symbiotic arrangement is one whereby the Egret picks the ticks that gives discomfort to the cows in return for their protection of the Egrets from predators. By way of interpretation, this speaks to the communal balance that existed in precolonial Africa before the destructive environmental habits of man which came with colonialism and its modern culture. The new arrangement involving the Woodpecker, which represents postcolonial culture, is injurious to the cows because of the dangerous beak of the Woodpecker (Ikiddeh, 2005, pp. 22-26). Another form of disjunctional relationship among the birds involves the Hen and the Hawk, which is a predator-prey relationship and captured in the poem 'Hen and Hawk' thus: 'An eternal lack of harmony/lies at the centre of the feud/between the Hen and the Hawk./Hen's complaint is that her species/may disappear from the planet earth/by the predations of the Hawk' (Ikiddeh 2005, p.20). The second-order mode of cultural semiotics helps us to understand that the nature of the Hen-Hawk relationship described above mirrors its counterpart in the human world.

Cannibalism among the bird kind is seen during the 'Raid' when the invading vultures feast on the carcass of its matriarch to the utter disgust of the birds. This is captured in the following words by the invaders: '. . .in our tradition/the greatest honour/we can bestow/on our most deserving mother/is to taste her flesh today' (Ikiddeh 2005, p.35). This action

symbolises the lack of humanity in most people's choices in life, as well as the human tendency to prey on the weaker ones in society. It is then seen that Ikiddeh merely uses animal characters as a poetic cover to interrogate human beings and human society.

The narrative schema Not human ($-S_2$) accounts for how human beings look at the birds and other animals in the text. As earlier hinted, the human characters in the text hold ambivalent attitude towards the birds. While Woman states that the birds do make the environment come alive with their songs, Man sees the birds as a terror to the environment. This is seen in the poem 'Man' where he tells Woman that the 'birds have congregated/at the beach by the seaside/to decide how to spread terror/above, below and everywhere/to make the world uninhabitable/for you and all mankind' (Ikiddeh, 2005, p.102). Man goes on to propose that the birds should be caught at their meeting place and used as meat. This illustrates the idea that human beings consider the birds as 'Other' and this fits into the Not human ($-S_2$) schema in Greimas' semiotic square and its corresponding discourses.

What remains to be done at this point is to carry out a discursive analysis of the second-order mode of the cultural semiotic signifiers in the text as they apply to the extant theoretical models outlined in the paper. The invading vultures depicted in Ikiddeh's *The Vulture's Funeral and Reincarnation* stand for military dictatorship and the usual way they disrupt democratic regimes in Nigeria and Africa. The brutality meted out to the Falcon who speaks out against the invasion of the congress by the ten militant vultures signifies how the dictators usually clamp down on critics and those who speak out against their misrule. Notice how Falcon uses rhetorical questions to try to conscientise the invaders and how the failure of Falcon's words implies that the dictators neither have conscience nor human kindness. The violence meted out to 'Falcon' is captured thus, 'He [Falcon] had not finished when/one of the invaders advanced/with an object shaped like a gun/With it he landed a blow/on Falcon's feathery face/thus inviting stars to his eyes...' (Ikiddeh 2005, p.37).

The Eagle's fate is similar to that of the Falcon when he attempts to challenge the invaders. Here Eagle represents a force of resistance to dictatorship in society, even though he is restrained by the vultures. The Dove represents the peaceful members of society who are not spared the brutality of the oppressors simply because they choose to be peaceful. Despite the fact the Dove obeys the orders of the invaders, he is still punished for doing nothing wrong. The act is captured thus: '... one of the ten creatures of terror/advanced upon the harmless one,/plunged the full fork of his beak/into the Dove's tiny eyes,/and pulling out the sunken eyeballs/one at a time/gobbled them with manifest relish. . .' (Ikiddeh, 2005, p.41). Barthes' assertion that semiotic meanings operate at the level of myth is seen in *The Vulture's Funeral and Reincarnation* through the depiction of Ibibio myth on death and flood (Ikiddeh, 2005, pp.45-46), whereby Vulture and Dog fail in their assignments ordered by the Creator to warn human beings on how to deal with death and flood because they are

easily distracted by carcass and bones, respectively. It is the Dove that is presented as a better messenger, as it is focused on the assigment. The rain that abruptly brings an end to the terror of the invaders signifies the sudden end that usually happen to dictators, as well as the poetic justice that signposts the idea that good always triumphs over evil in literature and in life. The rain can also be read as a signifier of the supernatural intervention in human affairs, as well as a metaphoric Deus ex machina in the work (Ikiddeh 2005, p.50). The Parrot among the bird characters represents orators in the human dimension of the discourse. In all, it can be safely asserted that Ikiddeh's poetics deploys allegorical gestures and tropes to mask a highly valued human discourse which has been extrapolated in our reading through the deployment of the tools of semiotics.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted the cultural semiotic analysis of Ime Ikiddeh's *The Vulture's Funeral and Reincarnation* by deploying tools and concepts from theoretical semiotics to present a discursive reading of the issues raised in the primary text. The analysis reveals that Ikiddeh's work is a rich poetic statement on the postcolonial and postmodern Nigerian and African life seen primarily from the perspectives of birds and drawn from the rich oral tradition and folkloric materials of the Ibibio. It is realised that the entire text is an allegory whose meaning is layered and varied, which explains why the semiotic approach was preferrable for this particular reading enterprise. The text is also rich in anthropomorphism as well as prosopopoeia, through the ascription of human qualities to non-human ones. The levels of signification in the work are discoursed based on the extant theoretical models outlined in the work. The discussion proceeds from the primary levels of signification involving animals and their attributes and graduates into the world of human beings, harvesting and yielding second-order mode meanings that enrich our understanding of the text.

References

Abrams, H. & Harpham, G. (2005). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Cengage Learning.

Batu, B. (20120. 'An Overview of the Field of Semiotics.' *Procedia Social and Behavioural Sciences*. *51*, 464-469.

Bressler, C. (1994). *Literary Criticism: An Introduction*. Third Edition. New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc.

Coby, P. & Jansz, L. (1999). *Introducing Semiotics*. Cambridge: Icon Books.

Danes, M. & Paul, P. (1999). *Analysing Cultures*: *An Introduction*. Third Edition. Project Muse. Indiana University Press. Accessed: 8th May, 2025, at muse.jhu.edu/pub/3/monograph/chapter/3722224.

Eka, D. (2008). *Elements of Grammar and Mechanics of the English Language*. Uyo: Samuf Nigeria Limited.

Etim, E. (2023). 'The Poetics of Rivers and the Intertextual Practices in Joe Ushie's "Bekwang River" and Gabrel Okara's "The Call of the River Nun"'. *Integrity Journal of Arts and Humanities*. *4*(5), 83-95. DOI: 10.31248/IJH2023.084.

Felluga, D. (2003). 'Modules on Greimas: On the Semiotic Square'. *Introductory Guide to Critical Theory*. *Narratology*. Accessed: 8th May, 2025, at cla.purdue.edu.academic/English/Theory/narratology/modules/greimassquare.html/

He, J. & Long, J. (2021). 'Cultural Semiotics and the Related Interpretation.' *Advances in Social Sciences and the Related Interpretation. 5 & 6*, 1268-1272.

Ikiddeh, I. (2005). *The Vulture's Funeral and Reincarnation*. Uyo: Minder International.

Oha, O. (2000). 'Signs, Cities, and Designs of Capacities: The Semiotic of Road Monuments in
Some Nigerian Cities'. *The African Anthropologist. 7* (1), 33-47.

Tarasti, E. (2017). 'The Semiotics of A. J. Greimas: A European Intellectual Heritage Seen from the Inside and the Outside.' *Sign System Studies*. *45* (1/2), 33-53.

Umoren, T. (2003). 'African Oral Tradition and the African Literary Renaissance: Ime Ikiddeh's The Vulture's Funeral'. *A Journal of Research in English and Literature. 4*, 119-128.

This Paper is Published Without Open Access Publication Charges Courtesy the NLNG