

Design Elements of the Omu-Aro: Towards A Semiotic-Hermeneutic Approach

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Abstract

Beyond being a visual aesthetic, the Omu-Aro is a visual language. As a cultural symbol, and a visual element, it communicates profound meaning peculiar to the historical and cultural experiences of the people of Arochukwu. Understanding visual language helps decode and interpret visual messages. The Omu-Aro is understood in the context of this study as a visual language that transcends linguistic barriers, encompassing symbolic meanings, preserving history and traditions, artistry, identity, and community representation. A cursory glance at available literature on the Omu-Aro reveals that there are no scientific studies on this symbol. This work, therefore, fills a gap by engaging in a study of the design elements in the Omu-Aro for a communication of the nuances of the component parts. The study adopts the semiotic doctrine of Charles Sanders Peirce for the interpretation of the Omu-Aro. Through a critical and semiotic analysis of its symbolic motifs, this research reveals the intricate narratives and cultural values embedded in the Omu-Aro.

Keywords: Semiotic, Omu Aro, Arochukwu, Aesthetics, Artistic, Design Elements

Introduction

Semiotics examines the meanings, applications, and roles of signs and sign systems, and how they create meaning. It examines how signs are used in various contexts, including language, culture, and media, to communicate and convey meaning. Semiotics seeks to understand the relationship between signs (signifiers) and their meanings, and how these relationships shape our perception of the world. Some refer to this field as a science, while others view it as an analytical tool or a critical approach. One of its contemporary founders, the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, referred to semiotics as a doctrine, implying a collection of principles (Anderson 1995, Atkin 2004, Burch 2001,

Hookway 198, Houser 1992, Misak 2004). Additionally, it has been termed “semiology” by Ferdinand de Saussure, another key figure in the development of semiotics (Saussure 1922, 1993, 1995). Scholars have tried to introduce new concepts like “significs”, as seen in Victoria Lady Welby, along with “sematology” (Petrilli 1999 and Joseph 2012). The designation “semiotics” was officially adopted by the International Association for Semiotics Studies in 1969 and has since become the primary term used to refer to the discipline.

Semiotics, generally, is a multifaceted field that provides a framework for understanding how meaning is created and interpreted through a wide range of sign systems, from language and visual communication to social practices and cultural beliefs (Saussure 1881& 1916). A semiotic study of the Omu-Aro (a sacred emblem of the Arochukwu people of Nigeria), therefore, would involve identifying and analyzing the signs and symbols within its visual and cultural context. This will be achieved by observing the visual elements, interpreting them within the broader cultural framework, and employing semiotic theories to understand their meaning and function. Omu represents the dignity and royalty of the Aro people; it is the quintessential emblem of honour and prestige. For the younger generations of Aro individuals, Omu-Aro simply denotes the George cloth that features the vibrant embroidery of Omu Arochukwu. Nevertheless, while this cloth is worn, it also serves to unite the Aro people who are dispersed across various settlements throughout the South-Eastern regions of Nigeria and around the globe. Omu-Aro continues to be regarded as the Coat of Arms, seal, crest, and a highly esteemed symbol among Aro communities, regardless of their location. While engaging in a semiotic study of the Omu-Aro, the questions looming on the horizon of this work are: What are the nuances of the different dimensions of the Omu Aro? How do these symbols reflect the peculiar historical, religious, and cultural experiences of the people of Arochukwu?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of studying the visual language of Omu-Aro includes:

1. To explore what the eagle, as a visual language, stands for in the Aro Coat of Arms.
2. To investigate the significance of the crown in the Omu Aro concerning the political organization of the Aro.
3. To understand what the symbols of gun, sword, and shield reflect in Aro's cultural heritage.
4. To explore the cultural value of the knotted palm in the life and history of the people of Arochukwu.

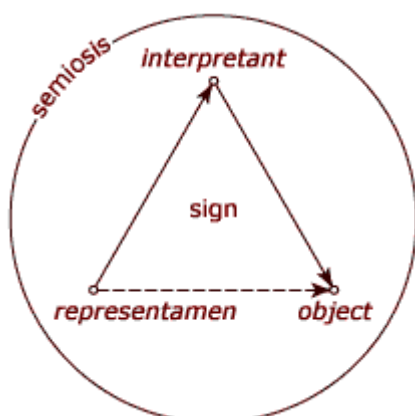
Methodology

Due to its appropriateness, the qualitative research method will be utilized. A multidimensional strategy will be adopted, considering the various aspects of knowledge that echo from the different design elements of the Omu-Aro, including the arts, spirituality, culture, sociology, history, and philosophy. To analyze written materials on this subject and incorporate their critical insights into the current work, the document study or document analysis method will be employed. Consequently, both primary and secondary sources will be referenced throughout this research. The different design elements of the Omu-Aro will be investigated and presented to illustrate the intersections of Igbo spirituality, philosophy, aesthetics, history, etc., concerning Arochukwu cosmology. Omu-Aro is a vital cultural artefact located in Arochukwu, Igbo-land, which will be the primary focus of the study. During the examination of the Aro, questionnaires will be distributed to gather feedback from the local community. These viewpoints will be presented and analyzed alongside other findings (Kanu 2024).

Theoretical Framework

Charles Sanders Peirce, an American logician, developed a framework for interpreting signs and symbols. His thoughts were based on the conviction that there were different types of signs, and that the relation between a sign and its object was not necessarily arbitrary (Hoopes 1991). Peirce argued that a sign consisted of three elements that form a triangle: an object, its representation, and its meaning. For instance, the sound of a dog barking outside of your door (what Peirce called the “referent”) is linked to the actual dog barking outside of the door (the “object”). Still, it is your interpretation (the “interpretant”) that connects the two, thereby completing the triangle and turning the sound into a “sign” for the presence of a dog. In fact, without the interpretant, you might still have a signal, but you wouldn’t have any meaning. This is the semiotic theorist’s answer to the classic philosophical question of whether a tree that falls in the woods makes any noise if there is no one there to witness it. The answer is both yes and no: the fall of the tree produces a signal, which we might call “sound”, but without someone to interpret that signal, it does not become a meaningful entity, or sign (Kress and van 2001; Seiter 1992).

Figure 1: Triangular elements in Peirce's Theory



Source: Dana and Vinu (2003)

For Peirce, what crucially defines a sign is the link in the triangle that is most important in the relationship. This led him to define three different kinds of signs (Hoopes 1991). The first is the icon, which is a sign in which the representation resembles the object strongly enough to be recognizable as the “real thing”. This is the case for drawing, for photos, or a video recording. The important link in the triangle is between the object and its meaning, but the referent is less relevant. Think of some of your past experiences with photo journalism: when you see a news picture of a terrible explosion, your attention goes to the object, on the assumption that you are indeed seeing the real event “as it is” (Barthes 1977; Eco 1979).

The Aro of South-Eastern Nigeria

The South-Eastern part of Nigeria is predominantly Igbo, with five states: Abia, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, and Imo; however, many of the Igbo reside in nearby states like Delta, Rivers, Benue, and Kogi. Over 40 million Igbo people live in the region, which occupies 30,991.1 km² (Kanu, 2023; Nnakamm, 2008). It is a tropical rainforest zone, distinguished by a high density of rainfall, particularly in the southern region (Nwaiwu et al., 2013; Afigbo, 1981). It is to this region that the Aro people belong.

The Aro, also known as the Arochukwu people, played a significant role in the pre-colonial history of southeastern Nigeria, particularly as traders and religious figures, with their influence centred on the “Long Juju” oracle of Arochukwu. They are believed to have originated in the region around present-day Arochukwu in Abia State, Nigeria (Anieche 2024). They formed the Aro Confederacy, a network of Aro agents who acted as intermediaries in trade, diplomacy, and religious matters, connecting various Igbo communities. They were skilled traders and played a key role in facilitating commerce and spreading the worship of the “Long Juju” oracle, or Ibini Ukpabi, which was a central

feature of Aro society, used to settle disputes, punish crimes, and as a supreme court for the kingdom (Afigbo 1992).

During the period of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, the Aro people used the "Long Juju" oracle and their network of agents to their economic and political advantage, establishing trading posts and slaveholding quarters in many towns and villages in the Igbo hinterland (Onwuejeogwu 1981). The power of the Aro Confederacy declined with the rise of European influence, particularly British colonialism, leading to the Anglo-Aro War in 1901-1902. Today, the Aro people are classified as Eastern or Cross River Igbo due to their location, mixed origins, cultures, and dialects (Anieche 2024). There are several Aro settlements in Igboland and beyond.

Table 1: Aro settlements in Anambra State, Nigeria

S/N	State/Country	Number of Settlements	Description of Settlements
1	Anambra State, Nigeria	14	1. Aro Abagana 2. Aro Ajali 3. Aro Azia 4. Aro Ndi - Owu 5. Aro Ndi-Okparaeze - Orumba North 6. Aro Ubuluisiuzo-Ihiala 7. Aro NdiIkerionwu 8. Aro Azia - Ihiala 9. Aro NdeIkokwo -Uli-Ihiala 10. Aro NdiEgungwu -Uli 11. Aro Ndi Oji - Ukpore/Ihembosi 12. Aro Ndiokpalaeke na NdiAguluezechukwu - Aguata 13. Aro Umuezeawara-Ihiala 14. Aro Ozubulu

Source: Kanu 2025

Table 2: Aro settlements in Ebonyi State, Nigeria

S/N	State/Country	Number of Settlements	Description of Settlements
1	Ebonyi State, Nigeria	9	1. Aro Abakaliki na Aro Ezillo 2. Aro Ikwo 3. Aro Nzerem 4. Aro Isu na Aroonichi-Onicha LGA 5. Aro izzi 6. Aro Uburu - Ohazara LGA 7. Aro Onueke- Ezza 8. Aro Okposi 9. Aro Nsukka

Source: Kanu 2025

Table 4: Aro settlements in Abia State, Nigeria

S/N	State/Country	Number of Settlements	Description of Settlements
1	Abia State, Nigeria	28	1. Aro Ama - Asa, - Isialangwa 2. Aro Omoba- Isialangwa 3. Aro Umu Aro - Isialangwa 4. Aro UmuNkpe- Isialangwa 5. Aro OnichaNgwa- Isialangwa 6. Aro Ngwa 7. Aro Ntalakwu- Bende 8. Aro Okporoenyi- Bendel 9. Aro OnichaNgwa 10. Aro Umudike- Ikwuano 11. Aro UmuEru- Isialangwa 12. Aro Isuochi 13. Aro NdeIjere- Ohafia 14. Aro NdiiteenaNde

			Okereke- Abam 15. Aro Mbala-Isuochi 16. Aro Itu-Nta Ibere 17. Aro Achara- Isialangwa 18. Aro AhumaAbam 19. Aro Ajatakairi- Ikwuano 20. Aro Nkaluntana Nde Totty naAroOboro- Ikwuano 21. Aro Ayama- Ikwuano 22. Aro Amuru-Ikwuano 23. Aro Amaokwe 24. Aro Amawom-Ezuala- Isialangwa 25. Aro Effium- Ohaukwu LGA 26. Aro EzialaNsulu- Isiala Ngwa 27. Aro Uzuakoli 28. Aro Nbawsi- Isiala Ngwa
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Source: Kanu 2025

Table 3: Aro settlements in Enugu State, Nigeria

S/N	State/Country	Number of Settlements	Description of Settlements
1	Enugu State, Nigeria	8	1. Aro Achi 2. Aro Udi 3. Aro Amokwe-Udi Enugu 4. Aro Nkalagu 5. Aro Ezeagu 6. Aro Ikpa 7. Aro Nike-Nike 8. Aro Nkerefi- Nkanu East LGA

Source: Kanu 2025

Table 4: Aro settlements in Imo State, Nigeria

S/N	State/Country	Number of Settlements	Description of Settlements
1	Imo State, Nigeria	37	1. Aro Amiri - Oru East 2. Aro Amuro - Okigwe 3. Aro Nempi - Oru West 4. Aro oji/Aro Ndeokoroji, na Aro Ndinwafor - Okigwe 5. Aro Umulolo - Okigwe 6. Aro Oguta 7. Aro Oji 8. Aro Obohia-Ahiazu Mbaise 9. Aro Amuzarina - Anara, Isiala Mbano 10. Aro Nkwesi - Oguta 11. Aro Ubulu - Oru West 12. Aro Umuejike Njiaba 13. Aro Atah [Atani Agbor]- Isiala Mbano 14. Aro Atta Ikeduru 15. Aro Awa 16. Aro Nta- Mbaise 17. Aro UmudaraNjiaba 18. Aro UturuOkigwe 19. Aro Awonmanma- Oru East 20. Aro Ugbele- Mgbidi 21. Aro Mbutu- Aboh Mbaise 22. Aro Ndizuogu - Ideato, Okigwe, Onuimo LGAs 23. Aro Mbana 24. Aro Umuororonjo [Ndeujah] 25. Aro Uzun'umu- Mgbidi 26. Aro Umunneoha 27. Aro Egbuoma - Oguta

			LGA 28. Aro Izombe 29. Aro Eleh - oru West 30. Aro Ezial - Mgbidi 31. Aro Ibiasoegbe - Mgbidi 32. Aro Iheagwa 33. Aro Iheosu 34. Aro Ihite Owerri 35. Aro Isuikwuato 36. Aro Oru 37. Aro Otulu -Oru East
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Source: Kanu 2025

Table 5: Aro settlements in Benue State, Nigeria

S/N	State/Country	Number of Settlements	Description of Settlements
1	Benue State, Nigeria	1	Aro Idoma

Source: Kanu 2025

Table 6: Aro settlements in Rivers State, Nigeria

S/N	State/Country	Number of Settlements	Description of Settlements
1	Rivers State, Nigeria	4	1. Aro Igirita- Ikwerre 2. Aro Isiopko- Ikwerre 3. Aro Kalabari 4. Aro Opobo

Source: Kanu 2025

Table 7: Aro settlements in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria

S/N	State/Country	Number of Settlements	Description of Settlements
1	Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria	5	1. Aro Ikot Ukana 2. Aro Ikot Umo Essien 3. Aro Mbiabong 4. Aro Ndiokoro 5. Aro Oburoite

Source: Kanu 2025

Table 8: Aro settlements in Equatorial Guinea

S/N	State/Country	Number of Settlements	Description of Settlements
1	Equatorial Guinea	2	1. Aro Panya 2. Aro Fernando Poo

Source: Kanu 2025

The Omu-Aro

Omu-Aro derives its literal meaning from two components: Omu and Aro. Omu refers to the yellow embryo of the palm tree that appears first before the leaves turn green. The second term, Aro, signifies that which is associated with the people of Arochukwu. Therefore, Omu-Aro translates to the Omu of the Aro people. Although the origins of Omu-Aro can be traced back to the period following the War of Conquest, its current form was created in 1925 by the late Aro patriot, Mazi Timothy Kanu Utchay. This design served as the Aro Coat-of-Arms, seal, and crest, see Plate 1 overleaf. It is a highly esteemed symbol among the Aro community. The versatile Mazi Utchay hailed from Ujari Arochukwu. He was an educator, publisher, printer, author, and a prominent figure in education. As a young philosopher of his time, he dedicated considerable effort to studying a diverse array of classical and philosophical literature (Ohia 2018).



Plate 1: The Omu-Aro

Source: Kanu 2025

With one hand on each side (one hand giving and the other receiving), the Omu-Aro resembles a rectangular shield featuring a knotted palm (omu) at its center. At the top of the shield, an eagle (ugo) adorned with two crowns on either side and wings fully extended is depicted. Behind the shield, a gun and a sword are arranged opposite each other as part of the design, with the gun's stock and sword hilt visible on one side, while the blade and barrel are visible on the other (Ohia 2018). This coat of arms was created to function as an appropriate seal representing the power and authority of the ancient Aro Empire (Isichei 1976). Additionally, it acts as a unifying symbol for all Aro individuals in the diaspora, commanding the same level of prestige, honor, and encouraging prompt obedience to foster a shared sense of affinity and solidarity. The Aro people are spread across the South-Eastern Region of Nigeria and beyond (including Abia, Imo, Anambra, Enugu, Ebonyi, Rivers, Benue States, and Equatorial Guinea). Mazi W. W. Okereke, an Aro nationalist and trader from Amuvi, Arochukwu, who was residing in Port Harcourt at the time, obtained the design from Utchay. To create usable wrappers of *George* extraction using embroidery, this merchant established connections with his colleagues in the Asian textile industry (Ohia 2021). Plates 2, 3, 4 & 5 illustrates the application of the Omu-Aro to unique wrapper design and fashion worn by adult males, females and children.



Plate 2: Omu-Aro and Fashion

Source: Kanu 2025



Plate 3: Omu-Aro and Fashion

Source: Kanu 2025



Plate 4: Omu-Aro and Fashion

Source: Kanu 2025



Plate 5: Omu-Aro and Fashion

Source: Kanu 2025

Dimensions of Omu-Aro

The design elements in the Omu-Aro include the Eagle, Crown, Hands, Gun, Sword, Palm, and Shield. They have artistic and aesthetic nuances that will be explored in this section of the paper.

a. *The Eagle (Ugo)*: The eagle for the Igbo is the Chief of Birds. It represents excellence, glory, respect, honor, strength, courage, bravery, and above all, the royalty of Arochukwu Kingdom. Beyond Arochukwu, it also reflects the Igbo people's values of resilience and determination. Given its ability to soar high into the skies, it also symbolizes liberty, which is a cherished value in Igbo culture. The choice of eagle in motion, depicted in gold colour on the Omu-Aro is for emphasis on the above listed attributes associated with Arochukwu Kingdom.

The eagle is also associated with wisdom, insight, and sharp vision, reflecting the Igbo people's emphasis on knowledge, education, and critical thinking. The feathers are affixed to the caps of title holders to symbolize honourable achievements - a concept known as "Ituru Ugo". Because of the significance of the Eagle among the Aro and the Igbo generally, children are given names associated with the eagle: Ugochukwu (the eagle of God), Ugonna (the eagle of the father), Adaugo (the first daughter of the eagle), Ugochinyere (the eagle from God), Anyafulugo (the eye that has seen the eagle),

Ugomma (beautiful eagle). Proverbs were also made using the Ugo, such as: “Onye hụrụ ugo nūrịa makana a dighi ahụ ugo oge obula” - which means "He or she that sees eagle should rejoice because it's not seen always".

b. *The Crowns (Okpueze)*: The crown on the left- and right-hand sides of the Omu-Aro signifies royalty and the hereditary nature of Aro kingship. It represents the highest authority and leadership in Aro society, often associated with kings (Eze), chiefs, and other high-ranking titleholders. At the same time, it embodies the rich cultural heritage and traditions of the Aro people, connecting them to their ancestors and history. It also connects the Aro people, as it represents the unity and wholeness of the Igbo community, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all members. Associated with the crown is wisdom and knowledge, which are indispensable for good leadership and personal growth.

c. *The shield (Ota)*: The shield was an instrument of war used during the War of Conquest. The shield in Omu-Aro is depicted by rectangular wavy rectangular lines, it is a testament to the bravery and strength of the people of Aro. It is also a symbol of defense. While they used the gun and sword against their opponents, they also used the shield to defend themselves from the attacks of their opponents.

d. *The Hand (Aka)*: In the middle of the rectangular design of the Omu-Aro are two hands, one giving and the other receiving the Omu- symbol of authority. The human hands among the Igbo are a symbol of creativity, productivity, human agency, and the ability to create and shape one's destiny. The Igbo people value hard work and industry, and the hand symbolizes the importance of manual labor and self-reliance. The hand is also associated with skill and craftsmanship, reflecting the Igbo people's reputation for excellence in various artistic and technical fields. The hand can also symbolize interconnectedness, highlighting the importance of community, cooperation, and mutual support in Igbo philosophy. While the right hand is often associated with strength, courage, and masculinity, the left hand is associated with intuition and creativity. The two hands joined together symbolize unity, cooperation, and solidarity. Also associated with the hand are the realities of balance and harmony, reflecting the Igbo emphasis on living in harmony with nature and maintaining social balance.

e. *The Gun (Egbe)*: The gun was an instrument of war used during the War of Conquest. It has complex and multifaceted meanings, reflecting the Aro people's history, culture, and experiences. It is not traditionally part of their cultural practices or symbolism. The gun symbolizes the achievement, power, or strength of the Aro Kingdom. Concerning hunting and provision, guns reflect the importance of self-sufficiency, hard work, and resourcefulness. The gun also symbolizes masculinity, strength, and bravery, particularly in the context of traditional title-taking ceremonies and initiation rites.

f. *The sword (Mma agha)*: The sword was used during the War of Conquest. It is an important symbol in Igbo culture. Associated with a sword is the "Ikenga" - a carved wooden figure often depicted with a sword. It represents personal achievement, strength, authority, leadership qualities, and power. Concerning leadership, it signifies critical thinking, wisdom, and discernment in decision-making. The sword is usually drawn or hung on the walls of the homes of warriors and respected individuals. It represents justice, fairness, strength, bravery, warrior spirit, defence of family, community, and territory, reflecting the Aro values of courage and resilience.

g. *The Yellowish Embryo of the Palm (Omu)*: The omu among the people of Arochukwu is a symbol of power, authority, and order. It served as a Royal Writ of Summons. For instance, when the Eze Aro-in-Council receives a formal complaint against anyone, a knotted omu is sent to the accused as a symbol of invitation on a fixed date to hear the charges against him or her, and to present his or her defense. Any recipient of the omu was duty-bound to honour the summons or face dire consequences.

symbolizes abundance, prosperity, and good fortune, reflecting the Igbo people's values of hard work, productivity, and generosity. It is often associated with community and cooperation, highlighting the importance of collaborative work, mutual support, and social bonding in Igbo culture.

It is also used to mark property/land in dispute and prohibit entry; to serve as Prohibition Notice on economic trees; to mark out prohibited boundaries during traditional ceremonies; to pinpoint dangerous masquerades and powerful herbalists; to designate 'holy grounds' around shrines, deities and oracles; to consecrate initiates/inductees during induction ceremonies; to mark sacred trees, objects during sacrifices and rituals; to identify emissaries/messengers during civil conflicts; to symbolize peace and non-violence; to mark dangerous spots or objects (death traps, projectiles, falling trees, collapsing structures), among others.

Conclusion

The design elements of the Omu Aro, which include the eagle, gun, sword, shield, palm, etc., convey meanings beyond their literal interpretation or their physical suggestions. They reflect the cultural context in which the Omu Aro was created, offering insights into the values, beliefs, and traditions of the community. By applying semiotic theories, such as those developed by Charles Sanders Peirce, the researchers have been able to uncover the underlying codes and conventions that govern the meaning-making process in Omu Aro. Analyzing Omu Aro through a semiotic lens, therefore, provides a deeper appreciation of the cultural narrative and values embedded in the artwork. The study

highlights the artist's intentional use of signs and symbols to convey meaning and evoke emotions and identity. This study reveals that understanding the historical and cultural contexts of the Omu-Aro is crucial for accurate interpretation and appreciation. Through the examination of Omu-Aro's design elements and significances through the semiotic framework, we gain a richer understanding of Omu-Aro's historical, cultural, economic, political, and religious relevance and artistic merit. This analysis can be applied to various art forms, enhancing the appreciation of the complex language of signs and symbols that shape our understanding of visual aesthetics.

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