

**THE LANGUAGE OF POWER IN AFRICAN SPIRITUAL NARRATIVES: A SEMIOTIC STUDY OF NON-VERBAL SIGNS IN *THE CONCUBINE*, *EFURU*, AND *DIZZY ANGEL*.**

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**Abstract**

*This article examines non-verbal signs as structured systems of communication through which power is expressed and interpreted in African spiritual narratives. Moving beyond speech-centred models of language, the study draws on linguistic and social semiotics to argue that ritual acts, omens, symbolic objects, bodily conditions, spatial arrangements and environmental signs function as organised meaning-making resources. Using Peircean and Saussurean theories of the sign alongside critical perspectives on discourse and power, the article conceptualises these non-verbal forms as rule-governed semiotic structures rather than as decorative cultural elements. Focusing on three key spiritual figures in three seminal African novels, the analysis demonstrates that authority in these texts is largely enacted through patterned non-verbal signs instead of direct dialogue. These signs operate within culturally shared interpretive frameworks that regulate behaviour, shape belief systems, and legitimise metaphysical authority. Power is seen as both performative and semiotic, rooted in community processes of interpretation where non-verbal signs are understood as important messages from the metaphysical world. By foregrounding non-verbal semiotics, the study contributes to communication and linguistic scholarship in three ways: it challenges the privileging of speech as the primary medium of meaning, it establishes African spiritual narratives as significant sites for analysing culturally encoded sign systems, and it expands the concept of language to include non-verbal semiotic structures through which ideology and social control are maintained. Methodologically, the study undertakes close semiotic readings of non-verbal manifestations in *The Concubine*, *Efuru*, and *Dizzy Angel*, classifying them as Peircean icons, indices, and symbols and examining how their interpretation by characters reproduces or contests*

*metaphysical authority. The article ultimately reframes spiritual manifestations in African prose fiction as structured communicative practices that function as languages of power.*

*Keywords: Non-verbal signs; communication; language of power; social semiotics; African spiritual narratives; metaphysical authority; African prose fiction; Oghanje; Uhamiri; Sea-King; meaning-making systems.*

### Introduction

Communication extends beyond spoken and written language to include structured non-verbal systems such as ritual acts, omens, symbolic objects, bodily manifestations, and environmental signs. These non-verbal resources function as organised meaning-making systems that shape belief, behaviour, and social relations. In many African spiritual worldviews, such forms are not secondary to speech but serve as primary channels through which metaphysical authority is expressed and interpreted. In this article, “non-verbal signs” refers to ritual acts, bodily episodes, symbolic artefacts, spatial configurations, dreams, accidents, and environmental disturbances that are culturally codified and interpreted as messages from the metaphysical realm. These signs are not treated as random clues or superstitions but as semiotic units that carry obligations, warnings, and sanctions, and that are read through shared cultural codes. Following social semiotics, signs are understood not as neutral reflections of reality but as resources that enact social relations and ideology in specific contexts. Within linguistic and social semiotics, signs are viewed as structured units of meaning capable of producing social effects. Peirce's classification of icons, indices, and symbols explains how signs signify through resemblance, causal connection, or cultural convention, while Saussure's signifier–signified model, highlights the socially constructed nature of meaning. Together, these frameworks make it possible to analyse ritual actions, bodily manifestations, dreams, and material objects in narrative texts as rule-governed communicative systems rather than decorative cultural details.

This article argues that non-verbal signs function as a language of power in African spiritual narratives. Authority in such contexts is often enacted through culturally recognisable signs rather than through direct speech, so that omens, ritual obligations, and bodily conditions operate as communicative acts that demand communal interpretation. Power is realised in what spiritual entities do and cause (storms, illnesses, accidents, dreams) rather than in what they verbally say. Critical discourse theorists such as Fairclough and Hodge and Kress view communication as a form of social practice in which power, ideology, and inequality are negotiated and reproduced. When non-verbal signs are interpreted within a community, the process of reading those signs becomes a site of social control, as certain interpretations are privileged and others suppressed. In African spiritual narratives, this interpretive work is often carried out by priests, diviners, elders, or family members whose authority rests on their ability to decode spiritual manifestations. Although African prose fiction has received extensive scholarly attention, existing studies largely emphasise thematic, cultural, or mythic dimensions of spirituality. Less attention has been paid to the communicative mechanisms through which spiritual authority is constructed and maintained, especially the role of non-verbal semiotic systems as structured forms of language in English-language and communication studies. This article addresses that gap by examining how non-verbal signs operate as autonomous meaning-making systems that regulate behaviour and legitimise authority in *The Concubine* (Amadi, 1966), *Efuru* (Nwapa, 1966), and *Dizzy Angel* (Osifo, 1985).

The analysis focuses on three figures whose influence is primarily communicated through non-verbal means: the Sea-King in *The Concubine*, Uhamiri in *Efuru*, and the Ogbanje in *Dizzy Angel*. Across these texts, authority is rarely asserted through dialogue; instead, it is communicated through patterned signs such as ritual events, bodily episodes, symbolic objects, sacred spaces, and environmental indices that characters are compelled to interpret. Methodologically, the study undertakes close semiotic readings of key non-verbal manifestations in these novels, classifying them as icons, indices, or symbols and analysing how their interpretation by characters stabilises or contests metaphysical authority. By foregrounding non-verbal semiotics, this study makes three main contributions. First, it challenges speech-centred models of communication by demonstrating that power can be enacted and sustained through non-verbal sign systems. Second, it positions African spiritual narratives as rich empirical sites for examining how culturally encoded signs regulate social life. Third, it expands linguistic and communication scholarship by recognising non-verbal semiotic structures as a legitimate domain of language through which ideology, morality, and authority are communicated. This article, therefore, reframes African spiritual manifestations not as narrative ornamentation but as structured communicative practices, showing that non-verbal signs function as organised systems of power that shape interpretation, behaviour, and belief beyond the level of speech.

#### Literature Review

##### Theoretical Foundations: The Semiotics of the Sign.

To understand how an omen or a ritual functions as a “language of power,” it is necessary to examine the mechanics of the sign. Academic discourse on signs is traditionally anchored in two foundational models: Saussurean semiology and Peircean semiotics.

**Saussurean Semiology.** Ferdinand de Saussure proposed a dyadic model consisting of the signifier (the perceptible form, such as a ritual object, bodily mark, or dream image) and the signified (the mental concept, such as “divine anger,” “jealous deity,” or “broken covenant”). This framework is vital to this research because it emphasises that meaning is not inherent in the object itself but is socially constructed within a specific cultural code, so that a cobra, a lake, or a recurring illness functions as a signifier whose meaning depends on communal belief.

##### Peircean Triadic Model.

Charles Sanders Peirce provides a more detailed classification that is especially helpful for examining spiritual manifestations. He distinguishes among icons (signs that signify through resemblance, such as a figurine representing a deity), indices (signs that have a causal or physical connection to their object, such as a sudden storm as an index of a god's presence), and symbols (signs that rely on cultural convention, such as the specific colours of a ritual cloth or the association of water with wealth and fertility). In African spiritual narratives, the Sea-King's cobra, Uhamiri's lake, or Ogbanje's recurring illness can therefore be read as complex constellations of indices and symbols that point to invisible spiritual contracts. **Non-verbal Systems as Structured Communication.** In the context of this study, non-verbal signs are defined as structured, non-vocal communicative resources, specifically ritual acts, omens, symbolic objects, bodily episodes, dreams, and environmental indices, that function as a primary semiotic system. Unlike casual gestures, these signs are “organised meaning-making systems” that

operate within a culturally specific “silent language,” one that community members learn and reproduce in everyday life. Within the African spiritual worldview examined here, a non-verbal sign is not merely a clue or superstition; it is a semiotic unit of authority whose interpretation can enforce obligations, justify sanctions, or redistribute status. For example, a bodily episode such as Ogbanje's illness in *Dizzy Angel* or an accident such as a sudden death in *The Concubine* is treated as a purposeful message from the metaphysical realm that demands ritual response. These signs are performative: they do not simply state a reality, they enact and enforce social obligations and regulate communal behaviour through a shared interpretive code. The research on non-verbal communication has gradually shifted from considering gestures and body movements as simple emotional expressions to understanding them as structured systems similar to language.

Ray Birdwhistell's theory of kinesics argues that body motion is patterned like a language, with its own “grammar” that members of a culture learn unconsciously. Similarly, Knapp, Hall, and Horgan extend non-verbal communication to include proxemics (spatial arrangements), artifacts (symbolic objects), and other channels such as touch and appearance. In the context of this study, these theories suggest that when the Sea-King in *The Concubine* “speaks” through a sequence of tragic events, or when Uhamiri “calls” Efuru through dreams and ritual objects, they are not merely acting; they are deploying structured communicative codes that the community is required to read and obey.

#### Power, Discourse, and Semiotic Performance

If non-verbal signs represent a language of power, then interpreting those signs is also an exercise of power. Critical discourse analysts like Norman Fairclough and social semioticians such as Hodge and Kress contend that communication is never neutral; it is a space where authority, ideology, and social relations are negotiated. Thus, discourse acts as a social practice that both mirrors and influences social structures, making the analysis of signs closely linked to the analysis of power.

In African spiritual narratives, power is often expressed through performance and semiotics. As shown in Okpewho's studies on African oral literature, the effectiveness of a spiritual message often depends on its performance (the ritual, spectacle, and physical representation) rather than on clear verbal explanation. Authority is upheld because the audience, or community, shares a common semiotic code: when the community identifies an omen, illness, dream, or ritual object as a sign, the spiritual entity gains metaphysical authority without needing to say a word.

#### Spirituality and Communication in African Prose

Although there has been extensive writing on the thematic presence of gods, ancestors, and spiritual forces in the works of Elechi Amadi and Flora Nwapa, a gap remains regarding the communicative mechanics through which these entities exert their influence. In *The Concubine*, much of the academic focus is on Ihuoma's fate or tragedy, but less attention is given to how the Sea-King's power is established through signs like unexplained deaths, snake attacks, and ritual prohibitions that quietly control behavior. In *Efuru*, Uhamiri is often examined through the lens of feminism or gender roles, yet her communication mainly occurs through dreams, the sacred lake, and symbolic items of wealth and beauty, creating a non-verbal conversation that alters

Efuru's social standing. In *Dizzy Angel*, the Ogbanje figure represents a physical condition that signifies a spiritual agreement, requiring specific ritual responses from the living and placing the family under constant interpretive strain. By bringing together these perspectives, this research goes beyond viewing African spirituality as just a myth and acknowledges it as a sophisticated semiotic system. The expression of power in these novels is not mainly found in dialogue or verbal exchanges between characters; instead, it is conveyed through the indexical violence of the Sea-King's cobra in *The Concubine*, the symbolic artifacts and sacred lake-space in Uhamiri's dreams in *Efuru*, and the bodily crises of the Ogbanje's recurring illnesses in *Dizzy Angel*. In these narratives, metaphysical authority is not verbalized but enacted through a structured interaction of omens, spaces, and bodily expressions that demand communal interpretation and redefine the social order.

#### Related Studies on African Non-verbal Semiotics

Research on African semiotics and non-verbal communication demonstrates that sign systems beyond spoken language play significant roles in meaning-making, social regulation, and cultural interpretation, a foundational premise of the present study. In a pragma-semiotic analysis focused on Yoruba symbolic communication, Onipede (2021) shows that traditional symbolic objects such as leaves, cloth, and natural materials function as encoded signifiers that communities interpret according to shared cultural norms and expectations. These signifiers operate not merely as decorative elements but as active communicative mechanisms that shape behaviour and social response in culturally patterned ways. Adésànyà (2019) further illustrates that non-verbal codes in Yoruba novels such as gestures, cultural actions, and symbolic behaviour function semiotically to express social relations, identity, and normative judgments. These non-verbal elements complement and sometimes surpass the communicative power of speech, highlighting the need to interpret narrative meaning through structural semiotic analysis. In a study of Igbo non-verbal communication, Anyogo (2019) finds that gestures and culturally specific sign actions are integral to everyday interactions, serving as crucial carriers of information and normative regulation within the community. Likewise, research into African media semiotics indicates that indexical and symbolic cues like visual signs, culturally codified markers, and embodied actions have powerful effects on audience interpretation and engagement, reinforcing socially shared codes of meaning (Adewoye & Odunlami, 2017). Taken together, these studies show that non-verbal semiotic systems are not marginal to communicative practice but central components of meaning-making in African cultural and literary contexts. However, most existing research explores non-verbal semiotics either in everyday cultural communication or as literary side codes, without systematically analysing how such semiotic resources construct and maintain spiritual authority and power within African prose narratives. The present study addresses this gap by focusing explicitly on African spiritual narratives in these three texts and examining how non-verbal signs such as ritual events, omens, bodily disturbances, and environmental indices operate as structured, rule-governed systems of power. By integrating Peircean and Saussurean semiotic frameworks with a critical discourse perspective, this research advances beyond prior empirical work by conceptualising spiritual semiotic performance as an autonomous communicative domain that regulates belief, behaviour, and authority. In doing so, it broadens semiotics and communication studies to recognise non-verbal systems as valid languages of power rather than mere decorative storytelling elements.

### Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, text-based design situated within linguistic semiotics and social semiotics. It treats *The Concubine* (Amadi, 1966), *Efuru* (Nwapa, 1966), and *Dizzy Angel* (Osifo, 1985) as discourse data in which non-verbal signs are encoded, interpreted, and used to organise social relations and power. The novels are selected purposively because each foregrounds a spiritual figure (the Sea-King, Uhamiri, and Ogbanje) whose authority is mediated primarily through non-verbal manifestations rather than explicit verbal communication. The analysis proceeds through close reading of the novels as communicative events. First, episodes in which spiritual presence or authority is signalled non-verbally are identified. These include ritual acts, omens, bodily disturbances, symbolic objects, sacred spaces, dreams, and environmental disruptions. Each such instance is treated as a sign-event and described in terms of its signifier (form and channel), its immediate narrative context, and the characters involved. Second, the sign-events are interpreted using Saussurean and Peircean tools. The Saussurean signifier–signified distinction is used to show how specific non-verbal forms (for example, a cobra, a lake, a recurring illness) are linked to culturally recognisable meanings (such as jealousy, wealth, covenant, or offence). Peirce's triad of icon, index, and symbol is then applied to classify whether each sign signifies through resemblance, causal connection, or convention. This dual semiotic framework enables the study to map how non-verbal signs function as structured units in a broader language of power. Third, drawing on social semiotics and a light critical discourse perspective, the study examines how these non-verbal signs are interpreted within the narrative communities and how such interpretations regulate social practice. Particular attention is given to who is authorised to interpret signs (priests, diviners, elders, family members), how their readings are articulated, and what communicative effects follow. These include changes in behaviour, reinforcement of taboos, ritual obligations, and shifts in status or relational positioning. Interpretation is therefore analysed as a communicative act that both reflects and reproduces metaphysical authority. Rather than counting instances, the study traces patterns of signification and interpretation across the three novels to identify recurrent semiotic strategies through which spiritual power is communicated. Throughout the analysis, textual findings are related to existing work on African non-verbal communication and symbolic practice, so that the novels are discussed in terms of codes, meaning-making processes, and discourse functions. This methodological orientation positions the article within language and communication studies by showing how non-verbal signs in African spiritual narratives operate as rule-governed semiotic systems that perform and sustain power.

### Data Analysis:

#### Non-verbal Semiotics as Languages of power

This section analyses how non-verbal and symbolic signs in *The Concubine*, *Efuru*, and *Dizzy Angel* function as structured semiotic systems through which spiritual power is communicated and regulated. Drawing on Saussure's dyadic model (signifier–signified) and Peirce's triadic distinction (icon, index, symbol), the tables below classify key signs in each novel and explain their communicative roles. Across the three texts, spiritual entities rarely speak directly; instead, their authority is encoded in ritual acts, bodily conditions, spatial symbols, and material objects that the community must interpret as binding messages.

The Sea-King and Non-verbal Signs in *The Concubine*.

In *The Concubine*, the Sea-King's presence is mediated through deaths, dreams, animals, and ritual actions rather than direct dialogue. Silence itself becomes a sign, while repeated tragedies around Ihuoma are read as coded messages of divine jealousy. These semiotic patterns construct a language of power in which natural events are interpreted as indices of spiritual control and ritual responses function as attempts to negotiate a predetermined fate.

**Table 1. Semiotic Analysis of the Sea-King in *The Concubine***

| Non-verbal sign/event                                         | Narrative context                                                                            | Saussurean analysis (signifier → signified)                                                                         | Peircean type (icon / index / symbol)                                                                                                 | Communicative function (language of power)                                                                                                         |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Silence of the Sea-King                                       | Sea-King never speaks directly; power known only through events around Ihuoma and her lovers | Signifier: silence; Signified: divine ownership, absolute control over Ihuoma and her relationships                 | Symbol (silence conventionally associated with hidden, superior power); also index (correlated with decisive outcomes)                | Encodes invisible authority; constructs a hierarchy where a silent deity overrules talkative humans and determines fate without verbal negotiation |
| Repeated deaths of Ihuoma's lovers (Emenike, Madume, Ekwueme) | Each man who loves/marries Ihuoma dies; Anyika reveals deaths as "design of the Sea-King"    | Signifier: patterned deaths following relationships with Ihuoma; Signified: Sea-King's jealousy and spiritual claim | Index (physical deaths as effects of unseen cause); symbol (recurrent pattern becomes conventional sign of cursed union)              | Functions as coded warning and enforcement; disciplines desire by showing that intimacy with Ihuoma attracts divine punishment                     |
| Ekwueme's "accidental" arrow death                            | Ihuoma's son accidentally kills Ekwueme; interpreted as fulfilment of Sea-King's will        | Signifier: "accidental" arrow shot; Signified: spiritual retribution, completion of predetermined destiny           | Index (visible wound linked to invisible will); symbol (arrow becomes emblem of inescapable fate)                                     | Shows human actions as instruments of divine will; naturalises Sea-King's control over life and death in the communal reading                      |
| The sea as spiritual space                                    | Anyika explains Ihuoma "belongs to the sea" as former wife of the Sea-King                   | Signifier: "sea" and references to belonging; Signified: destiny, spiritual realm, metaphysical authority           | Icon (vast, deep, dangerous like mystery); index (lovers' fates point back to sea's ruler); symbol (cultural sign of spiritual power) | Encodes a cosmology where human relationships are governed from a watery spiritual centre; situates Ihuoma's life within a metaphysical geography  |

|                               |                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                                                             |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Serpent that blinds Madume    | Spitting cobra attacks Madume after his hostility and desire toward Ihuoma; later linked to Sea-King | Signifier: serpent attack; Signified: Sea-King's jealous intervention and punitive ownership of Ihuoma                             | Index (direct physical effect tied to spiritual cause); symbol (serpent as recognised messenger of water spirits) | Enforces divine marriage boundaries; communicates that transgressing the Sea-King's rights over Ihuoma invites violent punishment           |
| Ihuoma's beauty and composure | Ihuoma's charm draws men who later die; revealed as Sea-King's earthly wife                          | Signifier: Ihuoma's beauty, calm nature, mysterious influence; Signified: status as spiritual wife, bearer of dangerous destiny    | Symbol (beauty as sign of spiritual affiliation); index (her presence correlates with male misfortune)            | Makes invisible power visible in human form; her body and relationships become the medium through which Sea-King's jealousy is communicated |
| Wolu's rituals and sacrifices | Wolu gathers specific ritual items on Anyika's instructions to avert Madume's misfortune             | Signifier: list and performance of ritual items; Signified: plea for appeasement, acknowledgment of dependence on spiritual powers | Symbol (each item has codified meaning); index (ritual action as response to prior misfortune)                    | Operates as non-verbal "prayer"; encodes submission and attempts to renegotiate power                                                       |

#### Uhamiri and Sacred Femininity in *Efuru*

In *Efuru*, Uhamiri never appears as a speaking character; she exists through dreams, songs, ritual colours, taboos, and economic outcomes. These signs collectively construct a non-verbal discourse of sacred femininity in which wealth, purity, and beauty coexist with the painful absence of children. The semiotic system surrounding Uhamiri redefines womanhood beyond motherhood while still binding women to strict codes of spiritual obedience.

**Table 2. Semiotic Analysis of Uhamiri in *Efuru***

| Non-verbal signs/event   | Narrative context                                                                                                   | Saussurean analysis (signifier → signified)                                     | Peircean type (icon / index / symbol)                                                                                          | Communicative function (power, womanhood, faith)                                                                                  |
|--------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Efuru's dream of Uhamiri | Efuru dreams; her father interprets it: Uhamiri "has chosen you to be one of her worshippers" (Nwapa, 2004, p. 147) | Signifier: dream; Signified: divine selection, Efuru's calling to serve Uhamiri | Icon (resembles a spiritual vision), index (points to goddess's interest), symbol (culturally recognised sign of being chosen) | Establishes Efuru's new identity through interpreted sign rather than direct divine speech; inaugurates a covenantal relationship |

|                                                                    |                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                         |                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                        |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Songs and chants in praise of Uhamiri                              | Women sing: "Uhamiri, the goddess... the thunder... the kind... the beautiful" (Nwapa, 2004, p.147 )                      | Signifier: titles "thunder," "kind," "beautiful"; Signified: power, mercy, sacred beauty, protection    | Icon (prayer-like rhythm and repetition), index (voices point to dependence and faith), symbol (shared code of reverence)                       | Builds a communal discourse around Uhamiri; shapes how women imagine divine femininity and position themselves as devoted subjects                     |
| White chalk (nzu) and white garments                               | A worshipper sits dressed in white, body rubbed with chalk (Nwapa, 2004, p. 147)                                          | Signifier: white garment and chalk; Signified: purity, peace, holiness, sacred womanhood                | Icon (resembles cleanliness/light), index (marks presence of cultic practice), symbol (conventional sign of ritual purity)                      | Visually marks devotees as set apart; encodes obedience and moral discipline; materialises spiritual identity on the body                              |
| Uhamiri as "most beautiful of women"                               | Uhamiri praised as "a great woman... the most beautiful of women" (Nwapa, 2004, p. 201)                                   | Signifier: descriptions "great," "most beautiful"; Signified: idealised feminine holiness and authority | Icon (image of perfect woman), index (her greatness points to divine status), symbol (model of sacred womanhood)                                | a spiritual template that Efuru mirrors; honours women's inner strength and independence while imposing demanding ideals of purity Providesand loyalty |
| Uhamiri's barrenness (no children)                                 | Efuru realises: "She cannot give me children because she has not got children herself" (Nwapa, 2004, p. 165)              | Signifier: goddess's childlessness; Signified: limitation, sacrifice, redefinition of womanhood         | Icon (Uhamiri mirrors Efuru's state), index (Efuru's barrenness signals bond with goddess), symbol (paradox of beauty/wealth without fertility) | Rewrites female identity by privileging spiritual and economic power over motherhood; encodes the cost of divine favour                                |
| Rituals and taboos (Orie day, no fishing, white dress, white fowl) | Dibia instructs that on Orie day no fishing is allowed; Efuru must wear white and keep herself holy (Nwapa, 2004, p. 153) | Signifier: taboos and dress rules; Signified: obedience, self-denial, spiritual loyalty                 | Icon (acts resemble separation and holiness), index (behaviour points to Uhamiri's ownership), symbol (codified signs of covenant)              | Regulate time, labour, and appearance; organise social life around divine demands and make obedience publicly visible                                  |

### Ogbanje and Cycles of Destiny in *Dizzy Angel*

In *Dizzy Angel*, the Ogbanje child embodies a semiotic nexus where naming, ritual sacrifice, maternal barrenness, and fear all function as signs within an Igbo cosmology of repeated death and return. Spiritual power is not asserted through divine monologue but through the community's interpretive practices: divination, ritual prescriptions, and everyday language that continually mark the child as both blessing and threat.

**Table 3. Semiotic Analysis of Ogbanje in *Dizzy Angel***

| Non-verbal / symbolic sign                         | Narrative context                                                                                                           | Saussurean analysis (signifier → signified)                                                                    | Peircean type (icon / index / symbol)                                                                                                | Communicative function (power, destiny, social control)                                                                        |
|----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| The name "Ogbanje"                                 | Tatakor instructs: "You must call her no other name but what she is, Ogbanje..." (Osifo, 2004, p. 5)                        | Signifier: the word "Ogbanje"; Signified: spirit child who dies and returns, bound to spirits                  | Icon (matches her nature as returning child), index (points to past deaths), symbol (culturally fixed category)                      | Turns naming into ritual control; every repetition publicly recognises her dual nature and binds her to the human world        |
| Repeated child deaths and returns                  | Father laments "these ogbanjes... children who kept coming... then die off" (Osifo, 2004, p. 3)                             | Signifier: pattern of short-lived children; Signified: curse, spiritual contract, unfinished destiny           | Index (observable pattern pointing to hidden cause), symbol (motif of suffering and spiritual debt)                                  | Translates private grief into a shared cultural sign; justifies recourse to divination and ritual intervention                 |
| Diviner's declaration "This girl is an Ogbanje..." | Tatakor identifies the child as Ogbanje and "Olokun's daughter" (Osifo, 2004, p. 44)                                        | Signifier: diviner's verdict; Signified: confirmed spirit identity and ownership by Olokun                     | Symbol (authoritative label fixing her status), index (links past deaths to this child)                                              | Converts unexplained events into a structured diagnosis; centralises the diviner as interpreter of signs and mediator of power |
| White cow and white cock sacrificed at the stream  | At naming, a young white cow and white cock are sacrificed to the stream; blood poured on child's head (Osifo, 2004, p. 45) | Signifier: white animals, sacrificial blood, stream; Signified: purity, appeasement, binding to life and deity | Icon (white mirrors purity; blood mirrors life/cleansing), index (sacrifice tied to hoped-for survival), symbol (ritual of covenant) | Functions as ritual "speech" to spirits; negotiates destiny through exchange and publicly inscribes the child's special status |

|                                  |                                                                                                                                            |                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                          |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Marriage to an Olokun priest     | Tatakori demands she be married to an Olokun priest before age fifteen (Osifo, 2004, p. 45)                                                | Signifier: ritual marriage requirement; Signified: permanent bond and lifelong obligation to spirit world | Icon (marriage resembles binding union), index (marks her as set apart), symbol (institutional sign of covenant) | Reorients her future relationships around spiritual obligations; uses social institution of marriage as a semiotic device of control     |
| Mother's barrenness as condition | Prophecy that "as long as Ogbanje stays alive, Obiageli shall have no other child... She is... Ezenwa – a King Child" (Osifo, 2004, p. 45) | Signifier: no more children; Signified: sacrifice, equivalence (one life for many), costly favour         | Index (living child points to absent siblings), symbol (barrenness as emblem of covenant and maternal sacrifice) | Makes motherhood itself a sign of negotiated destiny; encodes asymmetrical exchange between human suffering and spiritual power          |
| Ogbanje as "King Child"          | Child labelled Ezenwa ("King Child") whose survival governs the mother's fertility                                                         | Signifier: title "King Child"; Signified: elevated yet dangerous status, centrality in family destiny     | Symbol (title confers rank in spiritual hierarchy), index (her existence determines mother's condition)          | Concentrates power and vulnerability in one figure; turns the child into a living emblem of the covenant between human and spirit realms |

### Comparative Discussion

A comparative view of *The Concubine*, *Efuru*, and *Dizzy Angel* reveals a shared semiotic principle: spiritual authority is mediated through organised systems of non-verbal signs rather than direct divine speech. Across the three narratives, meaning is produced through the interpretation of events, bodies, spaces, and ritual acts, showing that communication with the spiritual realm operates through culturally regulated codes. However, while the semiotic logic is shared, the configuration of signs and the social effects they produce differ significantly.

One major point of convergence lies in the indirectness of spiritual communication. In all three texts, spiritual beings do not engage in extended verbal dialogue with humans. Instead, their presence is inferred through patterned indices such as repeated deaths, unexplained illness, dreams, barrenness, or unusual prosperity. This indirectness shifts communicative authority from the spirit itself to human interpreters (diviners, priests, elders) who translate events into meaningful messages. As a result, spiritual power is inseparable from social power, since those who interpret signs shape communal understanding of destiny, morality, and obligation.

Despite this shared structure, the novels differ in the gendered orientation of spiritual semiotics. *The Concubine* presents a system in which a female figure, Ihuoma, becomes the visible sign of an invisible male spirit's claim. Here, signs function to regulate female relational life, especially marriage and desire, through a logic of possession and jealousy. In *Efuru*, by contrast, spiritual signs elevate a woman into a chosen devotee of a female deity. The semiotic system constructs

femininity not through romantic attachment but through ritual purity, wealth, and symbolic motherhood, thereby redefining the meaning of womanhood while still placing it under spiritual discipline. *Dizzy Angel* shifts attention from woman as wife to woman as mother, where the child's body becomes the central sign through which spiritual contracts are expressed. Motherhood is thus semiotically reconfigured as a site of exchange between worlds rather than solely a biological or emotional bond.

The texts also diverge in the dominant type of sign through which spiritual power is expressed. In *The Concubine*, indices, especially deaths and animal manifestations, play a central role, linking physical events directly to spiritual causation. In *Efuru*, symbols such as white chalk, garments, songs, and ritual observances become more prominent, creating a visible aesthetic of devotion and sacred status. *Dizzy Angel* combines indexical and symbolic modes, as cyclical illness and survival point to spiritual interference, while naming, sacrifice, and ritual marriage formally codify the child's status within a recognised cosmological framework. These differences show that African spiritual semiotics is not monolithic but adapts its communicative resources to different narrative and social concerns.

Finally, the three novels collectively demonstrate that non-verbal semiotic systems function as mechanisms for organising social order. Whether through regulating marriage, redefining femininity, or restructuring motherhood, spiritual signs in these narratives translate metaphysical authority into everyday social practice. The comparative perspective therefore confirms that these texts do not merely depict belief systems but stage complex communicative processes in which power circulates through the interpretation of signs. In this way, African spiritual narratives emerge as rich sites for examining how meaning, authority, and social structure are negotiated through non-verbal language.

### Conclusion

This study has shown that non-verbal signs in *The Concubine*, *Efuru*, and *Dizzy Angel* operate as structured languages through which spiritual authority is expressed and made socially effective. Rather than relying on direct divine speech, the narratives organise meaning through ritual acts, bodily conditions, dreams, material symbols, and patterned events that communities are trained to interpret. Spiritual power therefore becomes visible not through voice, but through sign-systems embedded in everyday life.

By applying semiotic and discourse-based frameworks to these texts, the study demonstrates that African spiritual narratives encode complex communicative models in which interpretation is central. Meaning does not reside in events alone, but in the culturally regulated processes that classify those events as signs of destiny, favour, punishment, or spiritual claim. In this sense, diviners, priests, elders, and family authorities function as discourse agents: they stabilise meanings, legitimise responses, and shape social behaviour through their control of interpretation.

The analysis also highlights how these semiotic systems translate metaphysical authority into social structure. Gender roles, marriage expectations, and forms of motherhood are not presented as purely personal or biological conditions but as positions within spiritually

organised sign-networks. Through this process, non-verbal communication becomes a key mechanism by which power, morality, and identity are negotiated within the community.

Methodologically, the article affirms the value of treating literary texts as communicative artefacts that can be examined with tools from linguistics and social semiotics. This approach moves beyond thematic description to reveal how meaning is systematically produced through patterned, culturally codified signs. It therefore opens productive dialogue between literary studies, communication studies, and semiotic theory, especially in contexts where spirituality remains central to social life.

While the study focuses on three Anglophone novels and relies on textual analysis, the framework developed here can be extended to oral traditions, performance, film, and contemporary religious practices. Further research in these areas would deepen understanding of how non-verbal semiotic systems continue to shape social communication beyond the literary domain.

Overall, the article argues that African spiritual narratives are not only repositories of belief but also sophisticated models of communication. By recognising non-verbal semiotic structures as forms of language, scholars of discourse and communication can better account for how authority and meaning are constructed in culturally specific systems where the spiritual and the social are inseparably linked.

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