

Meaningfulness in Literary Naming of Soccer Mascots within the Semiotic Framework of Saussurean Structuralism Theory

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Abstract- *This paper examines some randomly selected sport mascots from lists of All African Games, African Cup of Nations and FIFA World Cup events between 2000 and 2013. Selected mascots and their names are subjected to semiotic analysis premised on the Saussurean Structuralist theory. Surface structure signs and symbols are analysed to determine their deep significances through the medium of syntagmatic analysis.*

Keywords- *Mascots; Semiotic; Saussurean Structuralism Theory;*

1. INTRODUCTION

The term 'mascot' can be defined as a word that brings luck. It could be a person, animal, or object. *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines mascot as an animal or toy, or a person dressed as an animal, that represents a team or organization and is thought to bring them good luck. Mascot could also be used as fictional, representative spokespeople for consumer products, such as the rabbit used in advertising and marketing of products.

The word mascot has been traced back to a dialectal use in France, specifically, in Provence and Gascony where it was used to describe anything which brought luck to a household. The French word "mascotte" (Provençal version: "mascoto") means talisman, charm, and is derivative of the word "masco" meaning sorceress. The synonyms for mascot include: amulet, fetish, charm, mojo, periapt, talisman etc. There are categories into which mascots can be grouped representing various groups with a common public identity, such as schools, professional sports team, society, military unit, brand names etc. This study examines sport mascot, specifically, soccer mascot.

2. LITERATURE

In the world of sports, especially, soccer and basketball, mascots are used to symbolize what each team stands for and most commonly, mascots naming is inspired by the country each team comes from. For instance, the 1850 Olympic Games' which was the first modern Olympian Games held in England had its mascot named Wenlock. This was inspired by Much Wenlock in Shropshire, England. In the United States, one of the earliest sports mascots was for the Chicago Cubs, an American

professional baseball team located on the North Side of Chicago, Illinois, in 1908. A cub signifies the young of a bear, fox or lion which are fledgling carnivorous animals. The official Cubs team mascot is a young bear cub, named Clark, described by the team's press release as a young and friendly Cub. In the United Kingdom, some teams have young admirers or fans become mascots (Alpert, 2012)[1]. These representatives sometimes have the appearance of a wish grant, the winner of a contest, or the national colours of the nations involved, or the trait/characteristics of the team so that mascots' actions can be associated with the team/club afterwards. Mascots also include older people such as Mr. England, who are invited by national sports associations to be mascots for the representative teams.

It is believed that a good mascot name should reflect the character of the community, school or business it is intended to represent. Some good names, although used by many schools and organizations/clubs, are: knights, lions, buffalos, gorillas, bears, marksmen, racers, aces, etc. Mascot names could also be determined by the geographical area of the team members, for instance something that identifies with the heritage much like the predominant animals found in the area, or significant rivers, or vegetation etc. Animal names with their pictures are always used for mascots, especially intimidating animals. For example, wolves are commonly preferred to dogs, and tigers to cats. Mascot names are chosen to last for a long time, therefore, it is required that one's imagination is put to task in choosing a name that is best suitable. Mascots also serve as symbols or signs through which information is communicated to the participating teams as well as supporting fans and audience. Hence, the language used in naming mascots plays a very significant role.

The concept of language is not necessarily about wordage but the message the sign is sending us. Therefore, it is

important that the essential elements of the science of communications is understood. It is necessary to fully comprehend not only what is being said but also what is not being said. Nothing is as it seems and there is always something else going on.

Charles Sanders Peirce defines semiotics as the “quasi-necessary, or formal doctrine of signs”, which abstracts “what must be the characters of all signs used”.... It is the study of signs which allows us to read texts analytically. Semiotics focuses on the signs that we come across as we move through our daily lives. It is also the study of the codes which can be deconstructed, using various tools, to help us ascertain in which codes are organised. In semiotics we look at signs, signifiers, signification, denotation, connotation, icon, index and symbol. Through semiotics, one is motivated to think about depiction, how texts, messages or signs can be studied, not just for obvious content but for what these signs and symbols have to say. This is done through using a method called Saussure which states that we read signs in three steps which are: Sign - What we actually see. Signifier - How we interpret the sign Signified- What we recognise as the sign. Hackley (2003) [6] believes that anything could stand for anything else; hence, the meaning of signs is arbitrary. He is of the opinion that it is the cultural context that frames the interpretation of signs with localized meanings. In other words, a sign can mean one thing in one particular cultural context, but mean something quite different in other cultures. Lévi-Strauss (1972)[10] corroborated this when he submits that 'language is the semiotic system par excellence; it cannot but signify, and exists only through signification'.

Saussure distinguishes between two entities: (i) the signifier is a sign or symbol that can stand for something else. By his definitions all words are signifiers since they always stand for something else e.g. a thought, a feeling or a thing. A signifier is used by the person carrying out a communication process. (ii) The signified is what the sign or symbol represents, that is, what it is interpreted to mean by the receiver of the communication. The meaning of signs is arbitrary. In principle, anything could stand for anything else. It is the cultural context that frames the interpretation of signs with localized meanings (Hackley, 2005)[7]. A sign can mean one thing in one particular cultural context, but mean something quite different in another. Culture is a community of codes and a code, in this context, is a convention that associates a signifier with a certain signified or meaning. One of the things that characterises verbal language, in comparison to pictures, is that the relationship between signifiers and signified is an accident or arbitrary. This actually means there is no direct relationship between the signifier and the signified; the relationship is determined by convention, rule or agreement among the users.

The concept of syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations is central to Sausseurs idea of language as a form of communication. The sign acquires its meaning through its relations with other signs. This concept of ‘difference’

works as an organising ‘principle’ in social life and extends all the way from letters and words to questions of cultural difference. Difference is organised along two dimensions and these are syntagms and paradigm. A syntagm is the same as a sentence, it is linear (moves horizontally), one word follows another to the end of a sentence, where we arrive at a meaning. This can also be extended to the linear dimensions of a text. The point is it provides a wide variety of possibilities when constructing sentences. The syntagm is the sentence designed to move us in a specific way, to react in a specific way or to behave in a specific way. The paradigms are the categories from which we make choices. Syntagmatic analysis is a structuralist technique which seeks to establish the 'surface structure' of a text and the relationships between its parts. We see a sign, think about it – link or associate it with something in reality. So, there are two steps involved although they do happen simultaneously (together). Denotation is the first and direct meaning and connotation is the indirect meaning. This study examines sport mascot, specifically, soccer mascots in Africa to depict that signs and pictures actually connote hidden messages or information just as much as text if deeply (consideration of deep structures) observed.

Out of the three syntagmatic relationships, (i) sequential relationship as found in film and TV narrative sequences; (ii) spatial relationship as found in posters and photographs juxtaposing signs and symbols; and (iii) conceptual relationships such as argument (Chandler, 2008); the study employs sequential and spatial relationships to analyse the mascots selected.

3. METHODOLOGY

Soccer mascots are randomly selected from lists of All African Games, African Cup of Nations and FIFA World Cup events from 2000 to 2013. Selected mascots and their names are subjected to semiotic analysis premised on the Saussurean structuralist theory. It is a study which proposes to search for 'deep structures' underlying the 'surface features' of mascots and their names as corroborated by Lévi-Strauss (1972)[10] who submits that 'language is the semiotic system par excellence; it cannot but signify, and exists only through signification'. According to Ferdinand de Saussure, a founder of modern semiotics, sign consists of two parts: the signifier (the form which the sign takes) and the signified (the concept represents). The meaning of signs is arbitrary. In principle, anything could stand for anything else. It is the cultural context that frames the interpretation of signs with localized meanings (Hackley, 2003: 162)[6]. Anything can be a sign as long as it is interpreted as signifying something. Saussure distinguished between two things:

- (a) the signifier is a sign or symbol that can stand for something else. By definition, all words are signifiers since they always stand for something else (e.g. a thought, a feeling, or a thing). A

signifier is used by the person wanting to communicate.

- (b) The signified is what the sign or symbol represents – what it is interpreted to mean by the receiver of the communication.

Therefore, the emphasis is on showing each mascot as an embodiment of signs which could be unfolded to show 'how signs mean' (Sturrock 1986, 22)[13]. In other words, semiotics is employed to analyse the text which in this case is an assemblage of signs (such as words, images, and gestures) interpreted with reference to significances through the medium of Syntagmatic analysis. Syntagmatic analysis is a structuralist technique which seeks to establish the 'surface structure' of a text and the relationships between its parts.

Selected soccer mascots to be analysed through the structuralist technique

Mascot 1

Mascot *Takuma the Hippo* 2013 Nations Cup in South Africa



Takuma the hippo is a stout, strong, focused, unrelenting and determined humanized hippopotamus dressed in the South African national colours: yellow, green, red and black. He is portrayed as a team player looking into the future

Hippopotamus is a power animal symbol. In addition to being a powerful animal, the name 'hippopotamus' connotes healing, ability to see beneath the surface, emotional depth, creation, imagination, proper use of aggression, ability to move gracefully through emotions, protection of family, mother-fury when needed, birth of new ideas, lucid dreaming, spirit contact e.t.c.

Although Takuma, the hippo looks friendly, the hippo is naturally regarded as one of the most aggressive and dangerous animals in Africa. He is humanized representing South African football team in all the attributes of the hippo. The colours of its sportswear are the national colours of South Africa. It is believed that by focusing on the attributes of some special animals, like the hippo, sports men internalize these traits and thus begin to externalize the very character we absorb from them.

Mascot 2

Mascot *Zakumi* 2010 World Cup in South Africa



Zakumi the Leopard is the official mascot for the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa. He is presented as a cheerful, sporty anthropomorphized leopard with green hair. Zakumi is deliberately coloured with a tribal motif to present the South African national colours.

Leopards are largely nocturnal animals that prefer to remain out of the public eye. However, it is an opportunistic hunter, meaning that it will take down any prey that happens to cross its path, including the occasional careless human. This signifies attack and confrontation mostly needed in winning at soccer/football games.

Leopards also signify amazing strength and are the only one of the big cat family known for their ability to drag the deadweight of prey up a tree; a task that requires great climbing skills and brute strength. In African folklore, they are seen not only as fierce warriors and hunters, but also as cunning and deceitful animals. The view of many African traditions is that the leopard is seen as a mentally astute animal. Many see the Leopard as a valiant warrior who never runs from a battle. There is no denying the fact that a leopard is an exquisitely beautiful animal. These are what the leopard signifies and are naturally expected to reflect in the skill of team members.

With the leopard as mascot, members are expected to portray intelligence and craftiness, ability to manipulate, nobility, royalty, and brute strength. All is geared towards winning and bringing much fun into the game.

Mascot 3

A *Super Eagle* and a *Black Star* Mascot 2000 African Cup of Nations



There are two mascots here signifying the two nations who co-hosted the 2000 African Cup of Nations: Super eagle signifies Nigeria and the black star signifies Ghana. Both of them reflect the prominent colours of their nations' flags, green and black respectively. It should be noted that the

eagle is almost synonymous with Nigerian soccer team as the junior team is also known as the Flying Eagles and the under-17 team as the Flying Eaglets.

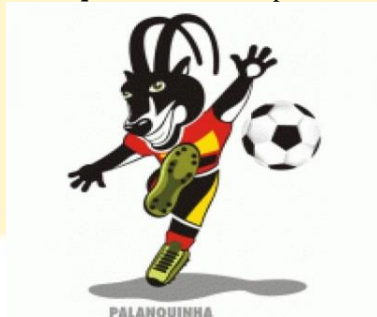
The Eagle has been a cultural representation for thousands of years and it is a signifier that signifies mysticism, astuteness and authority. In ancient Greece, eagles were perceived as the quintessence of masculinity and virility.

A star, on the other hand, is one of the most prevailing signs in the world's traditions and religion and one of the oldest symbols in many cultures, religions, and belief systems. As we have in this mascot of an eagle and a star, stars are often combined with other images and symbols to add further meaning as well as to create a more intricate and interesting design. Shooting stars, or comets as they are more correctly known, are often symbols of good luck.

In general, some of the most popular star signifiers signify these meanings: wish, accomplishment, success, good luck, uniqueness, challenge to conquer, balance, and individuality. Hence, the qualities of the eagle combined with what the star signifies are all expected to exude from members of the participating team.

Mascot 4

Mascot **Palanquinha** Africa Cup of Nations 2010



Palanquinha is the mascot of the 2010 Africa Cup of Nations. He is in a gay mood, in bright coloured jersey signifying the Angola national flag colours and he joyfully plays the football. He is inspired by the Giant Sable antelope, a representative species of Angola. An antelope is an animal like a deer, with long legs and horns that lives in Africa and Asia. Antelopes are graceful and can run fast. They are usually sharp and intelligent. Like many other herbivores, antelopes rely on keen senses to avoid predators. Their eyes are positioned on the sides of their heads, giving them a wide range of vision with smallest binocular vision. Their horizontally stretched out pupils also help in this respect. Also, their sharp senses of smell and hearing give them the ability to perceive danger at night and when they are in the open where predators are stalking around.

Antelope signifies decisive action. In other words, the message from an antelope to humans is to take action right now, quickly. Other attributes signified by the antelope include: keen intuition, mental clarity, moves with speed and grace, ability to advance quickly, awareness of its surroundings, vigilance, action, sacrifice and adaptability. A winning team must imbibe all these qualities.

Mascot 5

Mascot **Goleo** for the 2006 Fifa World Cup



The mascot Goleo seems to be more friendly than fierce, considering the fact that he is a lion. Goleo dons a pure white jersey signifying innocence or purity and he plays a smiling football. This atmosphere signifies tranquility and fun, however, underneath this serenity lies resilience and serious competitiveness.

Lions primarily signify strength. The fact that lions are nocturnal animals means that they are a symbol of authority and command over subconscious thought (as night is an ancient symbol of the subconscious - or dream states). Many ancient cultures consider the lion to be a solar animal symbol and the lioness, a lunar animal giving a symbolic message of balance and sound judgment. Hence, because the lion shares the world of both night and day, it bears a message of prudence. What the lion as a signifier signifies include honour, courage, royalty, strength, and leadership. These traits are naturally expected from team members.

Mascot 6

Mascot **Gaguie** 2012 African Cup of Nations in Gabon



Gaguie is a gorilla sport mascot who is huge and very intimidating. Its larger than life posture signifies terror to the opposing team. Gaguie is clad in Gabon national colours of white, blue and green. His red coloured lips however temper his ferocious look. He is humanized and stands taller and heftier than all.

It is believed that the gorilla is much nobler than its face-value or surface appearance. Gorillas are vastly sociable, and have intricate methods of communication with each other. Furthermore, there is a great deal of honour involved with their interactions with one another. The gorilla's attributes include communication, loyalty, leadership, compassion, intelligence, nobility, dignity, strength, responsibility, nurturing and connectivity. The gorilla manages other members within the troop with temperance, understanding, compassion and balance. The gorilla

signifies the need to take action as well as the other qualities listed above for team members to emulate.

Mascot 7

Mascot **Agoro-hene** 2008 African Cup of Nations in Ghana



Agoro-hene, the mascot is a huge humanized eagle donning the African motif of Ghana national colours. The all white head depicts wisdom and experience of the old one, while the hefty, agile body signifies strength and vigour of the youth.

Visually, everything about the eagle's appearance signifies sharpness. It is a signifier that is streamlined, sleek, and chiseled. This is believed to prompt teams' deeper minds to hone their thoughts and skills. The eagle is expected to influence team players and fans by commanding them to tailor their intelligence and talents in a form that best suits their needs. The eagle is known to possess the following attributes: opportunity, protection, guardianship, masculinity, dominance, control, freedom, community, command, action, authority, skill, focus, determination, vision, power, liberation, inspiration, ruler, and judgment. As king of the birds, the eagle's message of mental acuity is super-dominant. Therefore, the eagle is a signifier that signifies all the listed attributes above.

Mascot 8

Mascot **Croconile** 2006 Africa Cup of Nations in Egypt



This mascot is a sleek, jeweled crocodile embellished with a white cap and coloured in green, black, white and red, the

Egyptian national colours. The football is also adorned with the national colours.

The word 'crocodile' comes from the Greek words 'kroko deilos', which translates to 'pebble men'. This is a reference to their scaly skin, which provides protection against the harsh elements and any predator strong enough to touch these powerful creatures. They are perfectly capable of adapting to any difficult circumstance thrown at them. In other words, by these attributes, crocodiles signify astute power and great resilience.

In the ancient world, crocodiles were venerated as powerful deities of creation and life. The Egyptian god, Sobek, was frequently worshipped in an effort to protect pilgrims living along the sacred Nile against the ferocious crocodiles in the river. Sobek was a creator god and was often depicted with the symbol of life, the Ankh. The Egyptians were so enamored by these intriguing creatures, that they built a prosperous city of Asinoe, later renamed Crocodilopolis by the Greeks, in its honor (Crocodile Specialist Group (1996)[3].

This impressive signifier signifies status, balance, fearlessness, strength, masculine, power and virility.

4. CONCLUSION

Mascot names are determined by the geographical area of team members, thereby identifying with the area's heritage much like the predominant animals found in the area, or significant rivers, or vegetation or the general topography of the country. In Africa, for instance, animals' names are always used, especially intimidating animals. For example, hippos and gorillas are commonly preferred to smaller animals like dogs, and eagles to birds like pigeons. This explains why most African nations use intimidating, fearful and very strong animals as mascots to portray themselves to other teams. It can also be noted that many of the mascots analysed are predominant in the areas where they are used as mascots and have been chosen to last for a long time, since some of the mascots are almost synonymous with the nations they represent. Hence, mascots as symbols and signs communicate some covert messages to participating teams as well as supporting fans and audience. This message tends to stimulate and motivate home members of the participating team but frightens or intimidates the opposing team. In addition, these mascots are believed to bring luck and goodwill to team members. Hence, the language used in naming and presenting mascots plays a very significant role.

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