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Symbolically Speaking: The Use of Semiotics in Marketing Politics in Ghana

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Abstract

Le retour du Ghana à la démocratie depuis 1992, a apporté dans le domaine politique, électoral et celui de l'organisation de campagnes de nombreux changements, notamment une sophistication croissante des campagnes. Les partis politiques cherchent de nouveaux modes d'utilisation de la sémiotique - signes, de sons et de symboles. La simplification des messages ainsi qu'il est d'usage dans le domaine de la publicité commerciale est l'un de ces moyens. Bien que la pratique existe depuis des décennies, elle n'a à peine touché les discours politiques du Ghana comme littérature surtout comme un moyen d'attirer des électeurs et d'influer sur les résultats des campagnes électorales. Depuis les élections de 2000, lorsque le New Patriotic Party (NPP) lança le célèbre slogan "ASEE ho" (littéralement, le fond en la langue Akan), l'utilisation des signes, des sons et de symboles pour promouvoir les messages politiques locaux s'est développé au Ghana au fur et à mesure des élections. Depuis les signes, les sons et les symboles servent à montrer les prises de position ou à résumer les positions des partis politiques. Ainsi s'impose la nécessité d'étudier scientifiquement ces aspects et c'est l'objectif de cet article.

Symbolism had been an essential part of the Ghanaian society; and in politics, it has played enormous role in political campaigning since 1947 when Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Ghana, formed the CPP party (Apter, 1968a; Monfils, 1977). In the just ended Ghanaian election 2008, parties that contested the elections in Ghana, NPP, NDC, CPP, PNC etc (Ghana E.C, 2008) made enormous use of **semiotics** – signs, sounds and

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symbols – to drum home their message and to market their candidates. Aside the traditional symbol of the NPP, the *elephant* signifying a supposed dominance in Ghanaian politics, the party adopted also the “*hopping kangaroo dance*” of the national football team, the black stars and a popular gospel song, *go high*, as their campaign song, all to reinforce their message: “*yee – ko ye – nim*,” which means, “*we are moving forward*.”

The two main opposition parties, NDC and CPP with the *umbrella* and the *cockereel* as traditional party symbols respectively, also adopted the signs that football coaches and fans do at tournaments: “finger wriggling” of both hands lifted upwards to indicate a desire to change a player. A move to reinforce the two parties’ message of ‘*ye – re se sa – mu*,’ meaning, “change” in the Akan language. Although the use of semiotics in Ghana’s electioneering campaigns is decades old (Monfils, 1977; Mensah, 2007), the recent craze could largely be traced to the electoral fortunes of the NPP party in 2000. The party managed to cause momentum to its campaign with their “*asee ho*” (the bottom, in Akan language) slogan to depicts their ballot paper position.

The “*asee ho*” (the bottom) and the “*esoro ho*” (the top) “theories,” as they later came to be known in the Ghanaian political parlance (Sekyi-Addo, 2004), with the thumb pointing downwards in regards to “*asee ho*” and pointing upwards in the case of “*esoro ho*,” were to direct voters, especially the about 40% illiterate (UIS, 2006), where to look and place their thumb on the ballot paper. And in a country of such a high illiteracy rate, local political observers believe the “*asee ho*” did work for NPP’s candidate at the time, John Kufour who occupied the bottom position on the ballot paper. Of course, the reverse “*esoro ho*” however disappointed the NDC’s candidate as there could only be one winner.

Although it will be too amateur for any one to seriously attribute the electoral fortunes of the NPP to the “*asee ho*” slogan, it nevertheless contributed in two significant ways to their success. Firstly, it injected an incredible amount of excitement amongst the base of the NPP that truly the party was alive and had a winning mentality, giving the *viral effect*, as in viral marketing (Wilson, 2005), created by the sign as many people engaged it whenever the party’s slogan was invoked. The viral effect, according to Wilson, is when individuals are encouraged ‘to pass on marketing messages to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in the messages’ exposure and influence;’ and ‘like viruses, such strategies take advantage of rapid multiplication to explode the message to thousands, to millions’ etc (Wilson, 2005). In fact, the NPP party actually owes the popularity of the “*asee ho*” sign and chants to one popular Ghanaian musician, *Lumba* who had hit the airwaves with the hit song, “*asee ho*” that same year 2000, well ahead of the campaign period.

Secondly, the “asee ho” had become a *directional sign* to many of the illiterate voters, especially in the hinterland where the NPP commanded most support. With fears of they not able to read and thumb print appropriately, the “asee ho” offered the faithfuls the most helping hand needed to ensure that they voted their candidate. Since then, the use of semiotics to reinforce the political message is gaining currency in Ghanaian politics. Each and every election year has brought its own signs, sounds and symbols either depicting ballot positions or summing up issue positions of political parties.

For its objective, the paper is intended to contribute to drawing the attention of both academia and practitioner audience on the importance of symbolism to political campaigning in Africa, using Ghana as a case in point. Hence the need for its study and consideration as essential part of campaign planning. As methods, it dwells on extant literature on Ghanaian politics and culture (Austin, 1961; Apter, 1968a; Monfils, 1977; Oquaye, 1995; Ninsin, 1996; Jonah, 1998; Arthur, 2001; Carbone, 2003). The subjects of the study (NDC, NPP, Nkrumah and Rawlings) were purposively chosen based on their historic and current level of campaign sophistry, blending semiotics and marketing as campaign technique. Finally, the paper uses the 4ps of marketing mix (Dibb et al, 2001; Gilligan and Wilson, 2003) and the theory of semiotics (Saussure, 1916 - 1983; Peirce, 1931-58; Morris, 1938-1970; Barthes, 1964-1967; Eco, 1976) to showcase how political parties and their operatives have marketed themselves in Ghana.

Semiotics – the theory of signs, sounds and symbols

The study of signs, sounds and symbols is centuries old and could be located in *Semiotology* by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1916 - 1983). It was also referred to as *Semiotics* by the American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce (1931-58); it is his version of the term which is widely used. Semiotics or semiotology, suggests that signs and symbols are essential part of language and that they broaden our understanding in either composing or decoding messages.

The theory of semiotics is defined in many ways by different writers (Saussure, 1916 - 1983; Peirce, 1931-58; Morris, 1938-1970; Barthes, 1964-1967; Eco, 1976). However, Augustine (1958) defines signs (semiotics) as “a thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes upon the senses” (p. 34). Augustine classifies signs as *natural*, *sacred* and *conventional*. The first two, natural and sacred signs, Augustine explains, are “*meta human*” – beyond human order. However, conventional signs such as gestures, sounds and symbols are made by human and are fundamental to human’s own need, enabling us to refer to and

remember the world. The conventional signs and its value to aiding comprehension, as Augustine explains, could be argued to have contributed to the rise of theories that make use of symbolism, such as branding, promotion, advertising and the likes of marketing – and in many ways, of politics for that matter (Kress, 1996).

Why the rise of semiotics in marketing politics?

The relationships between semiotics and marketing and semiotics and marketing politics, are well noted in literature (Levy, 1959; Kotler, 1972; 1987; Umiker-Sebeok, 1987; Aaker 1991; Popkin, 1994; Schmidt, 1995; Kavanagh, 1995; Ries & Trout, 2000; Smith, 2001; Floch, 2005). Sidney Levy (1959), in ‘Symbols for Sale,’ noted that ‘people buy products not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean’ (p. 118). Hence, the reasons behind the rise of signs, sounds and symbols, of Augustine included, in spheres such as commerce and politics, could be attributed to a plethora of things, including human’s general susceptibility to imagery and effect as well as illiteracy. In illiteracy for example, politicians and their operatives, at least in Ghana, are aware of how little in meaning ideology, economic indices and many other related political discourses are to a large section of the voting public. Hence, politicians resort to the use of certain images of relevance that could transmit these same messages to the voting public.

In other words, politicians communicate to voters their ideological positions, policy statements etc through signs, sounds and symbols understandable and identifiable to them. In the Ghanaian election 2000, the NPP party, in their effort to let the masses understand how bad the country’s debt situation was, trumpeted to Ghanaians that they owe the international community, “*opipi-pi-i-pi-i*,” literally means, an amount one can not name, in the Akan language. The *opipi-pi-i-pi-i* figure certainly was not the friendliest of sounds in many people’s ears. Not when the impression as though the individual Ghanaian could be asked to pay the money owed the international community was created by the NPP party. And coupled with alleged and confirmed abuses of power and flamboyancy of some government officials of the NDC then, such pronouncements certainly sent chills through the spine of many Ghanaians, making them feel content of having the “positive change” agenda promised by the NPP party to correct the mess although were oblivious of what the party could offer.

Aside illiteracy, many are those who also refer the growth of signs, sounds and symbols in political, public and institutional communications to the shift of society towards capitalism, with the market at the helm influencing our way of life (Kress, 1996; Cameron, 2001; Richards, 2004). Those of the market view

have noted the plethora of information being bombarded the “consumer citizen” in today’s media society. Cameron (2001), for example noted that ‘kinds of discourses that were once primarily “informational,” designed to “tell,” have now become more “promotional,” also to “sell”’ (cited in Baab, 2007, p. 24).

Perhaps, the most sophisticated in this ‘market mentality’ society (Baab, 2007, p. 24) is the growth and influence of advertising, employing the ‘psychology of emotions’ (Richards, 2004) to affect people’s behaviour. Advertising has succeeded in “planting” needs and “causing” satisfaction in people, psychologically – or virtually. Literature (Levy, 1959; Richards, 2004) suggests that consumer needs (citizens, in this case) have largely been created and satisfied by (political) products and services through symbolic associations. These (political) products and services, through advertisements, can create “the need to belong,” “to feel secure” and “to have,” in the consumer (citizen) using public figures and popular culture that they can identify with. Through the same medium, a (political) product or service is seen to satisfy those “virtually-created” needs in an attempt to mitigate any ‘cognition of dissonance’ (Festinger, 1957) one may experience after purchase. This virtual creation and satisfaction of needs, advertisers believe, impact on consumers’ (citizens) response in demanding (political) products and services. And Ghana is no exception in this development.

Semiotics in Ghanaian Politics – historic and socio-cultural perspectives

According to G. F. Kojo Arthur (2001), signs, sounds and symbols were fundamental to the ancient Ghanaian social fabric through which indigenes recorded and expressed their thoughts, beliefs and feelings. Storytelling for example, was embedded in various forms of African artefacts, myths and ceremonies. These art forms included graphic systems such as the *adinkra*; one art form in which the Akans narrated, characterised and vocalized several stories. Arthur observes that ever since ancient times, storytelling in African culture in particular has been a way of passing on traditions and beliefs of a society from one generation to the next. It has also been used as means of passing on codes of behaviour, history, philosophy, and moral laws of the people in maintaining social order. And so is the case in politics.

Akin to the Ghanaian socio-cultural sphere and its use of signs, sounds and symbols, the political sphere had, since pre-colonial days, seen signs, sounds and symbols as fundamental part of political discourse to demonstrate dominance, power, bravery etc. The *golden stool* and *the divine sword* of Okomfo Anokye (a deity), for example, demonstrate the power of the Ashanti

Kingdom in Ghana and in fact, the whole of Africa during the formative years of the continent. In the upper western part of Ghana, a war dance, *takai* symbolizes *bravery* and *preparedness* to defend the people of Dagomba. The ‘*gye Nyami*’ (except God) symbol adopted by Jerry Rawlings and embossed on the country’s legal tender after seizing power in Ghana was enough statement to scare off any prospective attempt on his life.

In colonial party politics, the tradition of the use of signs, sounds and symbols was also passed on. Kwame Nkrumah’s use of white handkerchief and the walking stick signified victory and power; his flirtation with popular culture – *Tradition, Christianity, Islam* and *Modernity* symbolized his inclusive personality (Monfils, 1977; IJIMA, 1998 Apter, 1968a) and reaffirmed his preparedness to work with all manner of people. At CPP party rallies, religious symbolism was felt through the invocation of the name of God and singing of hymns (IJIMA, 1998). In his autobiography, Nkrumah observed that when he announced his resignation as secretary of the UGCC at a rally, a woman became enthusiastic and started blessing him, noting that:

The reaction was immediate and their cheers were deafening. Then one of the women supporters jumped up on the platform and led the singing of the hymn ‘Lead Kindly Light,’ a hymn which from that time onwards has been sung at most C.P.P. rallies. What with the strain of it all and the excitement, the singing of this hymn was as much as I felt I could take (Nkrumah, 1957: 107, cited in IJIMA, 1998).

Further on after Nkrumah’s era, successive administrations were unable to win hearts and minds nationwide until the arrival of Jerry John Rawlings (J.J. Rawlings) and his PNDC government in 1981. Although Nkrumah and Rawlings differed on many grounds, including their points of entry into political prominence – democratic and military means respectively – many believe Nkrumah and Jerry Rawlings had some characteristic resemblance. Jerry Rawlings, just as Nkrumah, was a left leaning progressive in ideological terms and adopted the all inclusive personality approach that famed Nkrumah. J.J., as he is affectionately known by many Ghanaians, especially the rural part, endeavoured to cast himself as the people’s leader; fluent in English, part fluent in Ga and in Ewe, his native dialect, and less so in Twi, the language of the Ashanti, the largest tribe in Ghana. Jerry Rawlings is trademarked in Ghanaian political discourse with his attempt to address local audience in their own language instead of the English language as many politicians do when not familiar with the local dialect of the area they have gone to speak. Amongst the most popular of Jerry Rawlings’ trademark discourse in Twi are: “*me – nua num,*” meaning, “fellow brethren”; “*se – bio ta fe – ra – kye,*” meaning, “excuse me to say.”

The most ubiquitous and most remembered is his version of the proverbial “lazy hand goes hungry,” which he said it in the Twi language as: “ano – maa entu – aa, ogyina ho,” literally means, “if a bird does not fly, it stands.” In fact, the proverb should read in Twi as: “ano – maa entu – aa, obua – da,” meaning, “if a bird does not fly in search of food, it goes hungry,” which is what President Rawlings at the time wanted to say. People loved him for this, whether he misfired or was on target; he inspired many, especially the rural folks, the urban poor and the youth across the country. His rhetoric power, one may argue, was unleashed with all intent to reinforce his personality as all inclusive and anti – establishment regardless of the consequences, just as progressives do. Other part of Rawlings’ symbolic past that reinforced his political personality and won him the hearts and minds, was his communal spirit. In television news and on radio, he was seen or heard on many occasions working with rail workers to fix broken rail lines; at ports and harbours loading cargo ship with cocoa and at the suburbs, desilting blocked gutters with the locals.

Although some, especially of the ideological right, may dismiss the above accounts of Rawlings’ relationship with the masses as propaganda, – which they already have as Kufour of the NPP party, which is the party of the right, once said he will not descend the presidency into the gutters (Ghana Palaver, 2006) – they certainly influenced the perception of the masses about Rawlings, the democrat of recent years and his relationship with the people of Ghana. Most of these images, captured during the hard economic times of the 1980’s, made the masses believe he (Rawlings) had been with them during the hardships; and in reverse, question those who are now fighting for political power their whereabouts in those times of crisis. Thus, just like Nkrumah, Rawlings’ popularity – and those associations of him – is still alive till this day although had relinquished power for almost a decade.

In recent times, since the return of multi party democracy in 1992, the importance and the exuberance surrounding signs, sounds and symbols at campaign rallies of the past have not diminished despite the advancement of television and radio as principal campaign battle fields. They have instead grown into a new level of importance to the extent that ballot paper position is deemed divine to a party’s electoral fortune (Sekyi-Addo, 2004; AFP, 2008). The next section will look at the effect of semiotics in marketing political parties and political operatives in the just ended Ghanaian elections 2008.

The use of semiotics as political marketing technique – Ghana's election 2008

Political marketing in simple terms is a marriage between two social sciences - political science and marketing (Lees-Marshment, 2001). It is commonly referred to as the 'adoption' (Butler and Collins, 1999) or 'adaptation' (Scammell, 1999; Lees-Marshment, 2001) of commercial marketing concepts and techniques by political actors to organise, implement and manage political activities to realise political goals.

In its formative years, the discipline was considered a policy of political communications and message development, which includes image building, issue tracking, voter targeting and timing of elections (Maarek, 1995; Smith and Saunders, 1990). Although these activities are political marketing, they however share border with promotion, a marketing technique, and are largely confined to campaigning. They are thus found insufficient to define the entire discipline of political marketing.

In recent years, experts (Butler and Collins, 1999; Scammell, 1999; O'Shaughnessy, 1999) suggest that political marketing includes managerial, planning and control elements as well as organizational issues (Bowler and Farrell, 1992) before, during and after electioneering campaigning and even well into governance (Nimmo, 1999). The phenomenon, they argue, 'could not only be confined to the stylized period called the campaigning' (Butler and Collins, 1996). Political marketing argues that through ideological positions, candidates' characteristics, and issue positions, political parties offer an imaginary representation of governance in exchange of the electorates' trust through votes well before they are voted into power. Kotler (1972) demonstrates this position in his explanation to the question: what is the political product? This, he deems as the promise of 'honest government' (p. 47) in exchange of votes. To clarify Kotler's view on the political product, perhaps, is helpful using Susan Hart's (2001) definition of the product in commerce.

According to Hart, a product can be an idea, a service, a good, or any combination of these (Hart, in Dibb et al 2001, p. 249). Where as the "good" aspect of the product is tangible, the "idea" and "service" aspects are intangible, needing human and mechanical application to affect a result. The political product however, is mainly referred to as a service and or an idea in political marketing as defined by Kotler due to its intangible character where *promises, images* and *appearance* of *symbolic* value facilitate customers' judgment and offer psychological stimulus to purchase. Therefore, the political product, like services and ideas in service marketing, is bought on

the premise of “promised satisfaction” yet to be experienced. Having illustrated semiotics and its relationship with marketing and explained the tenets of political marketing in sections above, the following paragraphs will demonstrate, using the marketing mix principles of the 4Ps, how semiotics and marketing were used in a sophisticated blend as a political marketing technique in Ghana by the parties in campaigning.

Product – as a consumption function, one could argue that voters who are of the opinion that the country had been managed well and are confident of further progress are likely to pitch sides with – or consume – the NPPs “we are moving forward” message. Their judgment of the NPP as the best party going forward, is reinforced by images of the party’s performance during Kufour’s term in office; its claim as “the sole beholder of true democracy” in Ghanaian politics and its candidate’s characteristics as a life time civil right activist. These values associated with the NPP and its candidate, offer the party’s supporters the needed psychological stimulus to reinforce their belief that they have made the right choice and to combat any dissonance they may experience as a result of external actions directed at them, such as opposition parties’ campaign messages.

Put differently, through the values of the NPP party and its candidate, those electorates who decide to vote NPP, it could be argued, do so because they are assured of the “good and honest governance” Kotler talks about. The reverse is the case to those who are on the “ye – re se – sa – mu” (change) camp of the NDC. Their choice to changing the government is reinforced by the opposite images of the Kufour years – images of mismanagement, corruption etc directed at them from the NDC campaign. It is therefore not surprising when the NPP leadership declared the 2008 elections as the *battle for comparing records*, in the hope that voters may see their performance in government as much better than that of the NDC, from 1992 – 2000 and vote accordingly. This notion led to the NPPs strategy of showing, across the country, elaborate images of developments, on television, billboards and newspapers, executed during Kufour’s eight years in government.

Place – as a distribution function, Hanneberg (2003) categorizes it into two main sub groups: *campaign delivery* and *offering delivery*. The campaign delivery, according to him, provides the primary exchange partner (the electorates) with access to all relevant information regarding crucial political policies and important agenda points. The campaign delivery channel is the means of conveying political messages to voters, availability of candidate in communities to interact with the electorates and the use of simple and common language identifiable and understandable to them. On the other hand, the offering delivery is referred to as the fulfillment of the political promises (Hanneberg, 2003; Harrop, 1990; Palmer, 2002). However, the

offering delivery can only occur, in most part, when the party has the political and legal mandate to fulfill the promises, i.e. when in government.

In the first instance, the campaign delivery, Hanneberg sees the candidate and the ranks and file members of the party as the haulage. The “distribution of the political candidate as a product surrogate” (Hanneberg, 2003), criss-crossing the political market to speak at radio and TV shows, conferences, rallies and many other events in an attempt to secure the mandate of the people come election day is an important part of the political distribution function. However, to the NPP and NDC parties, the rank and file members of the party as distribution function was equally important and played a crucial role in the just ended elections 2008. They provided local campaign and electioneering support, canvassing and leafleting for the parties’ campaign (Harris, 2001b; Wring, 2000a).

Just like the NPPs success in energizing their base in the 2000 elections with the ‘asee ho’ sign as explained above, the 2008 elections saw a multiple fold of that energy for both parties with the introduction of the ‘hopping kangaroo’ and the ‘finger wriggling’ signs as an embodiment of what the two parties stood for; and were the summation of what the political messengers wanted to tell their audience. The audience ended up being political messengers themselves as they invoke the parties’ campaign signs and the related sounds unconsciously at public spaces whenever they come into contact with party messengers. These signs and their related sounds that come along with them had a ‘viral effect’ connecting people whenever they are invoked by the political messenger, the foot soldier, making the parties’ support network wider and wider, or so it seemed, at least, as people were seen responding to the chants and engaging the signs.

Price – as a cost function, Hanneberg (2003) refers to the price as the management of actual and perceived attitudinal and behavioural barriers on the part of voters. He argues that for the price factor to reflect well on the political character, there is the need for redefining price element to mean “cost” or “sacrifice” (Hanneberg, 2003). Niffenegger (1989 p. 179), on the other hand, defines the political price/cost concept as the psychological construct made up of “voters feelings of national, economic, and psychological hope or insecurity.” In reference to Ghana’s election 2008, both parties sought to manage voters’ attitudes either to reinforce confidence, as in the case of the incumbent NPPs ‘we are moving forward’ agenda, depicting progress and growth in Ghana’s economic and social fronts; or to inject dissonance and insecurity in the minds of voters, as was the case of the opposition NDCs change agenda, signaling how costly it will be for Ghanaians to vote the NPP back to power.

Promotion – as a communication function, it informs the primary exchange partners (the voter in this case) of the offer and its availability (Hanneberg, 2003). It is characterized by the provision of political content – image and cues – and aids the interpretation and sense making of the complex political market (Kotler and Kotler, 1999). Its aim, among others as explained in sections above, is to simplify the political message and to form succinct political stances and pageantry capable of injecting excitement to engage the political consumer. And in the case of the NDC and the NPP parties in Ghana's elections 2008, the hopping kangaroo dance and the finger wriggling act did just that.

Conclusion

Evidently, Ghana's democracy is maturing (Kokutse, 2009) as the country conducts its fifth successive elections since 1992; so are certain party political management functions such as electioneering campaigning, as illustrated in this study. However, development in campaign management alone is limited and unsustainable to ensure political parties' endurance in the long term (Butler and Collins, 1996). It is only when most strategic activities such as fund raising, membership recruitment and retention, voter-centred issue development and delivery of campaign promises (Bowler and Farrell, 1992; Butler and Collins, 1996; Scammell, 1999; O'Shaughnessy, 1999; Steen, 1999; Nimmo, 1999) are well developed and managed as part of the entire party political management process, could parties survive the pressures of the political market and function as organs of a mature democracy. Until then, the sophistication in electioneering campaigning will continue to be 'a concocted pageantry for the hoi polloi,' says Todd Gitlin (1991) never to be remembered after the elections. Hence politicians will have to go full circle, come the next election cycle in search of support, again.

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