



The Semiotics of Colour in Contemporary African Art: A Linguistic Interpretation

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Abstract. Colour plays a central role in the expressive power of contemporary African art, yet its deeper communicative functions remain insufficiently explored. This study examines the semiotics of colour in selected contemporary African artworks, interpreting chromatic choices through a linguistic lens. Drawing on semiotic and multimodal theories, the study analyses how artists encode meaning through colour to articulate identity, memory, socio-political concerns, and cultural continuity. The research highlights the ways colour operates not merely as an aesthetic element but as a structured system of signs shaped by cultural knowledge and creative intent. Findings reveal that contemporary African artists employ colour as a communicative resource that functions similarly to language—marked by symbolic conventions, contextual variations, and interpretive possibilities. By integrating linguistic analysis with art interpretation, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how visual meaning is constructed in African artistic practice and how viewers can decode the communicative messages embedded in artistic palettes.

Keywords: Colour semiotics, contemporary African art, linguistic interpretation, multimodality, visual communication, chromatic symbolism.

1. Introduction

Colour has long served as one of the most expressive channels of meaning in African visual culture. Beyond its aesthetic appeal, colour in African art carries layers of symbolic, cultural, and emotional significance that shape both the production and interpretation of

artworks. In recent years, contemporary African artists have increasingly drawn on colour as a communicative tool to engage themes of identity, memory, gender, spirituality, and socio-political experience. As global audiences interact more frequently with African art, the semiotic potential embedded in colour usage has become even more important to understand (Adeyemi, 2022).

From a linguistic perspective, colour operates like a system of signs: it conveys messages, relies on cultural conventions, and acquires meaning through contextual interpretation. Linguists and semioticians argue that visual elements can function similarly to linguistic structures, especially when intentionally employed to communicate ideas (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). This makes contemporary African art an ideal site for interdisciplinary inquiry, where artistic creativity intersects with cultural semiotics and visual linguistics.

Despite growing scholarly interest in African art, the meaning-making functions of colour remain understudied. Much of the existing literature highlights themes, styles, and socio-political commentary, with less systematic attention to how artists encode meaning through chromatic choices (Olayinka, 2023). Yet contemporary African artists use colour not merely for surface beauty but as a language through which personal and collective narratives are expressed. An interpretive gap therefore exists between artistic practice and linguistic-semiotic analysis.

This study investigates ‘the semiotics of colour in contemporary African art’ through a linguistic lens. It seeks to demonstrate how colour functions as a communicative resource, how artists mobilise chromatic codes to express meaning, and how viewers can decode these visual messages. By bridging art and linguistics, the study offers a deeper framework for understanding the communicative power of colour in African creative expression.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Semiotics and Visual Meaning

Semiotics provides a foundational framework for understanding how visual elements operate as signs. Classic semiotic theorists emphasized that meaning emerges through systems of representation, whether verbal or non-verbal (Chandler, 2017). In contemporary multimodal linguistics, colour is recognised as a “meaning-bearing mode” that interacts with other visual cues to produce coherent messages (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021). Recent scholarship shows that colour meanings are shaped by cultural learning, emotional response, and social context (Taylor, 2022). This reinforces the need to interpret colour in African art through a culturally grounded semiotic lens.

2.2 Colour Symbolism in African Cultural Contexts

Colour in African societies is deeply connected to cosmology, identity, and ritual practices. While specific meanings differ across ethnic groups, colours such as red, black, and white often carry symbolic weight related to power, spirituality, or ancestral presence (Ncube, 2020). Contemporary African artists frequently draw from this cultural reservoir, using colour to reference tradition, critique social issues, or assert cultural identity (Oke & Abiodun, 2022). As African art becomes more globalised, artists also adapt traditional colour symbolism to address modern themes such as migration, urbanity, and hybridism (Mensah, 2023).

2.3 Contemporary African Art and Chromatic Expression

Scholars note a growing trend toward vibrant, expressive palettes in contemporary African art, reflecting new forms of experimentation and cultural dialogue (Haruna, 2021). Artists use colour to create emotional depth, challenge stereotypes, and subvert Western aesthetic expectations (Okafor, 2023). However, few studies provide systematic linguistic or

semiotic interpretations of how such meanings are encoded and decoded.

2.4 Linguistic Approaches to Visual Art

Linguistic approaches to art analysis focus on how visual components can be read as communicative structures. Visual texts possess grammar, coherence, and interpretive conventions, similar to verbal texts (Bateman, 2021). Colour is particularly influential, shaping visual “syntax” and guiding viewer perception (Forceville, 2022). Applying these insights to contemporary African art allows for a more rigorous understanding of how artists use colour as a communicative code.

2.5 Gap in the Literature

Despite substantial work on African art, colour symbolism, and multimodal communication, limited integration exists between linguistic semiotics and the analysis of colour in contemporary African artworks. Many studies treat colour aesthetically or symbolically, rather than as a structured communicative system. This study addresses this gap by applying semiotic and linguistic frameworks to interpret colour systematically.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

A ‘qualitative interpretive research design’ was adopted, suitable for exploring meaning-making processes in visual texts and uncovering symbolic representation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Bazeley, 2021). This approach allows for a detailed examination of chromatic patterns, cultural references, and artist intent.

3.2 Population

The study population consisted of ‘contemporary African artworks produced between 2015–2024’, along with ‘artists, curators, and art writers’ who contextualize and interpret these works (Okeke-Agulu, 2020; Kasfir & Roberts, 2023).

3.3 Sample and Sampling Technique

‘Purposive sampling’ was used to select artworks and participants rich in chromatic communication (Etikan & Bala, 2017). The sample included:

- * 10 contemporary artworks representing West, East, and Southern Africa
- * 5 professional artists

* 3 curators or art critics

Sampling was continued until ‘thematic saturation’ was reached (Guest, Namey & Chen, 2020).

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

1. ‘Visual Analysis Protocol’ - Focused on dominant colours, contrasts, symbolic references, and potential communicative intent (Rose, 2022).

2. ‘Semi-Structured Interviews’ - Engaged artists and curators to understand motivations, cultural influences, and intended meaning behind chromatic choices (Denscombe, 2021).

3.5 Data Collection Procedure

* Artwork images were sourced from galleries, portfolios, and exhibition catalogues.

* Visual semiotic analysis applied the structured protocol.

* Interviews were conducted physically or online, recorded, and transcribed for analysis (Tracy, 2020).

3.6 Data Analysis

The data collected from visual analysis of the selected contemporary African artworks, combined with insights from semi-structured interviews with artists and curators, were subjected to a thematic and semiotic analysis. The primary aim was to interpret how colour functions as a communicative tool, conveying cultural, emotional, and socio-political meanings within the artworks.

The visual analysis began with a detailed examination of each artwork, focusing on the dominant colour palettes, contrasts, spatial arrangements, and interactions between hues. Each chromatic choice was assessed for potential symbolic significance, contextual relevance, and affective impact. Colours were coded according to recurrent patterns and grouped into themes such as cultural identity, emotional expression, social commentary, and hybrid innovation. For example, in West African works, the repetition of red, gold, and green suggested deliberate references to pan-African identity, while earthy tones in Southern African works indicated connections to heritage and environmental context (Odetayo, 2025; Olayinka, 2023).

Simultaneously, interview data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic coding. Key themes emerged around artists’ intentions, cultural influences, and interpretive strategies. Artists frequently described colour as a conscious tool to communicate layered meanings, mediating between local symbolic systems and broader global audiences. Curators reinforced

these insights, highlighting that understanding colour codes is essential for accurate interpretation and audience engagement (Haruna, 2021; Mensah, 2023).

The analysis integrated ‘semiotic and linguistic frameworks’, treating colour as a system of signs capable of symbolic, indexical, and iconic meaning (Bateman, 2021; Forceville, 2022). Symbolic analysis focused on culturally embedded meanings, indexical analysis interpreted context-dependent or situational cues, and iconic analysis explored how colour mirrored emotional states, narratives, or environmental conditions. Through iterative coding and comparison across cases, the study identified consistent patterns in the communicative deployment of colour while also noting variations resulting from regional differences and individual artistic innovation.

Finally, the analytical process involved synthesizing visual and interview data to construct a comprehensive understanding of how colour functions as a language-like system in contemporary African art. This approach ensured that the findings were grounded in both the visual evidence of the artworks and the interpretive perspectives of the artists and curators, producing a holistic and nuanced representation of colour as a communicative, semiotic, and expressive resource.

4. Results

The analysis of the ten selected contemporary African artworks revealed rich and recurring patterns in the use of colour, demonstrating its central role as a communicative and semiotic resource. Across the sampled works, colour was used deliberately to convey cultural identity, emotional states, social commentary, and aesthetic innovation. In West African paintings, red, gold, and green frequently appeared, evoking pan-African identity, local heritage, and historical continuity. These chromatic choices function as visual markers that connect the artworks to collective memory and culturally specific narratives, enabling viewers familiar with these codes to immediately interpret layers of meaning embedded in the compositions (Odetayo, 2025; Olayinka, 2023).

In Southern African works, earthy tones such as ochre, brown, and muted yellow predominated, serving to situate the artworks within environmental, spiritual, and historical contexts. The choice of these colours reflected not only aesthetic preference but also the artists’ intention to engage audiences with themes of ancestry, ritual, and cultural continuity. These findings underscore that colour in contemporary African art operates as a symbolic tool, encoding meaning that transcends surface decoration.

Beyond cultural representation, the study found that colour served a key role in expressing emotion and responding to social realities. Bright, saturated hues, such as vivid yellows, oranges, and reds, were consistently associated with optimism, vitality, and celebration, while darker or muted tones, such as deep blues, blacks, and greys, were used to signify mourning, tension, or reflection on historical and contemporary social issues (Mensah, 2023; Haruna, 2021). These findings suggest that colour in African art functions similarly to affective cues in language, guiding audience perception and evoking emotional responses in alignment with the artist's intended message (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Bateman, 2021).

A significant observation from both the visual analysis and interviews with artists and curators was the prevalence of hybrid chromatic systems. Many artists combined traditional colour lexicons with contemporary, global influences, incorporating neon tones, pastels, and experimental palettes alongside culturally rooted hues. This blending demonstrates the dynamic and adaptive nature of colour as a semiotic resource, allowing artists to negotiate between tradition and modernity while communicating to both local and international audiences (Okeke-Agulu, 2020). For instance, one artist explained that the combination of earthy pigments with neon highlights was intended to reflect both heritage and contemporary urban experience, creating a visual dialogue that resonates across cultural boundaries.

The study also found that colour functions on multiple semiotic levels simultaneously. Symbolically, it conveys cultural values, spiritual meaning, and social identity. Indexically, it indicates context-specific conditions, such as celebration, mourning, or protest. Iconically, colour mirrors emotions, environmental conditions, or narrative motifs, enhancing viewer engagement and interpretive depth (Baiden, Aboagyewaa-Ntiri & Opoku, 2022; Forceville, 2022). Interviews reinforced that these semiotic functions are deliberate, with artists carefully selecting chromatic combinations to encode layered messages that communicate cultural, emotional, and socio-political meaning.

Overall, the results indicate that colour in contemporary African art is not merely decorative but constitutes a structured system of visual language. Its strategic deployment allows artists to articulate complex narratives, mediate cultural memory, express emotional depth, and engage audiences across diverse interpretive frameworks. By examining colour through both visual analysis and artist/curator

perspectives, the study highlights the intricate interplay between traditional symbolism, contemporary innovation, and global influences, affirming colour's central role as a primary communicative resource in African visual culture.

5. Discussion of Findings

The analysis of the selected contemporary African artworks revealed that colour serves as a multifaceted communicative tool, functioning at symbolic, indexical, and iconic levels. Across the ten artworks examined, recurring patterns emerged that demonstrate both the cultural depth and expressive versatility of chromatic choices. In many West African paintings, the use of red, gold, and green reflected pan-African identity and local heritage, while Southern African works frequently employed earth tones such as ochre, brown, and deep yellow to signify historical memory, spiritual resonance, or environmental connection (Odetayo, 2025; Olayinka, 2023). These findings underscore that, for contemporary African artists, colour is not simply decorative but is embedded with layers of cultural meaning that communicate identity and communal values to viewers familiar with traditional symbolic systems.

Colour also emerged as a primary vehicle for emotional expression and socio-political commentary. Saturated hues, including vivid yellows and oranges, were associated with optimism, vitality, and celebration, whereas darker tones, such as deep blues and blacks, conveyed grief, reflection, or social critique (Mensah, 2023; Haruna, 2021). These chromatic strategies align with multimodal linguistic theories, which suggest that visual elements, like verbal language, can encode affective meaning and guide interpretive processes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Bateman, 2021). Interviews with artists and curators revealed that these choices are deliberate: colour is used to create affective resonance, evoke narrative, and communicate nuanced messages about societal issues or personal experiences. For example, one artist explained that blending traditional palettes with modern neons or pastel tones allowed their work to speak simultaneously to local audiences familiar with cultural codes and to international viewers interpreting the artwork through broader visual conventions.

The study further highlighted the innovative use of hybrid chromatic systems. Many artists juxtaposed traditional colour lexicons with global influences, producing palettes that simultaneously preserve heritage and engage contemporary aesthetic trends. This hybridity demonstrates the adaptive capacity of

colour as a semiotic resource: it is capable of bridging historical and modern contexts while maintaining interpretive flexibility (Okeke-Agulu, 2020). Such hybridisation reflects an ongoing dialogue between local and global art spheres, suggesting that contemporary African artists are not only custodians of cultural memory but also active participants in transnational artistic discourse.

Overall, the findings confirm that colour in contemporary African art functions as a structured semiotic system, akin to language. Symbolically, it conveys cultural values, spiritual meaning, and identity markers (Baiden, Aboagyewaa-Ntiri & Opoku, 2022). Indexically, it communicates situational and contextual meaning, such as mourning, protest, or celebration (Haruna, 2021). Iconically, it mirrors emotions, environmental states, or narrative motifs, thereby enhancing the viewer's perceptual and emotional experience (Forceville, 2022). This layered functionality underscores the communicative power of colour, demonstrating that visual elements in contemporary African art are capable of encoding complex and multidimensional messages beyond the purely aesthetic.

The study's implications extend across artistic practice, art education, curation, and research. For educators and scholars, integrating colour semiotics into curricula and academic discourse is essential to cultivate critical understanding of African art. For artists, deliberate exploration of colour as a communicative tool can enhance narrative depth and audience engagement. Curators and exhibition organisers are encouraged to provide interpretive materials highlighting the semiotic significance of colour, ensuring that audiences can decode embedded messages and cultural references. Furthermore, researchers should expand the study of colour semiotics to include larger, cross-regional, and cross-media analyses, covering textiles, installations, and digital media to capture evolving trends and hybrid practices. Finally, public engagement initiatives such as workshops and gallery talks can foster awareness and appreciation of the communicative and cultural dimensions of colour, bridging the interpretive gap between artists and viewers.

In summary, the study demonstrates that colour in contemporary African art is a dynamic, structured, and multilayered system of communication. It is instrumental in expressing cultural identity, emotional depth, historical memory, and socio-political commentary. Through a semiotic and linguistic lens, the research highlights how contemporary African artists strategically manipulate chromatic codes to convey meaning, negotiate tradition and modernity,

and engage diverse audiences. Colour, therefore, is not merely an aesthetic choice but a primary vehicle of communication, bridging personal, communal, and global narratives in African visual culture.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study demonstrate that colour in contemporary African art operates as a sophisticated semiotic and communicative system, far beyond its traditional aesthetic function. Across the artworks examined, colour consistently served to articulate cultural identity, historical memory, emotional states, and socio-political commentary, functioning simultaneously at symbolic, indexical, and iconic levels. Traditional chromatic lexicons, rooted in local and regional cultural practices, continue to inform artistic choices, allowing viewers familiar with these conventions to decode layers of meaning and engage deeply with the work (Odetayo, 2025; Olayinka, 2023).

At the same time, the study highlights the adaptive and innovative use of colour, with artists blending traditional hues with global and contemporary palettes, including neons, pastels, and experimental combinations. This hybridisation reflects the dynamic negotiation between heritage and modernity, demonstrating that colour can bridge local cultural knowledge and global artistic discourse (Okeke-Agulu, 2020). Through these practices, artists are able to communicate complex narratives that engage audiences emotionally, culturally, and intellectually, establishing colour as a primary mode of visual language.

Moreover, the research reveals that colour functions not only as a symbolic marker of identity or heritage but also as a tool for emotional and social communication. Bright, saturated colours evoke vitality and celebration, whereas darker, muted tones convey reflection, mourning, or critique, highlighting the nuanced ways in which chromatic choices encode affective and contextual meaning (Mensah, 2023; Haruna, 2021). These findings underscore that understanding contemporary African art requires interpreting colour as a structured communicative system, akin to language, where each hue, combination, and contrast carries intentional and contextually rich meaning.

In sum, this study affirms that colour is central to the communicative power of contemporary African art. It is a vehicle through which artists express identity, memory, emotion, and social commentary, while also navigating the intersection of tradition and global

artistic innovation. By examining colour through a linguistic-semiotic lens, the study provides a framework for appreciating the depth and complexity of visual meaning in African art, emphasizing that colour is not merely decorative but a primary medium through which cultural, emotional, and societal narratives are transmitted and understood.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the understanding, practice, and interpretation of colour in contemporary African art:

7.1 Integration of colour into Art Education

Art education programs, both within Africa and globally, should incorporate colour semiotics into curricula. Teaching students to analyze and interpret colour as a communicative system will equip emerging artists and scholars with the tools to understand and create meaning-rich artworks. This approach encourages critical thinking about how cultural, emotional, and socio-political messages can be embedded in visual forms.

7.2 Deliberate Artistic Practice

Contemporary African artists are encouraged to continue exploring colour as a strategic communicative resource. By intentionally employing both traditional and hybrid palettes, artists can convey complex narratives, negotiate cultural identities, and engage diverse audiences more effectively. Emphasis on chromatic literacy enables artworks to communicate layered meanings across local and international contexts.

7.3 Curatorial and Exhibition Strategies

Curators and exhibition organizers should provide interpretive materials that elucidate the semiotic and linguistic significance of colour in artworks. Such resources—through labels, guides, or audio-visual content—can facilitate audience understanding and appreciation, enabling viewers to decode symbolic, indexical, and iconic messages embedded in chromatic choices.

7.4 Further Research

Future studies should expand the scope of research on colour semiotics in African art, incorporating cross-regional and cross-media analyses, including textiles, installations, and digital art. Comparative studies

could illuminate regional variations, evolving chromatic trends, and the influence of global artistic practices on traditional colour systems.

7.5 Public Engagement and Awareness

Efforts to educate the general public on the communicative and cultural roles of colour in African art are recommended. Workshops, gallery talks, and community programs can enhance viewers' ability to interpret colour-coded messages, deepen engagement with the artworks, and foster appreciation of the cultural, emotional, and socio-political dimensions embedded in contemporary African art.

7.6 Policy and Institutional Support

Arts councils, cultural institutions, and funding bodies should support initiatives that emphasize colour literacy and semiotic analysis in African art. Grants, residencies, and exhibition programs that encourage artists to experiment with and document the communicative role of colour can enrich cultural production and scholarship.

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