

IBIBIO CULTURAL COMMUNICATION AND THE VIVIDNESS OF SIGNIFIED IN *IFAK*

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Abstract

The use of film to portray human situation is being widely accepted but much emphasis on its effectiveness in referent arrogation is yet to be optimally explored. This has made the need for cultural signs in the Nollywood subgenres like Ibibio films, their specific meaning and their reflective signified to the audience necessary and binding for critical evaluation. Premised on Ferdinand de Saussure's Structuralism, this paper uses qualitative analytic method to analyse Ibibio cultural communication and the vividness of its signified(s) in Ifak. Findings show that cultural communication is the interchange of a people's way of life through the available medium. Ibibio people express their in-depth ideas through oral form, making proverbs, idioms, adages and jokes tenable indigenous media for critical information. The human emotions such as pity, love, courage, disgust and viciousness are deployed to encode salient possible intent, indicating that the future of a society depends more on the nature of their education, purpose and the viability of the communicating codes. Findings further show that cultural values are coded in symbols and that experience is required to grasp the referent. The paper concludes that the incorporation of a people's philosophical position and social values in embellish a film is one of the nascent means of exposing and promoting the values of those people and their society. It recommends that cultural ideas communicated through visual images should be made clearer to transcend the signified.

Keywords: Communication, Culture, Film, Signified, Vividness.

Introduction

Shared beliefs and indigenous human practices that define a people's philosophy may develop or diminish based on adaptability with the trends of time. This threat has gradually pervaded the African communities who are still struggling to identify a more suitable measure to negotiate the outlet for expanding their signs system, their phonology and the referents as are grasped internally in the society.

In Akwa Ibom State, many cultural ideas are expressed in oral form and made to generate significant referents realisable in attitudes, manners and dispositions of temperament. For instance, the Ibibio society gives interpretation of their physical presence from the spiritual backup. "According to Anietie Udofia and Aniekan Akpan, in this society, "the physical and the spiritual juxtapose to unify man and his cosmic ambience" (10). It is cultural to ward off evil and render medication to a sick person in Ibibio community using both natural and spiritual means. Through the use of herbs, beauty and people's outlook are brought to instant appeal. On the other hand, in Ibibio culture, "indigenous cosmetics made from indigenous plant/herbs can soot the skin and preserve it" (Umoh 13). In the case of morality, ethics and taboos, a natural influence evolving from cultural contact with foreign culture to the Ibibio terrain is noticeable. To grapple with the

newer occurrences of human practices, cultural communication is practically experimented in the media trends, in which people can see themselves and how the culture is being displayed to the betterment or detriment of the society.

Among the emerging media trends is film. Filmmaking is a craft projected in two ways. According to Aniekan James, Okon Jacob and Mbuk Mboho, “a significant social upheaval overbearing Nigeria today is the portrayal of sexual violence and rationalisation of practices that the nation proscribes as outright taboos in film... the deliberate shifting of the ideal cultures of the people of Nigeria are rationalised as aspects of aesthetics”(600). On the other hand, film is also used to present the interplay of voices in the society. According to Osondu Ahirika, “It can bring people of like-minds to think and fuse a similar view on a specific matter” (64). This is identifiable in the contemporary filmmaking, which allows for the intermingling of indigenous values with the adapted values from contacts with other people with different cultural backgrounds. The above fact is corroborated by Kelechi Uzoma Agoha, Judith Akunne Ume, Nicholas Akas who agree that films “promote cultural values and morals as well as expose social ills that affect the image of the country” (1).

A significant aspect of filmmaking in Ibibio is acknowledged also in allowing the vividness of cultural referents to distend through indigenous language deployment along with English in speech and in theory. It is the making of African subject quite African with its in-depth Africanness in theory and in practice. In the aspect of theorising, Anietie Udofia posits that “Africanness is the conceptualisation of media theorising in the nature of the Africa’s cosmic view. It is the activation of activities within the scope of African philosophy” (191). By allowing the flow of indigenous language in films such as *Ifak*, the primary intent of a speaker is conveyed and the referent is established without ambiguity. In *Ifak*, cultural communication is brought to a limelight in undertone that still express the vividness of the speaker’s intent as signified(s) through which a call for social action is intensified, hence the focus of this paper.

Theoretical Framework

The undertone of this study is language usage that is capable of conveying the actual intent of the encoder decipherable in a society. For this purpose, this paper dwells on the theoretical view of Ferdinand de Saussure’s Structuralism with specific view on his idea of the “signifier” and “signified” as the basic substance of language.

Structuralism is one of the contemporary theories that originated from the idea of Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*, which was compiled in 1911. According to Charles Bressler, it was “Saussure (who) introduced the synchronic approach, a method that proceeds by focusing on a language at one particular time... on how the language and its parts function... and how it operates rather than its evolution”(77). The theory acknowledges that the use of language in utterance or gesture works in two ways. One part suggests while the other establishes what is suggested.

The two ways conceived by Saussure is that a word uttered may suggest anything based on the understanding of the society, but a continuous usage makes each word to evoke a specific concept. This suggests the idea of the signifier. Along the line, what a word or gesture or even a narration

evokes may maintain a specific level of oneness only to diverge to a “twoness” based on the actual intent. This suggests the idea of “signified”. According to Saussure, cited in Widdowson and Raman, “words are not symbols which correspond to referents, but rather are signs which are made up of two parts (like two sides of a sheet of paper): a mark either written or spoken, called a signifier; and a concept (what is “thought” when the mark is made), called signified....Sign = Signifier/ Signified”(104).

The view above demonstrates why proverbs, adages, blinking, touches and body movement can suggest an idea and actually situate a concept for it. This is made bolder and stronger when a specific kind of language is used in a film as found In Ifak. The use of Indigenous language, gestures and paralanguages is made deeper in Ifak. In the film, a specific technique is deployed to blend actions and dialogue with the contemporary language usage in Akwa Ibom State. This expresses Terence Hawkey’s idea that “human beings communicate by non-verbal means and in a way which... must have the way of stretching our concept... until it includes non-verbal areas... gesture, posture, clothing, etc, symmetrically communicate something meaningful to us” (125).

The relevance of this theory to the essay is that the culture of Ibibio people as portrayed in Ifak is made decipherable through dialogue and gestures which are aspect of language. However, every cultural deployment is purposely used to suggest something and what every sign suggest is acted or brought to specific action, which situates Saussure’s conception of the “signifier” and the “signified”.

Ifak: An Overview

Koko holds that a woman’s role in her home is to prepare food and born children for the husband, while the husband goes hustling for money and food. Her husband, Tom, is neck-deep in drinking, smoking and gambling. He basically relies on alms or group gifts from people. Ima, their daughter is bent on going to school but the parents have gradually become irresponsible

They decide to give Ima to Steve and Theresa as housemaid, convincing her that she would be sent to school. In Uyo, Ima is not allowed to go to school. She only sneaks to classrooms after school to copy what students learned during school period and as her mistress, Theresa discovers, she punishes her severely.

In the house, Ima is constantly harassed by Steve, Theresa’s husband. He rapes her and threatens that if she divulges what goes on between them, he will kill everyone in her family and kill Ima also. This scares Ima. As it is discovered that she is pregnant, she refuses to mention the person involved; but rather run and begins to solicit for help in the street, sleeping at any uncompleted building in sight.

She specifically spread pieces of cartons to sleep in Nene’s building, which Nene herself has been suspecting some irregular aura after closing and opening the following day. Nene catches her. She breaks down and explains her predicament. Nene takes pity on her and ignores the legal consequence to give a home to an unknown person. She stays with Nene and delivers her child but the child dies. Sympathisers contribute some money and gave her for the loss. She uses the money to buy a sewing machine, which she uses to sew clothe. One of the designs attracts attention. Ima

is employed to represent a foreign design company. Determination surmounts sorrow, and this is raised and projected from the context of Ibibio contemporary signs structure deployed in Iflāk.

Cultural Communication in Ibibio Setting.

Cultural communication is the generation and circulation of information about a people's way of life which helps them to grapple with the challenges they face to survive. A more reliable mode of grasping what the term actually denotes is by evaluating human qualities that cultural communication filter through as presented thus:

It requires paying attention to both verbal and non-verbal cues and seeking clarification when needed... understanding non-verbal communication plays a significant role in intercultural interactions. Gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, personal space and tone of voice can convey different meaning across cultures. Being aware of these variation helps to avoid misunderstanding and offense. It is also helpful to know that some cultures are more expressive than others (cs.pressbook.pub np).

Drawing from the attitudes that engender cultural communication, it is clearer that cultural communication denotes the activities or practices of interchanging information within and outside a society. As Joseph Rishanteb submits "it is simply the spread of information... typical of rural communities (like)... the town crier, poetry, music, dance, community theatre, masquerades, drums traditional art and crafts as well as other forms of traditional culture and symbolism which are clearly distinguishable from conventional communication media" (213). It is equally the dissemination of ideas on the practices of a people through means which are decipherable and common to people.

Cultural communication is the exchange of human practices across boundaries and people. It suggests the gradual introduction and adaptation to human practices across human cultures. According to Gideon Isika, it embodies "acts (that) provide a good meeting point for sharing ideas and values which are requirement for social development and progress (168). One cultural value meeting another and possibly adapting by adopting the tenable culture in-between is an aspect of cultural communication.

Another way of assessing cultural communication is the human attitudes influenced and enhanced through indigenous media of communication. In Akwa Ibom State, there are many indigenous media of communication. According to Stephen Umoh, in Ibibio cosmology, "there is an aspect of cultural knowledge system on the workability of herbs"(101). In the view of Ekong Ekong, there is an aspect of Ibibio culture that proscribes taboos such as killing of a totem, manslaughter, murder of kinsman, committing any offense against a grandchild or grandparent, an in-law, or a stranger and breaking of oath or undermining injunctions (130-131). All these are cultural content expressed in utterance, attitude or action. Cultural communication involves the way these contents are presented before others, and the way they are made to transcend generation.

However, in the contemporary Ibibio society, cultural communication is made to manifest in dialogues and dramatic activities that suggest a wholesome idea; and the language expression and the dynamism it unfolds in arts is remarkable. There is a significant deployment of English

language in filmmaking, but in some indigenous films, the use of vernacular, proverbs, adage, and idioms equally indicate a dimension of cultural communication. This means, virtually all that a film or production contains in character, locale, gesture, dialogue, costume, makeup and props, there are factual cultural information displayed as signs to decode. As Umoh further intones about Ibibio cultural communication, “the signs may require extraneous knowledge especially of the language usage to decipher the interplay of the signifiers (with the signified) which the grammar of the text (film) projects” (280). Therefore, cultural communication is the interaction of human practices across societies.

The Signified: Conceptual Clarification

The word, signified was first used as a process or factor to ponder in communication by Ferdinand de Saussure. The idea suggests what Friedrich Ungerer and Hans-Jorg Schmid address as “a mapping of the structure of a source model unto a target model” (118). To properly expound the idea of the signified, Antony Easthope posits that “the relationship between the celluloid strip projected onto a screen, the shaped and patterned visual image, and what the image may represent.... is the relationship between signifier and signified”(70). The signified, then, suggests the substance of language evocation.

The signified is the final destination of the human communication. Saussure views human language as a two-sided projection, which one side suggests a thing the other side identify the suggested thing. That means, in a film, “things and state of mind are linked by a motivated relation....one is the image of another”. (Todorov 16-17); This suggests an idea evoked in speech, picture, action or gesture and what the idea really mean based on the indigenous mastery which creates the image of a rule. According to Terry Eagleton, “the rule seems to indicate to us the way to go like pointing finger... (to) creative interpretation”(20). The signified, to this end denotes the referent of a sign.

Another way to look at the signified is the substance of imagination in both real life communication and creative representation in the screen media. According to Rafey Habib:

Saussure’s exposition of the ‘Nature of linguistic sign’ provides a referent point for much subsequent literary and cultural theory. He attacks the corresponding theory of meaning whereby language is viewed as a naming process, each word corresponding to the thing it names.... Saussure argues that both terms of the linguistic signs (signifier and signified) are psychological in nature; the sign unites not a thing with a name but a concept with a sound-image. The latter (signified) is not the material sound but the “psychological imprint” of the sound... He suggests a new terminology: signified designates the concept, signifier designates the sound-image (226).

Drawing from Habib’s reiteration of Saussure conception of the signified, a clearer vision of the idea is what Udofia calls “the objective.... brought to situate the indefiniteness of the mind through pictorials and action”(46). Therefore, a sound may highlight anything in mind but what the sound actually suggests is the signified.

Ibibio Cultural Communication as Signified in *Ifak*

Ibibio cultural communication as implied in this essay is a collection of human practices of the Ibibio people deployed in speech, action, images and attitude in the film, *Ifak*, which projects Ibibio reasoning, philosophy and conception of life to other societies of the world, while vividness of the signified is what an utterance or action actually result in from the cultural position as realised in the language dispersed in proverbs, idioms, sign, colour and/ or what the images projected from the film actually suggest. Much attempt is made to transliterate the messages in a “piece of communication” in English language. Other direct cultural communication is only linked to their signified(s) under the subheads below.

Dialogue

The language of film is mixed. Ibibio is widely used but there is much code mixing and code switching which are laced with deep cultural signifier and a signified, as discussed in the explications from the characters’ dialogue:

- Koko:** Ima, *aya adi ka nkang eka Ikwo* (Ima you will go to Eka Iquo’s place).
Akwok Ison-ufok amo, ayed afong amo ye ake ndito amo (You will sweep her house, wash her clothes and that of her children); so that *uma uwuo idaga ndubreyo adu’nyong do, aya uno ndidia; amana uno okuk afo akpe usung anyong adi* (so that In the evening when you would return, she would give you food to eat and also give you transport fare to pay your way back).
- Ima:** Mummy, *ufok-nwed’e?* (Mother, what about school)
- Koko:** *Eke ufok-nwed?* (Which school?)

The Ibibio phenomenon encoded in the above dialogue is the Ibibio parents purposefully enslaving their children for food. Ibibio people serve others for their daily needs. The signified is that child education is a scam currently.

In another instance of using language, Tom uses code-mixing with Effiong to disseminate another valid idea prevalent as a culture in the Ibibio society.

(Tom is completely drunk. He is playing games on a draft board with Effiong. Ima walks to Tom, her father, and whispers....):

- Tom:** Kaa! *Common, vamoose; ak^k ndidia ibaga.* (Stop. Disappear immediately. There is no money for food).
- Effiong:** Tom, *ata ayen mfo ke abo ke ak^k ndidia ibaga?* (Is your real child you say, there is no money for food)
- Tom:** (fully sober with drunkenness) *Adiaha mmi ade’do. Nsin eka amo idip nanga ndogo fifteen.* (that is my first daughter. I impregnated the mother when I was fifteen years).

The context of the culture above is that parents feed their children but Tom’s attitude is a widespread situation in Ibibio land that irresponsible parents control their homes through utterances but dislodge the home by inordinate actions. Tom impregnated his wife at fifteen and

probably out of wedlock. The signified is that in Ibibo philosophy, a child born out of wedlock will born a child of wedlock.

Theresa: *Ntibob anyin ntaat, ame'ben mbad-idip mfo ado aworo ke kitchen mmi.*
(Before I close and open my eye, you should have carried that your dirty-stomach and move out of my kitchen).



Plate1: Ima Tries Quenching the Flame in Gas by Pouring Water (IfΔk, 2020)

Ima, a village girl, who does not know the difference between a gas cooker and a stove just finished worming food on a gas cooker. She does not know the actual button to press. She scoops some water and pour on the gas cooker to quench the fire. Theresa, Tom's wife makes the statement above. The word "mbat" is dirty, while "idip" stomach. *Mbad-idip*, then, suggests dirty stomach, but the signified is witchcraft. It suggests that witchcraft is eaten not injected or contacted:

Tom: *Ima asong esit a-cut nsa mmi* (Ima hardens her heart and cut my game).
Kase five-over-five mmi akpebreke, Ima a-cut nsa mmi (see my five-over-five that could have played; Ima cuts my game). *Mme kud mme ufok anyong, mme motor, mme keke mmi, Ima annam mmien Ibak.* (I saw my storey-building, cars and tricycles, Ima does this wickedness to me).



Plate2 : Nsa (Draft) is a signifier; Dowry is the Signified (IfΔk, 2020)

The conversation is going on between Tom and Koko over their daughter who has been raped and impregnated by Steve at Uyo. The culture communicated in Tom's utterance is that the girl-child is the means of wealth acquisition to her family. She is programmed, nurtured and showcased to attract consumers who are willing to pay. A good one attracts a good fortune while the bad one attracts shame. Thus, training the girl child is playing games. In this context, the signifier, "*Ima a-cut nsa mmi*" (Ima has cut my game) has the signified "pregnancy out of wedlock". This further deepens to pregnancy out of wedlock is abominable in Ibibio society.

Another cultural communication is the status of an unmarried lady with a child in the Ibibio episteme, as portrayed in the dialogue below:

- Koko:** *Afut asuko atiam etap ke inua do, mkpo akpenam eyen mmi* (All these spittle you are sputtering from your mouth, if anything happens to my child).....
- Tom:** *Anie ado eyen?* (who is child) *Anie abi ido born one?* *Second-hand ke ado* (Who would marry a girl that has had a child out of wedlock? She is a used product. *Aboikpa idogo akang iba* (maidenhood does not surface twice).

The conversation above indicates the Ibibio abhorrence to a girl-child who has a child out of wedlock. She may be forgiven and absorbed into the fold but she is forever tolerated. The signifier is that pregnancy out of wedlock is abhorrence. The signified is that a daughter impregnated out of wedlock loses honour and robs the parents of societal regard.

Action/Activities as Signified in Ifak.

Ima is denied education, making her to lack knowledge of her world. She ends up a social misfit because of pregnancy without a husband. A child should not be left without education, handwork or something to engage his/her time. This may open the child to any available antisocial practice that may not augur well with society. The signified portrayed in this act is that a wrong foundation results in social misfit.

Tears of a Child Induces Pity: In Ibibio culture, tears calls for questioning. The Ibibio say, *esi se owo iso eno uduk* (It is the face they look and offer pity or assistance). Ima runs away from Steve and Theresa's house and found an uncompleted building, which she lays until the owner, Nene, stalks and catches her. Ima pleads, mentioning her travails in tears.



Plate 3: Nene Takes Pregnant Ima Home out of Pity (*Ifak*, 2020)

Nene downplays the law, which should be reporting her to the police for safety, but takes her home out of pity. The signified is that in prima facie matters, sentiment can decide the good. Ibibios save life first then applies rules later.

A Pregnant Daughter Upsets her Family: Ima's pregnancy is justifiable. She is threatened, raped and tormented to run away from home.



Plate4: Abandoned Child Extends the Shame to the Family (*Ifak*, 2020)

All that goes on around her does not count in the Ibibio philosophy of the girl-child. What counts is how she emerges unscathed. Any error is the child's flaw. Pregnancy infuriates everyone. Tom even threatens Koko over Ima's pregnancy as if Koko impregnated Ima or has a hand in it by saying, "*Anyong ufok-usoh ke ebe*" (You would go to your father's house through the grave).



Plate5: A Pregnant Child Upsets the Cosmos (*Ifak*, 2020)

Tom's threat is an anguish released. This purges his long bottled inexpressiveness, the raised machete is a signifier for manslaughter he inhibits all through.

The Moon as Signified in *Ifak*: Ima's predicament sealed in her pregnancy is the marked of her life. The moon is a signifier for the glory of the dark.



Plate6: *Afiong Afro* (The Moon has Passed) is Signified for Pregnancy (*Ifak*, 2020)

In Ibibio cosmology, the moon is an indicator of season. According to Patrick Ebewo, "*afiong afuro* (which literary means that the moon has passed)... is a traditional way of saying that a woman has missed her period- in other words- she is pregnant" (122). The moon is a signifier for Ima's pregnancy.

***Abenge Ase Abo* Philosophy:** (The one who begs is the one that receives): An Ibibio culture of seeking the consent of the owner of something before collecting is one; the idea of giving the one

who seeks for something is another.



Plate7 : Ibibio Gives to the Needy Instead of the Worthy (*Ifak*, 2020)

There is the dissemination of Ibibio manners of giving and receiving, which underlies their philosophy: “the one who needs a thing is prioritised over the one who is suitable to receiving a thing”.

The Hawking Child: Child trafficking and street hawking are effects of a general concern overlooked.



Plate 8: Ima Hawks Vegetables to Survive (*Ifak*, 2020)

The film is communicating a salient human concern pervading the Nigerian society. Every child has the desire to go to school because humans naturally yearn for group identification school offers. Along the line, many children joyfully complete their education and most time dwell: within the academic environment as teachers or education workers. Many refuse to complete their school programme even when enabling environment with other social conditions is favourable to them. Others wilfully chose to stress themselves hawking fruits and vegetables to generate money to go back to school.

Ima is seen hawking vegetables with pregnancy. It is the urge to be educated that set her to her pitiable ordeal in life. However, the signifier established in her hawking vegetables with pregnancy is that human suffering is imputed by human beings. The signified is that the victim suffers for every mistake every mistake.

Death and Real love: A cultural communication that appears ironical among the Ibibio is the love for the dead over the living. Ima has been suffering, using her pregnancy to be hawking for nine months without people showing much concern over her circumstances and threats to her life dire. As she puts to birth, the child lives, she is appreciated with love; but as the child dies, the love for Ima's child results in everyone giving her a gift. Gift, in Ibibio culture, is a sign of love.



Plate 9 : Love is Quantified with Money (*Ifak*, 2020)

Love is concretised in money. The signifier is that love is gift not emotion. The signified is that deadness elicits concern and it is the dead that is truly loved

Problem Solving Method over Rote-learning: The current educational system in Ibibio society is basically the rote learning type, where students are expected to replicate their teachers who themselves replicate their own teachers by cramming what is said in class to present same for test and exams. They are awarded certificates on this and their worthiness as scholars is justified in speaking than in solving problems from their mental consciousness. That means:

Evidence of worthiness hinges on the ability to read, write and, of course, speak English language understandably. Children see their world as a mystery ensconced in pages of books, which they are obliged to... lift the mystery off the pages to rewrite impeccably so that they can be offered opportunity in the job market (James and Udofia 236).



Plate 10 : Ima misses Rote Learning but Sneaks to Copy Symbols (*Ifak*, 2020)

Cultural communication on this mode of learning for Ibibio children is vividly portrayed in *Ifak*. Ima is eager to get such education, even as it has eluded her, she always stops to admire students in uniform, indicating her painful forgone issue. It would have made her what Paul Opone expresses in the description of the bookish person, that his or her bookishness is to teach, manage a government institution or preach to give others hope of what is practically impossible (23). However, Ima has failed in the memorisation of words to replicate for brilliance on examination day. She only put the few she grabs from fun to practice and her constant practice makes her more relevant and fulfilling. According to Ekaette Brian, the best model for teaching a child is acknowledge “from the nurturing of emerging talent... for artistic growth and expression” (77). This suggests problem solving method, which a child is allowed to discover his world independently through active participation. This is communicated in Ima’s success as a seamstress.

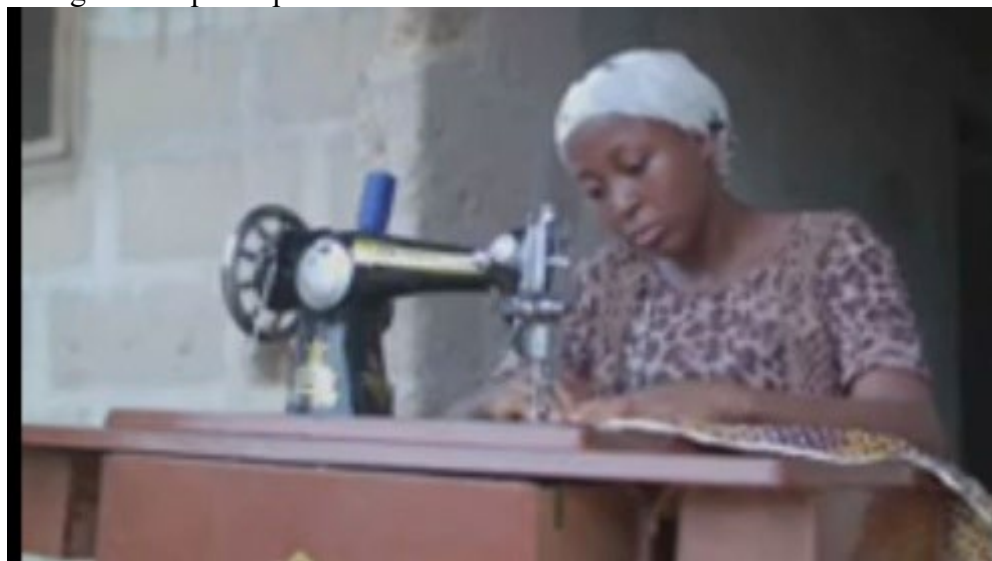


Plate 11: Ima applies Literary Symbol to Practice (*Ifak*, 2020)

The signified(s) are that rote-learning does not stimulate the contemporary child but problem solving method, which is learning with practice, equips the child with knowledge and practice.

Conclusion

Cultural communication projected through media that are consumed by many people allow for tenable human values to spread to other societies. In *Ifak*, many values of the Ibibio people are brought to view and are creatively disseminated for other people in other societies to also view. Some of these human practices as portrayed may evoke complex meaning; but in the film those as wound around dialogue, actions and symbols are resolved in the vividness of the signified(s). This makes the film a means and Ibibio a source through which healthy communication reaches the world. Therefore, the use of a film like *Ifak* to convey the distrust in role learning and the reliance of natural creativity has reflected that a good piece of information that should change the society's mentality may be lost due to the medium used in communicating it, and that tenable human practices in Ibibio land may exist, yet culture needs to be practiced for continuity, social development and should be a reliable outlet to showcase a pressing concern for humanity such as found the deplorable circumstance of the girl child in Ibibioland.

However, all indicators of cultural signs and what they stand for, objectively function as either a suggestive tool or the result of what is suggested in the films. This indicates the workability of structuralism in language, shaping the order of the human culture as a transcendent code decipherable beyond the shores of a specific terrain

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