

DICTION AND SYMBOLISM IN SISTA D'S *VITENDENI*: A SEMIOTIC APPRAISAL

Hambaba Jimaima and Naomi Njobvu

Univeristy of Zambia

Abstract

In exploring agency and phenomenology in the fight against child abuse and molestation, we turn to Sista D's Vitendeni, zooming in on two interrelated aspects of semiotics: diction and symbolism. Composed and launched at the height of cases of girl child abuse and molestation in Zambia, Vitendeni mixes diction and symbolism to provide phenomenological commentary, awareness, and prescribes the punitive measures to end the scourge as encapsulated in the song title. Thus, the article conflates two theoretical constructs – semiotics and literary appraisal – to explore the semiotic potential of diction and symbolism in Vitendeni as lenses into the appreciation of agency and phenomenology. We conclude that: as both a semiotic and literary text, the song Vitendeni, provides analysable materiality, which extends beyond the immediate context of the song, and confirms not only the attitude of the artiste towards the vice in question, but also re-echoes the collective feelings and judgments of the public towards the perpetrators of girl child abuse. Invariably, attesting to the idea that meaning-making is always a joint project arising from the shared socio-cultural knowledge and histories of a given society and polity.

Keywords: Agency, Diction, Phenomenology, Semiotics, Symbolism

Introduction

In appraising agency and phenomenology, this article focuses on Sista D's *Vitendeni* 'cut them' – a composition released in 2006 at the height of child molestation in Zambia. Situated within the broader context of contemporary Zambian popular music, Sista D's *Vitendeni* attempts to re-narrate complex sociological happenings of its immediate context, in which the artiste highlights child abuse and proposes punitive measures to try and curb the vice. It is this lyrical potency which this article wishes to discursively interrogate in order to gain insight into how the song is seen to conflate two theoretical constructs – semiotics and literary appraisal – to explore the semiotic potential of diction and symbolism as lenses into the appreciation of agency and phenomenology. The argument here is that: as both a semiotic and literary text, the song *Vitendeni*, provides analysable materiality, which extends beyond the immediate context of the song, and confirms not only the attitude of the artiste towards the vice in question, but also re-echoes the collective feelings and judgments of the public towards the perpetrators of girl child abuse.

For ease of uptake, the article is organised as follows: the immediate section, focuses on the semiotic and literary appraisal of the study in which diction and symbolism are implicated to

underpin the meaning potential of the song. Thereafter, the methodology and data transcription are transacted. That immediately leads to the discussion of the findings and subsequently, the summary and the conclusion.

Semiotic and Literary Appraisal: Diction and Symbolism

In recent scholarship, the theoretical appraisal of how societies construct and enact meaning-making potential of the different semiotic resources has been revisited. With its Greek root *semeions* – ‘semiotics deals with the way meaning is communicated (Berger, 2010:71). The work of Locke 1690 has been praised to have been the one that first used the concept semiotics as an important footing for the philosophical inquiry with regard to the relation between concepts and reality (Danesi, 2004). And thanks to the works of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857 – 1914) and the American philosopher Charles S. Peirce (1839 – 1914) (Danesi, 2004), that semiotics received active attention in the late nineteenth century. Jimaima (2016) records that their contribution to modern linguistics, especially Ferdinand de Saussure, is seen in grammars that were formulated based on the semiotic system (cf. Kress, 2010). In fact, *syntactics*, *semantics* and *pragmatics* are said to be based on semiotics.

In undertaking the analysis of Sista D’s *Vitendeni*, it is the evolved semiotics as distilled in the work of Halliday (1994) that we apply. For, drawing on semiotics, Halliday (1994) formulated a multimodal discourse analysis, which conflates ideational, personal and text meanings within one framework. For this reason, ‘systemic theory is a theory of meaning as choice, by which a language, or any other semiotic system, is interpreted as networks of interlocking options’ (Halliday, 1994: 41). On this account, we take the view that ‘the systemic network is a theory about language as a resource for making meaning,’ and this is based on Saussure’s ‘understanding of the relationship between the system of language and its instantiation in acts of speaking’ (Halliday, 1994: 52). In this connection, on the evolutionary continuum, multimodality ‘was introduced to highlight the importance of taking into account semiotics other than language-in-use, such as image, music, gesture, and so on’ (Iedema, 2003: 33). Parmentier (1994:3-4) argues that for our cognitions to involve true knowledge... object and sign must be connected in such a way that the former [i.e., object] ‘determines’ – specifies or specialises – the character of the latter [i.e., sign], which represents it. So, there must be some kind of principled linkage or reason, what Peirce calls the ‘ground,’ between the two if the sign is to become a mediate realisation of the object in this process of constantly developing knowledge-communication.

Whether we apply Saussure’s two part semiotics built on the signifier and signified relation or Peirce’ three part semiotics which is organised as sign, object, and interpretant also referred to as representamen, object and interpretant, respectively, the centrality of semiotics in the overall meaning making process is that elements of language or any other semiotic mode – including images, symbols and other elements and represent reality. Arguably, we believe that song as a piece of discourse is profoundly communicative given its semiotic potential.

While symbolism and diction are greatly studied in literary thought, they occupy a central place in semiotics and linguistics generally. Which is why, in describing Bourdieu’s contribution

to linguistics through his language and symbolic power, Thompson (1991: 1) avers that ‘we are aware that individuals speak with differing degrees of authority, that words are loaded with unequal weight, depending on who utters them and how they are used, such that some words uttered in certain circumstances have a force and a conviction that they would not have elsewhere.’ It would seem here that both symbols and words are context sensitive, exerting more force and imagery in one context than in another. This would validate the claim that there are ‘innumerable and subtle strategies by which words can be used as instruments of coercion and constraint, as tools of intimidation and abuse, as signs of politeness, condescension and contempt’ (Thompson, 1991: 1). As will become apparent in the analysis section, the symbolic capital of words stems from the social-historical use of the language to which they are a part. And we believe that this is also true for words and symbols in Sista D’s song.

Bourdieu (1991: 2) is instructive when he alleges that often, ‘linguists fail to grasp the specific social and political conditions of language formulation and use’ when they attempt to analyse language purely from its formal perspective. Bourdieu believes that ‘everyday linguistic exchanges are situated encounters between agents endowed with socially structured resources and competencies, in such a way that every linguistic interaction, however, personal and insignificant it may seem, bears the traces of social structure that it both expresses and helps to reproduce’ (1991: 2). This explains why Bourdieu (1991:4) is opposed to semiotics that excludes ‘the social-historical conditions of the production and reception of texts’. Thus, any theorisation, including the ones that extend to song as text, which ignore the socio-political and practical character of language presents a superficial picture of the state of affairs.

Thus, in understanding the authorial intent and the true extent of the authority of speakers, it is important to underpin the sociological power of institutions and the limitations of words themselves. On this score, Thompson (1991: 9) instructs that ‘the authority, which utterances have is an authority bestowed upon language by factors external to it.’ Which means that ‘when an authorised spokesperson speaks with authority, he or she expresses or manifests this authority, but does not create it: the spokesperson avails himself or herself of a form of power or authority which is part of a social institution, and which does not stem from the words alone.’ To the extent that an artiste like Sista D is seen as a spokesperson of the abused girl child, it would be insightful to see how the words in the song depict a form of power, which arises from the social institution or the collective social capital. It is also important to note how the habitus – a set of dispositions, which incline agents to act and react in a certain way – has largely shaped the choice of diction and symbolism in the song – *Vitendeni*. In what follows, the methodology and data transcription are presented.

Methodology and Data Transcription

While songs are an integral part of the ethnolinguistic character of a given society, and, therefore, inviting any researcher wanting to gain insight into the significance of such songs to undertake a longitudinal ethnographic research, the current study ignores such invitation by taking a descriptive qualitative methodology. The kind of descriptive qualitative method used here merely

afforded the researchers to purposively select a song from the plethora of contemporary Zambian popular music. In this regard, the choice of Sista D's *Vitendeni* song meets the purpose for which the study was undertaken: to underpin the phenomenological aspects of the song through the lens of semiotics, diction and symbolism.

As pointed out in the introduction, *Vitendeni* is associated with the narratives and voices against child molestation. Seen from that end, the song fits into a discourse catalogue of prevention, advocacy and protestation. The song was released in 2006 and went on to be used in organised governmental and non-government awareness campaigns against child abuse. It is also significant to underscore the fact that the choice of the language in which the song was done gave it a national reach as most Zambians understand Cinyanja. Here below are the lyrics:

Vitendeni

<i>Vitendi</i>	Cut them
<i>Vijubeni...</i>	Chop them
<i>Vichekeni...</i>	Cut them
<i>Vitendeni vigabenga ivo</i>	Cut those criminals
<i>Vijubeni vigabenga ivo</i>	Chop those criminals
<i>Vichekeni vigabenga</i>	Cut the criminals
<i>Vawononga bana eheee</i>	They have destroyed the children
<i>Nivinzelu vabwanji ivo</i>	What kind of thinking is this?
<i>Pogwila mwana mung'ono</i>	To molest a young child
<i>Mwana wazaka chabe zibili</i>	A child of only two years
<i>Mwana mung'ono ehee</i>	A very young child
<i>Vitendeni vigabenga ivo</i>	Cut those criminals
<i>Vijubeni vigabenga ivo</i>	Chop those criminals
<i>Vichekeni vigabenga</i>	Cut the criminals
<i>Vawononga bana eheee</i>	They have destroyed the children

Ref

<i>Vitendeni...</i>	Cut...
<i>Vijubeni...</i>	Chop...
<i>Vichekeni...</i>	Cut...
<i>Nvizimba vabwanji ivo</i>	What kind of charm is that?
<i>Pogwila mwana mung'ono</i>	To molest a very young child
<i>Mwana wazaka chabe khumi</i>	A child of only ten years
<i>Mwana mung'ono eheee</i>	A very young child

<i>Akazi mbwe mbwe mumi sewo</i>	Plenty of women in the streets
<i>Akazi mbwe mbwe muma bawa</i>	Plenty of women in bars
<i>Niwanji mwana mung'ono</i>	What is the young child for?
<i>Napapata vitendeni</i>	I beg, cut them
<i>Vitendeni iwe...</i>	You, cut them
<i>Vitendeni mama...</i>	Cut them mother

Interrogating Diction in Vitendeni

As data in Table 1 shows, Sista D's *Vitendeni* is constructed on the plethora of diction and loaded lexicon. Generally understood to mean the manner in which something is expressed in words, diction is part of the overall style of a particular text. It is normally associated with the different effects the selected words have on the people (Heffernan and Lincoln, 1986: 170). Thus, within the semiotic choices that inform the selection of the diction, there is a sense in which the artiste seeks to actuate the grotesque and urgency at the same time. As we argue later in the article, the graphic representation of the vice in the song together with the proposed punitive measure are borne by carefully selected diction, which draws on the social-historical conditions of production and reception of texts.

Table 1: Loaded Lexicon

	Diction in Nyanja	English Gloss
1	Vitendeni	Cut them
2	Vijubeni	Chop them
3	Vichekeni	Mutilate them
4	Vigabenga	Criminals
5	Wononga	Destroy
6	Vizimba	Charms
7	Vinzelu	Thoughts (pejorative)
8	Gwila	Molest
9	Napapata	I plead
10	Mwana mung'ono	Small child

Firstly, we acknowledge the fact that even though we refer to the data presented in Table 1 as diction (words), they can be read as syntactic units larger than words as they incorporate, as in the case of data 1 to 3, subject marker and the verbal form. That notwithstanding, reading these linguistic units as used in the song, somewhat compels us to look upon them as words with one unitary semiotic force. We now turn to illustrating their effect on the overall meaning of the song.

1. Vitendeni
2. Vijubeni
3. Vichekeni

The song opens with these three words in 1, 2, and 3 above. Measured on the semantic scale of sense relations, the words can be said to be synonyms. All the three words carry the sense of cutting. The question would be why would three synonyms be used at the beginning of a song when one would have done the job? The answer to this question is as complex as the question itself. Firstly, we argue that the deployment of synonymous words was semiotically motivated to sufficiently summarise the essence of the song: to end child abuse through the chopping off of the perpetrators' private organs. The second assumption we put forward in this respect, is the fact that given that there are no true synonyms; the use of the three words to describe the same act of cutting was to graphically render the process of cutting predicated on the different shades of meanings borne by each of the three words. Notice the potential meaning of each of the words: *vitendeni* carries with it the sense of mere cutting, *vijubeni* carries the meaning of chopping off with speed, while *vichekeni* shows an act of mutilation. The three different shades of meaning reinforce the overall meaning of the song and, hence, present a heightened gruesome nature of the punishment. It is also argued that pejorative marker [vi] in the three words is semiotically charged to depict the grotesque nature of the organs being referred to. Collectively, the three words trigger a successful localisation of the punishment within the women agency where knives as their kitchen instrumentalities are used.

Further, the use of the three synonyms in one instance for a call to one action demonstrates the intricate relationship between diction and repetition in creating the sense of urgency. Carried by the imperative mood with an elliptical subject, the three words in 1 to 3 potentiate the urgency with which the punitive measures should be transacted. There is a sense to which the artiste seeks to attach both importance and urgency to her message in this deployment of the sense relation of synonymy. It would seem that should the appeal be missed by the use of one of the words, at least, it can be understood by the use of the other synonym. Therefore, the triple articulation of the same meaning is undoubtedly intentional and is a semiotically motivated undertaking. We also note that in all the three words, the tense is in the present. This shows that the action to mutilate must be actuated in that moment of reporting rather than later.

Another loaded lexicon is number 4 *vigabenga*. Going through the entire song, there is no express mention of the male gender, who we believe are signified by the signifier *vigabenga*. The denotation – ‘the objective relationship between a lexeme and the reality to which it refers’ (Crystal, 2006: 170) – is unmistakably identifiable. As has been discussed in the section about the symbolism, the only humans with organs that are amenable to cutting and could be used to sexually abuse the girl child are men. Thus, the diction – *vigabenga* – is pictorial and graphic as well as denotative. We thus, argue that the criminality of the act of child molestation cannot be fully painted and achieved outside of the semantic extension of the sense of the word *vigabenga*. We believe that the selection of the diction for describing the criminality is well attuned and socio-culturally situated. While the prefix [vi] could denote plurality; we think that in the song, the prefix [vi] describes the gross and the grotesque nature of the criminals.

We wish to end the discussion of the diction with data number 9 *napapata*. The use of *napapata* (I beg; plead) is consistent with the overall sense of urgency depicted in the song. At

another level, the selection of the diction *napapata* (I beg) orients towards lack of agency on the part of the artiste to end the criminality. Agency is understood as a thing or person that acts to produce a particular effect or achieve an end. The fact that the artiste is seen to be begging for help, she denies herself the power of agency and transfers this to the unnamed actor, the one who should cut off the private organs. The decapitation of self-agency by the artiste is illustrative of the sense of hopelessness and, by extension, the place of weakness assumed by the composition. However, we hold the view that the decapitation of self-agency should be processed through Bourdieu's (1991: 2) portrayal of language: 'every linguistic exchange [should be seen] as situated encounters between agents endowed with socially structured resources and competencies, in such a way that every linguistic interaction, however, personal and insignificant it may seem, bears the traces of the social structure that it both expresses and helps to reproduce.' If what Bourdieu says is anything to go by, the begging expressed in *napapata* depicts the social structure in which women depend on men for survival. Additionally, the begging typified by the utterance *napapata* represents the voices of the abused girl child, who is the locus of the song and the object the song seeks to reproduce.

Underpinning Symbolism in Vitendeni

The semiotic dynamics of the song *Vitendeni*, is heightened by its loaded symbolism. Whether taken as an arbitrary sign (written or printed) that has acquired a conventional significance, symbols are a productive way to capture complex meanings in any communicative act. On this note, Chandler (2017: 45) reminds us that 'language is a predominantly symbolic sign system and is widely seen as the pre-eminent symbolic form', for which Peirce remarks 'all words, sentences, books and other conventional signs are symbols'. This generalisation of what a symbol is allows us to theoretically distil the use of some words in Sista D's *Vitendeni* as symbolism because symbolism can denote metaphors. After all, 'a symbol fulfils its function regardless of any similarity or analogy with its object and equally regardless of any factual connection therewith' (Chandler, 2017: 45). Thus, the following words as captured in Table 1 above fulfil their symbolic function in ways that are apparent:

4. Wononga
5. Vizimba
6. Gwila
7. Vitendeni, vijubenji, vichekeni

In data set 4, *wononga* (destroy) in Chandler's (2017) view of symbolism can be read as a symbol despite its similarity with its object, which it represents. In the song, the artiste describes the act of child molestation as destructive. The symbolic nature of the word lies in its double application: child abuse leads to bodily harm because of the asymmetric correspondence between the abuser and the abused in age and size. Secondly, the sexual abuse results in mental and emotional trauma. It is here that we see that '*wononga*' should be understood as a symbolic use of language that

graphically attempts to underpin the complex relationship between the signifier and signified, in which the act of child abuse is thus, portrayed as a savage act that leads to destruction, which can never be reversed.

The data in 5 *vizimba* (charms/ jinx) has been used symbolically to explain the myth that relates child molestation with jinx. The myth holds that having sex with a minor can bring you success in business, while elsewhere, the act has been associated with healing from incurable maladies. Again, here Bourdieu (1991) as is Kress (2010), is instructive as he sees any linguistic expression as an attempt to reproduce the socio-historical reality of a given setting. In implicating the act of child abuse with charms, Sista D draws on the shared socio-cultural histories of the people to enact her persuasive act aimed at preventing the vice. In fact, the song uses the question form to display the misplaced misconception about the assumed curative power of child abuse. It is here that words have been ‘used as instruments of coercion and constraint, as tools of intimidation and... as signs of condescension and contempt’ (Thompson, 1991: 1). In asking the question, ‘is it charms? Or what kind of thinking is this which leads to child abuse? Sista D deploys language as a tool to coerce, constraint, and as a sign of condescension and contempt. She basically chides the perpetrators of child molestation. In this way, language is seen as ‘an integral part of our social life, with its ruses and iniquities, and that a good part of our social life consists of the routine exchange of linguistic expressions...’ (ibid).

The data in 6, *gwila* (lit trans. Manhandle) is a rendition of the Town Nyanja, which symbolically means molest. Its symbolic potency lies in the fact that its use demonstrates, in a graphic way, the nature of the sexual assault between persons with unequal power. In the song, the pictorial representation of this imbalance in power relation is semiotically portrayed by mentioning of the ages of the victims: ‘*mwana mung’ono*’ (very small child); *mwana wazaka chabe zibili* (a small child of only two years); *mwana wazaka chabe khumi* (a small child of only ten). The exactitude in age heightens the degree of the grotesque nature of the abuse as the victims cannot defend themselves.

Finally, in data 7, the three synonyms are revisited to classify them under the symbolic use of words in the song. While we may never tell the extent of the chopping that is inferred by the use of *vitendeni*, *vijubeni*, *vichekeni*, there is a sense to which reading the text (song) together with the attendant discourse of the time might reveal what the symbolism of the words could be. In fact, on her Facebook page, Sista D has used the three words with a hush tag ‘*castrate them*’. There is a plausible explanation then to think that the words *vitendeni*, *vijubeni* and *vichekeni* refer to castration rather than to the chopping off of the manhood. In essence, the object of the message is to cause erectile dysfunction among the perpetrators of child abuse.

Summary and Conclusion

In exploring agency and phenomenology in the fight against child abuse and molestation, Sista D’s *Vitendeni*, offers two interrelated aspects of semiotics: diction and symbolism to provide phenomenological commentary, awareness, and prescribes the punitive measures to end the scourge as encapsulated in the song title. The phenomenological aspect of the song comes alive

when one recognises Bourdieu's habitus in the theory of practice (1991). The song and its artiste present the dispositions, which cause the agent to act and react in a certain way. The song, we believe, is a reaction to the prevalent cases of child abuse in Zambia. While we have argued that the artiste decapitates her self-agency by using the linguistic expression of begging (*napapata*), there is a sense that the dispositions in the artiste generate practices, perceptions and attitudes (Thompson, 1991) about her immediate environment and acts in a predictable way to try and heighten awareness of the evil of child molestation. The lack of power to carry out the chopping off of the perpetrators' private organs demonstrates Bourdieu's argument that authority does not inherently reside in words; authority stems of social institutions. It would seem, therefore, that the artiste recognises her limited authority as she does not have any socially institutionalised power beyond her role as a musician. This recognition allows the artiste to semiotically exploit the potential of the diction and symbolism in quite a strategic way. As demonstrated in the sections above, the deployment of synonyms – *vitendeni*, *vijubeni* and *vichekeni* – was semiotically revealing and rewarding as emphasis, urgency and importance were articulated in one moment of communication. Like other dictions, these three words are lexically loaded, potentiating meanings beyond what just one of them could have accomplished. The different shade of meanings each word exudes allows the song to articulate in an unambiguous way the intent of the composition – to decapitate organs of abuse.

The deployment of symbolism in song is not only semiotically motivated; it is also culturally endowed. Chandler (2017) has guided that all words are symbolic, and function to satisfy the relationship between the signifier and signified. Seen in this way, the words in the song dislodge beyond their denotative meaning to evoke connotation. Words like *wononga* (destroy) suggest irreparable effects of child molestation - physically and emotionally. Similarly, words like *vizimba* 'charm' summon the socio-historical realities of the society of production and reception. The symbolism of charm in relation to child abuse is well understood in the Zambian context. Thus, any form of linguistic expression carries with it the established socio-cultural knowledge and histories of its users. To this end, as both a semiotic and literary text, the song *Vitendeni*, provides analysable materiality, which extends beyond the immediate context of the song, and confirms not only the attitude of the artiste towards the vice in question, but also re-echoes the collective feelings, dispositions and judgments of the public towards the perpetrators of girl child abuse. Invariably, attesting to the idea that meaning making is always a joint project arising from the shared sociocultural knowledge and histories of a given society and polity.

References

- Berger, A.A. (2010). *Objects of Affections: Semiotics and Consumer Culture*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Chandler, D. (2017). *Semiotics. The Basics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crystal, D. (2006). *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Danesi, M. (2004). *Messages, Signs, and Meanings: A Basic Textbook in Semiotics and Communication Theory*. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Inc.
- Halliday, M.A. (1994). *Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Heffernan, J.A.W., and Lincoln, J.E. (1986). New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Iedema, R. (2003). 'Multimodality, Resemiotization: Extending the Analysis of Discourse as Multi-Semiotic Practice.' *Visual Communication*, 2(1), 29–57.
- Jimaima, H. (2016). Social Structuring of Language and Circularity of the Semiotic Resources across the Linguistic Landscapes: A Multimodal Approach. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of the Western Cape. South Africa.
- Kress, G. (2010). *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. New York: Routledge.
- Parmentier, J.R. (1994). *Signs in Society: Studies in Semiotic Anthropology*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Thompson, J.B. (1991). *Language and Symbolic Power*. Oxford: Polity Press.