Abstract: Political symbolism no doubt plays an important role in the political mobilisation of the masses towards political participation in Nigerian and indeed in Benue State which is the focus of the study. The use of political symbols became prominent during the 2011 governorship elections in Benue especially between the two dominant political parties the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and the Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) now the All Progressive Congress (APC). The study uses symbolic interactionism theory to explain the role that symbols play in awareness creation, while survey methodology was employed for the study. The study revealed that the use of political symbols by various political parties created massive political awareness especially among the rural dwellers and was a source of excitement to many political observers. The study recommended that the use of political symbols should be done creatively and unambiguously to elicit the desired response and avoid more conflicts in the political process.

Key Words: Political Symbolism, Political Campaigns and political parties

I. Background

Communication generally plays a crucial role in every human endeavour. Communication, whether written or oral, plays important role in conveying thoughts, ideas and feelings to a target audience. Visual communication represented by symbols much more helps in appealing to the consciousness of the people which transcends literacy. The visual component of communication serves as a mode of discourse and is an instrument that provides clarity through the use of tangible elements.

Visual design and imagery are often equated with art, decoration and creative presentation as well as entertainment; however, its place in the realm of effective public communication cannot be overlooked. A visual image not only fortifies what the audience reads and hears, but also titillates and delights them. The importance of symbols plays a crucial role in the political process even in the 2011 general elections. The political class has realised the importance of symbolism in the campaign process and most politicians adequately used both party symbols and other adopted symbols to carry out political campaigns across Benue state of Nigeria. According to Kertzer (1988:2), “Political action of all types involves meanings for participants and observers irrespective of long-term consequences or effects.” This statement therefore represents the fact that symbols create indelible impression on the audience which can go a long way in helping them to take a political decision.

Indeed the use of symbols serves as brands to some political aspirants as the symbols they use is identical with their intended campaign messages or a reflection of their party symbol. Supporting the above notion, Dennis, (2000), in Hackett, (2005: 91) noted that: “Today’s society is undeniably brand conscious. We are attracted to brands that project messages we like… Forward thinking companies (politicians) understand that if their brand carries a message, it carries equity. Companies (politicians) now are using that equity to deepen relationships with customers (citizens) by offering supporting products that reflect the personality of the brand. It’s called relationship marketing and it works.

Indeed politics and politicians are brands all over the world and they evolve strategies to market themselves and anything that can evoke the interest of the audience and could become a symbol for recognition or identity is not spared. These symbols at times can note the political philosophy or campaign slogan of the politicians. This fact is further supported by Johnson-Cartee and Copeland (1991) who state that voters no longer experience politics first-hand. Elements and pieces of knowledge are given to political consumers through the mass media system. Mass media has created symbols for the public to interpret on their own. Through these symbols, the voting public simplifies the political realities they experience, e.g., the differences between Candidate X and Candidate Y, Democrats and Republicans, ruling party and opposition, etc.
Political symbolism often entails complex meanings which may be contested, yet they evoke common understanding with slippage between the form they take and the meaning they produce. Political symbols are often encapsulated in myths. Not all symbolic and mythic forms are however, as contentious and acknowledged as flags. Some symbolic forms are mundane. These are symbols that are rarely designated as such, yet are political symbols that imbue meaning to stakeholders, citizens and agents within a state or community. According to MB EPU- Austria (2009: 8)

Symbols don’t remain static. Actually, as soon as a symbol gets out into the public, then it stands to be used, abused or misused. But it is also worth noting that whenever the masses derive their own interpretation of the symbol, it is not always based on the values they hold and cherish but rather could be a vice they dread and loathe.

This is true of the Hammer symbol which was adopted by the reform Agenda prior to the 2001 Austria’s Presidential elections. While the hammer was seen as a tool for effective removal of the cotter pin from state house, people opposed to the Reform Agenda looked at the hammer as symbol of brutality.

In Nigeria, right from the First Republic, political symbols played a critical role in mobilising both the literate and illiterate electorates to support different political parties and those symbols. During the second republic, in the days of National Party of Nigeria (NPN), Unity of Party of Nigeria (UPN), and Nigerian People’s Party (NPP) etc, symbols were extensively used to serve as a mark of identity for political parties. The NPN for instance used maize for its symbol signifying agriculture, while the NPP used a group of people symbolising the fact that power belongs to the people.

In the contemporary political dispensation in Nigeria, the use of party symbols has become very popular and these symbols do not just play educative roles but also serves an entertainment function to the public. The People’s Democratic Party (PDP) for instance is represented by an umbrella while the All Progressive Congress (APC) is represented by the broom respectively.

In the United States of America (USA), the donkey and elephant logos are symbols of the Democratic and Republican parties, respectively. To the American public, the “donkey” and the “elephant” serve as powerful reminders and are visual shorthand for all of the political ideologies that each of these parties represent. In essence, these animals are the visual representation of the Democratic and Republican “brands.” The same goes to the “Umbrella” and the “Broom” in Nigeria. The “Umbrella” represents the political ideology of the PDP quest to provide shelter of unity and good governance, while the “Broom” symbolically represents sweeping away corruption and enthroning good governance for all Nigerians. Indeed, symbolism in political campaigns in Nigeria is increasingly gaining ground with each passing political dispensation that cannot be easily ignored by communication scholars and the political class.

II. Statement of the Problem

The use of symbols in the political process is not new, symbols do not just reflect party identity in contemporary political campaigns especially in Nigeria and indeed Benue State, and symbols are used by political parties and their candidates to make caricature of other candidates, to make fun or entertain electorates during political campaigns. Indeed in the 2011 general elections campaigns apart from using the traditional and social media networks to reach the audience, many political parties and aspirants used symbols and effigies extensively to portray their candidature, political party or ideology. This study therefore seeks to ascertain the impact of symbols in the political process, the communicative value of symbols and its relevance to the political landscape of Nigeria and Benue State in particular. Furthermore, the study appraises the audience response to political participation as a result of the use of political symbols. Finally, the study explores the audience perception and understanding of symbols while participating in the political process.

III. Objectives of the study

1. To assess the impact of political symbolism on the political process in Benue State.
2. To investigate how electorates perceive the use of symbols in the political process in Benue State.
3. To ascertain whether the use of symbols in the political process break communication barriers between the electorates and government.
4.

IV. Literature Review

The use of party symbols has become an important campaign strategy in the Nigerian political process right from the First Republic. The importance of political symbolism stems from the fact that, apart from using the symbols as a mark of identity, symbols also entertain and provide information to the electorates especially during political campaigns. According to GrynaviskiWoon and Pope (2008:282):

Lacking more specific information about the candidates running in a particular race, voters use party symbols to make inferences about the kinds of policies that they are likely to pursue once in office. In this way, party symbols function as brands, providing voters with an efficient source of information about a party’s policies and performance.
Some scholars argue that party symbols are collective goods which provide politicians with a low-cost means of signalling their preferences to the electorate. Grynaviski (2010:5). While candidates concern themselves with the strength of their party’s brand name heading into the elections, much as they might, the state of the national economy, party reputations are likely to exert a direct effect on the vote regardless of whether or not individual candidates draw attention to their partisan affiliation on the campaign trail.

But as Groeling notes, “parties use both their words and their deeds to establish a ‘brand name’ with the public” (Harbridge 2010:165). National forces, such as the state of the economy or the parties’ public records, appear to have a direct impact on election outcomes (Basinger and Ensley 2007, 381). Importantly, the effects of national conditions are also mediated through the messages that individual candidates send to voters. McGhee, (2008, 721) for instance, argues that “if party popularity matters it is only in the way that candidates use it”. Even though partisan cues are available to voters on the ballot when they arrive at the polls on Election Day, the provision of party symbols on the campaign trail is of consequence because partisan cues help to shape voters’ evaluations of the candidates well before the day of the election (Campbell et al, 2007: 20).

Tommz and Van Houweling (2009: 15) uncover evidence to this effect, and find that “branded” candidates (that is, candidates whose statements are accompanied by their party label) who offer ambiguous policy positions are able to attract support from their co-partisans in the electorate without injuring their prospects among voters who identify with the other party. Strikingly similar results were reported by Lawrence and Colleagues (2011:16), that senatorial candidates whose names were accompanied by their party labels were actually evaluated more favourably by voters from the opposing party than they were in the “unbranded” condition.

In addition, when candidates employ party labels on the campaign trail they may be able “to prime the electorate to think about the issues that a candidate’s party ‘owns’” (Jarvis 2005, 146). Party labels also function as filters to the information contained in candidates’ communications to voters (Campbell et alRahn1993:12), and may go a long way toward mobilising their co-partisans in the electorate while at the same time helping them to attract the support of those who identify with a different party. The “supply side” of partisan cues is therefore a subject worthy of study (Tessin 2007:1).

In developed democracies like the United States of America and Britain, political symbols are artistically designed to attract the attention of electorates. Indeed, these symbols are designed by professional artists. According to Gbenga M. (2013:1) In order to attract more audience and followership for the Democratic Party and President Obama, The Democratic Party of the United States in 2010 unveiled a new logo – A Blue D in a Circle and “Change that matters” slogan. It was designed by New York-based SS+K. The same agency that produced the Obama/Biden 2012 presidential campaign slogan which got people talking, thinking and acting like no other effort in modern American politics.

This rebranding for the Democrats was a change from the Donkey which they use as their representative symbol. The donkey represents the Democrats’ beginning in 1828. The Democratic donkey represents hard work, diligence, humbleness and a dedication to the USA. Democratic National Committee Chairman Tim Kaine said: “So call it what you will — this new identity for our party captures the spirit that unites us all. Democrats — all of us — are working for the change that matters.

In UK, It cost the Conservative Party £40,000 in 2006 to change their logo from the old torch emblem with an image representing “strength, endurance, renewal and growth to a new one based around a “scribbled” drawing of a tree. Now with a redesign, adding a mix of the Union Jack. The Labour Party was also rebranded with a new shape of red rose and a new strap line - New Labour - New Britain.

A poll of branding experts carried out by EMR declared Liberal Democrat to have by far the best logo of the three main parties. Use of the liberty bird was praised as easily recognisable and appropriate branding linked to a guiding Liberal Democrat principle - freedom. The scribbled tree adopted by the Conservative party came in second and Labour's traditional red rose was last.

In Uganda, several tribes and cultures in have a system of symbols which are used for identity and communication purposes. The symbols are more distinct in the cultural Kingdoms of Buganda, Bunyoro, Busoga and Tooro kingdoms. The symbols also appear in the more than 50 tribes found in Uganda. Each tribe has a particular set of symbols that provide qualitative messages and identity, knowledge, values and feelings. For example one of the most distinct symbols across many Ugandan tribes and cultures is the drum. The drum is both a symbol of power and identity and also an important tool of communication. When the head of a family dies, a ceremony is held to get an heir and the new heir is handed down a spear and a drum. Because of the confusion that arises when the sound of the drum is made, many cultures in Uganda have adopted different drumming styles that communicate different messages.

In Uganda, during the general elections especially in 2009, symbols were used for communication to mobilise the masses for general elections especially the semi-literates. According to Besigye (2009)”A symbol is a figure of something intellectual, moral or spiritual, a visible object, representing to the mind the semblance of something which is not shown but realized by association with it.”
In Nigeria, the use of symbols in the political process has created emotions, excitement and anxiety during political campaigns especially in 2011 in Benue State. During the 2011 general elections in Benue, the major political parties and aspirants for various positions, apart from using their party symbols, also adopted some particular traditional symbols to reach out to the electorates. Predominantly, the umbrella and broom represented the People’s Democratic Party (PDP) and The Action Congress of Nigeria (ACN) respectively. Other symbols were also used as campaign tools by different political parties and candidates, for instance the ACN popularized the use of effigies of their governorship candidate but the PDP quickly capitalised on the relative novelty of the use of effigies and termed the effigies Atoki (scarecrow or mannequin) symbolically and sarcastically to portraying the governorship aspirant on the platform of the ACNProf. SteveUgba as political stooge (or Atoki) to Senator George Akume due to his attachment to the senator. In the same vein, the ACN in retaliation used the symbol of the pig to portray the PDP aspirant, Gabriel Suswam as a monumental failure who has only succeeded in importing pigs into the State as his most prominent achievement. With the mere display of Atoki and pig (Igyo) the masses could grasp the message in its totality.

Indeed the use of political symbols also became a tool for massive mobilisation of the grassroots who were in tune with the current political trends across Benue and actively participated in the political process with enthusiasm and keen interest. Indeed, other symbols such as palm fronds, corn, rice, yams became other traditional symbols used by the politicians and political parties for campaigning purposes across Benue State.

V. The theory of Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory which is accredited to Charles George Mead (1934) and Charles Cooley (1902). The theory sees people as not responding to reality directly but rather social meaning attributed to the comprehending of the reality. Interactionists place much emphasis on symbols which represents gestures, signs, language, facial expression and postures as being especially critical to human communication. To the theory, these symbols have special meanings attached to them by interacting individuals and that people react to these symbols based on meanings ascribed to those symbols. This means social actors communicate through use of symbols as the symbols are given meaning by the actors themselves through social interaction. Therefore to understand communication between actors, one must understand meanings given to these symbols by the communicating individuals. That is, comprehending communicating entails grasping the message such symbols represent; which is determined by actors. There are plethora of symbols which on the periphery are similar among societies, however these symbols differ in their meanings as one symbol may connote several things to different groups, communities and societies around the world at different times.

According Richard, T. S. (2008:18), “In the United States for example, a salute symbolises respect, while a clenched fist signifies defiance”. Another culture might use different gestures to convey a feeling of respect or defiance. Another culture might use different gestures to convey a feeling of respect or defiance. These types of symbolic interaction are classified as nonverbal communications which include many other gestures, facial expression and postures. The same scenario plays itself during the political process especially in the 2011 general elections where many political parties used symbols to educate and mobilise electorates. As noted by the interactionist theorists, people attach meanings to different symbols in different environments as their use can attract negative or positive response respectively.

VI. METHODOLOGY

Quantitative design was adopted for the study. As a result, survey research design was utilised. Samples for the study were acquired through simple random sampling technique as 300 respondents were selected from the three zones of the state; 100 in each zone. Questionnaires were used for collection of data while simple percentage and analytical tables were employed the analysis. Out of the 300 questionnaire distributed only 270 were valid because twenty were not returned while ten were wrongly filled. Our population for analysis therefore stands at 270 respondents.

Table 2: Do you agree that the use of political symbols have impact on Benue electorates?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>s/No</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>23.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table shows that 173 (64%) of the total respondents agreed that symbolism plays a crucial role on Benue electorates. However, some respondents represented by 64 (23.8%) disagreed that symbolisms has no impact on Benue electorates. While the remaining 33 (12.2%) were undecided. The statistics is an indication that political symbolism has huge impact on the Benue electorates.
The table above shows that symbolism has impact on the political process in Benue State as manifested in wider usage represented by 57 (21%). Other impact can be measured in instant understanding of symbols 82 (31%), effective tool for campaign 100 (37%) and as a means of sending messages to political stakeholders. The impact can be measured in all the factors stated above.

**Table 4: Do you agree that the use of political symbols created sufficient awareness on the political process in Benue State?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>s/No</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>38.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table shows that 127 (47%) respondents agreed that the use of political symbols created sufficient political awareness among the Benue electorates, other respondents represented by 103 (38.7%) however disagreed with the notion. A negligible numbers of respondents represented by 40 (14.3) were undecided. With the result there is no clear evidence that political symbols created sufficient political awareness because the number that supported the notion are below 1/3 of the entire population to convince us.

**Table 5: How do Benue electorates perceive the use of political symbols in the political process?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>s/No</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Act of mockery of political opponents</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>30.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Act of promoting candidates/political parties</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A tool for protest against political statements/actions</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Political mobilisation tool</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table above shows that Benue electorates political symbols as an act of mocking political opponents as represented by 83 (30.7 %) of the respondents. Other respondents represented by 62 (23%) symbols as important tools in promoting political candidates. Similarly, some respondents represented by 70 (26%) felt symbols are tools for protesting political statements and actions by the masses. Finally, other respondents perceive political symbols as effective tools for mobilising the masses as represented by 55 (20.5%). From the results in the table above symbols indeed play various functions in the political process across Benue State.

**Table 6: Do you agree that political symbols break communication barrier among the masses?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>s/No</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table above is shows that majority of the respondents agreed that the use of political symbols breaks communication barrier among the masses as it is represented by 200 (74%) while other respondents represented by 57 (21%) disagreed while a negligible percentage 13 (5%) shows the respondents were undecided. It is clear from the results that political symbols breaks communication barrier among the electorates /masses in Benue State.

**VII. Recommendations**

Given that nearly a half of the electorates in Benue state of Nigeria are either semi-literates or stark illiterates, and given that this class of people connect better with symbolism, political parties that do not reckon with the imperative of utilizing symbols in their electioneering will be doing so at their own peril.

As observed by Gbenga, M. (2013) that "once party symbols are out they could be interpreted or misinterpreted by various interest groups particularly the rival parties to suit their views and opinions of the party that is represented by the symbol”. In choosing symbols therefore, parties should take care to ensure that
the significance of the symbols is as clear as possible so as to make it extremely difficult for the opponents to mischievously distort the meaning of the symbols. When the opponents succeed in distorting the intended meaning of the symbol, it could be counterproductive to the party that came out with the symbol in the first instance. Care should also be taken to ensure that the symbols are such that derive their meaning and significance from a value system and culture that the majority of the electorates are conversant with.

VIII. Conclusion

From the research evidence, it is clear that symbolism plays a critical role in the political process of Benue State, symbolism does not just transcend illiteracy but also creates political excitement among the masses which in turn woo them consciously or unconsciously. Analysis from table 4 and 5 clearly affirms this fact where respondents totalling 127 (47%) agreed that political symbolism creates massive awareness. Similarly, in table 5 respondents represented by 55 (20.3%) confirms symbols as effective tool for political mobilisation.

From the forgoing, we can evidently conclude that the use of symbols by political stakeholders in Benue State especially during the 2011 general elections in Benue State indeed closed communication gap between the literate and illiterate hence the popular Chinese Proverb a picture is worth more than a thousand words. The communicative value of symbols especially in political mobilisation therefore cannot be in doubt.

Way Forward

From the discussion above, it is worth noting that symbols have the power to either attract crowds to a social or political cause or repel people away. The effectiveness of symbols is more pronounced particularly in rural communities and where literacy is low as is the case with Benue State where the use of symbols effectively mobilised the masses for the political process. The ability of a symbol to attract or repel will also depend on the choice and selection of the symbol for use. The following factors therefore could be considered when choosing a symbol for use.

- Research about the composition of the target community: this is crucial to understand the people to who the proposed symbol is aimed at. This is important in selecting the appropriate symbol for them.
- Secondly it is also important to pre-test the symbol at the design phase. This could be done through the media or even interviews. The purpose of the Symbol pre-test is to test the perceptions and interpretation of the symbol at design stage. It is also important to choose a simple symbol which has the ability to transmit a simple but concrete message to the target audience.

REFERENCES