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The Semiotics of Sustainability in African Contexts: Decolonizing Global Discourses of Development and Prosperity

T. O. Adesanmi[1] ✉
O. P. Adesuyi[2]
R. D. Awoyele[3]

[1]*Department of English Adeyemi Federal University of Education (AFUED) Ondo, Nigeria.*
[2]*Department of English Adeyemi Federal University of Education Ondo, Nigeria.*
[3]*Department of English St. Monica Grammar School, Ondo, Ondo State.*
(✉ Corresponding Author)

Abstract

This chapter explores how the language and imagery of sustainability are constructed and interpreted within African communicative traditions. Using a bipartite theoretical framework involving social semiotics and decolonial discourse theory, it examines how indigenous symbols, proverbs, and visual arts articulate values of balance, cooperation, and environmental care, principles that intrinsically align with the spirit of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The discussion contrasts these local semiotic systems with the standardized global icons and slogans of the SDGs, exposing inherent tensions between the demand for universal visual design and the necessity of cultural specificity. The chapter argues that African societies possess enduring semiotic grammars of prosperity and ecological harmony that have been historically overshadowed by Western models of development communication. By foregrounding these indigenous expressive forms, it calls for a decolonized semiotics of sustainability that acknowledges African epistemologies as vital to global prosperity. Ultimately, it proposes that the fusion of African symbolic systems with global SDG imagery can create more inclusive and culturally grounded narratives of sustainable futures. Therefore, sustainability emerges not merely as an environmental or economic imperative, but as a linguistic, cultural, and ethical process rooted in how communities make meaning and envision collective well-being.

Keywords: Africa, Decoloniality, Indigenous Communication, SDGs, Semiotics, Sustainability.

1. Introduction

Sustainability, framed globally by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) since 2015, has become the defining twenty-first-century paradigm for global prosperity and justice (United Nations, 2015). These SDGs function not just as policy tools but as communicative artefacts, employing a semiotic system of symbols, colour codes, and discourses to mobilize global consciousness. However, this apparent universality is deeply anchored in Western epistemologies, favouring linear development, technological rationality, and market-oriented solutions (Mignolo, 2011). Consequently, the global semiotics of sustainability often establishes a hierarchy, with a one-way flow of meaning from the Global North institutions that design the symbols to the communities in the South expected to implement them. This raises critical questions about how local cultures interpret, contest, and enrich these global messages, challenging the subtle semiotic injustices where culturally specific signs are imposed as global standards (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Thompson, 1990).

Africa provides crucial and fertile intellectual ground for challenging this dominance and rethinking the semiotics of sustainable development. Far from passively receiving global discourses, the continent is home to rich indigenous semiotic traditions that have long articulated philosophies of balance, interdependence, and communal well-being (Wiredu, 2004). Systems like the symbolic artistry of *Adinkra* motifs, the oral wisdom in Akan proverbs and Igbo idioms, and Yoruba *àrokò* communication embody sustainable principles, such as respect for life and harmony with the environment, through distinct epistemic and cultural lenses. Exploring sustainability through these African lenses is an ethical project that challenges the Western-centric model of prosperity, which often privileges material growth over relational, ecological, and moral dimensions of well-being.

Furthermore, this intersection between global and indigenous semiotics leads to a process of semiotic hybridization. When global icons like the SDG logos encounter local communicative traditions, they are reinterpreted and re-signified through local cosmologies, aesthetic conventions, and ethical worldviews. This hybridization does not just localize the global discourse; it fundamentally transforms it, imbuing the

concept of sustainability with the spiritual and communal textures of African worldviews. The agency of African societies in interpreting and adapting this rhetoric is key to a decolonial approach to sustainability (Smith, 2021), which recognizes that meaning is not merely transmitted but actively negotiated across diverse contexts.

Ultimately, the argument for a decolonized semiotics of sustainability holds that Africa's communicative heritage, rooted in its oral literature, visual art, and communal ethics, offers a valuable alternative to overly technocratic and economistic models. By recognizing and valuing these local semiotic grammars, the global community expands its imagination of prosperity beyond purely material terms to include holistic, relational values. Acknowledging Africa's symbolic and linguistic contributions is therefore not simply cultural accommodation, but a necessity for achieving a truly inclusive and genuine global sustainability that values cultural diversity in defining the future.

1.1. Objectives

This chapter seeks to interrogate how African semiotic resources (linguistic, visual, and performative) frame the idea of sustainability beyond Western developmental paradigms. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to:

1. Examine how indigenous symbols, proverbs, and artistic forms encode ecological wisdom and social cooperation.
2. Analyse the semiotic tensions between global SDG imagery and African communicative traditions.
3. Theorize how decolonial discourse can reposition African epistemologies as central to global narratives of sustainable prosperity.

1.2. Research Questions

1. How do African indigenous semiotic systems articulate concepts of sustainability and collective well-being?
2. In what ways do global SDG symbols and discourses align with or diverge from local African representations of prosperity and balance?
3. How can a decolonial semiotic approach reshape global development communication to include African perspectives and epistemologies?

2. Theoretical Foundations

Understanding sustainability as a communicative practice requires an engagement with the theoretical frameworks that explain how meaning is made, circulated, and contested across cultures. Thus, for this research, a bipartite theoretical lens, relying on two perspectives of social semiotics and decolonial discourse theory, provides the foundation for the analysis. This combination illuminates how symbols and languages not only represent reality but also participate in constructing the ideological and cultural order of global development.

2.1. Social Semiotics

Social semiotics, as developed by scholars such as Halliday (1978), Kress, and van Leeuwen (2006), views communication as a social process through which individuals and communities make meaning in specific contexts. It departs from classical semiotics by emphasizing that signs are not fixed or universal; rather, they are socially motivated and culturally situated. In this view, the same visual symbol or linguistic expression can generate different meanings depending on who uses it, for what purpose, and within which social and historical environment.

When applied to the discourse of sustainability, social semiotics allows us to see that the SDG logos, icons, and textual narratives are not merely neutral representations of global objectives. They are meaning-making tools shaped by particular ideologies about development, modernity, and human progress. The colour codes of blue for peace, green for the planet, and yellow for energy encode a Western aesthetic of order and rationality. In addition, the simplified circular icon of 17 coloured segments visually suggests completeness and harmony, yet it also imposes a singular logic of universality that may obscure the diversity of local interpretations. Thus, social semiotics helps us ask some sensitive questions asked by Kress & van Leeuwen (2006): "Whose meanings are privileged in these symbols?" "Whose cultural resources are marginalized?"

This perspective becomes crucial when analysing African communicative practices. Indigenous semiotic systems, such as *Adinkra* symbols, *Nsibidi* scripts, or Yoruba *àrokò* messaging patterns operate on relational logics different from the rationalized symmetry of global SDG imagery. Their meanings are co-created within community contexts and often emphasize ethical relationships, reciprocity, and ecological continuity. Social semiotics provides the analytical lens for understanding how these local sign systems function as active meaning-makers in the discourse of sustainability, rather than passive recipients of global communication (van Leeuwen, 2005).

2.2. Decolonial Discourse

While social semiotics explains *how* meaning operates in different contexts and among different people, decolonial discourse theory interrogates *whose* meanings dominate the global communicative order (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). Emerging from Latin American and African critical thought, decolonial theory critiques the persistence of colonial logics in global knowledge production and representation (Mignolo, 2011). Thinkers such as Walter Mignolo, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni emphasize that modernity and coloniality are two sides of the same coin: the same systems that promise progress often perpetuate epistemic hierarchies that marginalize non-Western worldviews.

From a decolonial standpoint, the global discourse of sustainable development can be read as a continuation of this epistemic hierarchy. While the SDGs proclaim inclusivity, they often encode Western assumptions about what counts as progress, rationality, and prosperity. The Global South, including Africa, becomes the terrain upon which these ideals are enacted and tested, rather than a source of alternative knowledge (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018). The icons, terminologies, and slogans that structure the SDG discourse thus reflect a form of semiotic coloniality, the dominance of one communicative order over others (Mignolo, 2011).

Therefore, a decolonial reading insists that sustainability must be reimagined as a pluriversal concept, one that recognizes the coexistence of multiple epistemologies, symbolic systems, and communicative traditions (Escobar, 2020). It challenges scholars to engage African semiotics not as exotic cultural artefacts but as legitimate ways of knowing and theorizing about the world (Smith, 2021; Wiredu, 2004). In doing so, decolonial discourse aligns with the goal of semiotic justice: the fair recognition and circulation of diverse modes of meaning-making within global communication.

2.3. Convergence of Frameworks

The idea of bringing social semiotics and decolonial discourse together is greatly expedient enabling a more holistic understanding of sustainability communication. In other words, social semiotics reveals how meanings are socially and culturally shaped, while decolonial discourse theory critiques the power relations that regulate which meanings gain global legitimacy. Their intersection allows us to explore both the structure and the politics of sustainable development communication and global relationship.

It is also important to reiterate that within the African context, this theoretical synthesis underscores the importance of symbolic agency. African communities should not be thought of as passive consumers of global imagery. This is far from real. Africans interpret, reframe, and sometimes subvert symbolic imagery through indigenous semiotic codes. This dialogic process between global and local meaning systems produces what might be called semiotic hybridity, a blending of global symbols with local cultural logics that gives rise to new, context-sensitive articulations of sustainability.

Ultimately, this theoretical foundation provides the analytical scaffolding for the subsequent sections of this chapter. It prepares the ground for exploring how African semiotic traditions, through proverbs, art, and symbols, reimagine the global rhetoric of sustainability, offering fresh perspectives on what it means to live well, ethically, and collectively within our fragile planet.

3. Methodological Perspective

This chapter adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and critical orientation, treating texts, symbols, and images as cultural data rather than neutral representations. It draws from selected African proverbs, artistic motifs, and public communication materials related to sustainability, comparing them with official UN SDG visuals and language to interact globally.

The analysis proceeds through semiotic reading, interpreting representational choices (colour, imagery, metaphor, and narrative framing) and critical discourse analysis (Thompson, 1990). This approach situates the choices within broader ideological and historical contexts. Thus, this method enables a dialogic comparison between indigenous African and global sustainability discourses, revealing both convergence and friction. For emphasis, the goal of employing this method is not to reject global frameworks but to interpret how local semiotic systems can redefine or enhance dominant paradigms and contribute to more inclusive models of global prosperity.

4. Indigenous Semiotics and the Grammar of Sustainability

The semiotic traditions of Africa provide a fertile terrain for rethinking the language of sustainability beyond the technocratic and economistic paradigms of global development. Before the advent of Western modernity, African societies had already evolved intricate systems of meaning that sustained ecological balance, moral order, and communal solidarity (Wiredu, 2004). These communicative forms which are deeply rooted in oral, visual, and performative cultures constitute what may be described as a grammar of sustainability i.e. a culturally embedded repertoire of signs, symbols, and narratives that articulate how humans ought to live responsibly within their social and natural environments. The grammar of sustainability from the African perspectives is further illustrated below.

4.1. The Semiotic Heritage of African Communication

African communication systems have historically been multimodal, combining verbal, visual, gestural, and spatial modes to convey layered meanings (Halliday, 1978). In the Akan culture of Ghana, for

instance, *Adinkra* symbols serve as condensed moral and philosophical statements. Symbols such as *Aya* (the fern), representing endurance and resourcefulness, or *Boa me na me mmoa wo* (help me and let me help you), symbolizing cooperation, embody principles central to both local ethics and contemporary notions of sustainability. Similarly, among the Yoruba, the *àrokò* system of symbolic messaging, using objects like kola nuts, cowries, or feathers, communicate relational and ethical meanings rooted in reciprocity and mutual care.

Across the continent, oral genres such as proverbs, folktales, and songs have functioned as repositories of ecological wisdom. Proverbs like the Swahili saying, "The earth is not ours; it is a treasure we hold in trust," or the Igbo proverb, "A man who neglects the river will soon thirst," encode environmental ethics through metaphor and moral reasoning. These forms of communication do not simply instruct; they construct collective consciousness around the interdependence of human and natural life.

4.2. Communal and Ecological Logic of Indigenous Semiotics

A key characteristic of African semiotic systems is their communal orientation. Meaning is produced not through individual intention but through shared cultural participation. This collectivist orientation mirrors the ecological vision of sustainability, which emphasizes interdependence and shared responsibility. In many African cosmologies, the human, spiritual, and natural realms are interconnected, with each sustaining the other in a cyclical relationship (Wiredu, 2004). Symbols, therefore, are not decorative but functional since they mediate the moral relationships that bind people to their communities and to the environment.

Furthermore, in the visual arts, for instance, the geometric designs found in Ndebele wall paintings, Maasai beadwork, or Igbo *uli* motifs often reflect harmony, balance, and symmetry: visual expressions of the equilibrium sought in social and ecological life (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Even the spatial organization of traditional African compounds, with circular courtyards and shared boundaries, visually encodes the value of cohesion and sustainable coexistence. These indigenous semiotics illustrate that sustainability is not a borrowed idea but an intrinsic element of African thought and aesthetics, a way of life commonly accepted.

4.3. Conformity with the SDG Vision

At this juncture, it is important to note that while the SDGs present sustainability through modern institutional discourse, many of their goals resonate deeply with African moral systems. For instance, the principles behind SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) find cultural analogues in indigenous philosophies such as *Ubuntu* generally practised in southern Africa, *Omoluabi* moral motto in Yoruba land, and *Ujamaa* in Tanzania. Each of these concepts foregrounds moral responsibility expected of individuals, respect for others, and harmony with the environment as foundations of collective prosperity (Wiredu, 2004).

In view of the above, the intersection between global and local sustainability discourses invites a revaluation of African symbolic heritage as a legitimate source of contemporary ecological ethics. Rather than treating indigenous semiotics as pre-modern relics, this chapter positions them as dynamic, living systems of thought that can inform global understandings of sustainable development.

The foregoing shows that recognizing the communicative power of these indigenous forms opens a pathway toward what may be termed a semiotic renaissance, a conscious reclamation of Africa's symbolic and linguistic heritage as resources for envisioning sustainable futures. Such a renaissance would not romanticize the past but would activate traditional semiotics for contemporary relevance. For example, integrating proverb-based pedagogy into environmental education, or using local visual symbols in SDG campaigns, can bridge global ideals and community values, ensuring that sustainability is communicated in culturally resonant ways.

The emphasis, therefore, is that African semiotics demonstrating sustainability is not an imported agenda but a moral and aesthetic principle long embedded in the continent's cultural imagination and daily activities. Understanding this grammar of sustainability invites the world to listen to Africa not merely as a site of intervention but as a repository of semiotic and philosophical wealth that can enrich global prosperity.

5. Global SDG Imagery and African Interpretations

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were designed not only as policy instruments but as a semiotic system: a coordinated network of icons, colours, and keywords intended to unify global communication around the idea of shared prosperity. Each goal is represented through a distinct colour palette, pictogram, and textual formulation, forming a visual language meant to transcend linguistic boundaries in a friendly or attractive way. This universal design, while laudable for its simplicity and accessibility, also exemplifies the politics of representation in global development discourse. The SDG icons could be seen or regarded as speaking in a neutral, technocratic idiom that projects progress as a measurable, standardized, and visually legible phenomenon. Yet, in doing so, they risk erasing cultural particularities and local epistemologies of what "development" or "prosperity" might mean (Mignolo,

2011). The need has therefore arisen to further explore these SDG icons as combined for collective comprehension.

5.1. The Semiotic Architecture of the SDGs

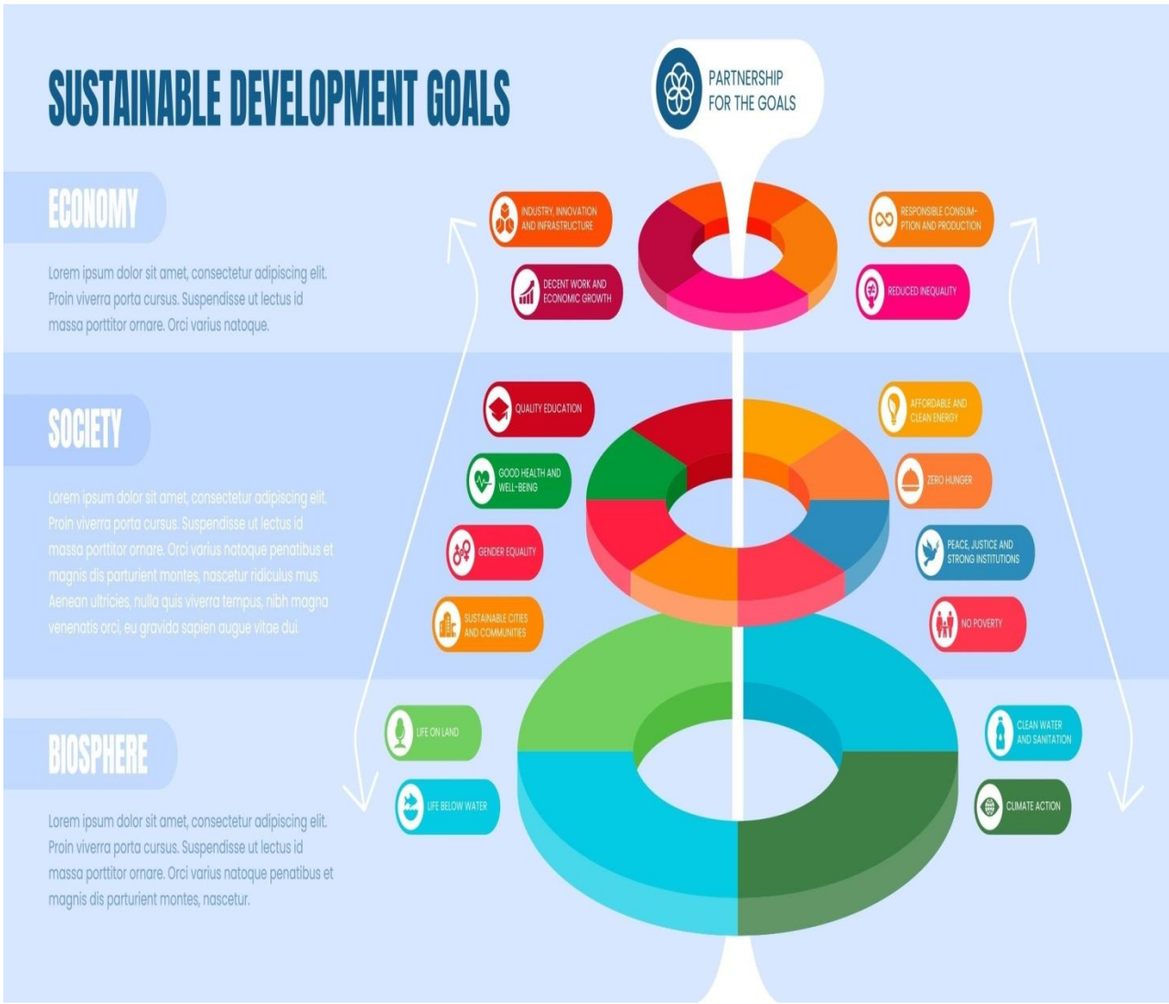

Figure 1. Shutterstock

The SDG visual framework, created by the United Nations Department of Global Communications, relies on minimalist design principles: geometric pictograms, bold colours, and concise textual anchors such as "No Poverty," "Gender Equality," or "Life on Land" (United Nations, 2015). These icons operate as global ideograms, distilling complex social and ecological issues into standardized symbols. From a semiotic perspective, they function as meta-signs, symbols about symbols that prescribe how the world should visualize and discuss progress. However, their supposed universality is not neutral: it is a semiotic performance of authority. The UN's design aesthetic embodies Western modernist assumptions about clarity, order, and rationality, privileging visual abstraction over contextual nuance that should drive the message home readily and steadily.

5.2. Reading the Global Icons through African Eyes

In African contexts, where communication often draws on metaphor, oral narrative, and relational symbolism, the SDG icons acquire new and sometimes divergent meanings. For instance, SDG 15 (Life on Land), represented by a tree and animal, might evoke not only environmental protection but also spiritual and ancestral connections to the land, a concept central to African ecological thought (Wiredu, 2004). Similarly, SDG 5 (Gender Equality), which depicts a simple equality sign within a female symbol, can resonate differently when interpreted through the lens of communal balance and complementary gender roles in traditional societies.

These reinterpretations underscore that meaning is not transferred but translated, and in translation, global signs encounter the moral and spiritual grammars of African cultures. In local community campaigns, SDG imagery is often adapted with indigenous motifs, colours, and slogans to align with familiar worldviews. In parts of West Africa, community-based organizations have reimagined the SDG wheel as a talking drum which is a symbol of dialogue and collective rhythm, reflecting the continent's communicative ethos of participation and reciprocity. Such creative appropriations demonstrate that global sustainability discourse is continually being reterritorialized within local semiotic ecologies (Van Leeuwen, 2005).

5.3. The Problem of Visual Coloniality

Despite these hybrid adaptations, the dominance of Western design conventions in the SDG architecture reflects what decolonial scholars term visual coloniality, the privileging of certain aesthetic norms as universal standards (Mignolo, 2011). The flat pictograms and English text that dominate the SDG icons often render local visual systems invisible or peripheral. This invisibility extends beyond design to epistemology: whose signs are recognized as authoritative carriers of meaning, and whose are deemed decorative or folkloric? In this light, therefore, the SDG framework inadvertently perpetuates a symbolic hierarchy where global institutions speak through logos, and local communities are expected to listen, adopt, and comply (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

5.4. Toward a Pluriversal SDG Semiotics

Now, to overcome such hierarchies as observed above, a pluriversal approach to SDG communication is essential. This will help to recognize and accept the coexistence of multiple semiotic worlds rather than imposing a single global code (Escobar, 2020). Therefore, in practice, this would mean engaging African artists, linguists, and community storytellers in the co-design of SDG imagery and messaging. It would also involve translating the goals not only linguistically but semiotically to ensure that their symbols reflect indigenous philosophies and cosmologies. For instance, the visual idiom of *Ubuntu*, often represented by interlocking hands or circles, could serve as an emblematic framework for goals addressing partnership, peace, and justice (Wiredu, 2004). Such an approach aligns with what Mignolo (2011) calls "epistemic disobedience," the refusal to accept global designs as neutral or universal. And by localizing the visual and rhetorical grammar of the SDGs, African societies reclaim agency in the global conversation on sustainability. They transform the SDGs from instruments of policy compliance into platforms for cultural dialogue and creative meaning-making.

In summary, the encounter between global SDG imagery and African interpretive traditions reveals a dynamic process of negotiation rather than mere adoption. African semiotic practices infuse the global discourse of sustainability with new ethical and aesthetic energies, reminding the world that the path to prosperity is not singular but plural. A decolonized semiotics of the SDGs thus invites the reimagining of global prosperity not as a uniform ideal but as a polyphonic conversation among cultures, symbols, and ways of knowing.

6. Toward a Decolonial Semiotics of Global Prosperity

The debates surrounding sustainability and development have at their core, struggles over meaning. They are contests about whose words, symbols, and narratives define what counts as progress and whose voices are heard or silenced in the articulation of a shared global future (Thompson, 1990). The previous sections of this chapter have shown that while the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) project a universal language of prosperity, this language is underwritten by semiotic and ideological assumptions that are historically Western and institutionally hierarchical (Mignolo, 2011). The African response which is deeply rooted in indigenous semiotic systems, communal ethics, and alternative epistemologies offers not merely a critique but a generative reimagination of how global prosperity might be conceived and communicated.

6.1. Decolonizing the Language of Development

The discussion so far shows that decolonizing sustainability should begin with recognizing that language and imagery are never neutral vehicles but instruments of worldview and power. The dominance of English as the discursive medium of the SDGs, and the hegemony of Western design principles in their visual expression, subtly encode a vision of development that privileges modernization, quantification, and market rationality. A decolonial semiotic approach challenges these paradigms by foregrounding plural modes of signification: those that emerge from oral, symbolic, and performative traditions.

African semiotic practices, as seen in proverbs, folktales, and symbols like *Adinkra* or *Nsibidi*, resist abstraction and hierarchy as they also locate meaning in relationship, reciprocity, and context. Translating this worldview into sustainability discourse would entail moving from a monologic model of development, where global institutions dictate universal goals, to a dialogic model, where multiple epistemic communities negotiate the meanings of prosperity. This shift implies that sustainability should not be "taught" or "transmitted" to African societies but co-created through dialogical engagement with local knowledge systems (Smith, 2021).

6.2. Rethinking Prosperity as Relational and Ethical

In most African cosmologies, prosperity is not merely economic affluence or material accumulation. It is defined through relational well-being: the harmony between individuals, communities, ancestors, and the natural world (Wiredu, 2004). This holistic conception parallels the spiritual and ecological sensibilities embedded in indigenous semiotics. Thus, a decolonized semiotics of prosperity would recognize wealth as multidimensional: moral, ecological, cultural, and spiritual.

By aligning sustainability with relational ethics rather than profit-driven growth, African semiotic thought expands the conceptual horizon of the SDGs. For instance, the Yoruba concept of *Àṣẹ* (vital

energy that sustains life) or the southern African philosophy of *Ubuntu* ("I am because we are") articulates prosperity as a shared and regenerative process. These worldviews are not merely cultural alternatives; they are epistemic resources for redefining what sustainable prosperity can mean in the 21st century (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018).

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the future of global sustainability communication lies in embracing what Escobar (2020) terms the "pluriverse," a world in which many worlds coexist. In semiotic terms, this means acknowledging that the global communication of the SDGs should not erase local grammars of meaning but engage them as equal partners in constructing global narratives. A pluriversal semiotics of sustainability would therefore integrate diverse symbolic traditions (African, Asian, Indigenous American, Oceanic) into a composite discourse that values difference as a resource, not a deviation. Such a transformation requires both institutional and intellectual reorientation. On the one hand, global development agencies must democratize their semiotic processes, inviting local cultural practitioners, artists, and linguists into the design and dissemination of sustainability messages. On the other hand, scholars and educators must cultivate critical semiotic literacy, teaching students to recognize how symbols carry power and how cultural translation can serve as a form of resistance and renewal (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

In the end, the call for a decolonial semiotics of global prosperity is a call for mutual understanding through symbolic diversity of terms and concepts. It invites the world to listen to Africa's communicative wisdom, not as heritage to be preserved but as theory to be engaged for collective benefit and global relationality. The continent's symbolic traditions, from proverbs to pictograms, offer alternative grammars of sustainability that foreground ethics, spirituality, and interconnectedness (Wiredu, 2004). Thus, if the SDGs are to achieve their transformative vision, they must evolve from universal templates into dialogic platforms, open to multiple cultural languages of meaning (Escobar, 2020). Then, global prosperity would no longer be a singular narrative authored by the powerful but a chorus of human and ecological voices, each distinct, yet harmoniously contributing to the global symphony of sustainable life.

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