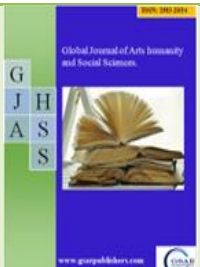


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MULTIMODAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE NIGERIAN CURRENCY NOTES

By

Mogbolahan Olalekan ODUOLA, (PhD)¹, Ojo Akinleye AYINUOLA (PhD)², Gift Chioma OKEKE³
^{1,2,3}Department of English, Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo, Nigeria



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Corresponding author
**Mogbolahan Olalekan
ODUOLA, (PhD)**

ABSTRACT

National identity is an agelong global phenomenon whose construction or meaning negotiations has always been tied to some set of official emblems that are used as vehicle for shaping certain collective national ideologies. Extant studies have largely considered national symbols such as the national anthem, coat of arm, national museums, archival sites, national motto, and national colour from philosophical, sociological, and cultural perspectives with only a sparse attention paid to the Nigerian currencies and the inherent multimodal expressions in the constructions of national identities. This study, therefore, explores how national identities are constructed in the Nigerian currency notes in order to unmask the prominent semiotic resources inherent in the notes. Kress and Leeuwen's Social Semiotic theory complemented with Fairclough's strand of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) were adopted as theoretical framework. Data, which were got online were the eight Nigerian currency notes (#5, #10, #20, #50, #100, #200, #500, #1000). The data were subjected to critical discourse analysis using interpretative design. The currency notes, featuring historical figures, landmarks, national colors, and inscriptions, were found to reflects Nigeria's political, cultural, and post-colonial context. They solicit support for national unity and citizenship. The analyses of the semiotic elements of currency notes, reveals how the Nigerian state uses these symbols to reinforce the political and ideological goals of the nation, particularly the promotion of unity and national cohesion amidst ethnic and cultural diversity. Naira notes, as national symbols, function not only as representations of cultural and historical narratives but also as dynamic agents in the formation of national identity. The Nigerian currency notes, with their rich display of multimodal discourse resources, index an identity of a diverse, rich, complex, and potentially great nation. Such symbolic negotiations, constructions and communication of collective values of unity, sovereignty, and patriotism could be objects of further research for greater 21st century Nigerian polity.

Keywords: *National identity constructions, Multimodal discourse expressions, Nigerian currency notes, Historical figures, 'National phrases'*

Background to the Study

The study of identity construction through multimodal discourse has gained prominence in understanding how national symbols serve as vehicles for shaping and communicating collective identities. In the context of Nigeria, a country characterized by cultural diversity and historical complexity, national symbols such as the coat of arms, the national anthem, the flag, and other official emblems are key instruments for constructing and reinforcing a

shared sense of national identity (Obi, 2014). These symbols play a central role in expressing the core values and aspirations of the Nigerian state, positioning them as both cultural and political artefacts that represent the nation's ethos, unity, and historical struggles. The term "multimodal discourse" refers to the use of various modes of communication, including visual, verbal, and sometimes auditory elements, to convey meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). National symbols in Nigeria are often multimodal



in nature, combining elements of text, color, image, and sound to evoke a sense of belonging, pride, and loyalty. For instance, the Nigerian coat of arms, with its elements of an eagle, horses, and green and white color scheme, conveys powerful messages of strength, unity, and peace (Akinyemi, 2010).

The construction of identity through such symbols is not a neutral process; rather, it is influenced by historical and political contexts. Nigeria's colonial past, its post-independence struggles, and its ongoing quest for national cohesion and development all shape the ways in which national symbols are interpreted and used to construct collective identity. For example, the incorporation of the Nigerian map into the national flag, as well as the eagle and the horses in the coat of arms, represent the nation's sovereignty and its aspirations to maintain peace and unity among its diverse ethnic groups (Akinyemi, 2010; Ojo, 2016).

Furthermore, national symbols are key to the nation-building project in post-colonial Nigeria, serving as tools for integrating the country's diverse cultures and fostering a sense of shared citizenship (Obi, 2014). These symbols play a critical role in both formal state functions and in the everyday lives of citizens, shaping perceptions of what it means to be Nigerian. They are not only markers of national pride but also serve as mechanisms of social control, promoting a collective identity that aligns with the political and ideological goals of the state (Ede, 2019).

Aligning with scholars' argument that identity construction through national symbols is a dynamic process that involves negotiation between the state, citizens, and external actors (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), this study, therefore, aims to examine how the Nigerian currencies, exemplifying national symbols contribute to the ongoing process of identity construction in the country, considering both their semiotic significance and their role in shaping public understanding of Nigerian identity.

Statement of the Problem

Extant studies have examined the discourse of Nigerian currencies and national identities from diverse perspectives. Olatunji (2009) submits that there is an intricate relationship between national identities and Nigerian currencies especially in a post-colonial context. the need for an in-depth exploration of the multimodal discourse of identity construction in Nigerian currencies as examples of national symbols remains critical for understanding how they continue to shape the collective consciousness of the Nigerian populace. This study, therefore, aims to investigate the Nigerian currency notes, exemplifying Nigerian national identities, through their visual, verbal, and graphic elements with a view to examining inherent colonial past, national struggles, and ongoing quest for unity that can contribute to a cohesive national narrative, foster social cohesion, promote citizenship, and align with the political and ideological goals of the Nigerian state. In other words,

Aim and objectives

The study aims to investigate how national identities are multimodally constructed through the Nigerian currency notes. The specific objectives of this study are to:

- (i) identify the semiotic resources in the construction of national identities in Nigerian currency notes,
- (ii) analyse the semiotic resources of national Nigerian currencies in the construction national identities,
- (iii) examine the functions of semiotic resources in the construction of national identities in the Nigerian currency notes.

Significance of the study

Nigeria's cultural and ethnic diversity presents a constant challenge for national unity. This study provides an understanding of how national symbols serve as tools for fostering social cohesion, promoting a shared sense of citizenship, and overcoming divisiveness. By examining the ways in which national symbols such as the currency notes are invoked in both formal and informal settings, this research offers important implications for promoting unity in a highly diverse nation. Understanding the role these symbols play in shaping shared values of patriotism, peace, and sovereignty can be instrumental in strengthening national solidarity, especially in the face of political and social challenges (Shittu, 2017). Precisely, the Nigerian currencies are unique in the reinforcement of national unity and social cohesion.

The study significantly advances the field of multimodal discourse analysis by applying its theoretical framework to national symbols, a relatively underexplored area in the existing literature. By examining how visual, verbal, and graphic elements on the Nigerian currencies work together, the research provides a novel perspective on how meaning is constructed in multimodal communication. This offers new insights into how national symbols are not just static representations, but dynamic agents in the creation of national identity. This analysis basically offers, among other things, supports for the broader goals of national development, political stability, and unity in contemporary Nigerian society within a multimodal framework. The study is significant because it highlights the central role of language in the symbolic construction of national identity. Furthermore, it provides a useful framework for analyzing the ways in which national anthems function as cultural and political texts.

Theoretical framework

This study adopts Kress and van Leeuwen' (2001) s social semiotics as theoretical framework. This theory is complemented with Norman Fairclough's socio-semiotic approach of Critical Discourse Analysis. Social semiotics is concerned with the study of signs and symbols in their social context. It emphasizes how meaning is made through different modes and how these modes work together to create and communicate messages. Kress and van Leeuwen (2001)'s theory is thus a foundational work on social semiotics which offers valuable insight into how meaning is created across different modes of communication. It has strong

supportive facility for the application of social semiotics and multimodal discourse analysis in the study of Nigerian currency.

This study adopts Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) socio-semiotic approach to multimodality. The strength of this theory lies in its ability to account for all modes within socio-cultural context. As against traditional model of analysis communication that focuses on text, this theory emphasizes that fact that specific representations of different modal resources are catered for in the socio-cultural context. This simply means that different modes are a coherent, integral and distinct resource for making meanings (Bamigbose, 2021).

As an extension of Michael Kirkwood Alexander Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, Kress and van Leeuwen's theory focuses on meaning which has two closely related issues. The issues are "the material resources of communication and how the way their uses are socially regulated" (van Leeuwen, 2005:93 cited in Bamgbose, 2021). The theory has three levels of meaning explication namely: representational, interactional and compositional meanings. These three levels coincide with M.A.K. Halliday's metafunctions namely: ideational (Experiential), Interpersonal, and Textual.

Social Semiotics, according to Bateman and Schmidt (2012), is directly concerned with analyzing how multiple modes (visual, textual, graphic, for examples) interact within a discourse to construct meaning. This approach is particularly useful for examining the interplay between different modes used in the Nigerian currencies to convey a unified message. By applying MDA, the study will identify how these different modes create a cohesive and powerful representation of Nigeria's national identity. For example, the pictorial and graphic aspects of the currencies help evoke emotional responses that reinforce the message of unity and national pride, which are then supported by the textual elements of. In the context of the Nigerian national symbols, Social Semiotics can be applied to analyze the visual elements of the currencies in multimodal terms. Elements such as colors, images, and linguistic or verbal signs and how they are deployed to produce a cohesive message that contributes to national identity, evidently require such theoretical groundwork.

Critical Discourse Analysis, on the other hand, examines the relationship between language, power, and society, focusing on how discourse is used to construct and negotiate social identities, ideologies, and power structures. CDA is valuable for understanding how national symbols are embedded in and shaped by political ideologies and historical contexts. This work of Fairclough's is a key reference for understanding how power and ideology are embedded in discourse. The study can draw on CDA to analyze the symbolic role of the Naira in the construction of national identity.

The historical and political context of Nigerian currencies can be analyzed using CDA to reveal how they function to convey ideologies of unity, sovereignty, and nation-building. The point is that, currencies as symbols are not neutral; but are ideologically charged. The choice of images and colors are not just aesthetic but

are deliberately crafted to project a unified national narrative that supports the state's political objectives.

Literature Review

In scholarship, there exists a shoal of views and orientations, highlighting their relevance to the study of multimodal discourse in national symbols and identity formation in Nigeria. Akinyemi's (2010) work, for instance, conceptually discusses the power of national symbols in shaping collective identity in Nigeria. The article highlights how symbols like the national coat of arms, flag, and anthem serve as tools of socialization and mechanisms for statecraft, influencing citizens' perceptions of national unity and patriotism. Akinyemi argues that these symbols are not merely decorative but function as key agents in nation-building, helping to form an emotional and cultural bond among citizens. The work's conceptual focus on identity-making via national symbols will be useful in examining the symbolic power and emotional significance of the chosen national symbols within the context of Nigeria's post-colonial identity.

Ede (2019) explores the functional role of national symbols in Nigeria, specifically focusing on their role in statecraft and identity formation in the post-colonial context. The article argues that symbols are powerful tools for political legitimacy and social cohesion, with a particular focus on how post-independence Nigerian governments have employed national symbols to achieve national unity and political goals. Ede's exploration of statecraft ties directly into the study's focus on the political implications of national symbols. By emphasizing how national symbols are used for political purposes, this article informs the analysis of how symbols reflect and promote national narratives in contemporary Nigeria. It supports the study's goal of assessing how national symbols contribute to social cohesion and the construction of shared citizenship in Nigeria.

Similarly, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) foundational text on multimodal discourse provides a framework for understanding how different modes of communication - visual, textual, graphic - interact to produce meaning. The authors discuss how meaning is not created through language alone but through the combination of multiple semiotic resources in communication. They emphasize the interdependence of various modes in constructing social realities and identities. This work is crucial for the study as it lays the theoretical foundation for analyzing multimodal symbols such as the currency notes (which combine text, images, and colors). Kress and van Leeuwen's theories will be applied to analyze how the interactions of different semiotic modes in these symbols contribute to identity construction in Nigeria, providing a methodological basis for multimodal discourse analysis.

The discourse of national identities

According to Anderson (1983:14), national identity is defined as imagined political community and a mental construct because citizens of a nation reason and perceive issues and concepts in a similar way and are affected by socio-political, economic, and cultural realities. Such similar experiences are earthquake, tsunami,

election, constitution and so on. Similarly, Bourdieu (1993) defines a national identity as a complex of ideas, concepts, or perceptual schemata that manifest in three ways, namely: similar/related emotional attitudes, similar/related behavioral dispositions, and national socialization. According to de Cillia et al., (2009), national identity is a modernized form of social identity, which is produced, reproduced, transformed, and dismantled *discursively*. According to Ayinuola (2017), national identity changes synchronically and diachronically thereby ensuring that national identities conforms with socio-economic, cultural and political realities. This study aligns with de Cillia et al., (2009) and Ayinuola (2017) that national identities are not fixed nor static but change over time depending on prevailing socio-cultural, religious and economic realities and happenings.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach. Data, were got online, were the eight Nigerian currencies notes. The currencies notes were #5, #10, #20, #50, #100, #200, #500, and #1000. These symbols have been purposively chosen for their prominence in representing Nigeria's national identity and their presence in various contexts, both formal and informal. Data were subjected critical discourse analysis using interpretative design.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The semiotic resources that are prominent in the constructions of national identities in the Nigerian currencies are both linguistic (textual) and non-linguistic. Linguistic resources are the word "naira", while the non-linguistic resources are images, visuals and icons. The Naira is, indeed, an important national symbol, reflecting Nigeria's cultural and political narrative through its design elements. Studying the currency, therefore, enriches the multimodal discourse analysis by showing how the state uses material symbols in everyday life (currency) alongside more traditional symbols (coat of arms, flag, anthem) to construct and communicate national identity and values. The currency serves as a subtle yet pervasive tool in shaping how Nigerians understand themselves as members of a unified national community.

Linguistic resource of naira explicating postcolonialism and national collectivism

The word "Naira" comes from the name of Nigeria, the country that issues the currency. Specifically, the name "Naira" is derived from a clipping or agglutination of the word "Nigeria". Etymologically, the word "Naira" was coined when Nigeria replaced the British pound with its own national currency in 1973. In terms of its 'root', it is a truncated form of 'Nigeria', where the last syllable 'ia' is dropped and redistributed, leaving the derivation 'Naira'. This etymological process reflects a deliberate post-colonial effort to assert Nigeria's distinctiveness and autonomy through a name that is both phonetically and symbolically tied to the nation itself. The intention behind this naming was to maintain a strong national identity by linking the currency directly to the country. This reflects an active construction of national identity by selecting a linguistic form that departs from colonial nomenclature and embodies Nigeria's sovereign self-image. This method of

morphological process in forming a new word by shortening the original one is a typical example of 'clipping' or 'agglutination' in linguistics—but in this context, it becomes a linguistic strategy of identity formation.

The Naira not only functions as a medium of exchange but also as a symbol of Nigeria's sovereignty and autonomy. It acts as a constant reminder of the post-independence political order, asserting the state's control over its economic system. The Naira effectively communicates national identity through a combination of visual (historical figures and landmarks), textual (language and inscriptions), and color (symbolic shades of the national flag) modes. These elements work together to create a multifaceted representation of Nigeria's national pride, unity, and cultural heritage.

As part of a broader multimodal discourse, the Naira plays a crucial role in constructing and reinforcing national identity. It serves as both an economic tool and a symbol of unity, pride, and political authority, helping shape both domestic and global perceptions of Nigeria. Overall, the Nigerian Naira is a vital symbol of the nation's post-colonial identity, embodying the country's values, history, and aspirations. Through its design, it actively contributes to shaping national pride, cultural unity, and political sovereignty, making it an integral part of the ongoing discourse on national identity. The name "Naira" is derived from a shortened form of "Nigeria" and represents a post-colonial effort to create a distinct national identity, marking Nigeria's shift from British currency in 1973. The Naira represents more than just currency for trade and economic exchange. It also functions as a symbol of political power, national sovereignty, and the ideological goals of the state. The Naira, as the country's legal tender, is a symbol of Nigeria's sovereignty and autonomy. It reinforces the state's control over its economic system and its political authority both locally and internationally. Through currency, the state asserts itself as the sole source of economic legitimacy, which is a core mechanism in national identity construction.

Nominal choice (Central Bank of Nigeria) showing post-colonial identity

The text on the currency plays a vital role in reinforcing national identity. The inscription of "Central Bank of Nigeria" on the banknotes directly connects the Naira to the sovereign authority of the Nigerian state. These inscriptions communicate the state's control over its economy and, by extension, its people's economic lives—thereby rooting national identity in state power and economic autonomy. Furthermore, the use of English as the lingua franca in the currency design also signals Nigeria's **post-colonial identity**, where English has become the official language, bridging the communication gap between Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups. This deliberate choice reflects a balancing act in the construction of national identity: using a colonial legacy (English) as a unifying force in a multilingual society. The language and inscriptions express national sovereignty and the official nature of the currency. The inclusion of "Central Bank of Nigeria" and "Republic of Nigeria" on the notes reinforces the state's authority. English, as

the official language, also highlights Nigeria's post-colonial identity.

Non-linguistic resources

The design elements on Nigerian currency are rich in visual symbolisms. Each denomination of the Naira features carefully chosen images, often reflecting historical figures, landmarks, and cultural elements significant to the nation's identity.

National figures symbolizing Nationalist ideology

Prominent figures from Nigeria's history such as Nnamdi Azikwe, Obafemi Awolowo, are featured on the currency notes. For instance, the Nigerian Naira notes display iconic leaders such as:

Nnamdi Azikiwe



Obafemi Awolowo



Aliyu Mai-Bornu, Clement Isong,



Ahmadu Bello.



These figures, in the light of the Pearsean idea of iconicity, symbolize Nigeria's independence struggle, political development, and post-colonial leadership. Their inclusion in the currency is a form of **identity narration**, embedding collective memory into everyday life. It reinforces their role in nation-building and provides citizens with shared reference points around which national identity is constructed. The images of national heroes and landmarks speak to the historical and cultural aspects of Nigerian identity. Currency notes feature images of influential figures like Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, and Ahmadu Bello, who symbolize the country's independence and political evolution. Prominent landmarks such as the Central Bank of Nigeria and National Theatre further emphasize unity and national pride. The selection of national heroes and cultural landmarks or sites on the currency design ties the Naira to Nigeria's national culture and heritage, forming a direct link between economic power and national pride. This visual linkage between the state and cultural identity plays a key role in solidifying a shared sense of national belonging among citizens.

National edifice showcasing territorial unity and cultural diversity

Key landmarks or sites from Nigeria's diverse regions are included in the designs of currency. Examples include the Central Bank of Nigeria building, the Nigerian National Theatre, and cultural monuments like the Nigerian National Mosque. These images serve a dual purpose of representing both **territorial unity** and **cultural diversity**, two essential pillars of national identity construction. They visually affirm Nigeria's goal of forging a unified national identity from a plurality of ethnic and regional identities. For instance, the display of cattle, groundnut pyramid and heir of millet on the reverse-side of 200-naira currency note constructs the identity of agriculturally rich northern region functioning within the pool of national polity.

Colors exemplifying National Values

Colors are often imbued with symbolism and used to represent various national values. The currency design uses colors like green, white, blue, purple, magenta, golden, and brass which are closely associated with Nigeria's national flag and symbolize peace, agriculture, fertility, sovereignty, royalty, and patriotism. The green and white colors are especially significant, as they appear on both the flag and currency, symbolizing hope, unity, and the vision for national prosperity. These color choices are not incidental—they are a deliberate part of crafting a visual language of national identity that citizens repeatedly encounter and internalize.

The symbolic colors link the currency to national values like unity, peace, and prosperity. By integrating multiple communicative forms, the currency becomes a pervasive and dynamic tool of national identity construction, reaching citizens in both conscious and unconscious ways. The Nigerian Naira is an important multimodal symbol within the broader framework of national identity construction. Through its visual elements, textual inscriptions, color symbolism, and political associations, the currency serves as an expression of Nigerian sovereignty, national values, and historical pride. As part of the multimodal discourse, the Naira not only facilitates economic transactions but also actively contributes to the national narrative by shaping how citizens and the global community perceive Nigeria's identity, unity, and statecraft. This analysis aligns with the study's goal of examining how national symbols, including currency, shape and reflect national identity, especially in the post-colonial Nigerian context. By incorporating the Naira into this broader discourse, we gain deeper insights into how everyday symbols can reinforce national unity, cultural pride, and political sovereignty. The green, white, and yellow colors on the currency connect to the Nigerian flag, symbolizing peace, agriculture, unity, and patriotism.

Conclusion

The Nigerian Naira is more than just a medium of economic exchange; it serves as a powerful multimodal symbol that reflects the nation's cultural, political, and historical identity. Through its design elements, visual imagery, textual inscriptions, color choices, and material symbolism, the Naira communicates key aspects of Nigeria's sovereignty, unity, and post-colonial narrative. In

studying the Naira within the context of national identity construction, it becomes evident that the currency is intricately linked to the broader discourse of national pride, heritage, and statecraft.

The Naira's name itself speaks volumes about Nigeria's postcolonial journey. Derived from a truncated form of "Nigeria," the currency is linguistically tied to the country it represents. This deliberate etymological choice, made when the Naira replaced the British pound in 1973, emphasizes Nigeria's desire to assert its independence and establish a strong national identity. The formation of the word through the process of clipping and agglutination exemplifies Nigeria's reclamation of its cultural autonomy, reflecting the country's break from colonial influence and its ambition to create something uniquely Nigerian.

The visual elements embedded in the design of the Naira are rich with symbolic meaning. Prominent historical figures such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, and Ahmadu Bello are featured on the currency notes. These leaders, central to Nigeria's independence struggle and post-colonial development, act as reminders of the country's political evolution and aspirations. The inclusion of architectural landmarks such as the Central Bank of Nigeria building and the National Theatre further emphasizes the nation's quest for unity and its vision for economic prosperity. These images are not mere decorative elements; they serve as visual representations of Nigeria's political and cultural identity, reinforcing the *symbolic weight of the Naira*.

Moreover, the textual inscriptions on the Naira contribute significantly to its role as a symbol of national sovereignty. The words "Central Bank of Nigeria" and "Republic of Nigeria" prominently displayed on the currency connect it directly to the legal and institutional authority of the Nigerian state. The use of English as the official language also reflects Nigeria's post-colonial reality, unifying its diverse linguistic groups while highlighting the global significance of the currency. In this way, the Naira functions as a tool of communication, not only facilitating trade but also reinforcing the state's control over its economy and territory.

The color palette of the Naira further amplifies its symbolic role in national identity construction. The green and white colors featured on the currency, echoing the national flag, symbolize hope, unity, and a shared vision for prosperity. These colors are integral to Nigeria's national narrative, representing not just economic aspirations but also the social values of peace, fertility, and national cohesion. Through its material design, the Naira ties economic exchange to a broader cultural and ideological context, where each transaction is a subtle yet powerful affirmation of national identity.

The Naira's political and ideological significance is also profound. It represents not only Nigeria's economic power but also its sovereignty. As the official legal tender, it reinforces the state's ability to regulate its economy and assert its presence on the global stage. By featuring historical figures and cultural monuments on its notes, the Naira becomes more than just currency; it becomes a

tool for communicating Nigeria's political and social order post-independence. Through everyday interactions with the Naira, citizens are continuously reminded of the nation's political struggle, victories, and ongoing efforts to consolidate its sovereignty.

In the broader multimodal discourse, the Naira operates across different modes - visual, textual, and color-based - each contributing to a more complete and nuanced understanding of Nigerian national identity. The combination of images of national heroes and landmarks, textual inscriptions of sovereignty, and symbolic colors ensures that the Naira communicates its message on multiple levels. As a result, the currency is not just a tool for economic transactions; it is a powerful symbol that reflects the nation's values, aspirations, and historical journey.

Ultimately, the Nigerian Naira serves as a critical part of the national identity construction process. It transcends its role as a simple economic instrument, acting as a constant presence in everyday life that shapes both the perception of Nigeria's identity within its borders and across the globe. By embedding national heroes, cultural landmarks, and key values within its design, the Naira is a tangible representation of Nigeria's sovereignty, pride, and political ideology. It acts as a bridge between the past and the present, continually reinforcing the shared vision of a united, prosperous nation.

This analysis reveals how everyday symbols like currency can function as powerful tools in shaping and reflecting national identity. The Naira, as a key part of Nigeria's post-colonial narrative, illustrates how material symbols can be harnessed to convey deeply ingrained values of unity, sovereignty, and national pride. Through its design, the Naira contributes not only to the economic landscape but also to the ongoing process of constructing and communicating Nigeria's national identity to both its citizens and the international community.

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