

Multimodal Stylistic Analysis of Environmental Protest Images in Ayetoro, Ondo State

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Article History	Abstract
Original Research Article	<i>This study examines environmental protest images in Ayetoro, Ondo State, Nigeria. It investigates how meaning is constructed through multimodal stylistic resources. The objectives are to examine the visual and linguistic semiotic resources in the protest images, to analyse how inscriptions, colour, gaze, gestures, composition, and spatial arrangement contribute to meaning, and to investigate how community grievances and environmental justice demands are represented. The study is grounded in Multimodal Stylistics (Nørgaard, Busse & Montoro, 2010) and supported by Visual Grammar (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). A qualitative research design is adopted. The data consist of six protest photographs sourced from Corporate Accountability and Public Participation in Africa (CAPPA). The images document a large-scale environmental protest involving community members affected by flooding, sea incursion, and coastal erosion. The analysis focuses on the interaction of visual and verbal modes in meaning-making. The findings show that environmental crisis is strongly constructed through linguistic and visual strategies. Recurrent metaphors such as “THE SINKING CITY” frame Ayetoro as an endangered space. Linguistic inscriptions function as urgent appeals to political authorities. Visual resources such as children in school uniforms, direct gaze, and raised placards intensify emotional appeal. Colour choices such as red and yellow signal urgency and danger. The images construct collective grievance and position government and oil corporations as accountable actors. Environmental justice is expressed through mass mobilisation and digital hashtags such as #SaveAyetoroNow. The interaction of modes presents Ayetoro as a neglected and vulnerable community facing ecological collapse. The study concludes that protest images function as ideological tools of resistance and advocacy. They extend environmental discourse into visual and digital spaces. The study recommends urgent governmental intervention and environmental remediation in the affected community.</i> Keywords: Visual grammar, environmental justice, semiotics, coastal erosion, ideology.
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Copyright © 2026 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited. Citation: Jayeoba, M. S., Adaramodu, L. R., Adegboyegbe, O. B., & Ibrahim, A. R. (2026). <i>Multimodal stylistic analysis of environmental protest images in Ayetoro, Ondo State.</i> UKR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, 2(7), 225-232.	

1 Background to the Study

Environmental issues have become a major concern in coastal communities in Nigeria, particularly in the Niger Delta region. Ayetoro in Ilaje Local Government Area, Ondo State, is one of such communities severely affected by coastal erosion, oil exploration activities, and sea encroachment. These environmental challenges have destroyed homes, schools, farmlands, and means of

livelihood. They have also triggered continuous protest actions and community resistance. Protest in this context is not only physical. It is also communicative and visual. It is expressed through placards, inscriptions, gestures, and photographic compositions. These protest images function as semiotic resources of resistance and advocacy. They communicate suffering, injustice, and demands for

environmental justice. In Multimodal Stylistics, meaning is created through the interaction of language and visual design (Nørgaard, Busse & Montoro, 2010). Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) also argue that images operate like language and can be systematically analysed for meaning.

Despite the frequency of these protest images in Ayetoro, there is limited systematic stylistic analysis of how meaning is constructed through their multimodal features. The research problem therefore lies in the lack of detailed scholarly attention to the visual and linguistic strategies used in environmental protest images in the community. This study addresses this gap by examining how meaning is constructed through multimodal resources. The objectives are to examine the visual and linguistic semiotic resources deployed in environmental protest images in Ayetoro, Ondo State. It also aims to analyse how multimodal elements such as inscriptions, colour, gaze, and gestures contribute to meaning construction in the protest images. It further investigates how community grievances and demands for environmental justice are represented through visual communication in the protest images. These images function as ideological texts that reflect power relations between the community, oil corporations, and government authorities. This aligns with Critical Discourse Analysis, which explains how discourse reflects social power and inequality (Fairclough, 1995). Therefore, this study explores how environmental protest images in Ayetoro construct meaning, identity, and resistance in a context of ecological crisis.

2 Literature Review

Multimodal studies of protest discourse have expanded significantly in recent years. Scholars argue that protest communication is no longer limited to spoken or written language. It increasingly includes visual and multimodal resources such as photographs, placards, gestures, and spatial arrangements. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) established that images function like language and carry structured meanings. This view is extended in multimodal stylistics, where visual and verbal modes are studied as integrated meaning-making systems (Nørgaard, Busse & Montoro, 2010). Recent research confirms that protest images are powerful ideological tools. They construct resistance and identity through visual design (Jewitt, 2016; Machin & Mayr, 2012). Such studies show that meaning in protest discourse is socially shaped and context dependent.

Empirical studies on environmental protest discourse have highlighted the role of visual communication in ecological activism. In studies of climate protests, images are shown to frame environmental injustice and corporate accountability. For example, Dobrin (2019) observes that

environmental activism increasingly relies on visual storytelling to mobilise public attention. Similarly, Brantner, Lobinger and Wetzstein (2011) show that protest photographs amplify emotional engagement and political urgency. In African contexts, visual protest discourse is also gaining scholarly attention. Okoye (2020) finds that environmental protests in the Niger Delta use visual symbols to express marginalisation and ecological violence. These findings support the idea that protest images are not neutral. They are ideological and persuasive.

Further empirical studies have focused on multimodal features such as gaze, colour, and composition in protest imagery. Machin (2013) demonstrates that gaze and framing in protest photographs position viewers ideologically. Colour is also shown to carry symbolic meaning in environmental activism. Red often signals danger or urgency, while blue and green suggest ecological loss or sustainability (Forceville, 2016). In a related study, Adami (2017) argues that gestures and bodily positioning in protest images construct solidarity and collective identity. These studies reinforce the importance of analysing multiple semiotic resources together. They also show that meaning is distributed across visual elements rather than concentrated in text alone.

Despite these contributions, limited research has focused on coastal Nigerian communities such as Ayetoro. Existing studies on environmental protest in Nigeria tend to emphasise political or sociological perspectives rather than stylistic analysis. There is also limited attention to how multimodal resources construct meaning in protest photographs from this region. This study addresses this gap by applying multimodal stylistics to environmental protest images sourced from Corporate Accountability and Public Participation in Africa (CAPPA). It builds on previous work while focusing specifically on visual meaning-making in a highly vulnerable coastal environment. It therefore contributes to both stylistics and environmental discourse studies by showing how protest images function as structured semiotic systems of resistance and environmental advocacy.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is Multimodal Stylistics. It is developed by Nørgaard, Busse, and Montoro (2010, Montoro 2014). It extends traditional stylistics beyond written language. It focuses on how meaning is created through multiple semiotic modes. These include language, images, colour, gaze, gestures, and spatial design. The framework is useful for analysing protest images because such texts are not purely linguistic. They combine verbal and visual signs to produce meaning. Multimodal Stylistics

explains how these different resources work together. It also explains how stylistic choices influence interpretation and ideology. Meaning is therefore seen as a product of interaction between modes. This approach is central to understanding environmental protest images in Ayetoro.

Multimodal Stylistics draws strongly from social semiotics. It is also supported by the idea that texts are socially situated. Meaning is shaped by context, purpose, and audience. In protest images, inscriptions, symbols, and visual arrangements are not random. They are deliberate stylistic choices. These choices communicate resistance, suffering, and environmental injustice. The framework allows the researcher to examine how these meanings are constructed and interpreted. It also helps to reveal how power relations are encoded in visual communication. In this study, it provides the main lens for analysing environmental protest images in Ayetoro. It is complemented by visual grammar principles where necessary (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). This combination strengthens the analysis of multimodal meaning-making in environmental protest discourse.

3 Research Method

The study adopts a qualitative research design anchored in multimodal stylistic analysis. The data consist of environmental protest photographs sourced from Corporate Accountability and Public Participation in Africa (CAPPa). The images document a large-scale protest in Ayetoro, Ilaje Local Government Area of Ondo State. The protest involved approximately 5,000 residents, including men, women, schoolchildren, and elderly persons. It was organised in response to severe flooding, sea incursion, and rising sea levels affecting the coastal community. These environmental challenges are locally attributed to oil exploration activities along the coastline. The photographs were selected purposively from CAPPa's documented visual archive. Selection was guided by relevance to the study objectives. Only images that clearly display multimodal features such as placards, inscriptions, gestures, bodily positioning, and

spatial arrangements were included. This ensures that the dataset captures rich semiotic resources for analysis.

The analytical procedure is based on Multimodal Stylistics as proposed by Nørgaard, Busse, and Montoro (2010), with support from Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar framework. The analysis focuses on how meaning is constructed through the interaction of verbal and visual modes in the protest images. Attention is given to inscriptions on placards, colour usage, gaze, gestures, framing, and compositional layout. These elements are treated as stylistic resources that construct environmental experience and social meaning. The study further examines representational, interactive, and compositional meanings embedded in the visual texts. This allows for a systematic interpretation of how environmental degradation, suffering, and resistance are visually communicated. It also explores how ideological positions are encoded through visual choices. Ultimately, the methodology provides a clear framework for explaining how protest imagery functions as environmental discourse that expresses grievance, constructs identity, and challenges power relations between the affected community, oil corporations, and government authorities.

4 Data Presentation

The data consist of six protest photographs from Ayetoro in Ilaje Local Government Area of Ondo State. The images are sourced from Corporate Accountability and Public Participation in Africa (CAPPa). They present a large-scale environmental protest involving community members, especially schoolchildren. The photographs are labelled Images 1 to 6 for ease of reference and systematic analysis. Each image captures different aspects of the protest context, including placard displays, group mobilisation, and emotional expression. The presentation of the data allows for a structured examination of how multimodal resources construct environmental meaning, collective identity, and resistance.



Source: Corporate Accountability and Public Participation in Africa (CAPPa) <https://cappaafrica.org/>



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4.1 Data Analysis

The analysis focuses on how meaning is constructed through the interaction of visual and linguistic semiotic resources in the protest images. Each photograph is examined systematically based on its compositional structure, inscriptions, colour use, gaze, gestures, and spatial organisation. Attention is also given to how linguistic expressions on placards interact with visual elements to produce ideological meanings. The images are interpreted as social texts that communicate environmental injustice, collective identity, and resistance. Particular emphasis is placed on how the visuals construct urgency, appeal to authority, and represent community suffering. This approach allows for a detailed interpretation of how multimodal choices shape meaning and reinforce environmental discourse in Ayetoro.

4.1.1 Visual and Linguistic Semiotic Resources Deployed in Environmental Protest Images

The environmental protest images from Ayetoro function as multimodal ideological texts that construct meaning through the interaction of visual and linguistic semiotic resources. Guided by Multimodal Stylistics (Nørgaard, Busse & Montoro, 2010) and Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar, the analysis of Images 1–2 shows a consistent construction of urgency, vulnerability, and moral appeal. In Image 1, children in school uniforms dominate the foreground. Their uniforms index innocence, discipline, and the right to education. Their direct gaze and open mouths create an interactive demand on the viewer. This establishes emotional alignment and moral pressure. Placards with handwritten and bold inscriptions such as “THE SINKING CITY” and “Mr. President, come to our aid NOW!!!” intensify urgency through metaphor and

direct address. The metaphor of “sinking city” frames Ayetoro as a disappearing space, while direct presidential address constructs institutional accountability. The repeated hashtag #SaveAyetoroNow extends the protest into digital space, linking physical suffering to online activism. Similarly, Image 2 amplifies collective urgency through mass participation. Children in coordinated uniforms fill the frame, constructing a visual narrative of disrupted education and shared vulnerability. The mixture of red and black typography signals danger and seriousness. The use of repetition in “Save Ayetoro NOW!!!” and “Mr. President, come to our aid NOW” strengthens emotional intensity and ideological insistence. The degraded ground surface functions as indexical evidence of environmental collapse, reinforcing the claim of a “sinking city” through material visibility.

Images 3–6 further deepen the multimodal construction of environmental crisis, collective identity, and political demand. In Image 3, a central child figure holding a banner with #SaveAyetoroNow becomes a focal semiotic anchor. The CAPPA logo introduces institutional framing, lending legitimacy to grassroots expression. The visual of a damaged school embedded in the banner connects linguistic meaning to material loss, reinforcing the collapse of educational infrastructure. Image 4 continues this child-centred framing but expands collective presence through background figures whose repeated gestures and uniforms index shared suffering. The interplay of raised placards, handwritten inscriptions, and digital hashtags constructs a layered discourse of resistance that moves between local and global spaces. In Image 5, the semiotic focus shifts to direct political naming: “President Bola Ahmed Tinubu come to our aid.” This explicit naming personalises responsibility and intensifies accountability. The inclusion of “Ayetoro is part of the Niger Delta too” functions as discursive inclusion, situating the community within broader extractive geographies. Image 6 consolidates earlier patterns through metaphor, repetition, and visual evidence of infrastructural collapse. The recurring expression “THE SINKING CITY” becomes a stabilising metaphor across the dataset, reinforcing existential threat. Across all six images, children consistently function as moral witnesses whose presence intensifies pathos and legitimacy. Overall, the multimodal orchestration of gaze, typography, metaphor, colour, and spatial composition constructs a powerful narrative of environmental injustice, state neglect, and collective resistance demanding urgent intervention.

4.1.2 Multimodal Elements in the Protest Images

The inscriptions carry the strongest linguistic force. Expressions such as “Save Ayetoro Now,” “THE SINKING CITY,” and “Mr. President, come to our aid

NOW!!!” function as urgent imperatives. They express desperation and demand immediate intervention. The repeated hashtag #SaveAyetoroNow extends the protest into digital space. It creates continuity between physical protest and online advocacy. The implication is that environmental suffering in Ayetoro is not isolated. It is publicly visible and globally shareable. It also positions authorities under continuous scrutiny.

Colour choices reinforce the emotional and ideological force of the images. Red signals danger, urgency, and crisis. Yellow signals warning and instability. Black conveys grief and seriousness. These colours intensify emotional engagement. They guide viewers toward interpreting the situation as an environmental emergency. The implication is that the crisis is not abstract but immediate and life-threatening. Gaze and gestures further construct meaning. Direct gaze from children and protesters creates a demand for response. Raised placards and open mouths function as visual shouting. They amplify urgency and collective distress. The implication is that silence from authorities becomes morally unacceptable. It frames inaction as complicity.

Composition and spatial arrangement strengthen collective identity and resistance. Children are consistently foregrounded. This increases their salience and symbolic value. It constructs them as innocent victims and moral witnesses. The implication is a moral appeal to protect future generations. Large, tightly packed groups suggest unity and shared suffering. They also signal mass mobilisation. The repetition of similar compositional patterns across Images 1–6 creates coherence. It reinforces a single narrative of environmental collapse. Overall, the multimodal elements construct Ayetoro as a “sinking city” marked by neglect, displacement, and institutional failure. The implication is clear. The community is not only protesting. It is making a structured moral and political claim for urgent environmental justice and state accountability.

4.1.3 Construction of Environmental Crisis, Grievance, and Justice in the Protest Images

The inscriptions such as “THE SINKING CITY,” “Our schools have been relocated severally,” and “We cannot access our schools again” verbalise ecological collapse. They frame Ayetoro as a space under constant environmental threat. The visual mode strengthens this message through flooded grounds, disrupted school settings, and overcrowded protest scenes. Children in uniforms dominate many images. This visually indexes educational disruption and environmental displacement. The implication is that environmental degradation is not abstract. It is lived, visible, and continuous. It affects daily

survival and learning.

Community grievances are represented through direct address and collective expression. Expressions such as “Mr. President, come to our aid NOW!!!” and “NIGERIA GOVERNMENT WHERE ARE YOU?” function as direct appeals to authority. They personalise responsibility and construct the state as accountable. The repeated hashtag #SaveAyetoroNow extends grievance into digital space. It amplifies visibility and solidarity. Visually, raised placards, open mouths, and direct gaze create a strong demand structure. They position the viewer as a respondent. The implication is that silence from authorities is constructed as neglect. The combination of verbal accusation and visual urgency frames grievance as collective and justified. It also shows a breakdown of trust between the community and governing institutions.

Demands for environmental justice are strongly encoded through multimodal reinforcement. Statements such as “Basic survival is not too much to ask” and “We have lost our coping capacities” construct survival as a human right. These verbal claims are reinforced visually through mass participation, child-centred framing, and repeated gestures of protest. Compositionally, children are placed at the foreground. This increases emotional appeal and moral pressure. The implication is that future generations are at risk. The recurring metaphor “THE SINKING CITY” symbolically frames environmental injustice as existential disappearance. Overall, the interaction of visual and verbal modes constructs Ayetoro as a site of environmental injustice, state neglect, and collective resistance. The implication is clear. The protest images function not only as documentation but as ideological texts demanding urgent environmental intervention, accountability, and justice.

4.2 Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study show that environmental protest images in Ayetoro are strongly multimodal and ideologically charged. The images combine verbal inscriptions and visual resources to construct meaning. This supports Multimodal Stylistics, which argues that meaning is created through interaction of modes (Nørgaard, Busse & Montoro, 2010). The repeated use of phrases such as “Save Ayetoro Now,” “THE SINKING CITY,” and “Mr. President, come to our aid NOW!!!” shows that language functions as a tool of urgency and persuasion. This aligns with Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), who state that visual and verbal elements work together to produce structured meaning. The findings also agree with Machin and Mayr (2012), who note that multimodal texts often encode ideology through combined semiotic resources. The implication is that protest

discourse in Ayetoro is not only expressive but also strategically constructed to influence authority and public perception.

Another discovery is that community grievances are visually and linguistically amplified through emotional and collective representation. The images consistently foreground children, crowded groups, and disrupted school environments. This visual framing constructs innocence, vulnerability, and collective suffering. Similar findings are reported by Machin (2013), who observes that gaze, composition, and framing in protest images position viewers emotionally and ideologically. Brantner, Lobinger and Wetzstein (2011) also show that protest photographs intensify emotional engagement and public empathy. In this study, direct address forms such as “Nigeria Government where are you?” and “Mr. President, come to our aid” function as accusatory and persuasive strategies. They construct the state as absent or negligent. The implication is that the images transform private suffering into public grievance that demands institutional accountability.

The analysis shows that environmental justice is constructed through repeated metaphors, spatial organisation, and digital integration. The metaphor “THE SINKING CITY” frames Ayetoro as an endangered and disappearing space. This aligns with Forceville (2016), who explains that metaphors in multimodal texts shape conceptual understanding of social reality. The use of hashtags such as #SaveAyetoroNow extends protest communication into digital activism. This supports Adami (2017), who argues that multimodal communication in digital contexts expands the reach of protest discourse. The CAPPA-framed documentation also adds institutional legitimacy to the images. The findings indicate that environmental protest images function as ideological texts. They construct environmental crisis, amplify grievance, and demand justice. The implication is that visual protest in Ayetoro operates as a powerful discourse of resistance, identity, and political accountability.

5 Conclusion

The study shows that environmental protest images in Ayetoro are powerful multimodal texts. They combine visual and verbal resources to construct meaning. They represent environmental crisis, community suffering, and demands for justice. The images also show strong emotional appeal and ideological positioning. They expose state neglect and environmental injustice. The study concludes that these protest images function as structured forms of resistance. They communicate urgent calls for intervention and accountability. It is recommended that government authorities respond promptly to the

environmental challenges in Ayetoro. Sustainable coastal protection measures should be implemented. These include sea defence construction and community relocation support where necessary. Oil companies operating in the region should also be held accountable. They should contribute to environmental remediation and compensation.

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