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**Transmission and Embodiment of Heritage: An Analysis of Adinkra
Symbology on Traditional Clothing in Ghana**

MA Thesis in Cultural Heritage Studies; Academic Research, Policy, Management

Central European University

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by

Cynthia Adjovi Mawuli

(Ghana)

Thesis submitted to the Department of Medieval Studies,
Central European University, Budapest, in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the Master of Arts degree in Cultural Heritage Studies

Accepted in conformance with the standards of the CEU

Chair, Examination Committee

Thesis Supervisor

Examiner

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I, the undersigned, **Cynthia Adjovi Mawuli**, candidate for the MA degree in Cultural Heritage Studies: Academic Research, Policy, Management declare herewith that the present thesis is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

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Abstract

Adinkra are symbols that convey philosophies of the Akan people of Ghana through stylized pictures/symbols. A group of symbols, or a symbol one wore on a local/indigenously knit material was used to reflect a person's mood, ethnic group, status and even political affiliation and influence in Akan society in the past. Adinkra legitimizes itself by means of external communication, an aspect which traces how people think about the world they live in. Therefore, a shift in the paradigmatic use of the symbols over the years serves as a case study to understand the evolution of symbols and the context in which these tangible and intangible heritage relevant symbols can be collected for analysis. Hence the research, through qualitative methods of fieldwork and comparative analysis, focuses on the use of Adinkra within contemporary Ghana (specifically within Ntonso- Kumasi and its environs) and how their “detachment” from their traditional social and cultural contexts affect philosophical knowledge production/reproduction and transmission.

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Chapter 1. Approaching a Culture

1.1 Introduction

People have different characteristic, symbolic ways of thinking about the world in which they live in. Thus, they use a wide range of symbol systems in accordance with various aspects of their social and cultural life, including the way they practice their arts. Members of the Akan tribe of Ghana, especially the Asante use a symbol system known as Adinkra that enrich, affirm and communicate a complex set of narratives around ritual, tradition and beliefs. They are found on paraphernalia such as carved woven, printed traditional crafts goods and fabrics. One wears the symbols on clothes to reflect one's mood, ethnicity, group affiliation, status and influence in the Akan social context. These symbols, although independent in their interpretation, use, and context, also mostly support the endless continuum of other inter-related tangible and intangible elements such as folktales, music, and dance. As such, although symbolic within varied context, the quality with which they endorse and accentuate an occasion or individual's status and mood cannot be overlooked. There are many symbols within the plethora of Adinkra stock, approximately 700 symbols catalogued by George Kojo Arthur.¹

The signs and their artistic expression mostly have symbolic content. They serve to represent communal beliefs that are deeply rooted in historical, social, philosophical, and political values forming which the basics of Ghanaian cultural knowledge that gave birth to the arts.² The Adinkra as ancient visual symbols propagated by the Asante of Ghana represent and convey

¹See G. F. Kojo Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor. (Re)reading the Adinkra Cloth: Symbols of the Akan of Ghana* (Legon, Ghana: Centre for Indigenous Knowledge Systems, 2001), 128—187.

²Robert Kingsley Ayiku, "Symbolic Meanings in the Ghanaian Arts: A Step Towards Developing Cultural Literacy," Art Education thesis (Montreal: Concordia University, 1998), 1.

essential concepts, values and traditional wisdom. As such, each Adinkra often has a corresponding proverb which imbues the symbol with rich meaning.

Adinkra symbols can be classified as both tangible and intangible depending on the purpose for which they are being for. They can be strategically placed on tangible elements like traditional drums, funeral cloths, houses (palaces), designed on walking sticks, used as emblems and logos, to mention but a few. The Adinkra communicate specific meanings in different social contexts. They also can be inferred and referred to in speeches or proverbs to drive specific themes and agendas. Either way, Adinkra serve as relevant sustainable indigenous knowledge elements that serve as important identity markers for the community. As supported by the UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage,

the intangible cultural heritage is a mainspring of cultural diversity and a guarantee of sustainable development... it is transmitted from generation to generation, and constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.³

This helps communities grapple with the challenges of globalization, not only by preserving the values and practices that define their identity, but also in promoting respect for other cultural traditions and mutual understanding.

Moreover, Adinkra symbols are “measures aimed at ensuring the viability of the intangible cultural heritage including the identification, documentation, research, preservation, protection, promotion, enhancement, transmission, particularly through formal and non-formal education as well as the revitalization of various aspects of heritage.”⁴

³ UNESCO, “Convention for the safeguarding of the cultural heritage,” Paris, 17 October 2003: 2. http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17716&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

⁴ Ibid.

The processes of safeguarding heritage elements are recognized and associated with specific communities. Within the Asante community of Ghana, Adinkra symbology has become one means of safeguarding indigenous knowledge. Ntonso in the Asante region is the main indigenous and well-known adinkra cloth producing village is Ntonso, in the Asante region. There are four types of Adinkra cloth, namely, the Mpakyiwa (plain background type), the Nhiwimu (linear marking type), the Kente strip type and the Nwomu type.⁵ The Adinkra symbols which were in the past worn and made prominent, first by spiritual leaders, royals and then taken over by the general populace for specific occasions on traditional clothes and in specific cultural contexts, carry particular messages. They represent and convey essential concepts, values and traditional wisdom recognized by the people. As such, each Adinkra often has a corresponding proverb which imbues a particular symbol with complex layers of rich meaning. Today, “the proverbial meaning of the symbols acts as subtle reminders of the fundamental virtues and values that should be inherent in everyday life.”⁶ It is evident that the symbols do not exist on their own but rather are connected to a knowledge system immersed in the cosmic, medical, health, warfare, farming, marriage, and socialization elements among other things. As such they function beyond visual “rhetoric” and also help communal interaction with other heritage elements within this culture. The symbols therefore serve as legitimate components of “formal cultural” education through which knowledge is transmitted from one generation to generations.

Adinkra [in] cloth is made by hand stamping Adinkra patterns onto a plain white or dyed russet-brown, cotton fabric. The dye is made from the bark of the kuntunkuni tree (Botanical name: *bombax brevisuspe*). A cloth dyed in this russet-brown colour is known as kuntunkuni, named after the tree. It is worn during funeral ceremonies. Other coloured materials like the Kobene (Vermilion red) and Brisi (indigo or black) are not stamped, although they are mourning cloths. Adinkra patterns can be stamped on yellow ochre or white background cotton fabric for occasions other than

⁵See Dickson Adom, “The influence of European elements on Asante Textiles,” African Art and Culture, MA thesis (Kumasi; Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology 2009), 21.

⁶ Robert Sutherland Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), 2.

funerals. The traditional patterns printed on the Adinkra cloths are symbolic. They have names that have proverbial, historical, allegorical, or magical significance.⁷

With the influence of other emerging traditions in the 21st century, the necessity arose to study and safeguard existing heritage elements like Adinkra to prevent the loss of indigenous knowledge. There is the need to promote, protect and revitalize cultural expressions and practices of communities, groups and individuals to gain access to, and to maintain data that help explain socio-cultural phenomena as people and society evolve. Herein lies Federico Lenzerini's contribution to the promotion of evolving cultures through feasible policies. He states that

what law should do to properly to safeguard Intangible Cultural Heritage(ICH) is to create the conditions for its creators and bearers unaffectedly to develop their intangible heritage, through avoiding the possibility that external interferences of living successfully in the urban societies may not corrupt this spontaneous evolutionary process. By following such an approach, laws could adequately provide proper and lasting safeguarding for the ICH despite its constantly changeable nature.⁸

He alludes to the complexity of the term 'safeguarding' and sets the foundation for divergent and context specific interpretations of elements and forms and how they often differ in different contexts. He further states that the word "safeguarding" must not be considered tantamount to protection, on the contrary, because it encompasses a more dynamic concept, meaning that actions should "simply" provide a favorable environment within which ICH can flow freely according to the expectations and needs of its creators and bearers.⁹ As the symbols evolve, so do their uses and appropriations. In Akan societies of the past, woven clothes incorporated these symbols to depict varied interpretations be it personal or communal. In the 21st century, these have been appropriated into many areas as shown in the figures below.

⁷Adom, "The influence of European elements," 18.

⁸Federico Lenzerini, "Intangible Cultural Heritage: The Living Culture of Peoples," *European Journal of International Law* 22, 1 (2011):110.

⁹ Ibid.

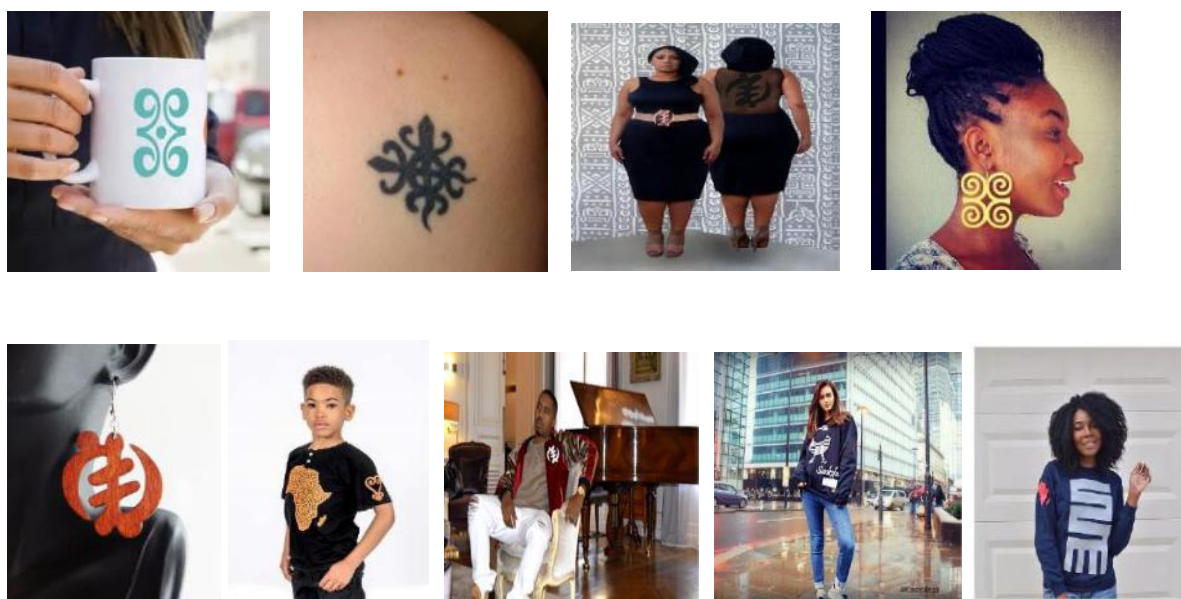


Figure 1: Google images of Adinkra symbols among the youth
[https://www.google.com/search?Adinkra symbols](https://www.google.com/search?Adinkra+symbols).

I argue that within the traditional Ghanaian setting, collective decision-making forms the basis for all rural actions and as such traditional social collectives are best equipped to sustain heritage elements when scholarship and governments propose an inclusive policy that allows them to contribute to the safeguarding processes designed for, and with them. Safeguarding must be contextualized as part of a cultural space that is object of a twofold strategy, aiming at simultaneously fostering preservation and constant adaptation of the tradition to the cultural evolution of its creators and bearers.¹⁰

The study thus explores the transmission and embodiment of heritage elements by the youth through their patronage and use of Adinkra symbols and the existing influence of the symbols within the Ntonso community. This requires a study of the symbols including their uses in the 21st century and a comparative analysis of how they were used in the past, their role in identity

¹⁰Ibid.,109.

politics, and how the current use affects safeguarding of indigenous knowledge systems within societies.

1.2 Justification for the Study

Out of the 700 existing Adinkra symbols, in my opinion, nine are considered most popular and be regularly seen at many occasions. They represent some very important values of individuals and the belief in the collective society as a whole in Ghana. They are *Gye Nyame*, *Nyame Dua*, *Esi ni Tekrema*, *Funtumfunafu Denkyemfunafu*, *Akofena*, *Aya*, *Adinkrahene*, *Sankofa*, and *Dwennimmen*.¹¹ They carry the general popularity of all other symbols and their acceptance as representative of Ghanaian heritage. This is because within individual spheres, most people readily identify with situations that these symbols represent. As such, a study like this concentrates on Adinkra and explores their influence in the transmission of heritage inter-generationally as an addition to the existing knowledge offered by Ghanaian heritage scholarship.



Gye Nyame is a symbol that expresses the belief in the omnipotence of and deep faith in the Akan's Supreme Being. (Appendix II, fig. 7)



Funtumfunafu Denkyemfunafu means and pictorially depicts the crossed “Twin Crocodiles” meaning unity in diversity given a common destiny of sharing. (Appendix II, fig. 6)

¹¹ For a detailed description of them see Appendix II.



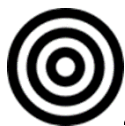
Akofena depicts two crossed traditional swords meaning “Sword of War” and symbolizes courage, valor and heroism. (Appendix II, fig. 2)



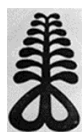
Sankofa, containing of two words “*San*” literally meaning, *Return* and “*Kofa*” meaning to “*take hold of*” is a bird looking backwards with an egg in its beak. It symbolizes the essence of consulting and taking back things through care and scrutiny from the past, to make life in the present better. (Appendix II, fig. 9)



Dwennimmen, literally meaning "ram's horns" deriving from the geometric shape of two rams’ horns symbolizes strength (in mind, body, and spirit), humility, wisdom, and learning.¹² (Appendix II, fig. 4)



Adinkrahene, meaning King among the Adinkra symbols symbolizes the Greatness and omnipotence of God. (Appendix II, fig. 1)



Aya meaning a “Fern.” A plant that can withstand diverse weather conditions and different soil types and symbolizes hardiness and defiance (Appendix II, fig. 3)

¹² Ed Lauber, “The ram, the lion and the lamb: Heart Language,” 2012. <https://heartlanguage.org/2012/12/20/ram-lion-lamb>.



Ese ne tekreme, meaning the teeth and the tongue symbolizes corporation, unity, growth, development and improvement (Appendix II, fig. 5)



Nyame Dua, meaning God's tree symbolizes God's presence or protection (Appendix II, fig.8)

1.3 Literature Review

There is rich literature on Adinkra symbols in studies of cultural transmission, semiotics, the Asante people, embodiment, intangible cultural heritage, and within performance arts theories and concepts. Adinkra as traditional symbols within the indigenous Ghanaian arts systems are predominantly used for communicative purposes albeit visually and aesthetic representations of the culture.

There are various theorems and hypotheses to explain the emergence of Adinkra symbols which vary between scholarly works. According to Thomas Edward Bowdich's account as a member of the British mission who were sent to the Asante Kingdom between 1817 and 1819, he states that "the Akan male performing at the festival wears a cloth rolled up to his waist with the Adinkra symbols designed in it". After his mission ended, he returned to London with a cloth that had nine symbols embossed on it. The cloth is now in the possession of the British Museum. His account posits that the cloth was obtained on his 1817 trip, a year after the Asante

-Gyaman war, giving some credence to the origin of the symbols coming as part of war booty conquered by the Asante.¹³

Real scholarly interest in Adinkra, however, only started with Robert Sutherland Rattray in their 1927 in their book on *Religion and Art in Ashanti*. The authors states that “religion runs like a silver thread, even through their arts and crafts, and thus tends to become the real inspiration of the craftsman. As a result, religion plays a major role when it comes to the Akan cultural elements.”¹⁴ Symbols draw on aspects of nature, and they often incorporate elements of geometric transformations such as reflection, dilation, rotation and translation.¹⁵

New interest arose in the 1960s with Sidney G Williamson in his book *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith* in it states that the traditional Akan religion “can be studied by means of investigation into their religious institutions and the religious implications of their social structure. The result of such inquiry is not a theology or a philosophy, but an undifferentiated number of rites and practices, enunciating beliefs which are statements and not creedal formulae.”¹⁶

Additional information by Kwesi Yankah postulated that in the court of the old Asante palace the Okyeame, (chief linguist and advisor to the king), was believed to be the initiator of metaphorically articulated speech using the values of the Adinkra. Royal oratory in most African cultures, including the Asante, was an infusion of the words of the king and the verbal embellishments of the Okyeame. He is not only a member of the royal entourage through whom the chief speaks and through whom others reached the chief but also considered as one of the respectable elite elders, the chief’s orator, diplomat, envoy, prosecutor, protocol officer, prayer

¹³ See Thomas Edward Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast to Asantee* (London: John Murray, 1819).

¹⁴Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, 1.

¹⁵Ibid., 222.

¹⁶ Sidney George Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith: A Comparative Study of the Impact of Two Religions* (Accra: Ghana University Press, 1965), 85.

officiant.... and confidant counselor.¹⁷ Okyeame would infuse proverbs that had connections to Adinkra symbols as a testament to their depth in cultural understanding and diplomacy.

Bruce W. Willis supports one theory held about the Akan spiritual belief system that the Adinkra symbols came with the Asantehene's golden stool conjured from the skies by the famed priest Okomfo Anokye. It is believed that some of these symbols came with the stool which represents the soul of the Asante people.¹⁸

A rather popular account of the origin of the symbols oral traditions posits that Adinkra was obtained after the Asante-Gyaman war in 1818 as a war conquest. It is claimed that Adinkra was obtained after 1818, when King Adinkra, the king of Gyaman (now Ivory Coast), was brought to Kumasi, the home of the Asante, as a prisoner of war. King Adinkra offended the Asante King (Asantehene) by claiming that he had a golden stool, which turned out to be an imitation of Asantehene's, causing a war to erupt in which he was captured and brought as a prisoner to Kumasi. It is believed that King Adinkra wore robes with the symbols.¹⁹

A theory held by the Adinkra researcher Alfred Kofi Quarcoo, has its roots on Bowdich's Adinkra account. He argued that Adinkra was obtained after the Asante defeated the state of Denkyira, which ruled over the Asante, in the Osei-Ntim war in 1701. During this time the Asante were first introduced to Adinkra made by designers for the kings of Denkyira, Takyiman, and Asante. However, the Asante had not acquired the technique for making Adinkra since it was made for them. They defeated the Denkyira nation; the theorem believes that the Asante learned from craftsmen that were captured during the war.²⁰

¹⁷Kwesi Yankah, *Speaking for the chief: Okyeame and the politics of Akan royal Oratory*, (Bloomington Indiana University Press, 1995), 84.

¹⁸ See B.W. Willis, *The Adinkra dictionary: a visual primer on the language of Adinkra* (Washington: Pyramid Complex, 1998), 31; Jasmin Danzy, "Adinkra Symbols: An Ideographic Writing System," Thesis (The Graduate School at Stony Brook University, 2009), 7.

¹⁹Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor*, 24

²⁰Alfred Kofi Quarcoo, *The Language of Adinkra Patterns*, 2nd ed. (Legon: University of Ghana, 1994.)

Regardless of how Adinkra use was widespread among the Akan people, the system of colonial education played a role in the dwindling patronage of the Adinkra symbols. The knowledge of the Adinkra through its use in Kasakoa²¹ was one of the formal ways in which literacy was conveyed in the Ashanti kingdom. With the advent of colonial schools (which was most of the time highly inadequate considering the nation's population), the implantation of European literature and other academic lessons started to affect the minds of the younger generation.²²

Analysis from some other scholars' advocate that the Adinkra symbols had their roots and bearings from Islamic symbology. Through an historical analysis of the Asante empire, it is realized that it grew to such an extent that it encompassed the whole of present day Ghana as well as some of its neighboring countries. It had exposure to different cultures as well as diverse trade routes and centers of which the northern and Muslim trade parties were no exception. It is believed that through the constant interaction with the Muslims, the Adinkra were influenced by Islamic writing, amulet symbols and Kufic scripts.²³

An analysis by Peace Amate on "Visual Representation of Selected Akan Proverbs in Ghana: Their Philosophical and Socio-Cultural Values," adds that symbols are pictorials that represent knowledge in other forms. They therefore force the mind to connect the pictorial to the relevant represented knowledge. As such, the mind in constant search for meaning constantly and

²¹ Kasakoa is an articulated art of speaking that delivers the ideals and morals of the Adinkra in the most sophisticated of ways. Kasakoa comes from two separate Akan words 'Kasa' which means to speak and 'Koa' which means to bend. In totality, kasakoa literally means 'bent language'. In the old Akan tradition, wise sayings and proverbial knowledge were never spoken in plain language but in a series of metaphoric and complex amalgamations of words and idiomatic expressions. See Eunice Delaquis, "The Adinkra: Re-Reading a Discourse within a Discourse." Thesis (Athens: Ohio University, 2013), 23.

²² Ibid., 40—41.

²³ Daniel Mato, "Clothed in Symbol: The Art of Adinkra among the Akan of Ghana." Phd Dissertation (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1986), 63—64.

actively explores, processes, and analyzes symbolic content. This increases comprehension rates and retention of information.²⁴

Maduabuchi Dukor asserted that “the evolution of human mind was accompanied simultaneously with the evolution of symbols and concepts” and that “Man’s understanding of the world, himself and the environment is characterized and associated with symbols.”²⁵

Recent scholars like David Scott in 2002 based their arguments on *era Philatelic Images of Emerging Ghana and Pan Africanism* that evolved in the era of President Nkrumah and provided significant evidence that Nkrumah used philately to restore Ghanaian ethnic dignity and establish an independent Ghana in the aftermath of the long century of colonial rule in Africa. While doing so, he also promoted ethnic culture to strengthen Ghanaian national identity. His Asante Minister of Communications, Krobo Edusei, must have encouraged Nkrumah to wear Asante Kente cloth and promote Adinkra symbols related to Asante culture transformed by philately to incorporate all Ghanaians.²⁶

1.4 Problem Statement and Aim of the Study

The problem of my research revolves around the current use of the symbols among the youth that suggest is a disconnection from cultural ideas and philosophies. This creates an avenue where the symbols are left as cultural objects or contemporary artefacts that just serve visual purposes without function. Without understanding the context within which these symbols functioned and were legitimized culturally, that there will be a possibility of cultural knowledge embodied and transmitted over the years will be lost. Consequently, the knowledge lying behind

²⁴Peace Amate, “Visual Representation of Selected Akan Proverbs in Ghana: Their Philosophical and Socio-Cultural Values.” Thesis (Kumasi: Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, 2011), 36.

²⁵Maduabuchi Dukor, *African philosophy in the global village* (Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2010), 200.

²⁶See David Scott, “Ghana: Independence, 2nd Anniversary,” 2002 in Kenneth Wilburn, *Africa to the World: Nkrumah Era Philatelic Images of Emerging Ghana and Pan Africanism*, *African Studies Quarterly* 13,1 & 2 (2012): 28.

these symbols will disappear. This calls for greater awareness, especially among younger generations to learn the importance of these cultural heritage element and the advantages associated with its safeguarding.

Transmission and embodiment of heritage elements like Adinkra symbols will help place critical discourses in Heritage Studies as having modern scientific significance rather than merely a concept for preserving elements form of the past for the sake of preservation alone. The influence and relevance of this symbolic system as well as other indigenous knowledge systems have taken front of stage within the shared Ghanaian national cultural environment where national unity transcends ethnic segregation. As such, in identifying through this study the unique communicative patterns that exist in selected symbols, the research should provide answers to their efficacy in visual and oral communication and how they are interconnected to all facets of traditional living in Asante today. It is the aim of this study to analyze the philosophical expression of selected symbols on clothing to unravel the contextual transmission protocols in contrast to their expressive use by the youth in Ntonso and Ghana at large. The contrast provides parallels in understanding, expression of cultural resources, and safeguarding but it also offers different perspectives on the analysis of transmission protocols. The aim is not only to help safeguard the symbols as a cultural property of the Asante but also to safeguard the holistic knowledge system behind it which goes far beyond individual or single values.

1.5 Research Questions

The research addresses the following questions.

1. What is the importance of Adinkra symbols when it comes to safeguarding other intangible elements of the Asante communities such as painting, anthropomorphism, music, and dance?
2. What have been distinctive features of Adinkra's transmission and safeguarding protocols over the years and how are they similar to contemporary safeguarding measures?

3. How does the shift from the older traditional community-centered contexts affect the community's identity today?
4. In what ways can Adinkra symbols be “destroyed”/ “harmed” through “incorrect” or commercial use?
5. What makes Adinkra symbols an important part of constructing or maintaining identity, and transmitting oral heritage to modern communities?

1.6 Background



Figure 2: A map of Ghana and Kumasi in the Asante Region. From http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/2008/11/081126_ghana08_kumasi.shtml

My research influenced by the Indigenous Knowledge Systems of the Akan people as depicted through their tangible and intangible heritage elements. Thus, the study of the Adinkra symbols as embodied legacies of the people reflects a unique chronology of knowledge systems and awareness of their environment that permeates Asante culture. Hence this study is crucial to the exploration and analysis of Asante culture and scholarship and its contribution to African knowledge and mentality.

The Akan community comprises of a cluster of people living in southern and central Ghana. The land is rich in gold, diamond, bauxite, timber and cocoa which serve as major exports in Ghana. The Akan represent over 53 percent of the current population in Ghana of more than twenty million.²⁷ They consist of several subgroups. They comprise of Asante, Fante, Bono, Akyem, Akuapem, Kwawu, Akwamu, Asen, Denkyira, Twifo, and Wasa. The Asante are numerically dominant. The Akan community share a common language, known as Twi, which has many dialects. Twi is a dominant language spoken in Ghana. Twi is also an important language of trade in almost all the ten regional capitals of the country especially the capital city of the country, Accra. The Akan also have a common socio-economic and cultural system. They are people who hold their culture dear which forms part of the society.

In the Akan language, God is addressed by accolades such as *Nyame*, *Onyankopon*, *Oboadie* and *Twerediampon*, considered supreme above all others. God's benevolence extends to every living thing.²⁸ They belief that God is the creator, the Supreme Being, omnipotent and omnipresent and life is a gift bestowed upon people by God.²⁹ This means that their very existence depends on God and as such existence is meaningless without him. The implication too is that acceptance of God goes with responsibility to serve him. Robert Agyarko adds that

the Akans believe God sustains every living thing: human beings and non-human forms of life. All relationships between persons, the living and the dead, and between person and nature are rooted in God and point towards God and towards the end of all things in God. The Akan have a sacramental notion of nature, proclaiming that all forms of life, including every person's future, lie with God. It must be added that for the Akan Onyame(God) cannot be imagined without his/her creation, nor without his/her saving will for humankind.³⁰

²⁷ Kofi Appiah-Kubi, *The Akan of Ghana, West Africa: A cultural Handbook for Reference* (Bloomfield, CT: Cowhide Press, 1999.)

²⁸ See Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion* (Islamabad: FEP International), 1979. For instance, some of the names with which God is addressed indicate (God) most worthy attributes, such as Amosu (Giver of Rain), Amowia (Giver of the Sun), and Amaomee (Giver of Plenitude). See also Williamson, *Akan Religion and the Christian Faith*, 3—51.

²⁹ Arthur, *Cloth as metaphor*, 49.

³⁰ Robert Owusu Agyarko, "God of life: Rethinking the Akan Christian concept of God in the light of

The prevailing notions of God and creation as found among Akan Christians in Ghana have been shaped both by Akan traditional religion and by missionary activities in West Africa. Understanding the introduction and growth of Christianity amongst the Akan people in Ghana and the ways in which it engaged with African traditional religion is indeed essential to an understanding of notions of God and creation among contemporary Akan Christians.³¹ Lamin Sanneh stresses the notion that

the first church in West Africa was planted in Ghana by Roman Catholic Western missionaries around 1482. The Christianity transplanted into Ghana was in the form of a sterilized European institution, safely quarantined in “hygienic” enclaves along the Savannah coast. From there the church in Ghana occasionally started to reach out to the indigenous population. As sections of the Akan population lived in the coastal region of Ghana, they came into contact with Christianity from early in the 19th century where the early missionary activities remained restricted. From 1820, a new wave of Protestant missionary activities led to the growth of Christianity amongst the Akan.³²

People participating in Akan Christianity religion believes that God(Onyame) rules the affairs of men and the word and his nature should be expressed in symbolic and abstract forms. This has brought up the concept firmly enrooted in the religious believes systems of the Akans as well as the environment by expressing the uniqueness of God. This is mostly seen in the symbolic language and the Adinkra symbols as “writing” system in the Akan religion which consists of pictorial symbolism created by the Asante craftsmen. It gives insight into philosophical thought, cosmology, and worldview passed down from generation to generation to preserve the cultural and spiritual values of the Akan people.³³

the ecological crisis,” *The Ecumenical Review* 65 (2013): 52. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/erev.12026>

³¹See Williamson, *Akan Religion*, 3.

³²The Basel Missions Society began its work in 1828. After a brief stay in Accra, they moved to the Akwapim area to work among the Akan groups. In 1835 the Wesleyan Methodist society (WMS) also started their activities in Ghana. The Methodist missions began their activities among the Akan (Fantes) in the coastal areas and later extended their work to other parts of Ghana. See Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity: The Religious Impact*, (C. Hurst, London, 1980):119—126. Currently, up to 70% of the people of Ghana are considered to be Christian, including 56% Protestants and 14% Catholics: See Agyarko, “God of life, 53.

³³See Robert Woodruff Library, “Traditional African Religion: Akan,” (Atlanta: University Center Library.) Accessed February 18, 2019. <https://research.auctr.edu/africanreligion>.

The Adinkra symbols have come to reflect emotions, beliefs, experiences and social status. Each symbol communicates specific information and as such what a person wears in the traditional system reflects(ed) a person's position in the Asante social hierarchy.

1.7 Research Methodology and Research Area

A qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) methodology will be useful for studying Adinkra symbology. It will help to identify and compare cases from different targeted age demographics on the way they use symbols and contributes to critical analysis in the research. This method also helps to develop theoretical insights from existing research to identify the phenomenon, reasons, problems, perspectives and justifiable aspects for safeguarding the Adinkra symbol system.

Within such a methodology, I focus on an action research approach which is a participatory element of data gathering. The aim to gain insight into a phenomenon and lend some theoretical justifications for the use of the symbols and their associated issues. This leads to an informal approach towards gathering data where offers to receive source information is received directly from the indigenous people by becoming involved in their activities. By recording their activities, there is an opportunity to be reflective in the analysis of practices gathered from discussions and fact-finding engagement. The informal environment created by this method enables the researcher to discuss issues the research questions on a semi-academic level providing a rather conscious avenue for expressing knowledge, ownership, and awareness of the symbols with an appreciative understanding that aims at promoting their safeguarding.

The participant-observation method in particular helps to focus research on the youth culture found at Ntonso-community center where funeral ceremonies, when held, see both the young and old to meeting at a neutral but intergenerational contextual ground for expressing some cultural language codes through the symbols. This center also provided opportunities for me to

meet Adinkra artists who work in the production of clothes, paraphernalia, and share in their knowledge in different contexts. They provided valuable information on the (re)production of the symbols on things like mugs, fans, earrings, among other things, and thus, exposed me to “commercialized Adinkra symbols”. This leads to first-hand knowledge about the printing process and why certain symbols are printed in particular colors and patterns as supposed to others. I also spent time in the cultural center of the town where the symbols are carved on stools, anklets, and bracelets for commercial purposes.

To make my data more diversified, I also utilized group discussions to solicit views on Adinkra symbols from different perspectives. The groups were divided as follows; (1) The group of artisans who carve and design symbols on varied wood, cloth and metal works (mostly men); (2) A selected sample from the Ntonso suburbs (between 18-35 years of age). Moreover, group discussions with museum curators, funeral participants, African-American tourists, and designers were relevant for the research in that provided specific answers representing each group demarcation. The participant observer analysis improved the quality of the different data collected, leading to new questions that were culturally relevant for the research. Besides, other methods such as interviews, video documentation, and a comparative analytical study of the uses of the symbols along particular timelines were employed to complement the research.

Ntonso as a research scope was crucial to understanding the transition from social and cultural contexts of the symbols to a more commercialized center for Adinkra propagation. Ntonso has become the go-to area for Adinkra knowledge for most people due to its popularity as the “center” of all Adinkra information.

This material became the basis for understanding both the role of the symbols from different perspectives and on how the Adinkra symbols are used, mainly among youth. The subsequent

chapters will highlight fieldwork experiences, as well as discussions on societal action and the influence of these symbols on identity politics.

Chapter 2. Adinkra within Identity Construction

2.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the role the symbols play in the context of identity politics. The problem with identity as a concept and or as a practice stems from the increasing fluidity of the use of the term by different generations in different contexts.

Identity is strongly intertwined with socio-cultural factors, such as language, societal norms, history, and belief systems. Negotiating or living in-between two cultures/societies can be psychologically and socio-culturally challenging, and as a result people frequently experience normative acculturation identity crises, including ethno-cultural identity and socio-cultural adjustment of acculturating individuals.³⁴

The complexity of the term can also be traced to the interactive variables arising from players in a given society and how their actions and inactions contribute to constructing parameters necessary for identifying and self-identifying an individual as part of society or not. The Asante people are people who are understood as having complex physical and meta-physical understanding. Thus, their naming and use of ecological elements to suit their needs is evidence of their collective intellectual capacity to expand generation after generation. For example, the Asante concept of power not only encourages social stratification, but also demonstrates a state

³⁴ See Colleen Ward, Larissa Kus and Jaimee Stuart, "The Construction and Validation of a Measure of Ethno-Cultural Identity Conflict." *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 93 (2011): 462. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00223891>; Chan-Hoong Leong and Colleen Ward, "Identity conflict in sojourners," *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 24 (2000): 763. <https://doi.org/10.1016/S0147>

of belonging/unity – a lived experience which is prevalent today. According to Acheampong and Paddington,

power originated in the Asante cosmos and was accessible to all. It was the control of authority structures that became the preserve of particular lineages or groups, and this historical development can only be understood from the relational perspectives of gender, age, and social stratification.³⁵

Gregory P. Stone also elaborated on the nature of a processual situation which contributes to the acquisition of identities and the development of a sense of self. He confirmed that “a self acquires identities when situated, that is cast in the shape of a social object by the acknowledgement of his participation in social relation.”³⁶ Dress, as well as other elements such as symbols and iconography, helps display identities for persons in a place they are socially situated. The role and functions of cultural symbols in communicating social stratification and “mediated” identities are important in this identity process. Mediated identity here connotes an individual who is capable of performing roles by virtue of understanding all the life-cycle changes within a traditional society in Ghana. The individual identifies with a context more than subjective individual ideologies and performs duties as a member of “the society” through wearing significant symbols in specific contexts for and with the society. The contexts may be funerals or weddings that the individual may choose to contribute to and function through his/her intellectual assessment and awareness of “appropriate symbols” to displayed through clothes or jewelry accessories. These people represent a community’s propagation of values and indigenous knowledge systems exhibited through symbols. The data provided from fieldwork in Ntonso in Kumasi identify such individuals who represent the community’s “performance” of identity. Adinkra among the Akan tribes, of Ghana represent meanings, specific symbols that enrich, affirm and communicate a complex set of narratives on ritual, tradition and beliefs.

³⁵Emmanuel Akyeampong and Obeng Pashington, “Spirituality, Gender, and Power in Asante History,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 28. 3 (1995): 506. <https://doi.org/10.2307/221171>.

³⁶Gregory P. Stone, “Appearance and the Self.” in *Human Behavior and the Social Processes: An Interactionist Approach*, ed. A.M. Rose (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), 93.

Around the 19th century, the Asante people, started painting traditional symbols onto clothes. Thus, a tradition appropriated from another society was reborn into a new culture and its importance solidified by its continual perpetuation and production, down to this day.

The self as a composite of an individual's totality and identity is communicated by cultural elements such as language, music, clothes, symbols, and movement systems (dance) among other things. The complexity of individual and collective identity interactions and formation is made poignant and legitimate by how constituents of knowledge about self and the environment are integrated into the cultural fabric of a people. By analyzing the varieties, differences in understanding, interpretation of signs and how meanings are socially collected, they become an important catalyst to unravelling how people interact with nature and changing social situations, through signs and symbols. This aspect of study focuses on fieldwork experiences and data gathered for interpretation and analysis. It will discuss how the symbols function within the Ntonso township and how their uses are legitimized as identity markers and elements for representing collective grief, happiness, readiness, spirituality, and state over individual goals. As such, the focus of analysis is on the dynamic use of Adinkra symbols within the 21st century's globalized rhetoric of identity politics to understand how symbols contribute to the conception of self within an increasingly evolving conception of "us together" through the use of Adinkra symbols.

2.2 In the Field; The Role of Adinkra Symbols in Ntonso-Kumasi



Figure 3: Ntonso (<https://www.google.com>)

Ntonso is a town in the Asante Region of Ghana. The town is 22km north of Kumasi which is the capital of the Asante Region. The Ntonso community is considered the center of Adinkra knowledge, production and propagation. I stayed at the house of Mr. Paul Boakye in Ntonso. Mr Boakye is my key informant and teacher in cloth printing and Adinkra calabash carving. He was also the caretaker of the community's Adinkra Center and he provided me with much information and access to other artists like himself. He is a very popular person due to his good relationship with the townsfolk and the respect he commanded as a custodian of Adinkra heritage. Everywhere he went, I followed and became part of his daily routines. At the time of research, there happened to be a major funeral in the town which provided me very valuable data on the communicative and contextual use of the symbols. Coincidentally, by virtue of Paul's affiliation to the deceased family, my assistant and I were granted access to take videos and photos to supplement the research. The funeral provided me an opportunity to talk to my targeted informants who also happened to constitute the youthful demography from 16 to 35 years of age.

Although I am Ghanaian, I am not an Akan, but rather I belong to the Ewe tribe of South-East Ghana and so, although I am a very good speaker of the Twi language, I have not been able to understand the inclusion of various proverbs or epigrams prevalent in the Twi language among my informants at the time of my ethnographic research. This would have created communication problems for me had it not been the effort of my chief informant to explain most of the proverbs and their relationships to the symbols I was asking about.

2.3 The Adinkra Center of the Ntonso Community

The cultural center where Paul Nyamaa Boakye works is located at the center of the town and a few meters from the town's community square where funeral ceremonies are held. Over the course of my stay, I scheduled many meetings and had several interactions with cloth makers and local people on the symbols selected for this research. Many times, I would be offered meals at several of my informants' homes where I would honor such invitations and use the opportunity to bond with the people. This helped me interact more freely with them since the environment created was that devoid of intimidation which automatically positioned me as an "outsider".

By virtue of the town's popularity when it comes to research on Adinkra symbols, most towns people could easily tell that I was not an indigene but a stranger with my camera around my neck making my reasons for coming to the town very obvious. The "foreigner" aura I "carried" around in the field, even though I am Ghanaian, exposed me to the further complexities of identity as either an insider or outsider. For example, when people saw my camera or phones, some were eager to know what I wanted and would mostly offer their help, while others found an opportunity to make some little money from me by "posing" as knowledge "centers" although it was obvious from their submission that they complicated themselves at each turn. This is a result of the tourism drive towards the town that creates economic activities for the

people. Overall, people were friendly and cooperative in responding to most questions I asked, help me to understand.

My affiliation to the experienced Adinkra cloth designer Paul Boakye also helped me settle well in the field. I was able to learn a lot especially the way the researcher's identity had to switch from an outsider to insider to help schedule interviews and gather information.

2.4 At the Funeral

Adinkra fits perfectly within the context of funerals because it can mean to bid 'goodbye' or 'farewell' in the Twi language. It is therefore not a surprise that the Akan people, particularly the Asante, still wear clothes printed with these symbols to this day. Clothes decorated with Adinkra symbols mostly for funerals are worn to show the people's emotional states and to bid farewell to the deceased. Funerals are rites of passage in many cultures, but the ritual and performance vary among these cultures.


Within the Akan traditional system, death marks a transition from the physical world into the spiritual ancestral world where it is believed that life continues. As such, there are specific traditional preparations before the final funeral rites and burial of an individual. Although the main contextual reason for a funeral is to bid farewell and the is the same for any member of Asante regardless their status in the society, the intensity and depth of each funeral may vary. Most times there are specific instructions from the family of the deceased on what traditional clothes/wrappers to wear, the specific color(s), the day to wear it, down to the specific Adinkra symbols to be printed on this clothing. Funeral ceremonies among the Asante of Ghana represent a unique opportunity to understand some aspects of the culture of the Akan people.

The official location for funerals in Ntonso is known as the Community Center which lies by the main road that passes through the town on to the neighboring town. The foundation stone


of the community center was laid by one of the Asante kings, Nana Sir Osei Prempeh KBE (Knight of the British Empire) on 23rd June 1956. The walls of the center have Adinkra symbols painted on them each with a particular symbolic meaning. The symbols are a combination of signs expressing both sadness and happiness at the same time; the reason being that the event other than funerals that also performed on the grounds. Hence, the venue has a dualistic aura about it and thus helps individuals express themselves depending on the individual social context.




Paul informed me that at major celebrations, as well as funerals, people would wear the symbols or clothes with specific symbols imprinted in order to blend into the contextual narrative. The funeral I attended had a larger representation of family, friends and well-wishers as well as a unique sitting arrangement. The wife and children of the departed member of society sat at one side whilst the family elders and important family decision makers sat opposite the invited guests and townsfolk. In addition to the use of a sound system, there was a Kete³⁷ dance group charged to perform at the funeral. The funeral officially started at 9AM amidst some rain showers. The deceased had already been buried two hours prior to the funeral. All guests who arrived had to form a procession to shake hands with the family of the deceased in counter-clockwise direction. Traditionally, the counter-clockwise direction within Akan philosophical tradition represents the direction of life and thus shaking hands from that direction inherently meant offering words or actions for a long life and good health to the living family members. It was during this process that I observed that each individual present wearing traditional funeral clothes had a singular Adinkra symbol or a combination of symbols on them. As they filed past my position of observation, each person at the ceremony had at least one symbol which sent consoling messages to the deceased or communicated to the other people attending the post-


³⁷Kete is one of the traditional dances of the Akan people performed at funerals and festivals.

burial ceremony. I observed that family members closer to the deceased had different symbols from non-family members. Some of these symbols worn by the family were *Nkonsɔnkɔnsɔn* 

- Unity (maintaining human relations), *Akofena*  - Power and loyalty, *Gye Nyame*  –

Dependence on God (symbolizing that only God can take care of the living), *Gyawu Atikɔ* 

- bravery, *Aya*  - Defiance, *Akoma*  - heart/love, *Dwennimmen*  - strength and *Esi*

ni tekyerɛma  – teeth and tongue (used to try and repair broken relations or bring together

feuding individual and factions). From these recurring symbols I understood that there a complex but plain interactive pattern at play during the funeral. Subtle communication processes were expressed individually or collectively through color and symbols. Those who wore these symbols strategically “identified” with the potency of the Adinkra symbols and thereby displayed the functional nature of the symbols until the present day. I would later find out from my lead informant that the feuding faction within the family had the opportunity to repair relations for the better after the funeral and that by agreeing to wear the same symbol to the funeral symbolized their readiness to partake in peace building.

Hilary Dockray affirms that the symbols worn in honoring the deceased could represent traits the deceased had, communicate sentiments and messages to the deceased, or both. The symbols which have basic meaning had been adapted to symbolize a variety of human bonds. The identity element created here is that of a bond between members of a community and members of a family. This everlasting bond calls for veneration and remembrance of the deceased by the living. In return, the deceased give protection and love to those who are still living.³⁸ Here, the Adinkra symbols served as a medium of communicating with the deceased. Adinkra as symbols

³⁸ Hilary Dockray, “Ghanaian Adinkra symbols and honoring the death.” Texas blog post, October 25, 2012. <http://christicenter.org/2012/10/ghanaian-adinkra-symbols-and-honoring-the-deceased>.

of language legitimizes itself by means of external visual communication and through semiotics. In this sense, the symbols take the forms of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects as communicative structures to express meaning. Lawrence Barsalou states that “cultural symbols typically link to a set of perceptual symbols and their role as the simulators for the concept (s) that constitutes the ‘meaning’ of the symbol.”³⁹ According to Paul Beynon-Davies, “regardless the type of funeral, Adinkra symbols of the Ashanti people prove dynamic and a form of linguistic knowledge.”⁴⁰



Figure 4: Funeral clothes at Ntonso community, Ghana

2.5 Identity Construction through Adinkra Symbols

The field work presented opportunities for the exploration of “existing” and “emerging” identities. Emerging identities have to do with the process of attaining affiliation to a group of people with specific values or an individual stance. This assertion is necessitated by my observations on how indigenes and how “foreigners” (researchers) interact with the symbols.

Coincidentally, I came across a group of African-American tourists who were on tour to Ntonso to learn about their “ancestral heritage” through the symbols. I found this fascinating since these

³⁹Lawrence Barsalou, “Perceptual Symbol Systems,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 22 (1999): 585.

⁴⁰Paul Beynon-Davies, *Significance: Exploring the nature of information, systems and technology*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 98.

informants brought into perspective the fluidity of the identity rhetoric and how influential symbols like Adinkra were in helping to construct individuals and society.

In an interview with one of the African-American tourists, Shannon Casely, she averred that,

before I came on this trip, I was fully aware of my African connection. Living through the confusion of not knowing my exact roots, learning about Adinkra symbols has given me a sense of understanding of who I am as an individual and as a member of a larger society. This is crucial for me in how I seek to re-invent myself physically and intellectually when I go back to the States soon (Personal interview 2018).

The compelling nature of this statement led me to understand how semiotic revelations help define and re-define identities in a constantly fluid environment.

The term Africa connects the Black Americans to a global community of people of African descent who are linked by common history and common experience. For these individuals of the African Diaspora, the Adinkra symbols provide a source of knowledge where these identities can be contested. They are a place where diasporic people can become themselves and renegotiate their identity with individuals like them. While sharing an identity is strongly about binding individuals together, “identity is also about signifying difference; as much as it allows for inclusion (i.e., in-groups) and results in exclusion (i.e., out-groups).”⁴¹ Therefore, it gives the diasporic people something to “own” which allows them not to be consumers of information alone but also active producers of information. Through exchange of discourse of the Adinkra symbols, members of the African Diaspora are given the opportunity to create and re-create their identity. Christel Temple in her book, *The Emergence of Sankofa Practice in the United States: A Modern History*, concurs that

the practice of Adinkra symbols by the African diaspora began to construct an historical narrative about the modern history of the symbols on identity. The Akan knowledge, practices, transformations

⁴¹ Kathryn Woodward, *Identity and difference* (London: Sage, 1997), 9.

and adaptations of the Adinkra symbols in the historical and cultural record of the African- Americans and the discipline of Black Studies, prioritize the *Sankofa* symbol as a concept fermented in cultural consciousness through an epic memory of both flight and dreams of "return" to the homeland... and this as a legacy exposes them to their root.⁴²

The propagation of Adinkra symbols and their corresponding ideologies becomes the avenue through which individuals can reconnect with their culture, which has been forgotten, left behind, and even craved for since the time of their dispersal from Africa.

Oral and symbolic language within the Asante culture become a repository of cultural knowledge that captures and provides effective cues to a complex body of shared values, experiences and even a common past. The Adinkra symbols can be discussed on two levels within the context of their influence in shaping contemporary identity. They are part of visual imagery and safeguarding mediums of cultural knowledge and its continuity. Adinkra symbols provide a rich source of imagery and a precise understanding that replaces long narratives and condenses meaning the way proverbs do. Chris Abani confirms that “the point of the proverb actually is not to ask the listener to call upon the specifics..., but the implied moral..., a gestalt suggests structural integrity that achieves its functionality at a level deeper than the mere summation of its parts.”⁴³ The implied moral within Adinkra symbols is important to forming identity because it provides the user with an ideological stance. On the one hand, “identity has become a complex concept in a contemporary globalized society.” It is defined as consisting of “customary practice and of beliefs, values, sanctions, rules, motives and satisfactions associated with it.”⁴⁴ On the other hand, cultural heritage, as an expression of the identity and history an individual belongs to, could serve both as a tool for the establishment of identities and

⁴²Christel N. Temple, “The Emergence of Sankofa Practice in the United States: A Modern History,” *Journal of Black Studies*, 2 (2010) :148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934709332464>.

⁴³Chris Abani, “Mapping Obscurity: Excavating Meaning Base Materials and the African Literary Tradition,” *International Journal of Ethiopian Studies* 1 (2003): 123. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27828823>.

⁴⁴Lene Arnett Jensen, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett and Jessica McKenzie, “Globalization and Cultural Identity,” in S. Schwartz, K. Luyckx and V. Vignoles (eds), *Handbook of Identity Theory and Research* (New York: Springer, 2011), 286. <https://doi.org/10.1007>

differences, which at the same time localize and globalize the cultural and tourist experience that keeps the authenticity and local sense of identity.⁴⁵

The Ntonso community serves as the center of Adinkra knowledge and has become a site where people come to learn the symbolic relevance of Adinkra symbols as part of the combination of tangible and intangible cultural heritage that has been passed on between generations. By virtue of its position in the distribution of tangible and intangible knowledge, its influence, whether consciously or not, is crucial to the conception and re-conception of knowledge of the Asante people and their interpretation of identity.

Within the Asante community of Ghana, Adinkra symbology has become one of the means to express many facets of human experience including emotions, events, social structures, and collective identity. In Ghana, the Adinkra symbols are used to communicate visually and create identity among groups of people. From my experience in Ntonso, identities are a tacit way to realize that culture has varied ways of connecting people but, although everyone is engaged in some specific activity, the actions and corresponding reactions expose ways of effective communication and connection through Adinkra symbols. They are an “asset that characterizes a society or a social group, and which includes creative expressions (language, literature, performing arts, crafts), community practices (celebrations and patterns of social interaction that contribute to the group and individual welfare and identity) and material or built forms such as sites, buildings, historic cities, landscapes, art, and objects.”⁴⁶

⁴⁵Lana Domšić, “Cultural Heritage and Identity in The Contemporary Tourism Development.” Accessed October 15, 2018. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/161546>.

⁴⁶ UNESCO (2006), “*Towards Sustainable Strategies for Creative Tourism*. Discussion Report of the Planning,” Meeting for 2008 International Conference on Creative Tourism, Santa Fe, New Mexico, U.S.A, October 25—27, 2006. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000159811>.



Figure 5: African- American Tourists at Ntonso

2.6 Negotiating “Power Relations” through Adinkra Symbols

Adinkra symbols have been in existence for a long time.⁴⁷ They were very much integrated in the visual and ideological representation of the Asante people due to their uses within all facets of life and especially in their proverbial language, dance, religion, and architecture. Labelle Prussin, in describing Asante design motifs in architecture alludes to the fact that

the point of departure for valid historical reconstruction of any African architecture is not the highly visible architectonic components of the built environment, but rather those features of the natural environment that were initially manipulated and incorporated into a conscious spatial frame, through ritual behaviors associated with the establishment of location in space. The establishment of place through the medium of ancestral attachment validates human existence, whether it be an individual, a family, clan, or an entire political system.⁴⁸

The Adinkra symbols used by the Asante people evolved in reaction to environmental and political manipulations to validate all social processes. It is therefore not surprising that as the symbols of efficacy were incorporated into the expanding Asante political scene, their overt, visible, two-dimensional surfaces became critically important as a system of direct

⁴⁷ Labelle Prussin, “Traditional Asante Architecture,” *African Arts* 13, 2 (February 1980): 57.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

communication. Not only are similar motifs found on all these surfaces, but the same motifs occur most prominently in the architectural context of political validation.⁴⁹

As an artistic element of the Asante, it will be improbable to deny that the processes of transmitting the symbols as well as sending and receiving culture go through changes. According to Jane Desmond, the embodiment process of cultural elements on the body and cognition of people is a complex phenomenon which demands careful analysis. She states that “...it is not only the pathway of the transmission, but also the form’s re-inscription in a new community... and resultant change in its signification that is important to analyze.”⁵⁰ The people who use the symbols invoke questions with regard to the interactive exchange by the environment and the user based on reasons concerning the patronage of symbols. The relevance of the symbols over the years enforces the relevance of safeguarding heritage, but also provides the varied ways within which various social stratifications affected the use of the symbols. A critical analysis of the symbols exposes the fact that the patronage of Adinkra symbols highlighted a visible divide within Akan society. That is, one’s social class and group affiliation was likely to affect the choice of symbol displayed in a particular context. Socio-cultural contexts validated social status, and this was made salient by the Adinkra symbol printed on either the clothes someone wore or accompanying paraphernalia and accessories.

Akan’s generally place value on cloth for reasons beyond its texture and quality. The Akan’s use of cloth is borne out of either a personal or collective history, its own aesthetic content as well as powerful emotional content. Indeed, the fabrics of the Akans like their other art forms represent a way of living. It renders the invisible and visible. N. K. Dzobo asserts that the Adinkra symbols and the clothes provide sources of insight into the Akan orientations to life.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Jane Desmond, “Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies,” *Cultural Critique* 26 (Winter, 1993—1994): 39.

The Akan's fascination with cloth is borne out of a point of communication of thoughts, beliefs and values of the people. Essentially, the Asante express their sentiments in Adinkra cloth motifs and designs. Patterns and motifs are peculiar to different cultures and motifs identify with leadership, status, and gender which sometimes carry particular names. Dress and adornment embody both the most personal and public way in which identity is created and expressed.⁵¹

The Asante are an organized people. They attach a lot of importance to their environment and the spiritual world. They believe that nothing is ultimately just physical and that daily interaction between the living and the dead is just a normal part of life. From their traditional modes of worship and spirituality to gender disparities and roles in the society, the level of order in the culture is evident. "The Asante were obsessed with order and feared disorder."⁵² This order translates into their stylized use of all material heritage including the wearing of Adinkra symbols. The symbols can help identify and enforce the nature of Asante cultural organization. As has been stated earlier, through the symbols one can identify an individual's role and status in the society. This is not an isolated identification process lacking strong interconnectivity but, to some extent, rather a mechanism to affirm political control. I argue that all things in Asante are interconnected and that each individual element becomes legitimate only because of existing elements that can help it to function. More like "order" and "disorder," one cannot be defined without inferring from the other. For example, although Asante culture is matrilineal, the influence of men in controlling affairs is very visible within their political, economic and social structuring. The Fontomfrom music ensemble⁵³ is a perfect example, where the two main

⁵¹See N. K. Dzobo, "African Symbols and Proverbs as Sources of Knowledge and Truth" in Kwesi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye, eds., *Person and Community*, Ghanaian Philosophical Studies 1 (Washington: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1992) 85—98, and *ibid*, "Values in Society," 223 —40. <http://www.marshall.edu/akanart>,"

⁵² Akyeampong and Pashington, "*Spirituality, Gender, and Power in Asante History*," 508.

⁵³ Fontomfrom music is a set of "State Drums" of the Asante people used to communicate or recite proverbs, replicate patterns of speech and provides music for ceremonies honoring Ashanti chiefs and Ashanti monarchy royal processions

percussion instruments are designated as male and female. The male tune is deeper in tone than that of the female drum. This order can also be seen in the naming and engendering of other musical instruments. Everything is male and female including deities.

Empirical evidence has demonstrated that patriarchy originated in economic conditions, primarily to ensure the means of subsistence by organizing the recurrent activities that cultivation involved. Patriarchy's growing coherence was associated with the accumulation of wealth.⁵⁴

Moreover, Asante power structure is based on traditions passed from generation that are still in practice.

African beliefs about the social and natural worlds privilege age and gender because they are the most salient characteristics of lived experience: the most successful individuals are those who live to old age and who abundantly reproduce themselves. By extension, they are even more successful, more "powerful," if they are able to apply their ability to other domains that are seen as inherently similar.⁵⁵

Herein lies the influence of the symbols in enhancing political power within the society through its use to enforce social roles; meaning, some symbols are reserved for some people in specific contexts. Each symbol represents a thought, backed by historical antecedents rooted in the culture, and is legitimized by generational use.

As this was a normal way of identifying individuals and groups in the past, this has found its way as a proof to the efficacy of cultural transmission to the 21st century cultural process. The people's use of the symbols, the clothing choice they are printed on, the context displayed in, the reasons for such decisions, and the depth of knowledge held by the user are important for the make-up of the cultural identity of a person.

Eric Erickson observes that

⁵⁴ Akyeampong and Pashington, "*Spirituality, Gender, and Power in Asante History*," 508.

⁵⁵Ibid.

identity construction does not only reflect the culminating summary of the past life, but also an ongoing construction created on the bases for future meaning.” He agrees that “identity function is future oriented and developed through life stages; successful orientation produces specific personal traits, which are changing and building upon experiences.”⁵⁶

Adinkra symbols aid in providing insight into a chronology of identity stratification in the Akan society and its use today by extension adds to the important discussion of identity construction for the people who find themselves anywhere in the world. Many of the Adinkra artists create a visual representation of the past, present and future through different interpretation of the symbols. Through the Asante visual and performance arts mediums, dialogues are created to speak to people by helping them to express individual social identities and traits in the contemporary world and society today. Identity explored through the arts provides a tangible source of expression which is linked to cultural heritage, age, social class, race etc.⁵⁷

This process achieves a meaningful connection to creating a greater attention to personal identities that was evident in Ntonso where social stratification was also visible through seating arrangements among royals and ordinary folk at the funeral I observed. Identity in this contemporary dispensation still allows for unique self-expression based on subjective individual representation.

2.7 “Curating” Identity: The Role of Adinkra as Tangible and Intangible “Museums”

My fieldwork included an internship at the university of Ghana’s Archaeology museum where I explored curatorial politics in museology. This is important to my understanding of the contemporary use of the symbols within the context of identity politics. Curating identity is apt as a sub-heading because of the politics of institutional interpretation of traditional cultures. I

⁵⁶ Erik H. Erickson, *Identity and the life cycle* (New York: International Universities Press, 1959), 75.

⁵⁷ Susan Dowling J, "Constructing Identity Construction," thesis (Atlanta: Georgia State University, 2011), 1. https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/art_design_theses/88.

do not allude to any idea that institutions like the university and museums have negative impacts on traditional culture but, on the contrary, they serve roles so crucial that their absence can spell doom and extinction for cultural knowledge and its dissemination.

Museums are institutions that create environments that offer people the opportunity to engage to some degree with works of art that have been selected and presented according to standards and motives. Curators enter a place of dialogue with the visitors that shape their experiences by presenting exhibitions that carry multiple interpretations. These messages are determined both by the goals of the curators and the cultural element on display be it political, educational or historical. The mentorship of the lead curator provided me insights into how the display of symbols under themes and context influence the perception of visitors as they come to see exhibitions. Here, knowledge is arranged/organized to transmit specific signals although the reactions are not easily to be found out.

Museum curators come to view these exhibitions with their own ‘entrance narrative’ that allows them to make meaning in the museum art industry. They look through the lens of their own personal experiences and create an identity based on what they know to visitors.⁵⁸

It has been recognized that museum curators play crucial roles in shaping both individual and national identities through their collections, research and public programs.⁵⁹ This conception of identity from the museum curator’s perspective thus includes the kind of knowledge and patterns of experience that are relevant to presenting data and eliciting responses overtime. This becomes the process by which the museum curators construct, maintain, project, and adapt multiple knowledge

⁵⁸Lynda Kelly, “Visitors and Learners: Adult Museum Visitors’ Learning Identities,” paper presented at the ICOM-CECA Conference. November 2007, Vienna, Austria. Assessed 12 December 2018. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228614737_Visitors_and_Learners_Adult_Museum_Visitors'_Learning_Identities.

⁵⁹Jay Rounds, “Doing Identity Work in Museums,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 49 (2006):133—150. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.2151-6952>

systems and thereby give people the opportunity to learn and understand the usefulness and dynamism of culture. Visitors are thrown into a critical state of aligning or not with display and to interrogate their knowledge about themselves and their roles within the bigger world society. Anthony Giddens opines that

self-identity cannot refer merely to its persistence over time in the way philosophers might speak of the “identity” of objects or things. The “identity” of the self, in contrast to the self as a generic phenomenon, presumes reflexive awareness. It is what the individual is conscious “of” in the term “self-conscious.” Self-identity, in other words, is not something that is just given, because of the continuities of the individual’s action system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual.⁶⁰

Dealing with identity involves the problems of how to get an identity(affiliation) in the first place, how to hold onto one once you have it, how to live with it while you possess it, and how to stop living with it when its time is up. The museum epitomizes this existential character in its work of exhibiting and disseminating information through audio-visual means. This is because “identity is not issued to us at birth, nor is it hiding somewhere, fully formed, waiting to be discovered. We make it up, and we must keep working at it our entire lives.”⁶¹ Erving Goffman postulates that “the bundle of characteristics that we now call ‘identity’ is not a material thing to be possessed and then displayed; but a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well-articulated.”⁶² Adinkra symbols, used in different social contexts, represent the material form of personal identity narratives.

⁶⁰ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 52.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1959), 70.



Figure 6: Images of Museums with Curators

At the archaeology museum of the University of Ghana, I came to firsthand understand the practice of handling, arranging, and projecting. I argue that these three elements that form the basis of any exhibition are deeply rooted in Adinkra symbols' usage. "Handling" as a traditional conception of knowledge resides in the traditional communities' respect for trusteeship where they see themselves as temporary holders of knowledge which they are supposed to "arrange" according to contextual changes and "project/disseminate" to the future of the heritage survival (children). This creates realities of the self-versus others. People's experiences can alter how they see themselves or are perceived by others. In one way, their identities also influence the decisions they make. Individuals choose their friends, adopt certain fashion tastes, and align themselves with belief systems based on their identities. Many artists use their work to express, explore, and question ideas about their existing identities based on the narratives that unfolds to communicate and connect with others. Paul Du Gay argues that

the relationship between a person's sense of who they are, their personal identity and the work they perform for a living has been related to the topic of concern of identification, and individuals experience three different planes of focus which gives attribute to one's unique socially shaped life history through apprenticeship, participation and participatory appropriation.⁶³

In Ntonso, producers/designers of the Adinkra clothes and motifs are in this research considered as curators of Adinkra heritage. Apart from producing artistic works, they use their lives and

⁶³ Paul Du Gay and Hall Stuart, *Questions of cultural identity* (London: Sage, 1996), 122.

experiences to teach and inspire generations after them to promote their culture. They reflect on their personal and social beliefs in the environment they live in to contribute to the safeguarding of its heritage.

Adinkra work apprenticeship involves individuals participating with others in the culturally organized activity of printing and reproducing the symbols for daily use.



Figure 7: Designers/ producers of Adinkra clothes and motifs

2.8 Conclusion

The semantic potential of cultural symbols depends on the meaning construction potential embodied in persons and thus provides an avenue for society to interact with the Adinkra symbols. The analysis of the identity construction of Adinkra symbols has proved as an important element of this study as seen from the data gathered. The chapter has analyzed the place and role of the symbol in disseminating pride in one's heritage and the propagation of such ideologies with the help of the symbols. Adinkra symbols demonstrate people's intellectual ability to understand, explore, and interact with their surroundings in ways contextually relevant to them. I therefore argue that the meaning of any symbol does not depend on the symbol alone but an inherent knowledge of the philosophical embodiment of that sign. Bradd Shore agrees that "any iconicity of signs is some part a psychological construct"⁶⁴ and thus serves beyond physical representations of ideas within different contextual periods.

⁶⁴Bradd Shore, *Culture in mind: Cognition, culture, and the problem of meaning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 200.

Chapter 3. Analysis and Interpretation

3.1 Introduction

Communication in the form of writing is based on the use of arbitrary symbols and or imageries in many different contexts. Every society uses symbols and signs as a complement to spoken language. We live in a world where everything is expressed in some form of symbolism apart from words to complement “effective” dialogue. The effectiveness of the communication depends on the masterful arrangement of the symbols and or words. For example, in the context of traditional/folk dancing in the Asante ethnicity, each salient movement gesture is accompanied by a particular musical stanza; the direction of the dancer, the dynamics of the body and its positioning, hands, feet, and even facial expressions combined, are as effective as oral language. For example, during the Fontomfrom dance performance, a seemingly simple gesture of pointing the right index finger towards the skies followed by a stretching of both palms towards an important dignitary in the context of performance can mean two things: 1) Pointing to the sky reflects reverence to God and the stretching of the palms in addition means asking for blessings from God for the person the movements are directed to. 2) It can also mean that, apart from God, the person the movement is directed to the most powerful individual. In as much as communication is a necessary condition for all societies, it behooves on the same people to develop elements and components as well as parameters for sending, receiving, and understanding messages. As has been established so far in this research, Adinkra falls within the visually expressive communicative elements of the Asante people of Ghana who have long used them as heritage elements.

Symbols provide the means by which people interact meaningfully with their natural and social environment. Symbols are socially constructed, and they refer not to the intrinsic nature of

objects and events but to the ways in which humans perceive them.⁶⁵ The symbols are geometrically arranged in shapes that are relevant and connected to cultural knowledge. These knowledge elements give rise to indigenous philosophies that find their way into arts and related aesthetics viewpoints. These aspects then come to reflect a system of human values that a society employs to understand their existential being and their worldview. Intrinsic aspects of all human behavior influenced ethnic elements in diverse ways. As such symbols can be used to portray themes of love, war, God, wisdom and proverbs as a part of oral and visual heritage. Therefore, the myriad things associated with those occupations, positions in society, classes and their functions play an important part in people come to understand and interpret the realities and experiences lying behind the symbols.⁶⁶ Adinkra symbols do not serve philosophical awareness alone because their display in specific context also educates others about these contexts and functions of socio-cultural organizations.

Jonathan Culler notes that

the notion that linguistics might be useful in studying other cultural phenomena is based on two fundamental insights: first, that social and cultural phenomena are not simply material objects or events but objects or events with meaning, and hence signs; and second, that they do not have essences but are defined by a network of relations.⁶⁷

I agree that the legitimacy of the Adinkra symbols from a semiotic point of view is only defined by the interrelated network of people, their environmental, and metaphysical understanding of their surroundings and the social norms. As such, the place or thing any Adinkra symbol is attached to are as important as the symbol itself and add to the meaning and relevance of other symbols.

⁶⁵ Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor*, 11.

⁶⁶Kurt Moritz Goldammer, "Religious symbolism and iconography- Influence of religion on symbolism and iconography," In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Accessed December 19, 2018. <https://www.britannica.com>.

⁶⁷ Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 4.

Based on Charles Peirce and Joseph Goguen, Christopher L. Nehaniv also add that the making of meaning in society emerges from the interaction of many participants as they communicate with one other in the world in which they are situated. Semiotics therefore, provides an insightful approach to understanding meaning in terms of a relational (rather than a naïve mapping). A sign or symbol is related to a signified via interpretant, the situated linkages between the two, depending on the particular act of semiosis.⁶⁸

Inferring from these concepts of semiotics and situating within Akan heritage, it becomes evident that the Asantes depend on the non-verbal Adinkra symbols as messages expressed in Akan societal aesthetics, proverbs, idioms, maxims, stools, jewelry, gold weights, traditional cloths, umbrella tops, modern wax prints and even architectural decoration.

The fascinating thing about the semiotic analysis of Adinkra symbols is that it deals with a mode of language that can be semantically analyzed to further a holistic understanding of this mode of social communication. Conceptualizing the symbols within the parameters of safeguarding means it is important to trace their communicative modes to be able to explore safeguarding possibilities. First, it must be established that symbols that stand on their own and out of social context have no authority within Akan philosophy. Thus, to understand the symbols, one must demonstrate how meanings are drawn from language that informs artistic and philosophical views and uses signs/ symbols to present meaning in Ghanaian society. Hence Adinkra becomes both tangible and intangible heritage due to its role in the language system and its materiality as elements on clothes, stools and buildings among other things.

⁶⁸ Christopher. L. Nehaniv, "The Making of Meaning in Societies: Semiotic and Information-Theoretic Background to the Evolution of Communication," in *Proceedings of the AISB'00 Symposium: Starting from Society - the application of social analogies to computational systems* (Birmingham: Society for the Study of Artificial Intelligence and Adaptive Behaviour, 2000: 73—84.

Adding to the semantic element of the symbols, G. F. Kojo Arthur's conceptual basis is apt to be used here. He states that

language as the most complex form of the use of symbols, has become the primary medium through which a society's concepts and elements are communicated. Even though communication within and among this social group comprises verbal and non-verbal means, over time human communication is increasingly concentrated on verbal means which had fixed visual marks.⁶⁹

This provides a framework within which Adinkra on funeral clothing or in other context can be meaningfully explored and reviewed. These symbols, although independent in their interpretation, use, and context, also mostly endorse the endless continuum of other inter-related tangible and intangible elements such as folktales, music, and dance. Although symbolic within varied contexts, the quality by which it endorses and accentuates an occasion or individual's status and mood cannot be overlooked.

The social significance of the Adinkra cloth transcends ethnic, cultural and national boundaries.

Abraham Ekow Asmah highlighted that

it is discovered there have indeed been changes in the perception and meaning of the symbols first among the Asante where the symbolic cloths are inextricably linked to their cultures and secondly, among the international community where the meaning and identity of the cloths vary. The vast array of clothes symbols in Asante, its significance and utilization are just as varied and different as its application.⁷⁰

⁶⁹Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor*, 12.

⁷⁰Abraham Ekow Asmah, "Cultural Symbolism in Asante Traditional Textiles," M. Phil. Art Education (Kumasi: Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, 2009), 417.

3.2 Multimodal Discourse Approach of Semiotics to Adinkra Symbology

The essence of any language is to produce some level of clarity in its “performance”. One experience I can recall from my field trip was at the funeral event I attended. Without any narrator, people could tell who someone was at the gathering depending on the Adinkra symbol on their clothes and where they were sitting. This especially influenced how that person should approached given the opportunity. The overt and yet complex language exhibited through the symbols can be understood only by the local people and is unique to them. Asked how this system of communication came to being, I would always be told “our ancestors did it and we came to meet it” answer-implicating that although they could not articulate its historical antecedents, it was nonetheless crucial to their identities because of the reverence attached to the way their forebearers handled it. The multimodal discourse approach explains this phenomenon distinctly.

Multimodality asserts that ‘language’ is just one among the many resources for making meaning. This implies that the modal resources available in a culture need to be one coherent, integral field of nevertheless distinct resources for making meaning. The point of a multimodal approach is to get beyond approaches where mode is integrally linked and defined, with a theory and a discipline in a multimodal approach, all modes are framed as one field and domain which are jointly treated as one connected cultural resource for (representation as) making meaning by members of a social group at a moment. Modes shape our encounter with the world and our means of re-making the world in semiotic entities of any kind.⁷¹

⁷¹Yang Yang, “A Social Semiotic Approach to Multimodal Discourse of the Badge of Xi’an Jiaotong University,” *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 6 (2016): 83. <https://doi.org/10.17507>.

Building on from that conception, one can identify that the Adinkra symbols of the Akan employ geometric and mathematical codes which originate out of human relation, environmental topographical shapes and religious associations among others.⁷²

James Paul Gee and Michael Handford affirm that

multimodality and social semiotics, together, make it possible to ask questions around meaning and meaning-making; about the agency of meaning-makers, the constitution of identity in sign- and meaning-making; about the (social) constraints they face in making meaning; around social semiosis and knowledge; how ‘knowledge’ is produced, shaped and constituted distinctly in different modes; and by whom.⁷³

This approach is essential in Adinkra study because it deals with the problems that currently define the world of meaning. Within communication, social semiotic theory offers a rhetorical approach; that is,

rhetoric as the politics of communication demands an attitude that enquires about the social environment of communication and its participants, about their relations in terms of power and their social characteristics of the audience. It focuses on what is to be communicated and on the means available for materializing the meanings at issue and the means most apt in terms of the social environment and of the characteristics of the audience.⁷⁴

Therefore, wearing Adinkra symbols predisposes an attitude of “awareness” on the part of the user. In the traditional setting, wearing specific symbols to specific/exclusive events was taken to be an attitudinal display of communicative competence where a speaker is making a political statement through their personal appearance, knows what to say, where to say it what he/she wants to say, whom to he/she wants to say it and how to say what he/she wants to say.

J. E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al. stress that

⁷²See William Babbit et al., “Adinkra Mathematics: A Study of Ethnocomputing in Ghana” *Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research* 5(2) (June 2015): 110-135. doi:10.17583/remie.2015.1399

⁷³James Paul Gee and Micheal Handford, *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (London, and New York: Routledge, 2013), 38.

⁷⁴Gunther Kress, “Multimodal Discourse Analysis,” in *the Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2012), 46. [http://doi.org/ 10.4324/9780203809068](http://doi.org/10.4324/9780203809068)

actions speak louder than words, so in the Akan- speaking communities, a person who uses a lot of nonverbal cues and few words is considered a competent communicator...the Akans have a conviction which is shared by many speech communities that, when a person uses few words and a lot of nonverbal cues or codes when communicating, the person avoids a lot of problems. The more a person uses words to communicate, the more he directly or indirectly offends people.⁷⁵

Jewitt Carey further expands multimodality to

describe approaches that understands communication and representation to be more than about language, which attends to the full range of communicational forms people use as image, gesture, gaze, posture, and the relationships between them. There are four interconnected theoretical assumptions underpinning multimodality; the first is which language is part of a multimodal ensemble, representation and communication always draw on a multiplicity of modes, all of which have the potential to contribute equally to meaning. The second is each mode in a multimodal ensemble is understood as realizing different communicative work. The third is that people orchestrate meaning through their selection and configuration of modes. The fourth is that meanings of signs fashioned from multimodal semiotic resources like speech, social.⁷⁶

Elizabeth Willis thus recognizes that the Adinkra symbols constitute a language that is multi-layered which constitutes then a set of visual marks as a “writing” system and reflects cultural mores, communal values, philosophical concepts or codes of conduct and the social standards of the Akan people.⁷⁷

Kress and Van Leeuwen, point out that there are certain relationships between the image and the language, yet the image is not dependent on the language explanation for itself but has its own structure and organization. They argue that

the image itself could produce the representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning. The interpreting of image is arbitrary to some extent and in different context there would be different interpretation. The language explanation makes the concrete image more specific and it also can reflect the meaning of the image clearly. At the same time, the image makes the content of language more vivid. Therefore, the combination of

⁷⁵J. E. T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al. “The philosophy behind some Adinkra symbols and their communicative values in Akan,” *Philosophical Papers and Review* (2015): 25. <http://www.academicjournals.org/PPR> . doi.org/10.5897/PPR2015.0117

⁷⁶Jewitt Carey, *The Routledge Handbook of Multimodal Analysis* (London: Routledge Falmer, 2009), 1.

⁷⁷Elizabeth Willis, “A lexicon of Igbo Uli motifs,” *Nsukka Journal of the Humanities* (1987): 28.

language and image which are both a kind of social semiotic, would communicate meaning more comprehensively and efficiently.⁷⁸

For example, some Adinkra symbols on clothes are used to show respect and honor the dead at funerals or for other reasons at festive occasions.⁷⁹ The symbols take the forms of language and communicate to dead ancestors, who, the Asantes believe acted as intermediaries among the living.

3.3 Semiotic and Semantic Analysis of Adinkra Symbols

Adinkra symbols on clothes are used as communication tools for verbal expressions, metaphors, slight gestures or literally conveys' sensory data which carry meaning.⁸⁰ When we say, "language is symbolic" we aren't talking about "what we say" (what symbols we use), but "what we mean" (what the symbols we use mean; what we are trying to communicate).⁸¹ The Adinkra symbols express attitudes or behavior related to depicted figures or concepts uniquely created from abstract shapes. Tzvetan Todorov, a prominent representative of French semiotics, highlights the symbolic nature of signs as well as the semiotic nature of symbols. He defines a symbol as a "concept of varying meaning and changing value...the historical horizon of distinguishing between sign and symbol at the same time means that the symbol obtains a deeper sense from something invariable hence a symbol is based on indirect meaning, a characteristic feature of certain uses of language."⁸²

Some Adinkra symbols bear polysemous (ability of having different meanings) characteristics emanating mostly from both moral and personal experiences. My informant Paul recounted a

⁷⁸G. R. Kress and van Leeuwen T, *Reading Images: The Grammar of Graphic Design* (London: Routledge Falmer, 1996), 20.

⁷⁹Hilary Dockray, "Ghanaian Adinkra symbols and honoring the dead." Texas blog post. Accessed December 8th, 2018. <http://christicenter.org/2012/10/ghanaian-adinkra-symbols-and-honoring-the-deceased/>

⁸⁰Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor*, 12.

⁸¹Thomas DeMichele, "Language is a System of Communication that Uses Symbolism," 2015 [online] Fact / Myth. Available at: <http://factmyth.com/factoids/language-is-a-system-of-communication-that-uses-symbolism/> [Accessed 3 Jan. 2019].

⁸²Tzvetan Todorov, *Theories of the symbol*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 302.

personal and challenging series of events in his life that led him to create a particular Adinkra symbol known as “Masem” (meaning: my predicaments) to commemorate that phase in his life. The same symbol was then requested by some clients and even though they were told it held personal meanings for the creator (Paul), they still paid him to be able to use it as they pleased. The duality that symbol alone displays in the sentimental meaning sphere is crucial to understanding the semiotic semantics of Adinkra that the youth should take note of.

Based on Thomas Sebeok, Peter K. Manning argues that

Since signs convey meaning in many ways, and are encoded variously, communicate by many vehicles (that which conveys the sign/symbols, be it person, animal, place or thing), work through many channels (modes of communication, electronic or physical), and are non-linguistic (signs, postures, gestures) as well as linguistic (words, discourse, texts), the scope of semiotics is vast.⁸³

These shared meanings embedded in the social connections convey concepts concerned with human relationship and indicate the need for understanding the essence of meaningful communication in content and context. Adinkra also have a decorative function. “They are mostly stylized representations of objects, plants, animals, natural shapes, hairstyles, or buildings. Many of these motifs share a common basic form, and slight variations in the representation which may entail a change in the meaning describing and communicating the realities of life.”⁸⁴ In order to understand the complexities of polysemy and iconographic qualities, I refer to Roland Barthes who proposes a tripartite method for studying clothing semiotics. Based on the study of language as well as its semiotic properties and interpretations, he believes that there exist three distinct structures; the technological structure, the iconic structure and the verbal structure. He argued that the meanings communicated by clothing are not engendered by the technological structure alone, but by the iconic and verbal structures as

⁸³Peter. K. Manning, “Semiotics, Semantics and Ethnography” in Paul Atkinson et al., *Handbook of Ethnography* (London: Sage, 2001), 148.

⁸⁴ See “Adinkra symbols,” Accessed March 12, 2019. <https://afroetic.com/adinkra-symbols>.

well within particular social contexts.⁸⁵ As such, Adinkra symbols are based on the concept, the style of the image and how the objects are manifested in semiotic representation. Thus, Adinkra communicate and describes the experiences of reality within identifiable environmental, cosmic, and philosophical influences. The symbol or images have primary functions that express salient recurring events or happenings within the lives of the people and as a form of archiving, symbols are created to maintain the “wisdom” of such events for posterity. Thus, Paul’s personal experiences embodied in his personal symbol became a more widespread symbol among his customers.

Umberto Eco also avers that

Signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects... and how meanings are made and how reality is represented. This therefore sets the ground for the exploration of the cognitive prowess of the symbol creators and demystifies racist ideologies of the African not being knowledgeable.⁸⁶

The Adinkra symbols demonstrate the Ghanaian Africans intellectual ability to understand, explore, and interact with their surroundings in ways contextually relevant to them. Eco goes on to argue that the meaning of any symbol does not depend on the symbol alone but an inherent knowledge of the philosophical embodiment of that sign. In this way, the semantic potential of cultural symbols depends on the meaning construction potential embodied in persons. This then provides an avenue for Ghanaian society at large to interact with the Adinkra symbols they see going a long way to legitimize the symbols.

Adinkra symbols organize meaningful systems which correlate signifiers and the signified through the structural forms of syntagm (where signs occur in sequence and operate together to create meaning) and paradigms. Every symbol of Adinkra is the text of a system which is

⁸⁵ Roland Barthes, *The fashion system* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 32.

⁸⁶ Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1976), 7.

organized according to codes and sub-codes and reflects certain assumptions and practices. Hall Stuart confirms that

in creating texts, we select and combine signs/symbols in relation to the codes with which we are familiar. Codes help to simplify phenomena to make it easier to communicate experiences.⁸⁷

Herein lies the relevance of symbols as codes David Chandler asserts that, within a particular culture, social differentiation is determined by a multitude of social codes. We communicate our social identities through the work we do, the way we talk, the clothes we wear, our hairstyles, our eating habits, our domestic environments and possessions, our use of leisure time, our modes of travelling and so on. Language use acts as a key marker of social identity.⁸⁸

The symbols and designs on the Adinkra clothes constitute codes that evoke meaning in which they carry, preserve and present aspects of history, cultural values and philosophy of the Akans. Michael Patton notes that “the verbal element of these clothes makes the visual metaphor...during important public occasions such as durbar, this visual metaphor reinforces traditional leadership roles.”⁸⁹ The metaphors are context specific and rely on one’s ability to skillfully connect elements of the communicated lingua or symbol to the targeted audience.

Hermine Feinstein describes metaphor as an essential process of thought:

The power of metaphor lies in its potential to further our understanding of the meaning of experience, which intends defined reality. In art and language, metaphor urges us to look beyond the literal, to generate associations and tap new, different, or deeper levels of meaning. The metaphoric process recognizes and vivifies; paradoxically condenses and expands; it synthesizes often disparate meaning in this process, attributes of one entity are transferred to another by comparison, by substitution, or as a consequence of interaction.⁹⁰

⁸⁷Hall Stuart, “Encoding/decoding”. in *Culture, Media, Language* ed. S. Hall, D Hobson, A. Lowe, and P. Willis, (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 128.

⁸⁸ David Chandler, *Semiotics the basic*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2007), 153.

⁸⁹See Michael Patton, “Visual Metaphor,” in Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor*, 12.

⁹⁰ See Hermine Feinstein, “Meaning and Visual Metaphor,” in Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor*, 12.

According to Kwesi Yankah, “the cloth design along with the mode of wearing it may be used not just to praise political heroes, to commemorate historical events and to asserts social identities, but also as a channel for the silent projection of argument.”⁹¹ Hence, oral and symbolic languages within the Asante culture become a repository of cultural knowledge that captures and provides effective cues to a complex body of shared values, experiences and even a common past. This can be seen in context with Ernst Cassirer statement that “all culture takes place in and proves its self in the creative process, in the activity of the symbolic form and through these forms life awakens to self-conscious life and becomes mind.”⁹²

Adinkra symbolism and signing is complex and has over the years gained increasing fluidity in the way it is appropriated in social contexts beyond Asante tradition and by different generations. Thus, different people in Ghana have different characteristic ways of thinking about the world and expressing these ideas in varying symbolic terms. Thus, they use a wide range of symbol systems in accordance with various aspects of their social and cultural life, including the practice of their arts.

Indeed, Ghanaian Adinkra symbols and artistic expression are mostly symbolically oriented, serving to represent communal beliefs that are deeply rooted in historical, social, philosophical, political values which form the basics of Ghanaian cultural knowledge that gives birth to arts.⁹³

⁹¹Kwesi Yankah, “*Speaking for the chief*,” 81.

⁹²Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: The phenomenology of knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 213.

⁹³Robert Ayiku Kingsley, “Symbolic Meanings in The Ghanaian Arts: A Step Towards Developing Cultural Literacy,” PHD diss. (Montreal: University of Concordia, 1998), 1.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter has provided details of the Adinkra symbols through a semiotic and semantic exploration. It has thus become evident that all data analyzed lends credence to Adinkra importance or function within Asante, Akan, and Ghanaian culture. The data analysis explored the essence of the symbols in formulating and maintaining people's identity formation and legitimization within Akan societies and even among black people in the diaspora. Linkages between all facets of Akan life could be found as expressed through Adinkra symbols and how these symbols are used and re-used in different times and social contexts. Because no culture can survive without traditional systems recycling, certain symbolic elements. The Adinkra symbols of the Akan help to contextualize and indigenize their own views of the world around them. Through the Adinkra symbols, it is easier for the community of Ntonso to communicate and convey feelings, thoughts and ideas through a multimodal discourse approach that takes into consideration the way language and symbols take knowing the form of words together to communicate information and ideas.

Chapter 4. Issues of Heritage Preservation:

Adinkra Symbols in Perspective

4.1 Introduction

The ability of Adinkra to represent a people as well as helping individuals function effectively in their day-to-day lives gives credence to their importance and the fact that they deserve attention and support to be safeguarded. Safeguarding heritage is thus relevant not only because it allows cultural continuity but also because it creates channels for understanding a people's attachment to their religion, traditions and belief systems as well as, a means to foster civic responsibilities. Although museums have played a crucial role in the preservation of some tangible heritage elements, they are handicapped when it comes to safeguarding intangible heritage because of its roots in oral history. In museums as physical space, "objects on display... possess the heritage conscience where information is passed on to future generations in the era of the modern community and becomes the agent of change."⁹⁴ This chapter refers to the aspect of heritage and policy and places Adinkra symbols within strategic safeguarding as proposed by UNESCO's Convention, and operational management. Alexandra Denes argues that "the safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention 2003 is a turning point for the heritage sector, not only drawing attention to oral narratives such as performing arts, social practices and local knowledge, but also representing a turning point for management."⁹⁵

⁹⁴Emmanuel N. Arinze, "The Role of the Museum in Society," Georgetown: Guyana, 1999, 4. Accessed December 18, 2018. http://www.maltwood.uvic.ca/cam/activities/past_conferences/1999conf/batch1/CAM%2799EmmanuelArinze.GuyanaFinal.pdf.

⁹⁵Alexandra Denes, "Acquiring the Tools for Safeguarding Intangible Heritage: Lessons from an ICH Field School in Lamphun, Thailand," in Michelle L. Stefano et al., *Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage* (London: Boydell and Brewer, 2012), 165.

4.2 Adinkra Symbols and the Issues Surrounding their Safeguarding

Intangible cultural heritage is viewed today as a common interest of humanity that, besides its national dimension, deserves to be protected also under principles and rules of international law, as seen in Art. 19, para. 2 of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.⁹⁶ It states that

“[W]ithout prejudice to the provisions of their national legislation and customary law and practices, the States Parties recognize that the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage is of general interest to humanity, and to that end undertake to cooperate at the bilateral, sub regional, regional and international levels... the intangible cultural heritage also involves other fundamental values, such as the preservation of the natural environment and the respect of human rights, especially those of indigenous peoples and minority groups.”⁹⁷

Preserving the cultural heritage plays an important role in the development and cultivation of the values and traditions that make up the identity of a social group. Based on Natsuoko Akagawa and Laurajane Smith, Xie Fan stresses that the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, in contrast to what some may believe, has many important benefits. First, the intangible cultural heritage has a cultural value which records and shows the lifestyle, the historical and cultural track of different nations and can effectively help people understand the social and cultural fabric of a time.⁹⁸

Safeguarding recognizes that human creation is crucial to exploring knowledge systems that represent social functions and actions. Adinkra symbols fall under visually expressive heritage which can be performed, worn, or displayed as artefact. Safeguarding Adinkra is not limited to the knowledge of the Akan's symbols alone but also serves as the gateway to accessing a

⁹⁶See Tullio Scovazzi and Laura Westra, “The Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage According to the 2003 UNESCO Convention: The Case of the first Nations of Canada,” *Inter Gentes* 1/2 (2017), 28.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*

⁹⁸ See Xie Fan, “Preservation of China's Cultural Intangible Heritage,” Accessed January 12, 2019. <http://www.encyclopediasd.com/blog-1/2016/5/25/preservation-of-chinas-intangible-cultural-heritage>

culturally complex social interconnectivity that highlights the depth and potency of traditional knowledge system that has survived generations. The essence of safeguarding this Intangible Cultural Heritage lies in the resilience of these knowledge forms and cultural spaces supported by actions and thought patterns that were re-invented for the good and benefit of generations before us and will continue to fruitfully transform for the generations after us.

The intangible cultural heritage is associated with a “cultural space” and is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment and to their interaction with nature and their history... in which “the cultural space must be intended more for social practices than for its geographical character, as a physical or symbolic space in which people meet to enact, share or exchange social practices or ideas.”⁹⁹

Adinkra symbols as heritage of the heritage of Asante people of the Akan ethnic have undergone many changes in meaning and significance depending on the period, and the muse of artists. Given the possibility that changes have occurred in various degrees along their historical path, we must not lose sight of the fact that the rate of technological advancement resulting in the decreased use of indigenous knowledge systems such as symbols is a factor worth considering for their future safeguarding. Contextual changes and uses of the symbols are a salient element in both the promotion or disappearance of the symbols. It is particularly alarming when modern Ghanaian youth for whom the ancestors preserved the symbols for their use and for their intellectual awareness are mostly oblivious of these symbols are connected to their identities. I argue that visibility of the symbols on the internet, cars, houses, and even on clothing is not a true reflection of the functional purposes for which they were created and thus the lack of understanding and use amounts to losing intangible cultural heritage. In other words, the fact that you wear them does not mean they serve the purposes for which they were created, for the development of communal identity and collective prosperity. The youth need to play a crucial role in safeguarding this Intangible Cultural Heritage through a series of meaningful

⁹⁹Wim van Zantern, ed., *Glossary Intangible Cultural Heritage* (The Hague; Netherlands National Commission for UNESCO (2002), 4.

interactions/dialogues aimed at providing quality information on how the knowledge of the past becomes a way to understand the present in preparedness for the future.

Marcello Carrozzino, et al. explain that ‘knowledge and skills that are passed down through the ages are likely to seem obsolete in a world where information spreads quickly and globally. The nature of ICH requires artisans, the master teaching the learner, often passing knowledge of generations down to generations.’¹⁰⁰ Donna Mitchenson thus propose that

the heritage sector moves beyond the convention to engage other safeguarding paradigms that lie outside its increasingly dominant framework. Following from this, the true safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage is in successful creation of meaningful transmission experiences. The term ‘meaningful transmission experiences’ describes situations where heritage communications are optimized by using novel technologies which exploit established learning mode.¹⁰¹

Safeguarding ICH also means preserving a link between living cultures and their roles in the identity of its holders, as well as allowing the transmission of its different shades and colors to future generations. Safeguarding constitutes an essential prerequisite to ensuring the effectiveness of certain human rights in favor of the individuals and communities concerned. In practical terms, this translates into a requirement for states to ensure that such individuals and communities have appropriate access to, and ability to participation in the management of, their ICH. This highlights the influence of modern day value systems where focus is shifted from communal development to individualism. Cultural identity is inextricably linked to the safeguarding of ICH and to its transmission to future generations and modern societies. The possibility of cultural ‘extinction’ of peoples may arise from the detachment of people from

¹⁰⁰See Marcello Carrozzino et al., “Mubil, a Digital Laboratory: Creating an Interactive Visitor Experience in a Library-Museum Environment,” (2012), 7. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232807672_Mubil_a_Digital_Laboratory_Creating_an_Interactive_Visitor_Experience_in_a_Library-Museum_Environment

¹⁰¹ Donna Mitchenson, “Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage by Creating Meaningful Transmission Experiences.” *International Journal of Heritage in the Digital Era* 4, 1 (March 2015): 57. doi:10.1260/2047-4970.4.1.57.

their distinctive cultures. Recognition of cultural heritage is the effective way to keep up and develop personal and national identity, to understand the history of one's own culture.

The administration of the Asante communities should never do away with symbols as a means of communication. It is therefore not out of place to expect that the youth in particular become conversant with the traditional cultural values of the kingdom. Asante visual arts were created within the “process” mindset: meaning they were created to serve purposes that imply a certain god-like intentionality on the part of distant ancestors. Changes in the way Adinkra is used happen because the symbols are important and visually pleasing to multiple generations not because of some foresight on the part of the people who first used these symbols beyond their earlier existing functions and serve as yet unborn generation. In that sense, each generation has had the liberty to use, within and outside of the traditional context, the symbols mean to reinforce their beliefs both individually or collectively. Adinkra is also a representation of cultural memories of the Asantes of Ghana. According to Aleida Assmann

Cultural memory is a kind of institution that is exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms that, unlike the sounds of words or the communicative and cultural memory sight of gestures, are stable and situation-transcendent: They may be transferred from one situation to another and transmitted from one generation to another. what we call memory, should be able to be reembodyed in the sequence of generations... cultural memory exists also in disembodied form and requires institutions of preservation and re-embodiment.¹⁰²

The tangible and intangible cultural heritage(ICH) characteristics of Asante Adinkra symbols are considered important aspects of their cultural identity and an essential value for the people. The people in the Asante share an understanding of this unique cultural platform of values and doctrinal transmission. However, safeguarding tangible and intangible cultural heritage today

¹⁰²Aleida Assmann, “Communicative and Cultural Memory,” in Astrid Eril, Ansgar Nunning (Hg), *Cultural Memories Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. (Berlin: New York, 2006), 110—111. http://www.springerlink.com/index/10.1007/978-90-481-8945-8_2.

is by no means an easy task. This is because of the complexities of the word in the first.

Ghanaian dance researcher Eric Awuah argues that

Safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage is a subject that is addressed with some level of caution nowadays. Safeguarding as an idea is different from safeguarding as a practical goal set to be achieved. The viability of effective safeguarding measures depends on very pertinent factors like the historical and socio-political-cultural elements for which the intangible cultural heritage in question is derived from. Each society in the world has their own unique measures of safeguarding their cultures even though some may be more effective than others. To safeguard means to retain certain aspects of some qualitative or quantitative accoutrements of a given culture.¹⁰³

Tullio Scovazzi and Laura Westra add that

today the dangers to the preservation or integrity of the intangible cultural heritage are the result not only of disuse or abandonment by members of the communities concerned, but also of abuse or misuse by third parties where intellectual property rules put emphasis on products, rather than on practices and processes that create them...and as a result of granting a patent to a third party, the communities concerned with the heritage may become deprived of both their past history and present identity and can be even prevented from producing the same knowledge that they have been making for generations.¹⁰⁴

Safeguarding as a term/concept/ideology, acknowledges changes and is quite flexible in determining solutions as compared to conservation which is the direct opposite. Awuah further states that

the safeguarding of aspects of culture is not a new phenomenon especially because there are mostly conscious mechanisms to legitimize reason for their sustenance especially when it grants a people a sense of belonging through their continuity... [therefore, continuity becomes the need] to have a coherent aim of safeguarding traditional forms, both kinesthetic and philosophical knowledge should be grounded in theories and tested practically continuously to determine their usefulness.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Eric Baffour Awuah, "A study of Amateur groups' re-interpretation of traditional dances in Ghana: Role on continuity and safeguarding," Unpublished thesis (Trondheim: Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 2014), 71.

¹⁰⁴ Scovazzi and Westra, "The Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage", 37.

¹⁰⁵ Awuah, "A Study", 74.

As such the convention's highlighted elements of 'practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage'¹⁰⁶ apt for this analysis as Adinkra symbols fall within them.

4.3 Adinkra as “Museums on Display”

Museums are defined by the objects they display. The display engages visitors in learning experiences to enhance their curiosity and interest on objects and collections. Lord Dexter explains that

the purpose of museum exhibition is to transform some aspect of the visitors' interests, attitudes or values effectively, due to the visitors' discovery or some level of communication in meanings to the objects displayed or where a discovery that is stimulated and sustained by the visitor's confidence is perceived in the authenticity of those objects.¹⁰⁷

Adinkra as “museum exhibits on display” provides room for analyzing the symbols on clothes as “displayed” in the manner of artefacts in a museum. The symbols however exhibit the performance aspect of values and philosophies through their context based interpretation.

As a place possessing the heritage consciousness where information is passed on to observers of different generations, museums have become crucial to information dissemination in modern capitalist economies. For instance, the ability of “any” painting to communicate depends on the effect that paintings as a “teacher of reality” have on the observer. As such communication is established when the “student” (visitor) enters the “classroom” (museum) to learn in an interactive session. Adinkra as museums connotes here a simple conceptual and practical ideology that which hinges on an object's ability to transcend generational realities and still

¹⁰⁶ UNESCO, Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, 2003. Assessed December 12, 2018. <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/convention>.

¹⁰⁷Lord Gail Dexter, *The Manual of Museum Exhibition*, (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2002), 18.

makes sense, in the same way as observation and performance mediums dancing and folk songs. As such, an Adinkra as museum translates into the ability of the symbols as independent objects to speak for themselves. Adinkra museums are embodied knowledge systems due to their cultural and intergenerational affinities and are living and breathing parts of Akan life. Interestingly, Adinkra tattoos on anyone create a form of museums in the sense of their display and projected knowledge. Adinkra as a tattoo on a person from the Ntonso community reflects a different reality from an African-American who is trying to trace his or her roots/identity back to Africa. The same symbols found on their bodies as permanent tattoos, or as ear-rings, or as clothing prints reflect their own unique culture, culture dependent realities to the onlooker. The difference between this Adinkra museum as an embodied legacy of conventional museums lies in its ability to seamlessly move between different realities as well as political boundaries and realities.

The Adinkra symbols help Ghanaians learn past societal values. The Adinkra symbols in the museums expatiate on how the symbols have been used, giving access to ideas that are fundamental to human lifeways, well beyond visual gallery displays. Abebe Payne recollects that in the past,

in symbolizing the Akan traditional proverbs and tales, merchants became known to the Akan ethical principles using gold weights in which they recognize the traditional values of the Asantes. The authentic Mrammuo¹⁰⁸ are left in museums and in private collections which comes in both the geometric and figurative weights such as the proverb weights, animated human and non-domesticated animal figurines.¹⁰⁹

I argue here that Adinkra symbols as emblems and totems became a form of literate culture which arose over time with consistent exposure to and participation in certain key cultural

¹⁰⁸Mrammuo are Asante gold weights made of brass and or a system use to measure and value gold dust among the Akans people of Ghana.

¹⁰⁹Abebe Payne, "The Gold Weights (Mrammuo) of the Akan ethnic groups of Ghana," 2015. Accessed January 8th, 2019. <http://museums-ioj.org.jm/?p=5429>.

strongholds such as the arts, history and nature. The way the Adinkra symbols are displayed and interpreted determines how the visitor ascribes meaning to the symbols and, by extension, the people who created and used them. Abebe Payne alludes to the fact that, the *Mrammuo* were not typically made of gold, but also of copper, brass and other available alloys, using the traditional Lost Wax method (molten metal is poured into a mould created using a wax model, the heat melts the wax and pushes it out of a hole). The Asantehene (Paramount Chief) and other chiefs had weights cast in gold, while the Queen Mother occasionally had sets made of silver.¹¹⁰ The use of Adinkra symbol on gold weight shows some code of conduct that guides people in their ways of life and to easily understand aspects of the Akan culture which perhaps may have been lost as well as endowing kings with a wider cultural significance. So, whether the symbols are tattooed on the body, carved on a drum, or worn on clothes, its value(s) are expensive.

4.4 Adinkra influence in Institutional Cultures of Ghana

The influence of Adinkra in shaping institutional cultures are reflected in the adoption of the symbols as institutional logos. In Ghana, many institutions adopt the philosophical underpinnings of specific symbols upon which they model company ethics, aims and objectives. For example, the adoption of the Adinkra symbols by the Bank of Ghana reflects a sense of national acceptance and identity. The symbols strategically enforce the ethos of creating balance that is needed to influence the stability of the entire financial sector. Therefore, to communicate such values, selected symbols are carefully placed on each denomination of the currency. This shows the national acceptance and relevance of the symbols to national identity propagated through state institutions as well as private firms. The institutional culture helps enforce values

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

that will promote productivity. Symbols like *Gye Nyame*,¹¹¹ *Dwannimmen*,¹¹² *Esi ni Tekrema*,¹¹³ *Nyame dua*¹¹⁴ and *Adinkrahene*¹¹⁵ among others are common examples of symbols adopted by companies. . The symbols help direct performance, management, organizational development, and provide guidelines for the people who work for them and are intended to affect the way in which employees should follow objectives.

The structural concept of institutional culture in the Bank of Ghana (BOG) as reflected in the symbols they use plays an important role in the political and financial development of the country by shaping the institutional practices and performance within a framework which promotes change. The printing and publication of the Adinkra symbols on the banknotes affirms a people's national acceptance of a "common" identity. A critical analysis of the Ghanaian banknotes over the years can attest to the relevance of the symbols in transmitting the importance of traditional knowledge systems on legal tenders such as banknotes issued by the state. The Bank of Ghana deploys these symbols as designs but, more than that, a succinct communication to the people on varied themes and contexts.



Figure 8: This is the 2 Ghana Cedi banknote (equivalent to 0.34 Euro cents). The arrow shows the *Nyame nnwu na mewu* (God never dies; therefore, I cannot die) symbol epitomizing God's omnipresence.

¹¹¹ See Appendix II, fig. 7

¹¹² See Appendix II, fig. 4

¹¹³ See Appendix II, fig. 5

¹¹⁴ See Appendix II, fig. 8

¹¹⁵ See Appendix II, fig. 1

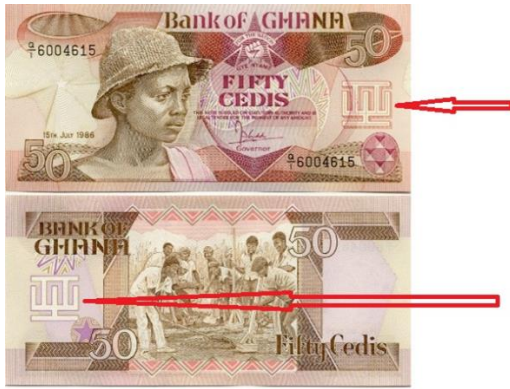


Figure 9: This old banknote shows the Hwe mu dua (measuring stick) symbol. This talks about thorough Symbol of critical examination, excellence and quality

4.4.1 Adinkra Propagation through Traditional Chieftaincy Institutions

Within chiefdoms the visible level of culture in displayed artefacts and costumes influences invisible communication among attendees to political gatherings. M. Nnamseh affirms that “communication is the means through which members of an institution relate with one another by interchanging ideals, facts and feeling by words, memoranda and symbols.”¹¹⁶

Chieftaincy provides a consistent focus of political representation for people at all social levels. It is an outstanding path to social recognition and political influence with very visible feature of both traditional and modern Ghanaian life. Chiefs represent power, service and authority. Hence, they have become the most recognizable users of Adinkra symbols. The symbols can be found in their traditional regalia as well as on umbrellas and on their subjects. These symbols can be seen at a majority of public events taking place in settings of chiefly pageantry, where

¹¹⁶See M. Nnamseh, “The Role of Communication in Business Success,” *Nigeria Journal of Management Research*, 1/4 (2009) in Lovlyn Ekeowa Kelvin-Iloafu, “The Role of Effective Communication in Strategic Management of Organizations” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 6(2016): 94.

top political figures at national, regional or local level interact with ‘traditional authorities’ who represent particular communities or sections of society.¹¹⁷

4.4.2 Adinkra as a Strategic Management Communication System

Ansgar Zerfass et al. define strategic communication as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization or other entity to engage in conversations of strategic significance to its goals.”¹¹⁸ Adinkra as communicative elements enforce this ideology. Thus far, this research has established how the symbols are used most times among traditional people strategically to communicate covertly. Within chieftaincy institutions, the symbols have the potential to aid problem solving within the community because they serve as reminders of equity. Symbols can be found on the walls and inner chambers of the chiefs’ palaces as not just decoration but as reminders of the presence of the spirits (ancestors) and an indigenous knowledge system. To understand the cultural system in an institution like chieftaincy, one can glean some information from how Adinkra symbols are projected as well as traditional. For example, the *Gye Nyame* Adinkra symbols among others can be used by any of the institutions but, in their publication, their relevance and authority depend on their point of projection.

Within the chieftaincy institution, the ‘linguist’, in the native Asante language called ‘Okyeame’, is a spokesperson who mediates communication between subjects and the chief/king. He is an ambassador of the chief and plays such role by always walking in front of a procession, pours liquor as libation on the ground, and announces the presence of the chief/king to the public. Carved images on the finial of linguist staffs typically illustrate Asante

¹¹⁷Pierluigi Valsecchi, “He who sets the boundary” Chieftaincy as a “necessary” institution in modern Ghana,” Working paper 3 (University of Teramo: Department of Communication, 2007), 6.

¹¹⁸Ansgar Zerfass, et. al “Strategic communication: Defining the field and its contribution to research and practice,” *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 12(4) (2018): 493. doi:10.1080/1553118X.2018.1493485

proverbs about power and institutional responsibilities and their relationship with Adinkra symbols.

Partly based on Nii Quarcopome, Daniel Kwesi Asare explains that

the linguist is not just the spokesman for the chief but also an advisor, an intermediary with his subjects, a store of knowledge, a legal expert, an ambassador, and occasionally, a ritual officiator... as a symbol of authority to speak for the chief, the Linguist (okyeame) carries a staff which connects and represents an Asante proverb or saying.¹¹⁹

The images are linked to the Adinkra symbols through proverbs. Linguist staffs “reflect the political authority either because they distill power relationships or convey the virtues of leadership. The linguist staff’s iconography is uniquely managed and suited for the purpose; its symbolism communicates ideas about the chief and his rule. Its imagery is designed to make a poignant, thought provoking statement deemed relevant for the occasion.”¹²⁰ Thus, a wooden linguist staff with a finial carved in the shape of a hand holding an egg translates to ‘the handling of power and authority is likened to the handling of an egg. When held too tightly and firmly, it might break. When held too loosely, it might fall and break’. This bears similarities to the *Akofena* Adinkra symbol which extols good leadership modelled on service to the people. It reminds people in authority to guard against getting power-drunk.

¹¹⁹Daniel Kwasi Asare, “The Use of Asante Linguist Staff Symbols in Textile Design,” thesis (Kumasi: Department of Industrial Art, 2011), 18.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 21.



Figure 10: 'Power is like an egg' which shows the 'Tumi te se kosua' Adinkra symbols depicting delicacy of political power, fragility of democracy and restraint. The staff dates from the middle of the 20th century¹²¹

Figure 11 shows a spider in its web flanked by two human figures, representing the proverb: “No one goes to the house of the spider to teach it wisdom.” The spider is a fitting symbol of respect due to its oratorical and diplomatic skills in Akan folklore. The staff is composed of a long wooden shaft carved in two interlocking sections and a separate finial attached to the base.¹²²



Figure 11: Linguist Staff (Okyeame), of the Asante people, 19th-early 20th century, (The New York Metropolitan Museum of Art). <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-africa/west-africa/ghana/a/linguist-staff-okyeamepoma-asante-peoples>

¹²¹The Lowlands-collection includes several linguists sticks and sculptural finials which were collected between 1997 and 2000 in Ghana

¹²² See Christa Clarke, “Linguist Staff (Okyeamepoma) Asante peoples,” New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006. <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-africa/west-africa/ghana/a/linguist-staff-okyeamepoma-asante-peoples>

Conclusion

My research has explored the use of Adinkra symbols within contemporary Ghana and its uses as an element of socio-cultural transformation. Through, fieldwork data, I have established the dynamic use of the images as complex linguistic structures interconnected with historical representation and contextual dynamics. The ability of the symbols to permeate different social contexts enhancing meaning through linguistic routines is a very important element of meaning creation. The rhetoric of Adinkra as a well-known traditional knowledge system in Ghana can thus be justified.

Although there are over 700 Adinkra symbols, this study concentrated on the analysis of nine selected symbols based on their communicative potential explored by the youth consciously or unconsciously in the contemporary dispensation, and their popularity as images of “Ghanaian/African identity”. In addition, this research has referenced and catalogued 20 other symbols from different socio-cultural contexts in Ntonso. The research has highlighted and expanded the notion of identity negotiations through varied appropriation and transmission routes such as Adinkra symbols. By providing a semiotic inquiry into indigenous symbolic systems, it has underscored the need for scholarship on Adinkra to be expanded through institutional agents such as museum curators, African-American tourists, funeral event participants, and artisans. Identity negotiations are shaped and legitimized by the social world through cultural elements, space, time, and memory. Hence, meaningful connections are made between the past, present and future through the use of the symbols.

The semiotic analysis of the transmission and embodiment of traditional knowledge as disseminated through Adinkra in contemporary Ghana and their effects of their use on safeguarding oral and linguistic elements of the Asante culture has been examined during this

research. Therefore, safeguarding of heritage elements like Adinkra symbols will go a long way to project and protect traditional knowledge systems necessary for enhancing cultural development and propagation. Using critical analysis, the study was able to demonstrate that the symbols re-interpret and re-enforced the potency of visual communication which draws on social, political, religious, and cultural ideologies. The Adinkra helps define community structures, embodiment routines, and human interaction as form cultural integrity and survival.

Having shown the tradition and contemporary use of Adinkra in Ghanaian society this research advocates for the support of a continuous further exploration of Adinkra symbols as methods for safeguarding not only of images, but its interconnectivity to other elements of traditional Akan living and all other intangible cultural heritages of the Ghanaian people. This awareness is particularly relevant because of the increasing use of the symbols in many different ways by the youth. The symbols have moved from being the holders of cultural knowledge to individual performance and demonstrations of individual, collective, and corporate identity.

Thus, what can be done, on the one hand, to preserve this important part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Ghanaian people and, on the other hand, to develop a senseful future of the symbolic Adinkra knowledge system and its use?

Exhibitions should be organized periodically by Adinkra cloth producers and scholars to help promote the understanding of communication systems through symbols. This would generate discussions on how symbols may be “destroyed”/harmed” through incorrect or commercial use and also how these symbols could be harnessed for future generations.

As such, it is also imperative to organize workshops to sensitize the public on the relevance of these symbols to cultural and national development. Such workshops could make available information pertaining to Adinkra materials and artefacts, their uses and relevance for identity construction in order to encourage the public to familiarize themselves with issues of tangible

and intangible heritage elements and usage. To reach this, it is certainly important that more funding be provided to develop an interdisciplinary analysis and “new” concept of the traditional symbols to enhance Ghanaian African concepts of semiotics, communication, identity construction, and social structure to promote the awareness and safeguarding of traditional symbols. It is therefore, necessary for governments, chiefdoms, scholars and corporate bodies who have keen interest in the indigenous arts of the nation to rally together to address issues with regards to the protection of these forms of Ghanaian identity.

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Appendix I

Some Adinkra symbols on funeral clothes and their symbolic meaning at Ntonso-Kumasi.



Plate 1: The black(brisi) funerary type of Adinkra cloth with stripped lines with the Aya(fern) symbol, Ntonso-Kumasi, Ghana. Photo by the author, August 2018



Plate 2: The mixed type of Adinkra cloth with multiple symbols on one piece of clothing - Ntonso-Kumasi, Ghana. Photo by the author, August 2018.



Plate 3: The red(kobene) funerary type of Adinkra cloth, Ghana. Image source: 'The Adinkra-Kente Zone', accessed 16 August, 2018, <http://www.flickrriver.com/groups/770185@N22/pool/interesting>.



Plate 4: The brown(kuntunkuni); the brick type of Adinkra cloth with the 'Gye Nyame' (Only God) symbol, Ntonso-Kumasi, Ghana. Photo by the author, August 2018



Plate 5: The screen printing type of Adinkra cloth with the 'Adinkrahene' (King of Adinkra) symbol, Ntonso-Kumasi, Ghana. Photo by the author, August 2018.



Plate 6: The stamping process of Adinkra - Ntonso-Kumasi, Ghana. Photo by the author, August 2018.



Plate 7: Some Adinkra motifs stained with dye for stamping Adinkra clothes, Ntonso-Kumasi, Ghana. Photo by the author, August 2018



Plate 8: Different types of Adinkra motifs carved from the calabash, Ntonso-Kumasi, Ghana. Photo by the author, August 2018



Plate 9: Funerary Adinkra cloth with the 'Nkonsonkonson' (human relation, Unity) symbol, Ntonso-Kumasi, Ghana. Photo by the author, August 2018.



Plate 10: Red funerary Adinkra cloth with the 'Akofena' - sword(authority) symbol, Ntonso-Kumasi, Ghana. Photo by the author, August 2018.



Plate 11: Adinkra designed cloth with the 'Dwannimmen' (Humility, strength) symbol, Ntonso-Kumasi, Ghana. Photo by the author, August 2018.



Plate 12: Red designed Adinkra cloth with the 'Gyawu Atiko' (Valor, bravery) symbol, Ntonso-Kumasi, Ghana. Photo by the author, August 2018.



Plate 13: Designed Adinkra scarves showing the symbol of 'Sesa wo suban'(transformation) on the green cloth, Ntonso-Kumasi, Ghana. Photo by the author, August 2018



Plate 14: Printed Adinkra cloth with various Adinkra symbols, Ntonso-Kumasi, Ghana. Photo by the author, August 2018.



Plate 15: Aesthetically designed Adinkra cloth depicting the colors of the Ghana flag with the 'Gye Nyame' (Only God) and 'Sankofa' (Go back and retrieve) symbol, Ntonso-Kumasi, Ghana. Photo by the author, August 2018



Plate 16: Aesthetic value of Adinkra stamped scarves with several bright colors- Ntonso-Kumasi, Ghana. Photo by the author, August, 2018



Plate 17: Printed Adinkra cloth with the 'Ohene adwa symbol which means "The king's stool" a symbol of the State and Chieftaincy, Ntonso-Kumasi, Ghana. Photo by the author, August 2018



Plate 18: A funerary Adinkra cloth with Adinkra symbols like 'Sankofa' (Go back and retrieve, Akofena-Sword(authority) and 'Gye Nyame' (only God), Ntonso-Kumasi, Ghana. Photo by the author, August 2018.



Plate 19: A funerary Adinkra cloth designed with the Nsoromma (star) symbol, Ntonso-Kumasi, Ghana. Photo by the author, August 2018.

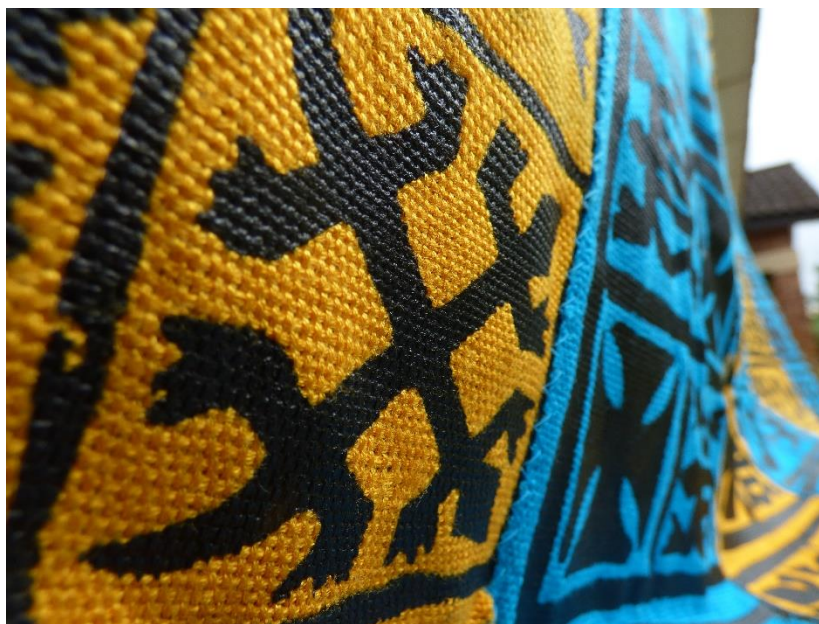


Plate 20: Colorful Adinkra cloth designed with Funtumfunafu Denkyemfunafu (Twin Crocodile) symbol on the yellow cloth and Fihankra (Compound house) symbol on the blue cloth, Ntonso-Kumasi, Ghana. Photo by the author, August 2018

Appendix II

Some Adinkra symbols and their Akan proverbial meaning with English interpretation in the book *Cloth as metaphor* By G.F. Kojo Arthur (2001).

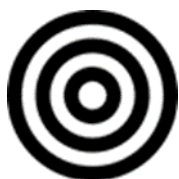


Figure 1: Adinkrahene

Looking closely at this symbol, one can observe a black dot in the middle and 3 black concentric circles around it. In the past, it was believed that “Ohene ye owia”, meaning “The King is the Sun”. So just as the planets revolve around the sun in our solar system, making it the most important object, as it the “hene” pictured as the dot. The concentric circles around this dot represent the people in his kingdom, and the dot represents the king, making the king the most important person.¹²³

Literary Translation from the Akan(Twi) language to English: ‘Adinkra king or Chief of all the Adinkra designs’

Symbolic meaning: ‘The concentric circles signify the universe and its creator. Only the creator of the universe, like the creator of the circle, knows the beginning and the end.’

Akan(Twi)Proverbial saying and its English Interpretation: ‘Yɛde brɔɛrɛ bekum Adinkra.’

‘Slowly but surely we will defeat Adinkra’ This symbol is believed to have been named in memory of King Kofi Adinkra of Gyaman who was defeated by the Asante during war because king Adinkra was authoritarian and intransigent.’



Figure 2: Akofena

¹²³ Venessa Danso, Adinkra Abokes3m 3na 3mu Asekyer3 - History of Adinkra and Its Symbolism, 2016. <https://www.modernghana.com/lifestyle/8937/adinkra-abokes3m-3na-3mu-asekyer3-history-of-adinkra-its.html>.

The crossed swords were a popular motif in the heraldic protection of many ancient Akan states. Within the meaning of strength and courage the sword symbolized the prestige and integrity of power.

Literary Translation from the Akan (Twi) language to English: Royal/ceremonial sword

Symbolic meaning: Courage, valor and heroism.

Akan (Twi) Proverbial Saying and its English Interpretation: Akofena kunini ko a, wobo a fena kye no safohene.’

“The great warrior always has a royal sword of rest even when he retires.”

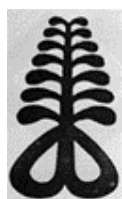


Figure 3: Aya

The importance of seeing through issues. The design of this symbol, is a representation of a tree with all its branches.

Literary Translation from the Akan(Twi) language to English: “Fern.” a plant that can withstand diverse weather conditions and different soil types.

Symbolic meaning: Hardiness, resourcefulness, endurance, and defiance

Akan(Twi)Proverbial saying and its English Interpretation: ‘Mensuro wo’.

“I am not afraid of you, I am independent of you”. Persistence is invariable rewarded with success.”



Figure 4: Dwannimmen

A ram will courageously fight against its foes when prompted, but will submit to slaughter when necessary, indicating that even the strong must be humble. The strength of a ram depends not so much on the forcefulness of its horns but on the integrity of its heart. In addition to the beauty (inner and outer), Dwannimmen also signifies the necessary balance that is needed in life.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Ed Lauber, The ram, the lion and the lamb: Heart Language, 2012.

Literary Translation from the Akan(Twi) language to English: Ram's horn

Symbolic meaning: Humility, strength and learning.

Akan(Twi)Proverbial saying and its English Interpretation: 'Dwannini ye asisie a, ode n'akorana na...'

"The ram will courageously fight against its foes when prompted, but will submit to slaughter when necessary, indicating that even the strong must be humble...and also, the strength of a ram depends not so much on the forcefulness of its horns but on the integrity of its heart."



Figure 5: Ese-ne-tekrema

The symbol depicts the complementary nature of human beings as well as nations. Or, the tongue lying between the two rows of teeth, literally starves off tension between two people.

Literary Translation from the Akan (Twi) language to English: The teeth and the tongue

Symbolic meaning: corporation, unity, growth, development and improvement

Akan(Twi)Proverbial saying and its English Interpretation: 'Wɔnnwo ba a ɔwɔ ne se dada. Or, Tekrema wɔ hɔ a, ese mmɔ nkuro.'

"No child is born with an already developed set of teeth. Or, In the presence of the tongue, the teeth do not litigate."



Figure 6: Funtumfunafu Denkyemfunafu

The symbol stresses the oneness of humanity despite cultural diversity. It also emphasizes the need for unity in the family or state. Members should not quarrel or fight for selfish interest, for what each gain is for the benefits of all.¹²⁵

Literary Translation from the Akan (Twi) language to English: 'Twin Crocodile'

Symbolic meaning: Unity and diversity given a common destiny of sharing Democracy and oneness irrespective of cultural differences.

¹²⁵ G. F Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor. (Re)reading the Adinkra Cloth: Symbols of the Akan of Ghana* (Legon, Ghana: Centre for Indigenous Knowledge Systems, 2001), 152.

Akan (Twi) Proverbial Saying and its English Interpretation: ‘Funtumfunafu denkyemfunafu, won afuru bom, nso woredidi a na woreko.’

“They share one stomach and, yet they fight for getting food.”



Figure 7: Gye Nyame

It is used in decorations, clothing, and artwork and reflects the religious character of the Akan people. In the Akan scheme of things, God (*Nyame*) is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. The Gye Nyame Adinkra symbol encapsulates the faith of the African people who see God's involvement in every aspect of human life. The expression Gye *Nyame* is used in many ways. For example, it signals the necessity of God's intervention in a difficult situation which transcends the ability of man to resolve. It shows the relative greatness of a task or entity. For instance, by saying “Obira ntumi nku me, gye Nyame,” (literally meaning “Nobody can kill me except God”) the speaker signifies his hardiness as well as his faith in God's ability to protect him from harm.

Literary Translation from the Akan (Twi) language to English: ‘Only God’

Symbolic meaning: God (*Nyame*) is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient.

Akan (Twi) Proverbial Saying and its English Interpretation: ‘Obiara ntumi nku me, Gye Nyame’

“Nobody can kill me, only God” The speaker signifies his hardiness as well as his faith in God's ability to protect him from harm



Figure 8: Nyame Dua

The *Nyame Dua* is a sacred spot where rituals are performed and erected in front of the house or compound. It is crafted from a tree that has been cut where three or more branches come together. This stake holds an earthenware vessel filled with water and herbs or other symbolic materials for purification and blessing rituals.¹²⁶

Literary Translation from the Akan (Twi) language to English: God's tree.

Symbolic meaning: God's presence/protection

¹²⁶ See West African Wisdom: Adinkra Symbols and Meanings.
<http://www.adinkra.org/htmls/adinkra/nyamedua.htm>.

Akan (Twi) Proverbial Saying and its English Interpretation: “God’s presence everywhere and every time.”



Figure 9: Sankofa

The symbol appears frequently in traditional Akan art and has also been adopted as an important symbol among African-Americans in the diaspora to represent the need to reflect on the past struggles to rebuild a successful future. It is one of the most widely dispersed Adinkra symbols, appearing in modern jewelry, tattoos and clothing.¹²⁷

Literary Translation from the Akan (Twi) language to English: ‘Go back and retrieve, return to your roots and importance of a people’s heritage.’

Symbolic meaning: ‘This symbolizes the Akan’s quest for knowledge with the implication that the quest is based on critical examination, and intelligent and patient investigation.’ ‘History or importance of learning from the past’. The past serves as a guide for planning the future, or the wisdom in learning from the past in building the future’.

Akan (Twi) Proverbial Saying and its English Interpretation: ‘Se wo were fin a wo Sankofa a yen kyɛ.’

‘It is believed that there must be movement and new learning as time passes. As this forward march proceeds, the knowledge of the past must never be forgotten.’

¹²⁷ Robert Sutherland Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), 27.