

ADINKRA ©
THE LIVING DREAM



By Seyram Agbleze

Acknowledgement

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To Almighty God

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INTRODUCTION

Adinkra cloth is any fabric made with old Akan ideograms or Akan tribal symbols that carry meaning. These tribal symbols are referred to generally as Adinkra. Adinkra cloth is used as a ceremonial cloth in Akan culture. Akans are an ethnic group that live predominantly in the West African countries of Ghana and Ivory Coast/Cote D'Ivoire. The motifs of Adinkra are still relevant to Akans today as they ever were in the past. In the British Museum is displayed an Adinkra cloth collected by a British traveller on his celebrated expedition to West Africa in the early 1800s (1).

This work addresses first, the process of making Adinkra cloths traditionally. Just as the earlier project addressed the natural dyeing process of making indigo cloths, this one would also look at the natural dyeing process involved in making Adinkra cloth, covering plants/trees used as the source of colours. In present times most Adinkra fabrics have been produced by machine prints and modern batik methods which mainly use synthetic dyes. But fortunately, artisans of Ntonso (Adinkra craft village) still use some natural dyes for their work and traditional methods of making the cloth also.

Furthermore we would look at the spiritual significance of Adinkra cloth, which would focus on the history and culture behind Adinkra cloth, with also the meaning of the motifs/symbols of the cloth. Alongside information from written history, this part would also include contributions from chiefs and custodians of tradition indicated respectively as the oral tradition.



Adinkra fabrics at Ntonso

The Process of Making Traditional Adinkra Cloth

Adinkra cloth was dyed in the past with colours extracted from plants (vegetable/natural dyeing) but in present times synthetic dyes have replaced most of the colours. We would look at some of the natural dyeing methods still being practised by artisans of Ntonso in the Ashanti region of Ghana.

To begin the process, the artisan would first need to have his handwoven cloth in place if he intends to hand-print symbols/patterns on cloth. If artisan prefers a different colour background aside the white cloth, the cloth must be dyed first to whatever colour preferred before printing done. In case he intends to do an embroidery of symbols or weaving of symbols in cloth as in Kente, he would have to dye threads first in the preferred dye. The Akans refer to their handwoven cloth as Kente as the Northerners of Ghana refer to theirs as Fugu (refer to Part 1). There is also a longstanding tradition of weaving in this region as well. Bonwire village is the main center for kente weaving in Ashanti region.

In the past, Adinkra symbols were carved on pieces of gourd/calabash (depicted below). This is still being practised here. This gourd is originally a hard-shell, green inedible fruit of a vine. After harvesting this fruit, a hole is made on top and the inner part scooped out. It is then left under the sun to dry for days until it turns all brown and hard for the artisan to create his desired Adinkra symbols. These carved symbols shown below can be used for several years. Gourd has also been used in ancient West Africa and present-day for creating musical instruments such as xylophone. The carved Adinkra symbols are dipped in dyes/ink processed from plants/trees and printed on the cloth when making Adinkra fabric.



Gourd vine

Gourd/ Calabash

Carved Adinkra symbol

Some Adinkra symbols Embroidery

Before the use of plants, I have been informed mud was used specifically to dye Adinkra cloths here. Mud dyeing involves the use of specific clay preserved for a year in an earthen pot with some water. A piece of this old mud/clay is scooped and mixed in a bowl of water to make a uniform solution which is then used for dyeing purposes. One tree that served as a source of colour for Adinkra and still used by artisans in Ntonso is the Badie tree (fig 1). The artisan extracts colour from the bark of this tree by first breaking it into pieces and then soaking it in water for 24 hours. After the 24 hours in water the solution turns brownish (fig 4), the artisan tells me this means it is ready. The pieces are then removed, placed in a mortar and pounded with a pestle into fine grains. It is then transferred into a pot of water and cooked for 4 hours. After 4 hours the solution turns reddish brown (fig 6) and the artisan takes it off the fire. He sieves out the rough particles from the solution and cooks the smooth solution for an extra 4 hours until it evaporates and form a thick

solution. This final solution then serves as the ink to be used for hand printing or stamping symbols on the cloth. The Senufo people of Ivory Coast when doing their Korhogo cloth prefer to draw their tribal symbols/designs with stencils directly on handwoven cloth. They also hand paint natural dyes directly on the cloth. The Badie ink used for Adinkra serves as a source of black colour which is stamped on a plain white background or coloured background of cloth. As indicated earlier this was done on handwoven cloth in the past since it was the cloth available but now it is also done on ready-made cloth. The Badie ink is also called Adinkra aduru.

In order to have a cloth dyed reddish brown colour (a ceremonial Ashanti mourning cloth) before stamping symbols with the ink, the roots and bark of a tree known as Kuntunkuni (*Bombax Brevicuspe*) are used for dyeing. They are boiled for hours and cloth dipped in solution for some time and dried. The cloth is repeatedly soaked in the dye bath and dried until artisan gets the desired shade of colour. I have been informed this is the same process used in the past for dyeing cloths into other colours as well. Roots of the Baobab tree (*Adansonia Digitata*) can be used for red and for yellow, leaves of a tree called Kanee (*Anogeissus leiocarpa*). It is a tropical West African tree which is also partly used for dyeing mud cloth in Mali.

Other plants such as the roots and stem of a vine called Avumansaka (fig 14) by Ewes, can be used for a red shade. They grind the stem of the plant and mix in water, the cloth is then left in the solution for a day. *Combretum glutinosum* plant (fig 12) is used for yellow dyeing too. All these plants also undergo the boiling process of extracting dye. Some of these dye plants including the indigo plant (Part 1) are also used by indigenous herbalists for medicinal purposes. In present-day, red, yellow and other colour backgrounds of Adinkra cloth are no longer done traditionally but with synthetic dyes. Only russet brown dyeing (kuntunkuni) and the black ink (adinkra aduru) are still traditionally done by some artisans.

Extracting Traditional Ink and Stamping



Fig 1 Badie tree



Fig 2 cutting out bark



Fig 3 Bark broken to pieces



Fig 4 bark soaked in water



Fig 5 Pounding



Fig 6 Sieved after 4 hours cooking



Fig 7 Final traditional ink



Fig 8 Dyed fabrics to be used



Fig 9 Ready to print with Adinkra stamps



Fig 10a Printed symbols



Fig 10b woven symbols

Other Plants for Traditional Dyeing



Fig 11 Kuntunkuni dyeing



Fig 12 Combretum Glutinosum(yellow)



Fig 13 Forest expedition



Fig 14 Avumansaka (red shade)

Spiritual Significance of Adinkra Cloth

The Adinkra cloth as we mentioned earlier originated from the Akan culture. Akans speak a Kwa language and are believed to have migrated from the Sahel region of Africa. As common with the medieval era in Africa, Akans migrated to parts of West Africa for settlement just as some other ethnic groups at the time. As at the 13th century, the Akan kingdom of Bonoman was already established and is accepted as the origin of other Akan subgroups who migrated out in search of gold, a commodity that started to boom in Bonoman (2). At a period when the Mali Empire (mentioned in part 1) was experiencing recession, Bonoman and other Akan states filled the void as major players in gold trade of the region. Bonoman and other Akan states are the predecessors of the Ashanti/Asante kingdom (2). This kingdom is the pillar of Adinkra and also the most popular of Akan kingdoms. It was founded in 1670 by King Osei Tutu I by unifying some Akan states. It is known for its gold trade, kente and rich culture. Gold dust was a medium of exchange in Ashanti and the kingdom wielded great influence in West Africa. The most important cultural element of the kingdom is the Golden Stool conjured from the sky by the chief priest Okomfo Anokye according to legend. It is the unifying force, the ultimate symbol of power and the royal throne of the Ashantis. Ashantis designed their Kente mainly with geometric patterns (fig 16) unlike the linear patterns of Fugu from the north, before they were introduced to Adinkra symbols after their conquest of Jaman kingdom. Ever since Kente has also been designed with Adinkra patterns. In the past, a selection of Kente was even made with golden threads for the king and royal household. This type was also worn by wealthy individuals who could afford it. It is unclear the exact date Adinkra cloth came into existence in Akan culture before being introduced to Ashanti between 1800 and 1803. But it is believed to have been made even before the 1700s. One early example of Adinkra cloth can be found in the British Museum, collected in 1817 by T.E Bowditch (1). It was collected on his journey to Kumasi, capital of the Ashanti Kingdom now Ghana's Ashanti Region. The present-day ruling monarch is King Osei Tutu II and the residence of the sovereign is the Manhyia Palace. Bowditch recorded details of the journey which was even before the series of Anglo-Ashanti wars in his 1819 book, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashanti: With a Statistical Account of that Kingdom, and Geographical Notices of other Parts of the Interior of Africa*.



Fig 15 the Golden Stool



Fig 16 Kente



Fig 17. Statue of Ashanti sovereign in cloth

According to oral tradition, Adinkra symbols were revealed to a Jaman king called Kwadwo Adinkra Agyemang in a dream. Jaman was a former kingdom covering from Brong Ahafo region to present-day neighbouring Ivory Coast. It was also made up of an Akan group. This king drew the symbols on a gourd as they had been revealed to him in the dream and later presented them to his chiefs and family members with their interpretations. These revelations came at a time that

there was discord in the royal household, thereby threatening peace in the entire kingdom. He was successful in using the symbols along with their interpretations to suppress the ensuing hostilities. These symbols bear proverbs, folktales, philosophy and even myths. Right from their inception in the kingdom of Jaman, they were regarded sacrosanct.

Many years after his reign, there came a later successor around the late 1700s named Nana Kofi Adinkra. By Ashanti history, he provoked the Ashanti kingdom to war by claiming he has in his possession the same golden stool as that of the Ashanti kingdom. He would lose the war in the early 1800s and be marched to the Ashanti kingdom where he would also lose his life. The Jaman kingdom would then be annexed to the Ashanti kingdom and the two kingdoms unified under one ruler, King Osei Kwame Panyin (King of the Ashantis). Adinkra, as the name suggests, was named after the Jaman king (Nana Kofi Adinkra). He wore an “Adinkra” patterned garment while being taken to Ashanti. This patterns/symbols not common to Ashantis then would be interpreted as the defeated king’s way of expressing sorrow on being taken away from home. Synonymous to a farewell/goodbye posture. In Twi (Akan language) the word Adinkra stands for goodbye.

The Ashantis would then trace the symbols back to Jaman and adapt them. Due to the sorrow associated with the patterned garment of the Jaman king, it would first come to represent funeral cloth in Ashanti culture. But later come to represent more than that to them. These Adinkra symbols would then become an integral part of the Ashanti culture.

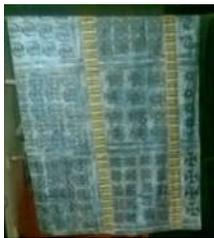


Fig 18 Adinkra fabrics



Fig 19 Manhyia Palace Museum, Kumasi



Fig 20 women in Adinkra

Adinkra cloth would come to serve as a significant means of communication in Ashanti and Akan culture as a whole. Adinkra symbols would give a particular voice to cloth/garment worn. It would first come to be associated with the royals and priests of the Ashanti kingdom, worn during festivities and on sacred ceremonies. It is reasonable to presume Adinkra cloth was first associated with royals because it was popularized in Ashanti by a king (Nana Kofi Adinkra). The symbols are also revered because they are believed to have been revealed to the ancient Jaman king (Kwadwo Adinkra Agyemang) from above. Even when Adinkra cloth became popular among all categories of people, symbols placed on a cloth to be worn were carefully selected by the wearer to convey a specific message when worn. Adinkra cloths are used mainly on occasions such as naming ceremony of newborn, Akan festivals, weddings and as usual funerals. During marriage ceremonies, not only is it worn but also in most cases forms part of the dowry from the groom to his bride. Red, black and brown colours of Adinkra cloth are associated with funerals but a mixture of black and white background (fig 18) is also accepted for funerals especially when the deceased died at the old age due to natural causes. This makes it a form of celebration of life, like the 91-year-old’s funeral I witnessed during my stay (fig 21). The colour red symbolizes death and black

sadness in Ashanti culture (fig 20). White – purity, green – growth and good health, yellow – precious and the colour gold represents royalty and wealth. White, yellow and other bright coloured Adinkra cloth are normally associated with festive occasions and categorized as Kwasiada Adinkra. Kwasiada Adinkra stands for merry cloth and is considered inappropriate for funerals. Till date, the Adinkra cloth is worn by the Ashanti king on festivals. The symbols on his cloth/kente also serve as a means of communication to Asanteman (means Asante-state in twi as Bonoman also means Bono state). Type of cloth worn could depict the mood of the kingdom (3). In past times, it could even serve as strategic communication for military advances, similar to the traditional dance and Akan talking drum which was a major channel of communication. By the beat of the drum, the sovereign could communicate anything he wanted to his people which will just be music in the ears of a stranger. One of the most popular of Adinkra symbols is the Gye Nyame symbol (fig 22) which represents the supremacy of God. It is so widely used and accepted that it can be seen even on churches. Over the years other variations of the main symbols of Adinkra would come up, Ashantis would develop additional symbols incorporating their art and culture which would all come to be accepted as Adinkra symbols. I would like to mention that there are more Adinkra symbols than the ones covered below and that few of the symbols are no longer relevant in the present-day state of affairs in Ashanti culture.



Fig 21. Adinkra used at an Akan funeral service



Fig 22. Gye Nyame symbol



Fig 23. Depiction of Ashanti talking drums

Adinkra Symbols and Meanings



Adinkrahene (Adinkra King): Chief of all designs. Symbolizes leadership and forms the basis of Adinkra printing



Nea onnim no sua a, ohu: He who does not know can know from learning. Symbolizes lifelong education.



Dwannimen (Ram's horn): It is the heart and not the horn that leads a ram to bully.



Ese ne tekrema (the teeth and the tongue): We improve and advance together. Symbolises Friendship.



Nyame dua :Tree of God. Symbolizes God's protection



Sankofa (to go back for something): Symbolizes going back for a forgotten tradition or policy



Sankofa. (Another version): Learning from the past



krado- mmra krado (seal of law and order): Symbolizes the authority of the court.



Odo nnyew fie kwan: Love never loses its way. Symbolizes the power of love.



Bese saka: A bunch of cola nuts. Symbolizes abundance



Mframadan (Wind house): House built to stand windy and treacherous conditions. Symbolizes fortitude.



Ohene tuo. (The king's gun): Defender of the king.



Akoma ntoaso: Symbol of agreement or charter.



Odenkyem da nsuo mu, nso onnhome nsuo, ohome mframa: The crocodile lives in water yet it breathes air, not water.



Owo foro adobe. (A snake climbing a palm tree): Performing the unusual or impossible.



kete pa: Good bed. Symbolises good marriage.



Gye Nyame (Except God): Symbol of the omnipotence and immortality of God



Nyame nwu na mawu: If God dies then I may die



Gyawu atiko: This is said to be the haircut of Gyawu, a past hero and chief of the town Bantama in Ashanti



Pempamsie (that which will not crush): Unity is strength.



Nyansapo: Symbol of wisdom and intelligence.



Boa me na me mmoa wo: Help me and let me help you. Symbolizes the spirit of cooperation



kra pa Mmusuyide: Symbol of good fortune and sanctity



Akoma (The Heart): Symbol of patience and endurance



Aban (Fence): Symbol of protection or safety



Ntesie- mate masie: I have heard and kept quiet. Symbol of knowledge.



Nsaa (a kind of blanket): Symbol of excellence



Wawa Aba: Seed of the Wawa tree. Wawa is a hard wood used for carving.



Ananse ntonan: Spider's web. Symbolizes creativity



Nyame nti: By God's grace



Nyamedua: An altar to the sky god



Aya, (the fern): A symbol of defiance.



Biribi wo soro: God there is something in the heavens let it reach me. Symbol of hope



Bi nka bi: Bite not one another



Nkyinkyim: changing oneself. Playing many roles. Symbolizes Dynamism and adaptability



Nhwimu (crossing): The crossed divisions made on some Adinkra cloth before stamping. Symbol of skillfulness and precision.



mpuannum: Five tufts of hair. Symbolises a priestly office.



Osrane ne Nsoroma (Moon and star): Symbol of faithfulness



Fihankra (the complete house): Symbol of safety or security in a home



Krammo bonne amma yeanhunu kramo pa: Cannot tell the good from the bad



Duafe: The wooden comb symbolises feminine virtue. (Everlasting love)



Akoko nan tia ba, na nkum ba: The hen treads upon its chicken but does not kill them



Hwemudua (Quality Control): Symbol of Quality



Afena :A state ceremonial sword. A retiring great warrior always has a royal sword of rest.



mpatapo: Knot of reconciliation. Symbolizes peace.



Asase ye duru: Symbolizes divinity of mother Earth.



Funtumfunafu denkyemfunafu: Siamese crocodile. Sharing one stomach yet they fight over food (Need for unity)



Pa gya (to strike fire or make fire): This is said to represent war.



Kuntinkantan (Do not boast): There is the need for humility and service



Ako-ben (War horn): Symbol of call to arms



Epa (Handcuffs): You are the slave of him whose handcuffs you wear.



Owuo atwedie baako mmfo: All men shall climb the ladder of death.



Fofoo: Symbol of Jealousy



Nkonsonkonson (Link of Chain): Symbol of Human relations.



Nsoroma (star): Child of the heavens



Dame-dame: A draft game



Nkwuma kesse: Symbol of superiority



Kontire (Tikoro nko agyina): One head does not make a council. Symbolises a ruler must lead with the guidance of a council.



Nea ope. : Do unto others what you wish be done to you. Symbolizes Justice



Me ware wo: I would marry you. Symbolizes commitment

Courtesy Adinkra Village

Conclusion

I find it pretty interesting to observe similar practises in old fabric-making techniques between different West African ethnic traditions during my research. Different West African cultures have always had different traditions. But spanning from the strip-weaving methods down to dyeing methods used in fabric making, one can see a meeting point. Indigo dyeing, for instance, has been practised by major West African ethnic groups ranging from tribes in Nigeria, Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Senegal, Ghana, to mention a few. Also, similar methods of dyeing other colours with known plants seem to run through the groups as well. I also used to think mud dyeing was something only peculiar or singular to the Malian culture but it is used by Senufo people of Ivory Coast too for dyeing Korhogo cloth. I was quite surprised to find out it was also practised by the Akan culture in the past for making early Adinkra cloths.

I believe as the Jaman king Nana Kofi Adinkra made that final journey to Ashanti, he never suspected he would become the greatest export of his kingdom. He must have thought of the disappointment that had come of his reign and ponder what might become of his kingdom and culture. He would have never known he was going along with a tradition on his back that would be embraced and passed on generations after generations to this day. As one Adinkra symbol above implies, Death comes to all living. To some cultures, what matters is what piece of us lives on long after we are gone. It may take any form, be it a legacy, through a tradition, through a child or even through a piece of cloth. This king might not have had a golden stool that could rival the power of the Ashantis, but a tradition that would be worthy of their respect. Today Adinkra symbols are widely used and have become part of our daily lives. We see them not only in fabrics but in logos, architecture, tattoos, jewellery, and furniture among others here in West Africa and other parts of the world.

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Part 1 refers to my previous work: *Traces from the Other Side. A Journey to Northern Ghana to Research the Process and History of Traditional Batik Dyeing in West Africa*