

## Adinkra Symbols as Expressions of Faith in the Ghanaian Christian Context

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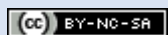
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### ABSTRACT

Traditional symbols are forms in indigenous art that are usually translations of thought and ideas, expressing the values and beliefs of the people. Adinkra symbols are ideographical depictions of maxims, philosophies, beliefs, and values of the Akan of Ghana. Of the works cited by the researcher, there is no available literature on the theological reflections of the Adinkra symbol for Akan Christians. Since the focus of most of the works on the Adinkra symbol have been on how to do effective communication in a non-verbal manner, and the analysis of the philosophy behind the Adinkra, the few accessed literature does not directly show how the Bible interacts with the Adinkra symbols by way of exegesis; and how some of these symbols could be employed for ecclesiastical purposes of exhortations that allows the Akan believer to easily relate with the homily interwoven in familiar symbols. This study researched into selected Adinkra symbols (*Gye Nyame*, *Nyame Nti*, *Onyankopon Adom Nti Biribiara Beye Yie*, *Nyame Nwu Na Mawu*, *Nyame Dua*) so as to do a theological reflection to provide a sound Akan hermeneutical basis for homilies. It also examined its implications to the everyday life of the Akan Christian and Clergy. Both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies were employed. First, theological reflections were conducted on selected Adinkra symbols, and data were collected from 110 Christians and 20 clergy representing various denominations. The reflections revealed that the symbols were religious and that the people acknowledged God before the arrival of Christianity. Although the majority of respondents were able to explain the meanings of *Gye Nyame*, *Nyame Dua*, and *Nyame Nwu Na Mawu*, they generally lacked knowledge about *Nyame nti* and *Onyankopon Adom Nti Biribiara Beye Yie*. The survey revealed that some clergy incorporated Adinkra symbols into their sermons, particularly the *Gye Nyame* symbol, and 75% of the clergy indicated that these symbols were suitable for Christian use. The data revealed that both clergy and the congregants favored the use of the Adinkra symbols since the symbols help them in understanding the nature of *Nyame* (God). The outcome in terms of knowledge and resourcefulness can encourage the church to incorporate it into its liturgical art, leading to enhanced worship through the use of symbols. Theologically reflecting on the symbols will lead to an increased understanding of them in the light of God's word and facilitate their ecclesiastical adoption. Additionally, the ideological and moral lessons integral to the Adinkra symbols will encourage their meaningful use among Christians.

**Keywords:** *Adinkra, Symbols, Liturgy, Theological*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

According to Kofi Amoateng, symbols have become building blocks for the maintenance appreciation of life in the broader sense and religious familiarity, particularly for a group of persons and their future generations'.<sup>1</sup> The Christian faith is known to have adopted significant symbols that have been acknowledged by most ages and to all places of the world.<sup>2</sup> George Ossom-Batsa and Felicity Apaah explains that the Protestant Reformation served as a turning point for the relationship that existed amongst Christianity and symbols that has shaped the attitude of several members of the Christian faith.<sup>3</sup> Ossom-Batsa, and Apaah again notes that most Christian biblical liturgy art in Ghana was designed and developed by the West and passed on through the activities of the early missionaries.<sup>4</sup> Although by observation some churches have incorporated some Adinkra symbols into Christian worship and theology, majority of the churches are yet to see the essence of such act and are still glued to the European liturgical art. Liturgical Christian art such as architecture, visual art and music according to Nketia was introduced to the then Gold Coast with the arrival of the Basel Missionaries in 1828 and became prominent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century through school and church activities.<sup>5</sup> The reason for the non-usage of indigenous Ghanaian symbols like Adinkra could be as Olaomo A. Azeez observed, he notes that initially, early Christian missionaries did little to encourage the introduction and use of traditional religious elements, such as symbols and musical instruments into Christian worship.<sup>6</sup> The Protestants according to Olaomo were known to be very suspicious of the traditional arts and elements because they perceived the new converts could place magical value on them.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the form of Christian art in use was primarily devotional and a copy of Western iconography, with the crucifix being the most popular art.

Although the introduction and use of traditional symbols in Christian worship was frowned upon by the early western missionaries, the symbols have over the period found their way into Christian worship. Fidelis Nkomazana and Senzokuhle Doreen Setume opine that the Bible was presented in a way that rendered all African practices or mode of worship as paganistic in order to endorse western beliefs, ideals and practices.<sup>8</sup> The symbols have nonetheless been embraced by churches and can be seen in logos, buildings, apparels and liturgies. These adopted Adinkra symbols communicate spiritual thoughts and help the churches in passing on the message of the Bible to the congregants or the faithful. This work touches on what the Adinkra symbols of the Akan are, the traditional religious uses of the Adinkra, the first Adinkra *Obi nka* 'bi, brief survey of the use of symbols in church history.

## 2.0 METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed methods approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies in the collection and analysis of the needed data. For the theological reflection on the selected symbols, the study examined biblical texts along with relevant available scholarly and

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<sup>1</sup>Kofi Amoateng, "The Creedal Symbols of My Great Grandparents: The Adinkra Symbols Reveal the Theology of the Akan People of Ghana" (PhD diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 2018), 144.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Sarpong, "The Adinkra Symbols of Ghana and the Biblical Psychology Behind Them"(2018), accessed July 9, 2021,

[https://www.academia.edu/38220302/The\\_Adinkra\\_Symbols\\_of\\_Ghana\\_and\\_the\\_biblical\\_psychology\\_behind\\_them](https://www.academia.edu/38220302/The_Adinkra_Symbols_of_Ghana_and_the_biblical_psychology_behind_them).

<sup>3</sup>Ossom-Batsa, George, and Felicity Apaah. "Rethinking the Great Commission: Incorporation of Akan Indigenous Symbols into Christian Worship." *International Review of Mission* 107, no. 1 (2018): 261–78.

<sup>4</sup> Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, "Rethinking the Great Commission," 262.

<sup>5</sup>J. H. K. Nketia, as cited in "Art Music in Ghana: An Introduction," IFRA-Nigeria, January 5, 1995, <https://books.openedition.org/ifra/615?lang=en>.

<sup>6</sup> Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, "Rethinking the Great Commission," 262.

<sup>7</sup> Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, "Rethinking the Great Commission," 262.

<sup>8</sup>Fidelis Nkomazana and Senzokuhle Doreen Setume, "Missionary Colonial Mentality and the Expansion of Christianity in Bechuanaland Protectorate, 1800–1900," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 29, no. 2 (2016): 29–33, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24902913>.

moral literature. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation from diverse denominational backgrounds among both clergy and lay Christians. Primary data were gathered from a total of 130 respondents, covering 110 lay Christians and 20 members of the clergy. Data collection instruments included structured interviews and questionnaires, designed to capture both in-depth perceptions and measureable leanings.

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in IBM SPSS Statistics Version 28, while qualitative responses from interviews were subjected to thematic coding to identify recurring patterns and insights. This dual process aided a complete understanding of the research questions. The methodology provided a robust basis for capturing varied perspectives on Christian symbols in Ghana, ensuring that the study's findings made a evocative contribution to modern Ghanaian theological discourse and scholarship..

### **3.0 WHAT ARE THE ADINKRA SYMBOLS OF AKAN?**

In the Akan language, Adinkra means farewell or goodbye. These Adinkra symbols are ingenious means of communicating the worldview of the people group related with it.<sup>9</sup> Adinkra symbols are ingenious and inventive ways of conveying the worldview of the people associated with it.<sup>10</sup> They are pictorial illustrations of proverbs with important philosophical and historical meaning. Ida Korkor Kumoji observes that, the word Adinkra is composed of three main parts i.e.: a, di and nkra.<sup>11</sup> According to Ida, the prefix “a” indicates an abstract noun in Akan, and the “di” means “to make use of, and “nkra” communicates “message”.<sup>12</sup> A combination of these parts produces the word *adinkra* which simply means the message that every soul takes from God when departing to earth. Dzobo according to Ossom-Batsa and Apaah indicates that Ghanaian traditional symbols could be grouped into six classes but based on their use: the Adinkra symbols, stool symbols, linguist symbols, linguist staff symbols, religious symbols, ritual symbols, and literary symbols.<sup>13</sup> Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al. asserts that indigenous signs exist in native Ghanaian artworks which remains mostly an interpretation of philosophies, articulating and representing the ideals and beliefs of the people among where it is being practiced.<sup>14</sup> These images in some situations have become symbolic by the confirmation or imputation of ideas or proverbs on them. Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al. again explains that most native Ghanaian signs are accompanied with permanent justifications; its other importance are however a subjective issue.<sup>15</sup> Appiah Adjei also observes that Adinkra symbols relates with anthropological standards, apprehensions, wants, and yearnings both in the historical and present-day and reflects the present age, a community's faith or a smaller group, or an individual's understanding.<sup>16</sup> The use of the Adinkra symbols may be wholly helpful and beautiful, or symbolic, or an amalgamation of them. Thus,

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<sup>9</sup> Isaac Boaheng and Leticia Adomako, “A Costume Christology of Ghana's Most Beautiful Reality Show,” *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review* 6, no. 4 (2023): 271–83, <http://dx.doi.org/10.47814/ijssrr.v6i4.1167>.

<sup>10</sup> Boaheng and Adomako, “Costume Christology,” 275.

<sup>11</sup> Ida Korkor Kumoji, “Adinkra Integration of African and Western Cultural Visual Vocabulary” (MFA thesis, University of Minnesota Duluth, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Kumoji, “Adinkra Integration,” 67

<sup>13</sup> N. K. Dzobo, “African Symbols and Their Philosophical Significance,” in *The Foundations of African Philosophy* (Ibadan: University Press, 1992), 104, as cited in George Ossom-Batsa and Felicity Apaah, “Rethinking the Great Commission: Incorporation of Akan Indigenous Symbols into Christian Worship,” *International Review of Mission* 107, no. 1 (2018): 262.

<sup>14</sup> Edward Tettey Jonathan Kuwornu-Adjaottor, G. Appiah, and M. Nartey, “The Philosophy Behind Some Adinkra Symbols and Their Communicative Values in Akan,” *Philosophical Papers and Review* 7, no. 3 (2016): 22–225, <http://www.academicjournals.org/PPR..>

<sup>15</sup> Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Appiah, and Nartey, “Philosophy Behind Some Adinkra Symbols,” 23.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Appiah Adjei, “Sankofa and Drama: A Study of Adinkra and Akan Clan Symbols in Modern Ghanaian Plays” (PhD diss., University of Ghana, 2014).

they have deep roots in history, and very socio-cultural in nature and mental state of affairs and progressions.<sup>17</sup>

The symbol, just like all other physical way of life is seen as connections to social and economic configurations and traditional standards. Amate cites Glover as saying that the symbols are graphical symbols that exist in abstract forms of proverbial sayings that natively aid to caution, inspire and provide guidance for members of the community.<sup>18</sup> The Adinkra symbols are said to be embedded with specific messages. Kojo Fosu suggests that these messages may be communicated either in philosophical, allegorical or in satirical terms to illustrate religious, social or political concerns as well as rouse a thinking on subjects in relation to beauty or morality.<sup>19</sup> The symbols are literary and non-verbal illustrations of profound thoughts that borders on every facet of people's lives. Captain Robert Sutherland Rattray, a British anthropologist is credited with the first publication of the Adinkra Symbols.<sup>20</sup>

Asihene and Anquandah as cited by Philip Owusu posit that the name Adinkra by tradition is the name of a mourning cloth of the Akan of Ghana, whereas the designs in the much sought after traditional cloth, *Kente* is woven the Adinkra by contrast is stamped on the cloth. The plain color or a cloth with no design *Kente* cloth is also used for Adinkra cloth with just the introduction of the stamps. This position is supported by Damuah and Martino who have also said that the Adinkra cloth is ordinarily an unadorned cotton textile on which several traditionally meaningful designs are stamped.<sup>21</sup> Philip Owusu also indicates that these meaningful designs are known commonly as Adinkra symbols and adds that the Adinkra however now represents a repertoire of Akan symbolisms.<sup>22</sup>

The Akan, according to Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al communicate by both verbal and non-verbal means where verbal language is the use of words and non-verbal is the expression through symbols and signs.<sup>23</sup> According to Yankah, domestic symbols are surrogate language where the message is presented in the form of a traditional symbol in view of the spoken word.<sup>24</sup> Some linguists (e.g., Brooks and Health) refer to this feature of language as "object language" and indicate that it is made up of the display of material things – graphic arts object, clothes, the adornment of room, hairdo, and equipment.<sup>25</sup> The Adinkra symbols are pictorial metaphors that have nomenclatures and meanings for communication in the Akan language. The symbols are used extensively by the Akan in Ghana, these symbols represent concepts. Philip Owusu observes that the Adinkra symbols are ideographical symbols of proverbs, philosophies, thoughts, and values of the Akan of Ghana.<sup>26</sup> The symbols summarize the view of the Akan concerning his world and observations of the behavior of man with regards to relations with nature.<sup>27</sup> Adinkra is also seen as an ideographic form of writing which supports the position of Owusu.<sup>28</sup>

The Adinkra clothing with its pictographic forms depicts the gorgeous cultural heritage of the Akan; it is one of the magnificent and amazing artistic inventions that attract a number of tourist to

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<sup>17</sup> Adjei, "Sankofa and Drama," 77..

<sup>18</sup> Peace Amate, "Visual Representation of Selected Akan Proverbs in Ghana: Their Philosophical and Socio-cultural Values" (Master's thesis, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> Kojo Fosu, *Art and Symbols of the Akan of Ghana* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1981), 23.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Adom, Emmanuel Appau Asante and Samuel Kquofi, *Adinkra: "An Epitome of Asante Philosophy and History,"* 42.

<sup>21</sup> Philip Owusu, "Adinkra Symbols as 'Multivocal' Pedagogical/Socialization Tool," *Contemporary Journal of African Studies* 6, no. 1 (2019): 46–58, <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/contjas.v6i1.3>.

<sup>22</sup> Owusu, "Adinkra Symbols as 'Multivocal' Tool," 47.

<sup>23</sup> Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Appiah, and Nartey, "Philosophy Behind Some Adinkra Symbols," 23.

<sup>24</sup> Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Appiah, and Nartey, "Philosophy Behind Some Adinkra Symbols," 23.

<sup>25</sup> Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Appiah, and Nartey, "Philosophy Behind Some Adinkra Symbols," 23.

<sup>26</sup> Owusu, "Adinkra Symbols as 'Multivocal' Tool," 47

<sup>27</sup> Owusu, "Adinkra Symbols as 'Multivocal' Tool," 46.

<sup>28</sup> Adom, Appau Asante and Kquofi, "Adinkra: An Epitome of Asante Philosophy and History," 42.

Ghana.<sup>29</sup> The Adinkra symbols are used extensively today in fabrics, logos, painted walls and pottery but hitherto its usage was said to be for the mourning of the departed soul. The symbols currently can be found on buildings, currencies, cloths among others. The symbols can be found on wooden stools for both home usage and ritual uses. Additionally, the symbols can also be found on items such as necklaces, bracelets among others. Owusu observes that artisans such as carvers, goldsmiths, brass castors and cloth weavers use these Adinkra patterns to design their products and offerings.<sup>30</sup> The Akan people group uses a myriad of symbols; largely the Adinkra is used to uphold and transfer sophisticated set of stories around their rituals, beliefs and traditions among others. There are many symbols within the Adinkra plethora, G.F Kojo is said to have catalogued about 700 of them.<sup>31</sup> Adom *et al* on the other hand posit that there are sixty (60) main Adinkra designs that are used for the production of Adinkra souvenirs and cloths.<sup>32</sup> This figure however contradicts the hundred (100) *Adinkra* designs asserted by some authors. In contrast, G. F. Kojo has suggested a much higher number, putting forward a total of seven hundred. The reason, according to Adom *et al.*, could be the different renditions of the same Adinkra pattern.<sup>33</sup>

According to the Sumamanhene, the *Obi nka obi* symbol was the first to be created by Nana Kwadwo Adinkra Agyeman.<sup>34</sup> The symbol's creation was necessitated by a seeming a civil war that was erupting in the Gyaman Kingdom led by the sub chiefs. Nana Kwadwo Adinkra Agyeman according to the narration is said to have received the *bi nka bi* symbol in a dream as a way for repressing the fighting that was brewing. Nana Kwadwo Adinkra eventually called together all the angry sub chiefs and elucidated them on the symbol and that calmed nerves down and stopped the civil war.

The symbols, apart from their aesthetic function also possess evocative messages that communicate traditional knowledge, facets of life, or the environment; many of the symbols have distinct meanings and often embedded with proverbs. The symbols also has a motivating elements which when explained to a person can uplift the downhearted, also it could as well influencing people to acquire knowledge for the right human conduct.

#### **4.0 TRADITIONAL RELIGIOUS USES OF THE ADINKRA**

Symbols, according to Amoateng project into the future apart from telling the metaphors of religious experiences and expedite the evocation and introduction to the religion and theology of the original person(s).<sup>35</sup> Thus, Amoateng asserts that some of the *Adinkra* Symbols of the Akan were made as result of the creator's religious understandings.<sup>36</sup> Rattray posits that "in Ashanti, to divorce religion from any of these will be well-nigh impossible and it is hardly an exaggeration to say that any such estrangement would lead to an illegality".<sup>37</sup> Religion, indeed, in this sense, runs like a silver thread, even though their arts and crafts, and thus tend to become the real inspiration of the craftsman."<sup>38</sup> Rattray says this to indicate how religion permeates every fiber of the Ashanti and by extension Africans in general. Traditionally, the Adinkra symbol(s) is used to communicate different messages that relates to the history, beliefs and philosophy of the Akan; they are most of the time embedded with

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<sup>29</sup>Adom, Appau Asante and Kquofi, "Adinkra: "Adinkra: An Epitome of Asante Philosophy and History," 42.

<sup>30</sup>Owusu, "Adinkra Symbols as 'Multivocal' Tool," 47

<sup>31</sup> Cynthia A. Mawuli, "Transmission and Embodiment of Heritage: An Analysis of Adinkra Symbolology on Traditional Clothing in Ghana" (MA thesis, European University, 2019).

<sup>32</sup>Adom, Appau Asante and Kquofi, "Adinkra, "Adinkra: An Epitome of Asante Philosophy and History," 44.

<sup>33</sup>Appau Asante Adom and Seth Kquofi, "Adinkra: An Epitome of Asante Philosophy and History," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 4, no. 9 (2014): 44–49.

<sup>34</sup>Amoateng, "Creedal Symbols," 69.

<sup>35</sup> Amoateng, "Creedal Symbols,"149.

<sup>36</sup> Amoateng, "Creedal Symbols,"149.

<sup>37</sup> Amoateng, "Creedal Symbols,"149.

<sup>38</sup> Amoateng, "Creedal Symbols,"149.

proverbial insights since proverbs play an important role in the Akan culture. Adinkra symbols also sometimes depict past important events, such as human conduct and animal behavior, plant life forms and shapes of objects.<sup>39</sup> Amate affirms that symbols play a critical part in the African people's conception of reality. This means that the Adinkra symbols helps the people in forming a sound understanding of African patterns of thought and feeling.<sup>40</sup> For instance, the *Adinkra* symbol *Adwera* -*Adwera nsuo, wo ne nkwansuo, nsu korogyenn a wohuru nso wonhye*, meaning Water of life, you are the pure crystal clean water that boils but does not burn (watery shrub), means: purity and sanctity, chastity, good fortune, consecration and cleanliness.<sup>41</sup> This symbol communicates to the people about the need for them to be pure, consecrated and be clean always.

The *Gye Nyame* symbol is a religious symbol used by traditionalists to affirm their faith and the existence of a Supreme Being who oversees everything. The *Gye Nyame* is said to have been created by Gyaman to indicate their belief in the Supreme Being who protected them from the superior military might of the Asante state. According to the narration by the Sumamanhene as recorded by Amoateng, the Gyaman Kingdom before the 17<sup>th</sup> century was once neighbors of the Asante state in present day Kumasi. But war broke out and led to the killing of the then King of the Asantes, Nana Obiri Yeboah, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>42</sup> According to tradition, King Osei Tutu I after his enstoolment as King of the Asante people always pursued revenge, to put an end to Gyaman and the kingdom of Nana Adinkra. The Gyaman people upon realization of the new king's intentions moved further from the Asante state and went on to settle in their current locations in Ghana and the Ivory Coast.<sup>43</sup> The Asante Kingdom since its inception has waged six wars with Gyaman in a continued attempt to annihilate the Gyaman Kingdom. The Sumamanhene contends, however, that Asante never defeated Gyaman, and that Gyaman never turn into subjects to Asante.<sup>44</sup> The Adinkra like other Christian symbols helps the faithful during their times of worship. The symbol *Gye Nyame* is serving as a memorial and a reminder to generations that a firm belief and total reliance on *Nyame* or *Onyankopon* will always guarantee protection and victory over enemies.

## **5.0 THE FIRST ADINKRA *OBI NKA 'BI***

The *Obi nka 'bi* Adinkra symbol was the first to be created according to Amoateng.<sup>45</sup> This symbol which literally means that no one should bite the other is mostly worn by the Asantehene especially when he is meeting his subjects. The symbol was originally a drawing of two cat fish or lizards with each other's tail in the mouth of the other. Willis according to Amoateng has simplified it in his book by using crocodiles.<sup>46</sup> Nana Kwadwo Adinkra Agyemang, ruled the Gyaman kingdom, circa 1800 to 1818 according to Amoateng is credited with the creation of the symbol. In a narration by the Sumamahene to Amoateng, he indicated that the symbol was born to quell a civil war that was erupting among the subchiefs of the kingdom. Nana Adinkra in a dream at night saw the symbol and woke up from his sleep and drew it on an object and summoned all the chiefs and explained it to them in the morning. The explanation calmed the chiefs down and so the war was averted. The Asante state adopted it and continued its usage and up to today the symbol is worn by the Asantehene to communicate the interdependence of everyone in his kingdom. Amoateng suggests it could be interpreted literally, "one does not have to bite the other since we are interrelated and interdependent."

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<sup>39</sup>Available at: [https://www.ceske-tradice.cz/fotky80750/fotov/\\_ps\\_2438adinkra\\_symbols.pdf](https://www.ceske-tradice.cz/fotky80750/fotov/_ps_2438adinkra_symbols.pdf) , accessed on September, 2021.

<sup>40</sup> Amate, "Visual Representation," 28.

<sup>41</sup> Daniel K. Appiah, *Adinkra Symbols: Meaning and Significance* (Accra: Heritage Press, 2015), 42–43.

<sup>42</sup>Amoateng, "Creedal Symbols,"140.

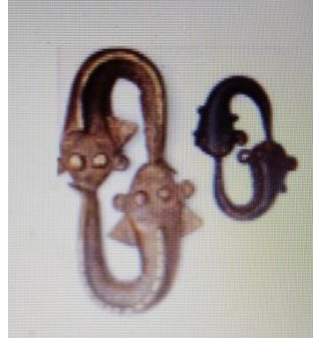
<sup>43</sup>Amoateng, "Creedal Symbols,"141.

<sup>44</sup>Amoateng, "Creedal Symbols,"151.

<sup>45</sup>Amoateng, "Creedal Symbols," 99.

<sup>46</sup>Amoateng, "Creedal Symbols,"100.

This interpretation sits rightly well with Christian doctrine which admonishes people to live in peace with one another. “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” (Rom 12:18)



**Fig.1** Picture showing the original design *Obi nka 'bi* in a cast

## **6.0 A BRIEF SURVEY OF USE OF SYMBOLS IN CHURCH HISTORY**

Religion in its variants according to Musoni, Machingura and Mamvuto is a critical feature of people's socio-culture and transcends past epochs the world over.<sup>47</sup> Musoni *et al* cites De Gruchy as saying that, various religious groupings employ art and artifacts as symbols of social interactions and identities.<sup>48</sup> Emeriewen and Omatseye in “An Appraisal of Religious Art and Symbolic Beliefs in the Traditional African Context” observes that just like spiritual beliefs, the understanding of fine art touches on a person's feeling which has implications for the person's values be it moral or religious.<sup>49</sup> Religious people rely on symbols that communicate sacred; the faiths of the adherents grow by their acceptance of divine revelation on God's authority. This takes place when the minds of the adherents are applied to those things which He (God) has revealed through the signs and symbols which are presented to their sense. In the liturgy, modest elements from life such as clothing, water, light, hands, oil, wine and bread are brought forward and made sacred symbols for worship. The emotive attribute of art in religion is what may have propelled some of these great works of art in religious liturgical art today. Tillich intimates that, religion in relation to the subject of human experience of brokenness points to death which Tillich considers to be the ultimate. He again suggests that the search for answer to the mystery of existence by man ends with God; that is man's finitude. Tillich posits that, man's eventual concern should essentially be uttered symbolically, since the language of symbols is able to ultimately express it. Religion therefore requires a medium of expression; without language it would be blind, not directed toward the content, not conscious of itself. Symbols employed in religious circles carry truthiness so long as it accurately communicates the correlation of revelation. All religions express their own truths concerning spirituality, personal God and the deepest reality of human being either verbally or symbolically. These means of communicating like symbolic communication serves as a means of expression for the unseen, divine reality that surpasses the concrete existential reality of this world.

Paul Ricoeur asserts that symbols serve as “food for thought,” and are important implements for the transmission of information in the African setting.<sup>50</sup> Bede Griffiths observes that no significant religious revelation has been received in terms of abstract logical thought as posited by Professor Dummet. Griffiths adds that, the Vedas, Bible and Koran were all received in the form of symbolic

<sup>47</sup> P. Musoni, F. Machingura and A. Mamvuto, “Religious Artefacts, Practices and Symbols in the Johane Masowe Chishanu yeNyenyedzi Church in Zimbabwe: Interpreting the Visual Narratives” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 46 no.1, <https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/index>, 2.

<sup>48</sup> Musoni, Machingura and Mamvuto, “Religious Artefacts, Practices and Symbols in the Johane Masowe Chishanu yeNyenyedzi Church in Zimbabwe: Interpreting the Visual Narratives”, 2.

<sup>49</sup> K. Osevwiyio Emeriewen and B. O. J. Omatseye, “Appraisal of Religious Art and Symbolic Beliefs in the Traditional African Context,” *African Research Review* 4, no. 2 (2010): 85–102.

<sup>50</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “The Symbol: Food for Thought,” *Philosophy of Cognitive Science* 4, no. 3 (1960): 201–15..

thought.<sup>51</sup> However, the adoption and use of symbols by the church has not been without struggles; it is crystal clear that the mistrust of religious images which took extreme form in Byzantine Iconoclasm predates a time period of overwhelming questioning about the legitimacy of Christian representation.<sup>52</sup> For instance in 691, the well-known canon 82 of the Council in Trullo outlawed the faithful from depicting Christ as a lamb and restricted his depiction to only human form.<sup>53</sup>

### **6.1 The Fish**

The fish symbol is one of the earliest symbols adopted by the Christian community. The word fish when spelt in Latin has each alphabet representing another word which is a crossword for Jesus Christ. The word fish in Greek is “ichthus”.<sup>54</sup> Ichthus, spelled in Greek gives these letters:

<b>Iota</b>	<b>Chi</b>	<b>Theta</b>	<b>Upsilon</b>	<b>Sigma</b>
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**Table 1:** An acrostic for "Jesus Christ, of God, the Son, the Savior" [Iesous (Jesus) CHristos (Christ) THEou (of God) UIou (the Son) Soter (the Savior)].

The fish as a symbol played a remarkable role in the gospels; for instance, the Gospel of Mark records the words of Jesus in chapter 1:17 where Jesus is noted to have bid Peter and some of his colleagues: "Come after me, and I will make you become fishers of men." Biblically, the disciples of Jesus were most of the time denoted as “fishers of men.” They were referred to as *Pisciculi* a Latin word whose root word is "fish". The symbol served as a secret code for the identification of fellow believers during the period of the Roman persecution. A believer will draw an arc and expect the other person to also draw the reverse of the arc to complete an outline for a fish to confirm their identities.<sup>55</sup>

### **6.2 The Anchor and Cross**

The anchor, one of the most extensively used symbols employed by first century Christians is one of the original, 1st century symbols used in Christianity. It reflects the truth in Hebrews 6:19: “This hope is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls.” The anchor is always portrayed with the crossbar, forming a cross. The cross is generally believed to be one of the earliest used symbols; it among other things symbolizes the pain and victory of Jesus Christ. There is however limited explanations of the usage of the cross in the late 2nd and 3rd centuries, it is predominately a 4th century symbol.<sup>56</sup> Constantine also made the cross a popular icon when he reportedly was told by God to put a cross on all of his shields around 320 C.E In Roman times, the cross was an instrument of torture and public humiliation, and criminals were put to death on crosses. Cameron observes that, while the cross has been in use long before the beginning of Christianity, the Jesus and Easter story has made it an icon that is easily recognized globally. The cross among Christians embodies ransom, pain, penitence, unity, and exclusion.<sup>57</sup>

## **7.0 THE HISTORY OF ADINKRA SYMBOLS IN THE CHURCH**

According to Finney as quoted by George Ossom-Batsa and Felicity Apaah lecturers at the Department for the Study of Religions at University of Ghana in “Rethinking the Great Commission: Incorporation of Akan Indigenous Symbols into Christian Worship” indicates that the earliest Christian art could be traced to the second or third century, before which time Christians did not produce anything that was “materially distinct, no art and no separate material culture in any form.”<sup>58</sup> Ossom-Batsa and Apaah

<sup>51</sup> Bede Griffiths, “A Symbolic Theology,” *New Blackfriars* 69, no. 817 (1988): 1–10.

<sup>52</sup> Averil Cameron, “The Language of Images: The Rise of Icons and Christian Representation,” *Studies in Church History* 28 (1992): 1–21.

<sup>53</sup> Cameron, “Language of Images,” 10.

<sup>54</sup> <https://earlychurchhistory.org/christian-symbols/the-fish-symbol-ichthus/>

<sup>55</sup> Cameron, “Language of Images,” 9–10.

<sup>56</sup> Cameron, “Language of Images,” 10.

<sup>57</sup> Cameron, “Language of Images,” 10.

<sup>58</sup> Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, “Rethinking the Great Commission,” 264.



indicates that the onset of the use of Christian art for the instruction of Christians began in the fifth century; it was used for the instruction of the illiterate poor to explain the scriptures and later to portray the theological issues of the period.<sup>59</sup> This position is supported by Mbiti when he categorized the types of theology into three i.e. oral, written and symbolic theologies. Mbiti observe that the oral and symbolic theologies were highly practiced since the rate of illiteracy was high among the people of the continent.<sup>60</sup> Finney, Ouspensky and Lossky according to Ossom-Batsa and Apaah agree that there was the adoption of arts or symbols similar to that of pagan deities or secular symbols but that does not suggest pagan influence on Christianity; but rather indicative of the “Christianization of pagan art.”<sup>61</sup>

Ossom-Batsa and Apaah observes that in an attempt by historic and newer churches to contextualize their faith adopted one indigenous symbol or the other in liturgical praxis and church architecture which is informed by their beliefs and practices and based on their theologies.<sup>62</sup> Western missionaries according to Walls “had been moved by the power and mystery of African and Pacific art, without being able to adopt its indigenous significance or identity, its ritual or cosmological context.”<sup>63</sup> Cardinal Celso Constantini’s acquaintance with Asian arts caused a shift in his view, he was of the opinion that the new generation of Asian Christian artists presented a fresh vision of creation and of the Christian faith and consequently concluded that they provided the same sort of preparation for the gospel that Greek philosophy did in the Mediterranean world and not a threat to Christian integrity as earlier on held.<sup>64</sup> Archbishop Emeritus Peter Akwasi Sarpong a cultural anthropologist, implores ministers of African descent to remember the sacramental value and emphasis placed on rituals and ceremonies of the African traditional religion and culture. External gestures, signs and symbols form a core of the African religion depicting our innermost realities. Robert Kingsley Ayiku observes that an important socio-cultural distinguishing feature of Ghanaian native arts is that of its ultimate connection and engrossment with religion.<sup>65</sup> Ayiku underscores that the consciousness of religion is of the major been one of the major influences stimulating art-making and its use.

### **7.1 History of the Adinkra in the Roman Catholic Church, Ghana**

The Roman Catholic faith is part of a global religious institution of over a billion membership. Historically, the faith is linked to Jesus of Nazareth, a traveling preacher around Jerusalem at the time of Roman occupation around 30BC. The word catholic comes from the Greek *katholikos* meaning a “universal” church, with the bishop of Rome (traced to the apostle Peter) holding primacy. The Catholic Church survived the persecution in its beginnings in the Roman Empire and the conversion of Constantine the Emperor, the church enjoyed peace and was allowed to exist without any further persecution. Roman Catholicism has gained significant influence over time not only in Rome but elsewhere in the world and such great influence on the development of the art and culture of the western world through the middle Ages.<sup>66</sup> Today, its growth is fastest in Africa, South America, and Asia.

Lori Elizabeth Godich observes that Catholicism the most common Christian denomination in Ghana has been competing with its other mainline colleagues like the Methodist and Presbyterians

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<sup>59</sup>Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, “Rethinking the Great Commission,”265.

<sup>60</sup>Mbiti, *The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology* African, *Theology En Route* :Maryknoll, N. Y Orbis Books, (1979) 119.

<sup>61</sup>Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, “Rethinking the Great Commission,” 262.

<sup>62</sup>Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, “Rethinking the Great Commission,” 262.

<sup>63</sup>Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, “Rethinking the Great Commission,” 262.

<sup>64</sup> Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, “Rethinking the Great Commission,”263.

<sup>65</sup> Roben Kingsley Ayiku, “Symbolic Meanings in the Ghanaian Arts: A Step Towards Developing Cultural Literacy” (PhD diss., Concordia University, 1998).

<sup>66</sup> V. Umennebuaku Anayo, “A Study of Selected Arts and Symbols in Catholic Liturgical Worship” (MPhil thesis, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, 2012), 12.

since the late 1970's.<sup>67</sup> Godich however indicates that due to the number of religious divisions or orders within the Catholic Church its history is somewhat difficult to tack in Ghana.<sup>68</sup> Godich quotes C.G. Baeta as stating that: "the most remarkable and painful gap in source materials at present is that occasioned by the absence of histories of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Roman Catholic African missions". Godich intimate that, regardless of the absence of transcribed materials on the Roman Catholic Church in Ghana, there is no doubt that the church has contributed significantly to the country's religious growth.<sup>69</sup> Kwame Dankyi Ansong quotes Kwesi Sarpong as saying, church "liturgy is full of symbolism"<sup>70</sup> and the symbols in real terms exhibit a fact which is most of the time complex to divulge. The Archbishop Emeritus Peter Akwasi Sarpong, knowing how the Akan people of Kumasi value symbols especially the Adinkra symbols moved for its incorporation into the architecture of the cathedral during its renovation.<sup>71</sup> Ansong reiterates that the symbols form an integral part of the traditional worship of the Akan people group.<sup>72</sup> The renovated St. Peters Catholic Basilica in Kumasi is a symbolic representation of the church in Kumasi; during its refurbishment for it to be elevated to the status of a Basilica, the board in charge of the refurbishment chose glazed glasses for the window.<sup>73</sup> Ossom-Batsa and Apaah informs during the 1995 refurbishment of the Holy Spirit Cathedral in Accra ten Adinkra (*fihankra*, *Nyame biribi wo soro, ntesie, hye woanhye, Gye Nyame, Nyame dua, pempamsie, dweninmmeen, Ohene Aniwa, adwo*) symbolisms were incorporated to the religious imageries of the Holy Spirit Cathedral in Accra.<sup>74</sup> In the case of the Holy Spirit Cathedral, Fr. Fred Hahn (SVD) a German missionary suggested the incorporation of the symbols to communicate God in a language that the native Ghanaian could relate with.<sup>75</sup> The symbols today can also be seen in the stoles and other vestments of most catholic priests.

## **7.2 History of the Adinkra in the Methodist Church, Ghana**

The Ghana Conference of The Methodist Church was regularized on July, 1961; hitherto, it was a District in the British Methodist church. Joseph Dunwell is credited with the introduction and evangelization of the *Fantis* in the coastal region of Ghana. The twenty-one missionaries that came were left with ten as a result of the conditions in the environment they found themselves in.<sup>76</sup> Thomas B. Freeman joined the missionary force in the year 1838, the Methodist faith expanded greatly to Kumasi in the Gold Coast and Badagry and Abeokuta in Nigeria from 1838 to 1857. There is concrete cooperation between Ghana Methodism and the other member churches of the Christian Council of Ghana.<sup>77</sup> Joseph M. Y. Edusa-Eyison points out that the Methodist Church Ghana has since developed from being a District of the West African British Methodist Church from its inception to an autonomous status.<sup>78</sup> The Church, despite its numerous challenges has grown to fifteen Dioceses from the initial five and has over a million memberships and a clergy base of over nine hundred.<sup>79</sup> The Church continues to make great strides in education and other social services such as health as her contribution to development of the country.

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<sup>67</sup>Lori Elizabeth Godich, "The Africanization of Roman Catholic and Presbyterian Churches in Krobo Odumase, Ghana" (BA thesis, Butler University, 2000).

<sup>68</sup>Godich, "Africanization of Roman Catholic and Presbyterian Churches,"20.

<sup>69</sup>Godich, "Africanization of Roman Catholic and Presbyterian Churches,"20.

<sup>70</sup> Ansong Kwame Dankyi, "The Influence of Indigenous Akan Cultural Elements on Christian Worship in the Kumasi Metropolitan Area" (PhD diss., Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, 2012).

<sup>71</sup>Dankyi, "Influence of Indigenous Akan Cultural Elements,"195.

<sup>72</sup>Dankyi, "Influence of Indigenous Akan Cultural Elements,"196.

<sup>73</sup> Amoateng, "The Creedal Symbols"1.

<sup>74</sup> Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, "Rethinking the Great Commission,"269.

<sup>75</sup> Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, "Rethinking the Great Commission,"269.

<sup>76</sup>Available at: <https://worldmethodistcouncil.org/africa/name/ghana-methodist-church/> (accessed April, 21 2022).

<sup>77</sup> Available at: <https://worldmethodistcouncil.org/africa/name/ghana-methodist-church/> (accessed April, 21 2022).

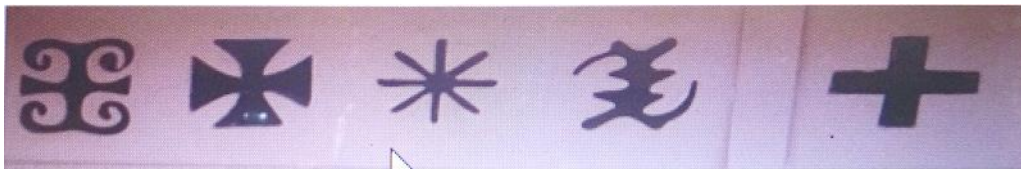
<sup>78</sup> Joseph M. Y. Edusa-Eyison, "The History of the Methodist Church Ghana" (2011), <http://hdl.handle.net/10516/1318>.

<sup>79</sup>Edusa-Eyison, "History of the Methodist Church Ghana."

The Adinkra symbols have been incorporated into the liturgy of the Church over the years and can be seen in church buildings, vestments and on the logo of the church. The *Nyame Dua*, a symbol that communicates the presence and protection of God is found in the center of the Ghana map with the cross placed on it. The Emmanuel Methodist, Labadi and St. Peter's Methodist in Ashaiman are examples of churches that have used the symbols in the physical structure of their chapels. At the St. Peter's Methodist alone, twenty-six Adinkra symbols could be counted on the building.<sup>80</sup> The floor of the church has some of the symbols; the symbols were incorporated by Rt. Rev. Yedu Bannerman in the year 1995. In the opinion of Rt. Rev. Bannerman, the Adinkra symbols are "thought symbols" that communicates Akan philosophies which are embedded with ethical and religious messages and adds that Christianity will grow when it engrosses in the cultures of the people it is reaching.<sup>81</sup>

A.K Quarcoo as cited by Ossom-Batsa and Apaah explain that, the sequential arrangement of the Adinkra symbols when translated reads "God; son of the sky, sacrifice, ram and household." And when it is harmonized, the sentence states "God's son became a sacrificial lamb for the household."<sup>82</sup>

**Fig.2** Adinkra symbols in the Emmanuel Methodist Church, Labadi



*Dweninmmeen* – horn of a ram or lamb (meekness, and divinity); *Mmusuyide* – ransom; *Nsoroma* – the star; *Gye Nyame* –except God; and *Fihankra* –household.

### **7.3 History of the Adinkra Symbol in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana**

The earliest missionaries of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana first arrived in Ghana upon the request of Major de Richelieu, Governor of Christiansburg. The request was occasioned by the immoral lives of the Europeans in the fort. The request to the Danish Crown was honoured by the Basel Mission, which who were involved in the training of missionaries. The missionary team of four died within a space of their first three years. The Basel Mission then sent another three: Andreas Riis, 28 years, Peter Petersen Jaeger, 24 years, and a physician, Christian Friedrich Heinze, 28 years. Heinze and P.P. Jaeger died within the first three months.

In view of this, Riis moved to Akropong to escape the problems of the coast and the destructive examples of the Europeans, and to preach the gospel to a people who had not yet been greatly affected by contact with Europeans. The time in Akropong was not altogether very successful causing Andreas and Anna Riis to leave Akropong in 1840 for Europe. The Basel Mission based on the high mortality recorded among the missionaries decided to abandon the mission to the Gold Coast, the mission saw the death situation as an indication that the people of Africa and for that matter Ghana was not ripe for the gospel of Jesus Christ. At the departure of Riis, the Okuapehene, Nana Addo Dankwa provided the key to successful mission which had eluded the missionaries. He is reported to have said on behalf of his people: "When God created the world, He made a book for the Whiteman and abosom for the African. But if you could show me some Africans who can read the Whiteman's book, then we would surely follow you".

The Basel Mission returned to the Gold Coast following the assertion and challenge by the Okuapemhene; he said "if the missionaries could show him some Africans who can read the

<sup>80</sup> Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, "Rethinking the Great Commission," 270.

<sup>81</sup> Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, "Rethinking the Great Commission," 270.

<sup>82</sup> Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, "Rethinking the Great Commission," 268.

Whiteman's book (Bible), then they would surely follow them". The new missionary team arrived at Christiansburg on the 16th April 1843 made up of 25 West Indians. The Lord blessed their mission and soon schools were started in Akropong and Osu. Stations were opened at Aburi, Larteh, Odumase, Abokobi, Kyebi, Gyadam, and Anum. Later the work entered Kwahu, Asante, Yendi and Salaga and subsequently the North. This led to the formation of the Presbyterian Training College in 1848; the College played a key role in the expansion and growth of the church. The development of the vernacular was in keeping with the Basel Mission policy of ministering to the people in their indigenous language.

The Scottish Mission was mandated to provide leadership following the exit of the Basel Missionaries from Ghana in 1918. The need to train more of the indigenes rose because of the growth of missionary enterprise which could not be fully handled by the two missionaries.<sup>83</sup>

In an interview with Very Rev. Dr. Sam Prempeh, a past moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana he underscored the need for an identity that was peculiar to the church in Ghana. The past moderator explained that the gown that the clergy wear was borrowed from the Scottish and so adding something small that was more Ghanaian was in the right direction. He indicated that there has not been any official communication or directive concerning the use of the symbols in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana.<sup>84</sup> He added that, to the best of his knowledge the General Assembly has not constituted any committee to work on a policy on that neither has the Assembly officially directed its officers for the adoption and use of the symbols even though it is been used extensively in the church presently. The past moderator stressed the need for an identity that was unique or that would make the church in Ghana stand out from the crowd since the churches in other jurisdiction would have things that made them unique. The *Gye Nyame* symbol with a cross on top was adopted by the moderator during his tenure in pursuit of a national identity for the church in Ghana.<sup>85</sup> According to the past moderator, the church's understanding of *Gye Nyame* supersedes that of the traditional understanding hence the placement of the cross on top of the *Gye Nyame*. The *Gye Nyame* and the cross could be found in the stoles of many Presbyterian ministers' apparels with some adding new Adinkra symbols also communicating religiosity and culture.<sup>86</sup> Today, the symbols are in used extensively in the Presbyterian Church of Ghana not because the General Assembly passed a resolution but because Rev. Dr. Sam Prempeh decided to look for an identity for the church.

#### **7.4 Priestly Apparels/Garments and Church Logos**

Jung as cited by Sarpong observes that cultural symbols have undergone much transformation and even protracted course of deliberate development and have become communal images recognized by enlightened societies like the church.<sup>87</sup> The Adinkra symbol is one of such and can be found in the priestly garments of some clergy belonging to some ecumenical bodies. They add a sense of beauty and helps people to connect well with the minister as he ministers. This position is supported by Turner, he indicates that, human beings appreciate religious information better when it is experienced, and they are able to keep it and make that experience part of their lives through symbolic representations of those experiences.<sup>88</sup> In this instance the congregants are meeting an experience they are familiar with from the common environment and thus make it easier for them to relate well. Christian worship employs symbols, which include but are not limited to artworks, and acts which use objects or symbols with inner meaning to communicate Christian ideas. According to Sarpong, Christianity has copied

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<sup>83</sup>Available at: <https://pcgonline.org/brief-history/>, accessed July, 20 2023.

<sup>84</sup> S. Prempeh (14<sup>th</sup> Moderator, Presbyterian Church of Ghana), in discussion with the author, May, 2023.

<sup>85</sup> Sam Prempeh (14<sup>th</sup> Moderator, Presbyterian Church of Ghana), in discussion with the author, May, 2023.

<sup>86</sup> Sam Prempeh (14<sup>th</sup> Moderator, Presbyterian Church of Ghana), in discussion with the author, May, 2023.

<sup>87</sup>Sarpong, "The Adinkra Symbols of Ghana and the Biblical Psychology behind Them," 34.

<sup>88</sup>Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, "Rethinking the Great Commission,"151.

from the common stock of important symbols; these symbols which are regarded as messages from the elders and are printed on fabrics originally worn exclusively by royalty and spiritual leaders.<sup>89</sup>



**Fig. 3** *Nyame nti* (Because of God) **Fig.4** *Nyame dua* (God's tree) **Fig.5** 3 *Nyame biribi wo soro*  
Source: DeGraft Methodist, Pakyi No. 1

Figures 3 and 4 as well as 5 are pictures of Methodist ministers at the De Graft Methodist Church in Pakyi No. 1 and a Presbyterian minister respectively in their ministerial apparels displaying different symbols of Adinkra. Ossom-Batsa and Apaah posit that apart from the decorative functions, “symbols,” whether secular or religious, are on the whole effective tools for communicating which is more louder than when words are used.<sup>90</sup> Ossom-Batsa and Apaah argues that that has been the case for traditional symbols like the Adinkra adopted into Ghanaian Christianity and have had a strong impact, especially in liturgical practices and doctrinal disputes.<sup>91</sup>



**Fig.6:** Logo of the Methodist Church, Ghana- the inner perimeter of the Ghana map has the Adinkra symbol *Nyame Dua*. Source: [www.methodistchurchghana.com](http://www.methodistchurchghana.com)

The importance and meanings as well as the aesthetic features that the Adinkra hold has led to its adoption by some churches for beautification and communication through their display on their walls and furniture. In the Book of Exodus chapters twenty-five and twenty-six, God issued orders for the construction of the Tabernacle in order for him to come and reside with his people. God gave a detailed plan for the construction and furnishing of the temple; for instance the Ark of the Covenant was to be covered with a cover that is made of pure gold. The gold serves as a reminder of the purity that must and should always surround the service to God.<sup>92</sup> Some churches in Ghana like the Roman Catholic and the Methodist Church use the Adinkra symbols for both beautification and communication purposes in their church premises. The St. Perter's Basilica in Kumasi and the St. John's Catholic Church at Donyina near KNUST in the Ashanti Region are examples of the use of the symbols in the church. Ossom-Batsa and Apaah attests to the foreign symbolic designs on the walls of the St Peter's

<sup>89</sup>Sarpong, “Adinkra Symbols of Ghana.”

<sup>90</sup> Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, “Rethinking the Great Commission,” 261.

<sup>91</sup> Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, “Rethinking the Great Commission,” 261.

<sup>92</sup>Abel Ndjerareou, “Exodus,” in *Africa Bible Commentary*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo, general editor (Nairobi: WordAlive Publications, 2006), 121.



Basilica in Kumasi which displayed a typical example of Christian art inherited from the Europeans in 1947 at the time of its dedication.<sup>93</sup> Amoateng however reports that a visit to the Cathedral will show that these replacement of these foreign symbols with some Adinkra symbols which the committee tasked with the renovation of the Cathedral strongly recommended.<sup>94</sup> Quarcoo as cited by Ossom-Batsa and Apaah points out that the uniqueness of the Emmanuel Methodist Church in Labadi lies in its incorporation of the Adinkra symbols into its biblical-liturgical arts.<sup>95</sup> According to Quarcoo, the symbols when properly arranged read “God’s son became a sacrificial lamb for the household.” And that represents the core of the Christian message.



**Fig. 7: Church Furniture**<sup>96</sup>



**Fig. 8 : Church Wall Furnishing**

## 8.0 REFLECTIONS

The *Gye Nyame* symbol literally means, “Except God” and it is variously interpreted to mean “God only,” and “God alone holds the final decision, [and not humans]” it is a symbol that speaks of the supreme nature and immortality of God (*Nyame*). The symbol also speaks of the faith of the Akan that no human can prevent him/her when he/she is determined to accomplish a task except God. The adherents of the symbol hold the belief that it is only God who is powerful enough to alter or obstruct a person’s ambition.

*Gye Nyame* as an Adinkra symbol points to the robust belief of the forbearers of the Akan people group in the omnipotence as well as the greatness of the Creator God that sits at the top in the pyramid of spirits understood to be habiting in the heavens amongst the people of Africa in as a whole.<sup>97</sup> Asamoah posit that, the native sacred beliefs of the Akan depict the precise position for the omnipotent just like the biblical position of God.<sup>98</sup> “Onyankopon” or “Nyame” in Akan is the highest order of power and commands all the respect and authority.

The *Gye Nyame* symbol is a derivative of the saying “*Abode santann yi firi tete; obi nte ase a onim n’ahyease, na obi ntena ase nkosi n’awieeee, Gye Nyame,*” by translation it means that, “This pronounced scenery of creativity goes back to times past; no human saw its beginning and no human will see ever see the end with the exception of God.”<sup>99</sup>

The symbol came about as a result of the belief that the Gyaman people traveled safely from Kumasi through the thick forest to their present location by the devine help of *Nyame* (God). The Akan

<sup>93</sup> Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, “Rethinking the Great Commission,” 261.

<sup>94</sup> Amoateng, “The Creedal Symbols of My Great Grandparents,” 262.

<sup>95</sup> Amoateng, “Creedal Symbols,” 268.

<sup>96</sup> Source: Fig. 7 DeGraft Methodist, Pakyi No. 1 ; Fig. 8 Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, “Rethinking the Great Commission,” 270.

<sup>97</sup> Appau Asante Adom and Seth Kquofi, “Adinkra: An Epitome of Asante Philosophy and History,” *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 4, no. 9 (2014): 44–49.

<sup>98</sup> Foster Emmanuel Asamoah, “The Bible and Akan Traditional Religious Values: A Search for Dialogue,” *Journal of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics and Theology* 2, no. 2 (2020): 78–82, <https://doi.org/10.38159/motbit.2020081>.

<sup>99</sup> Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, “Rethinking the Great Commission,” 271.

people like all Africans are very religious and therefore had relationship with God. Rattray informs that, the referent God of the Akan people is the same God of the Bible.<sup>100</sup>

Reflecting on the symbol on the basis of biblical text brings to light passages that corroborates with the Akan perception of God. In the exodus story of the Israelites, God is seen as the Omnipotent one who brought the Israelites out of the control and oppression of their Egyptian taskmasters. In the book of Exodus 3: 7, 8, God indicates to Moses that he has realized the pain his people are going through in Egypt and that the call for deliverance of the people had come to him and he has come to deliver them and take them to the Promised Land. According to the account, God delivered his people and brought them out of Egypt with Moses as the leader. In the verses 14 and 15, God answered Moses when he asked of his name and said his name was *Eheyeh asher Eheyeh* in Hebrew meaning I am(who or what) I am – or Self existent-One; Eternal, the One who is and will always be and it is cut short to I AM and equivalent to Jehovah the Eternal.<sup>101</sup> The name I AM positions God as the all-powerful with him all things are possible. The name expresses the truth that God has always existed and will always exist.<sup>102</sup>

The symbol was therefore meant to share their experiences with their unborn children for all the years to come and to also transmit the faith, which evolved out of God's faithful and gracious safekeeping of the ancestors of the Akan people with the unborn generations of the Akan people. This corroborates with the institution of the Passover Festival and the collection of the stones by the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel; they were to serve as a memorial for generations. As such faith symbolization, the symbol was meant to also call unborn generations of all Gyaman people, and later when it became a leading symbol, all the Akans, to depend in the all-powerful God of heaven, *Nyankopɔn*. The Adinkra Symbol exudes and for that matter, *Gye Nyame* as a symbol highlights the philosophical underpinnings of traditional cultural belief among the Akan people, which includes the existence and supremacy/sovereignty and omnipotence of God the Supreme Being. Willis shares the understanding that the symbol talks about "the omnipotence, omnipresence, and immortality of God." *The Gye Nyame* is used by the people in indicating their faith and reliance in and on God.<sup>103</sup>

The Akan sees the activity and role played by God in their lives; people normally attribute their escape from danger to God (*Nyame*). Sayings like *se enye Nyame aa anka me wu ye* meaning if had it not being God I would have died. This is a saying that can be heard in the conversations of people and it resonates with the *Gye Nyame* symbol. Amoateng maintains that the story surrounding the creation of the popular *Gye Nyame* Symbol illustrates further for our understanding of the historical experience-based origins of the Adinkra Symbols. Amoateng further indicates that the *Gye Nyame* Symbol was created from two traditional clubs with something in between them, which keeps them from crushing each other. The symbol intimates that there may be danger all around; however, if anybody takes shelter in the reality holding them apart that person will not be crushed. The reality that is believed to be holding the clubs apart is the Supreme Being, God. The *Gye Nyame* symbol points to the strong faith of the forefathers of the *Akan* about the supremacy of the Creator. Amoateng relates by submitting that, Christians corresponds the concept of *Gye Nyame* to the biblical text of Ecclesiastes 1:8: "There is one most high Creator, Almighty and a powerful King and greatly to be feared, who sitteth upon his throne, and is God of dominion." *Nyame* (God) of the Akan is the creator and redeemer of the world, who reveals himself in Jesus Christ and who is loved, worshipped and adored by believers.<sup>104</sup>

*Nyame Nti* is an Adinkra symbol of religious significance, representing an aspect of the Ghanaian's and particularly the Akan relationship with God. The symbol has a flowery appearance,

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<sup>100</sup> Amoateng, "The Creedal Symbols", 144.

<sup>101</sup> F. J. Dake, Dakes Annotated Reference Bible, 108.

<sup>102</sup> Abel Ndjerareou, "Exodus," in Africa Bible Commentary, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo, general editor (Nairobi: WordAlive Publications, 2006), 91.

<sup>103</sup> Amoateng, "The Creedal Symbols of my Great Grandparents," 263.

<sup>104</sup> Amoateng, "The Creedal Symbols of my Great Grandparents," 263.

and is the image of a type of stylized plant or leaf. The stalk is said to represent the staff of life and symbolizes that food is the basis for life. Literally: “By God’s Grace,” it is a symbol of faith and trust in God. It symbolizes that people could not survive without the food God has provided. The symbol variously communicates the theology that *Nyame* is the sole provider for mankind and corroborates with the teachings of Jesus concerning God’s providence in Matthew 6:26, 31-33.<sup>105</sup> A reflection on this symbol *Nyame nti* unearths the people’s interpretation of the symbol as being: *Nyame nti me nwe wura* meaning by God’s grace, I will not eat leaves to survive. This means, “because of God’s providence, the adherent of *Nyame* will not be eating leaves.” In the view of Amoateng, the expression, “chews leaves,” among the Akan people group, communicates that the person has been reduced to the level of an animal, for the reason that the person is extremely poor.

The moral message of the symbol is that people should depend on God for their daily bread just as *Nyame* provides daily for animals that do not farm or embark on an economic activity that will ensure the provision of food daily. The symbol resonates with the life of the Jewish people of the Bible on their way from Egypt to Canaan. In Exodus 16 the account shows how God provided for them Bread (*manna*) from heaven after they grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. Their God in response gave them food to make them know he does not expect and will not give them leaves to survive and that he is able to provide for them. According to Finis Jennings Dake author of the Dake’s Annotated Reference Bible, God continued to prove by way of miracles to the Jews that He was the One who had brought them out of Egypt and that He was still with them and leading them into Canaan as promised.<sup>106</sup> Dake further indicates that when the people grew tired of the bread they murmured again and God again responded with quail for a month but the manna did not cease for the 40 year period they traveled (Numbers 11:4-9; 18-34). This showed how God was loving and caring for his people and would not allow them to go hungry without making provision for them *Nyame nti wonnwe wura* meaning because of God they did not chew leaves to survive.

Again, during the life and ministry of Jesus on earth, issues of food shortage were recorded but Jesus provided for the people and averted hunger and a disruption of ministry. In the Gospel of Matthew 14:13-21, we read of Jesus in a desolate place with five thousand people with no food for them to eat, the disciples recommended that Jesus sends them away since there was no food for them to eat at such a place. Jesus did not grant to them as requested but instead asked them to bring what they had; they had two fishes and five loaves of bread. The account indicates that, they were multiplied to cater for five thousand people. This and many acts of Jesus (God) is what the Akan believes that God (*Nyame*) is always able to provide for them and so they will never survive by eating what is unacceptable of men to eat. The *Nyame Nti* symbols shows that the people knew God and trusts in him for their well-being and that of their succeeding generations. Adom et al. observes that *Nyame Nti* is an indication of the critical role the Akan believes God plays in their daily lives and all their endeavors of life.<sup>107</sup>

The symbol, *Nyame Nwu Na Mawu* means “God won’t die for me to die,” it is a symbol that expresses the immortality of the human soul, expressing faith in God to preserve one’s soul even after death. To say God will not die for me to die is to assert that the only way the declarant can die is for God to die.<sup>108</sup>

Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al. explains that it is believed that during creation God been the creator gave part of his soul, *okra* to mankind and that gave man life; and at death, the *okra* which is eternal

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<sup>105</sup> Boaheng and Adomako, “Costume Christology,” 278.

<sup>106</sup> Dake, Dake’s Annotated Reference Bible, 151.

<sup>107</sup> Adom and Kquofi, “Adinkra: An Epitome of Asante Philosophy,” 45.

<sup>108</sup> Ronald O. Mensah, C. Obeel, and P. A. Babah, “The Philosophical and Sociological Implications Behind the Adinkra Symbol ‘Nyame Nwu Na Mawu,’” *International Journal of African Society, Cultures and Traditions* 8, no. 3 (2020): 1–7, <https://ejournals.org/ijasct/vol-8-issue-3-september-2020/the-philosophical-and-sociological-implications-behind-the-adinkra-symbol-nyame-nwu-na-mawu/>.



goes back to God.<sup>109</sup> They further explain that since the soul is embedded in God and God does not die, it is impossible for the soul to die. The symbol emphasizes the eternal nature of the human soul which is a belief among the Akan and most people in the other groupings in Ghana.<sup>110</sup> The symbol also indicates the reliance of the Akan people on *Nyame* and the fact that one resides in (the bosom of) God for life; that is for spiritual and physical well-being.<sup>111</sup> This God themed symbol shows that the Akan people had serious thought about God—his power, his attributes and his domain of influence. *Nyame Nwu Na Mawu* is a bold declaration of faith by the declarant that his/her life is concealed in God and therefore an enemy can only get to the declarant after going through God.

In reflecting theologically on the symbol, Paul is seen in his epistle to the Colossians in 3:3-4 explaining to them that their lives are hidden in Christ with God and that when Christ appears in his glory they will also appear. Logan Murphy suggests that the significance of this verse lies in the security that the believer has in his or her union with Christ, it is in light of this union and the security it brings that we are to obey the imperatives “seek” and “set your mind on”.<sup>112</sup> Since Christ is eternal (John 3:16) his followers will also be. The quest for immortality has been an abiding meditation for generations of thinkers but this confession overlays it with a dimension of faith. God cannot die therefore I cannot die. The reason he cannot die primarily does not rest in his ability to keep himself but in God’s power and insurmountable authority which he exerts over the creation. God calls man to entrust his/her life to him because he is omnipotent, and nothing can destroy people under the protection of God. By entrusting their lives into *Nyame*’s hands, they take relieve of themselves of the task to defend themselves in the arena of malevolent yet unseen spiritual activity. The declarants here believe that it is not possible for another human or spirit medium (be it witchcraft, sorcery, or necromancy) to take his or her life from him or her without the express authorization from God the Supreme Being. Even when God has sanctioned that a person dies, the spirit and soul which are the two most important aspects of that individual return to him (God). Thus, it is therefore fruitless for someone to wish to kill another, when that individual cannot get access to the victim’s spirit and soul to destroy. The individual therefore becomes fearless in his or her quest to uphold that which is right and shuns evil, knowing that his or her destruction does not lie in the bosom of any mortal but the Almighty alone. In Matthew 10:28, Jesus admonished the people not to fear the one who can only destroy the body but rather they should fear the one who can destroy both the soul and the body.

Ashley M. Gay explains that darkness and death brought by persecution can only overcome the physical body; but since the human being is made in God’s image and God cannot die, victory is not held over the soul. Gay informs that this concept is found in Hellenistic Judaism’s view of martyrdom. Therefore, God as the judge of the soul is deserving of fear more than mortal man (Psalm 56:4-23, Isaiah 51:12-16). And if He is to be feared as the judge of souls, He is also to be adhered to as the commissioner and keeper of souls (Psalm 33:18). This proverbial symbol also communicates that there is life after death and rightly corroborates with the scripture that says it is appointed for man to die once, after that comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27). The symbol therefore suggests or calls on adherent to lead exemplary lives.

The symbol, *Onyakopon Adom Nti Biribiara Beye Yie* literally means by the grace of God, everything will be alright. It is a pictorial representation of faith, providence and hope and highlights the need to depend on God (*Nyame*). This particular symbol has hope as one of the embedded symbolic messages, as well as two others, providence and faith. The adherents of this symbol believe that *Onyame* is able to deliver them from every form of threat that they encounter in life. The generosity of *Onyame* extends to all and sundry especially people who demonstrate faith in him. This Supreme

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<sup>109</sup> Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Appiah, and Nartey, “Philosophy Behind Some Adinkra Symbols,” 27.

<sup>110</sup> Mensah, Obeel, and Babah, “Implications Behind the Adinkra Symbol” 4.

<sup>111</sup> Mensah, Obeel, and Babah, “Implications Behind the Adinkra Symbol” 3.

<sup>112</sup> L. Murphy, available at: [https://www.academia.edu/19468502/Exegetical\\_Essay\\_on\\_Colossians\\_3\\_1\\_4](https://www.academia.edu/19468502/Exegetical_Essay_on_Colossians_3_1_4) accessed July, 21 2023.

God is seen and affirmed as the creator (*Oboadee*) of the universe and considered as the central norm of the universe.<sup>113</sup> Again, the Akan according to Agyarko has a sacramental view of nature, asserting that every form of life, the future of all mankind lies with God and that it is impossible for the Akan to imagine *Nyame* without his creation and his strong will for the salvation for mankind.<sup>114</sup>

Reflecting on the symbol on the basis of the God's word shows a crystal clear connection of the symbol's meaning in scripture. In 1 Peter 5:10, the Bible says: "And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all Grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you" (ESV). What the scripture is saying in relation to the symbol is that, although one may suffer in life, God will ultimately intervene and deliver his faithful. The scripture teaches endurance and hope and calls for total dependence on God in difficult moments of life after which God will honor and establish the one who is able to stand to the end. In 2 Timothy 2:10, Paul writes that "Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory." The elect in the verse is translated from the Greek word *eklektos* which means picked out or chosen and it represents the believers. The author has the hope that when he endures the elect will obtain salvation which is the desire of all and sundry. Salvation severally means redemption, deliverance and or recovery; this means that the God who is able to grant this salvation to the elect is equally able to grant it to the author who in this case is Paul the Apostle. The adherents of the symbol have hope, faith and believe that *Nyame* is able to provide and meet every need that they may have. The provisions may not come suddenly but by the grace of God they will receive an intervention from their creator.

The symbol, *Nyame Dua* literally means God's Tree and communicates the presence and the protection of God. *Nyamedua* apart from it being a name of a tree is also known to be a three-pronged stake which is erected in courtyards and in front of homes.<sup>115</sup> Small size pot or calabash with water and some herbs is placed on it and there prayer is said for purification and cleansing rites. Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al explains that in the past every household had *Nyamedua* which protected the family, and warded off bad omen and evil forces and served as a place of worship; it also signified the presence and the protection of God.<sup>116</sup> Adolph Hilary Agbo, a lecturer at the Department of Publishing Studies KNUST, observes that the symbol among other things also encourages people to recognize God's presence and protection and worship him in reverence.<sup>117</sup> Agbo thus designates the *Nyamedua* as a symbol of worship and veneration.<sup>118</sup>

Scripturally reflecting on the symbol, the burning bush which attracted Moses when God was calling him to service typically resonates with this symbol. In Exodus 3:1-5, Moses encounters the Lord while tending the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro the priest of Midian. Moses in his quest to find out why the bush was not consumed was told by the LORD not to come closer since the place where he was standing was a holy ground and was thus instructed to remove his sandals. God's first disclosure to Moses about him is his holiness, holiness communicates a complete departure from sin and evil and a commitment to righteousness.<sup>119</sup> This scene and the words of God are to serve as a perpetual reminder to Moses that God is holy and that he should be holy. The taking off the shoes by Moses is a sign of respect or veneration which communicates his unworthiness before God.<sup>120</sup> The

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<sup>113</sup>Owusu Robert Agyarko, "God of Life: Rethinking the Akan Christian Concept of God in the Light of the Ecological Crisis," *The Ecumenical Review* 65, no. 1 (2013): 51–56, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/erev.12026>.

<sup>114</sup>Agyarko, "God of Life," 2.

<sup>115</sup>Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Appiah, and Nartey, "Philosophy Behind Some Adinkra Symbols," 28.

<sup>116</sup>Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Appiah, and Nartey, "Philosophy Behind Some Adinkra Symbols," 28.

<sup>117</sup>A. Hilary Agbo, *Values of Adinkra Symbols* (Kumasi, Delta Designs and Publications, 2011), 26.

<sup>118</sup>Agbo, *Values of Adinkra Symbols*, 26.

<sup>119</sup>D.C. Stamps and J. Wesley Adams eds., *Full Life Study Bible, New International Version* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 92.

<sup>120</sup>*Life Application Study Bible, New Living Translation 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2004), 100.

removal of the shoes by Moses was a sign of respect; Orientals are known to be people who remove their sandals in their homes and at every place of worship. It is an act that indicates the putting away of all pollutions from using the path of sin or iniquity.<sup>121</sup> The place is described to be holy because God was present and Moses was not to come closer and to take off his sandals indicating humility and worship.<sup>122</sup> This portion of scripture rightly correlates with the *Nyamedua* of the Akan. The symbol also communicates that, wherever the symbol is placed is a sacred place and therefore requires people to show respect and worship their maker and depend on him for their provisions in life. God demonstrates to Moses that the task of bringing the Israelites from the hands of the Egyptians will not merely happen but will take a divine intervention for it to happen. Thus, Moses was empowered with the signs to know that God was with him.

Similarly, the Akan sees the *Nyamedua* as a symbol of sacredness which communicates the presence of a God (*Nyame*) who receives the prayers of his people and answers by providing and protecting him. Thus, the Akan is called upon to revere the place of worship in order to receive from his/her Maker.

## 9.0 CONCLUSION

This work has brought to the fore how Adinkra symbols which is a translation of thought and ideas helps in expressing the values and beliefs of the people. The symbols are ideographical depictions of maxims, philosophies, beliefs, and values of the Akan of Ghana. The theological reflections carried out on the selected symbols: *Gye Nyame*, *Nyame Nti*, *Onyankopon Adom Nti Biribiara Beye Yie*, *Nyame Nwu Na Mawu*, *Nyame Dua* serves as a firm foundation for a sound Akan hermeneutical basis for homilies. It also provides an opportunity to examine its implications to the everyday life of the Akan Christian and Clergy. Thus, the reflections show that the symbols are religious and make a case for its ecclesiastical usage. The data from the survey revealed that both clergy and the congregants favored the use of the Adinkra symbols since the symbols help them in understanding the nature of *Nyame* (God) and helps them to connect well with him thereby offering new ways of seeing, hearing, and thinking about the gospel message and faith in God. The study also discovered that, the Adinkra symbols create a sense of belonging among the people and enabled the clergy and Christians to contextualize the knowledge they acquire in their theological training and church respectively.

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<sup>121</sup> Dake, Dake's Annotated Reference Bible, 108.

<sup>122</sup> Abel Ndjerareou, "Exodus," in *Africa Bible Commentary*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo, general editor (Nairobi: WordAlive Publications, 2006), 90.

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