



Theological Reflections on Selected Adinkra Symbols

Theophilus Effah-Manu¹ , Isaac Boaheng²  & Nathan Iddrisu Samwini¹ 

¹ Department of Religious Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana.

² Christian Service University, Ghana; Research Fellow University of the Free State, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

The Adinkra Symbols of the Akan of Ghana are traditional symbols that are ideographical illustrations of sayings, faith, philosophies, thoughts, and values. The Adinkra symbols aid them in socially relating with members of the community and religiously with *Nyame* (God). The low level of literacy in the continent among others makes the adoption and use of symbols for theological discourse very appropriate. Symbolic theology involves the use of symbols to communicate biblical truths. This study collected data through literature research using secondary sources such as books, articles, and dissertations. The study also administered a structured questionnaire to 110 Christians and 20 Clergy belonging to different denominations. The Theological reflections on the selected symbols showed a convincing correlation between the symbols and the biblical truths. The results from the fieldwork also confirmed the literature: 35% of Christians indicated that the selected symbols were good for Christian use while another 15% said it was good for African Christians. 75% of the clergy also indicated that the symbols were good for Christian use, 47% also said it was very useful and another 47% indicated it was most useful for their line of duty as clergy. The paper seeks to make a case for African Symbolic Theology as a branch of ethno-theology through ethno-hermeneutics. This is on the basis that symbols occupy a huge space in the epistemology and religious space of the people.

Correspondence

Theophilus Effah-Manu

Email: theomanu19@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

The Adinkra symbols are symbols of sayings, ethics, opinions, and beliefs of the Akan of Ghana.¹ Their expressions could be passed on through signs/performances, oral and/or graphic images, and are very adaptable. The symbols have their respective meanings but the symbols in most cases take on vast understandings at different circumstances for application thus making the symbols “multi-vocal.”² The Adinkra symbols are traditional forms by which native Ghanaian graphic arts are used to basically

¹ Philip Owusu, “Adinkra Symbols as ‘Multivocal’ Pedagogical/Socialization Tool,” *Contemporary Journal of African Studies* 6, no. 1 (2019): 46–58.

² Owusu, “Adinkra Symbols as “Multivocal” Pedagogical/Socialization Tool,” 46.

communicate the thoughts and thinking of the people which embodies their ideals and beliefs.³ Neil Wilson and Nancy Ryken Taylor submit that the Bible is not only a book of beliefs but it is also a book of symbols.⁴

Christian authors in most cases replaced an attribute with a known entity to highlight an attribute that is being explained.⁵ The Akan people group employs several symbols that aid their communication. Philip Owusu posits that the Adinkra symbol is adaptable and thus possesses the potential to be engaged as a medium to both educate and socialize.⁶ The Akan symbols, Adinkra are filled with a lot of truths that connect them to their Maker. These symbols have been used over the years and are still in use as a mode of communication and play a significant function in the Akan culture but not very present in Christian churches even though they are the same people practicing it culturally. It is filled with rich socio-religious messages; the Adinkra symbol symbolizes the wealth of the ethical, religious, and artistic culture of the Akan people and serves as an easy swift way for the communication of philosophical realities visually including its unearthed theological truths.

The symbols are used extensively by both Akan and non-Akan but are absent in their places of worship. This is contrary to the observation by John S. Mbiti that Africans and for that matter, the Akan tribe are notoriously religious. Since the symbols link the Akan to his/her Maker, it will be appropriate to have them incorporated into their Christian form of worship to aid in communicating with their Maker. Peter White rightly indicates that the European missionaries' activity in Africa was saddled with loads of European theological positioning and expansionism in terms of their mission theology and praxis.⁷ The actions of societies are driven and directed by symbols and their derived meanings.⁸ The Adinkra symbols have greater cognitive importance and are symbols that are filled with a deep array of implications that far exceed the capabilities of theoretical intelligence and propositional communication. Dulles observes that emblematic information is self-involving, for the symbols "speak to us simply insofar as it pulls us to place ourselves mentally in the space of understanding and significance which it unlocks to us."⁹

The Christian walk is a relationship with God that is intermediated by symbols which aids the adherents of the faith in communing with God. The symbols in use are found in the Bible and in the living tradition of the Christian practicing community where it is found. Dulles rightly states that Biblically, there are descriptions which present Christ in so many ways. Christ is referred to as David's son, Messiah, God's Son, Good teacher, and Lord, with descriptions like, Good Shepherd; among others are the achievements of the religious imaginings relying on symbolic resources made available by the religious traditions of primordial Israel."¹⁰ Thus, employing the Adinkra in Christian worship among the Akan people group will be a privileged fulcrum on which the worship of the Christian church could revolve. This then leads to a state in the Church where there is the utilization of both the traditional and scriptural symbols which drives passionate worship. Appiah-Kubi also observes that traditional values and customs are innately bound up with the beliefs of people especially speaking from the African point of view.¹¹ Religion is seen and practiced within the cultural setting of the adherent. Africans and for that matter Ghanaians ought to contextualize the theology of the Bible so as to make it more relevant to their setting.

³ J.E.T Kuwornu-Adjaottor, George Appiah, and Melvin Nartey, "The Philosophy behind Some Adinkra Symbols and Their Communicative Values in Akan," *Philosophical Papers and Review* 7, no. 3 (2016): 22–33.

⁴ Neil Wilson and Nancy Ryken Taylor, *The A to Z Guide to Bible Signs and Symbols: Understanding Their Meaning and Significance* (Baker Books, 2015).

⁵ Wilson and Taylor, *The A TO Z Guide To Bible Signs and Symbols Understanding: their Meaning and Significance*, 11.

⁶ Owusu, "Adinkra Symbols as "Multivocal" Pedagogical/Socialization Tool," 48.

⁷ Nathan Iddrisu Samwini, "Religious Toleration as a Key Factor for Social Stability in Plural Ghana" (IISTE, n.d.).

⁸ Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Appiah and Nartey, "The philosophy behind some Adinkra symbols and their communicative values in Akan," 24.

⁹ Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System* (Crossroad, 1992).

¹⁰ Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System*. 6-7.

¹¹ Francis Appiah-Kubi, "Cultural Rationality and African Religious Culture: A Critical Anthropological and Theological Investigation towards Intercultural Dialogue," *Asian Horizons* 13, no. 04 (2019): 629–46.

This research was, therefore, conducted to theologically reflect on some selected Adinkra symbols with the objective of bringing to the fore the need for symbolic theology as a vehicle for the propagation of the gospel. The section examines the *Gye Nyame* and *Nyame Nnwu Na Mawu* symbols to provide a model for symbolic theology in the Akan setting.

Aspects of Akan Traditional Religious Worldview

The Akan people group in Ghana can be located mainly in the southern and central parts of the country. Dewitt explains that a worldview involves a system of beliefs which are integrated like a piece of a puzzle which is interconnected.¹² Thus a people's worldview is not simply a group of distinct, independent, and unconnected beliefs, but rather are interwoven, interrelated, and interconnected system of beliefs. Awuah-Nyamekye as cited by Daniel Asante Boamah intimates that the worldview of the Akan people group is the summation of their fundamental thoughts and or philosophies about the world and their role within it.¹³ Michelle Gilbert explains that the Akan holds the view that each human is made up of blood (*mogya*), soul (*kra*), which is given by God and is closely associated with the person's destiny (*nkrabea*); and the spirit (*sunsum*).¹⁴ The African views God (*Nyame*) as a moral being who is involved in a moral relationship with the human creation. Boamah adds that the Akan worldview is made up of the spiritual (unseen) and the living (the seen), with the unseen or spiritual being at the helm of the affairs of the seen.¹⁵ Kofi Asare Opoku intimates that Traditional African Religion forms a portion of the religious legacy of the human race, and thus possesses some level of universality just like the other religions of the world, but it derives its uniqueness from its indigenous origin.¹⁶ Opoku further indicates that the spirituality of the people accrues from the encounters and theological reflections of their forbears. The African spirituality offers solutions to the countless problems.

God

The Akan believes that *Nyame* or *Onyankopon* is the Supreme Being who is known and said to be omniscient and omnipotent and the creator of the entire world. The Akan doctrine of God according to J.B Danquah is that the Akan, by their own wisdom, have been able to perceive God in a way that gives the west no basis for a feeling of superiority.¹⁷ The Akan religious view has it that, God was born on Saturday and thus referred to as Kwame. In addition to *Nyame*, the Akan also express their belief in Mother Earth, lesser divinities, ancestral and other spirits, and material things. It is firmly maintained that all these spirits, as well as other material things, were created and sustained by *Nyame*. The Akan people group perceives God as the originator of the world and the creator of humans, all of which exist in the world, and the final authority.¹⁸

This notion is resolutely deep-seated in the religious beliefs of the Akan people and it is fundamental to their religious systems. The name Onyame or Onyankopong is exclusively used for the Supreme Being.¹⁹ Included in the several attributes of God are; *Odomankoma* – which translates creator, and or the source of all grace; *Twedumpong* on the other hand translates one that can be leaned on safely; *Borebore* – the architect of Being, and maker of all things.²⁰

¹² Richard DeWitt and Jutta Schickore, "Worldviews: An Introduction to the History and Philosophy of Science," *Aestimatio: Sources and Studies in the History of Science* 8 (2011): 188–91.

¹³ Asante Daniel Boamah, "Akan Indigenous Religio-Cultural Beliefs and Environmental Preservation: The Role of Taboos," *Masters of Arts Thesis, Queen's University*, 2015.

¹⁴ Michelle Gilbert, "Akan Religion," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade, 1987, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/akan-religion>.

¹⁵ Boamah, "Akan Indigenous Religio-Cultural Beliefs and Environmental Preservation: The Role of Taboos."

¹⁶ Kofi Asare Opoku, "Traditional Religious Beliefs and Spiritual Churches in Ghana: A Preliminary Statement," *Research Review* 4, no. 2 (1968).

¹⁷ Joseph Boakye Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God: A Fragment of Gold Coast Ethics and Religion* (London: Cass, 1968).

¹⁸ Robert Owusu Agyarko, "God of Life: Rethinking the Akan Christian concept of God in the light of the ecological crisis," *The Ecumenical Review* 65, no. 1 (March 4, 2013): 51–66, <https://doi.org/10.1111/erev.12026>.

¹⁹ Opoku, "Traditional Religious Beliefs and Spiritual Churches in Ghana: A Preliminary Statement." 48.

²⁰ Opoku, "Traditional Religious Beliefs and Spiritual Churches in Ghana: A Preliminary Statement." 48.

Kofi Asare Opoku submits that the Supreme Being despite his accessibility is not visible and the Akan believes that he could be reached by speaking to the wind. All relationships – between persons, the living and the dead, and between person and nature – are rooted in God and point towards God.²¹

Eschatology

The term eschatology is associated with an arm of theological studies concerned with the ultimate destiny of humans from the Judeo-Christian viewpoint.²² Boaheng *et al* in explaining the term eschatology, suggest that it concerns that which is last or ultimate, the teachings of the end time which God sent his Son Jesus Christ to proclaim here on earth.²³ Jerry L. Walls also explains that the word “eschatology” emanates from *eschatos*, a Greek word that denotes “last,” thus, it is therefore the study of the final end of things of creation.²⁴

The phrase, “The Son is the radiance of God's glory” in the book of Hebrews is symbolic and communicates a message to the reader through symbols. The apocalyptic literature of the Bible employs the use of symbols and imagery. Boaheng *et al* assert that eschatology offers a message of hopefulness to the hopeless devotee and serves as a basis for life.²⁵ According to Boaheng *et al*, the anticipation of an exceptional interference by God in time and history, chiefly the second advent of Jesus has had a remarkable influence on the worldview, and way of life of believers and even the clergy.²⁶

Ancestors

The African ontology of the world is composed of both the physical (seen) and nonphysical (unseen) beings that are arranged up in a pecking order of significance and authority.²⁷ Stephen Nkansah Morgan and Beatrice D. Okyere-Manu submit that both Wiredu and Gyekye agree that the Akan people group of Ghana holds the understanding that there is a hierarchy of beings, with God (*Nyame*) being the Supreme.²⁸ They have the belief that there are other kinds of spirits after God and that these spirits are the smaller gods and the spirits of the ancestors. Morgan and Okyere-Manu also cite Uguwanyi as saying that, ancestral spirits and other spirits of other divinities can dwell in things like hills, trees, rocks, mounts, and even animals, and whatever object that can be home of a spirit. These things and such places are usually consecrated as sacred. The belief and worship of ancestors are deep-rooted among most people in Africa.

Wiredu observes that, among indigenous Akan people, ancestors occupy a special place among the unseen beings and adds that even though they are not the most powerful, they are loved and cherished and venerated by a great majority of African societies. Ancestors are believed to dwell in a nonphysical world comparable in many ways to the physical world that they left behind. The Akan like other African societies believe their ancestor still possess the ability to work together with the living and provide assistance and guidance for them in their daily lives.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a hybrid or mixed-method approach. Qualitative data was collected from secondary sources and quantitative data was collected from structured interviews and analyzed using descriptive analysis. The empirical research methodology was used to collect primary to obtain a good

²¹ Opoku, “Traditional Religious Beliefs and Spiritual Churches in Ghana: A Preliminary Statement.” 48.

²² Isaac Boaheng, Nicholas Abbam, and Frank Agyapong, “Eschatology and Contemporary Ghanaian Christianity,” *Biblical Studies Journal* 04, no. 03 (2022): 39–56, <https://doi.org/10.54513/BSJ.2022.4304>.

²³ Boaheng, Abbam, and Agyapong, “Eschatology and Contemporary Ghanaian Christianity.” 40.

²⁴ Jerry L Walls, *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁵ Boaheng, Abbam and Agyapong “Eschatology and Contemporary Ghanaian Christianity.”

²⁶ Boaheng, Abbam and Agyapong, “Eschatology and Contemporary Ghanaian Christianity.”

²⁷ Stephen Nkansah Morgan and Beatrice Okyere-Manu, “The Belief in and Veneration of Ancestors in Akan Traditional Thought: Finding Values for Human Well-Being,” 2020.

²⁸ Morgan and Okyere-Manu, The Belief in and Veneration of Ancestors in Akan Traditional Thought.

understanding and perception of the use of Adinkra symbols among the people in the study area. Structured interview questions were used to obtain data for the research, 110 Christians belonging to different denominations and 20 clergy in different denominations were selected. The collected data was then statistically analyzed; ANOVA and descriptive statistics using SPSS (Version 20).

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Background characteristics of individual Christian respondents

Characteristic	N	Percent
Gender		
Male	77	70
Female	33	30
Total	110	100
Age		
13-20 years	9	8.2
21-30 years	25	22.7
31-40 years	32	29.1
41-50 years	25	22.7
51-60 years	14	12.7
Above 60 years	5	4.5
Total	110	100
Denomination		
Mainline Protestant	47	42.7
AICs	19	17.3
Charismatic	21	19.1
Pentecostal	23	20.9
Total	110	100
Education		
Primary	31	28.2
Secondary	65	59.1
Tertiary	14	12.7
Total	110	100

Background Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 shows among other things that more males than females responded to the questionnaire. This could be due to the fact that most of the women are traders and would have left before the researcher got there. The distribution in terms of percentage is 70% for males and 30% for females. The figure also shows the age distribution, denomination, and educational levels of the respondents. The age bracket of 31-40 recorded the highest number of responses of 32 with a percentage of 29.1% in terms of denominational responses; the Mainline Protestant Churches (Methodist, Presbyterian, Anglican, and Roman Catholic) recorded the highest with a total of 47 responses accounting for 42.7%. The results also indicate that most of the respondents had their education up to Secondary School, 65 of the respondents representing 59.1%.

Table 2: Responses on Gye Nyame symbol (identification, meaning, when it is used)

Picture A		
	N	Percent
Name of symbol		

Gye Nyame	110	100
Total	110	100
Meaning		
All power belongs to God	5	3.6
Except God	94	84.5
Only God	11	9.1
Total	110	100
When used		
Only in difficult moments	8	8
All times	18	18
In all life situations	13	13
Difficult moments of life. When in a hot argument	7	7
When only God can do the impossible	3	3
When faced with life's challenge	10	10
When one is faced with difficult situations	26	26
When one is in trouble/ loss of hope	4	4
When talking about God's mighty works	6	6
When we know that only God can help us	5	5
Total	100	100



Fig. 1: Gye Nyame Symbol

The Adinkra symbols according to Isaac Boaheng and Adomako are ingenious and groundbreaking modes of communicating the worldview of the people associated with it.²⁹ The *Gye Nyame* symbol is the symbol that emerged as the most known and recognized symbol which agrees with Jasmine Danzy's position that it is the most popular of the symbols.³⁰ It recorded 100% recognition by the respondents out of the five selected symbols (Table 2). *Gye Nyame* according to Boaheng and Adomako is derivative of the Bono-Twi aphorism "*Abodee santann yi firi tete; bi nte ase a onim n'ahyeasee, na bi ntena ase nkosi n'awiee, Gye (se) Nyame*" ("This great panorama of creation dates back to time immemorial; no one lives who saw its beginning and no one will live to see its end, except God). The "multi-vocal" nature of the symbols as observed by Owusu might have accounted for the multiple suitable times for its usage.³¹ In all 26 respondents representing 26% of those who gave the time for the usage of the symbol indicated that it was useful when one is faced with difficult situations. This means that in such moments, the people recognize the Supremacy of God and admit that he alone can deliver them from their predicament. *Gye Nyame* literally means "except God," "only God" and or "all power belongs to God." This indicates the respondents' total or whole dependence on God. 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.

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ Jasmine Danzy, "Adinkra Symbols: An Ideographic Writing System" (Stony Brook University, 2009).

³¹ Owusu, "Adinkra Symbols as 'Multivocal' Pedagogical/Socialization Tool."

This supports the position of Asamoah that the Akan traditional religious values portray the exact situation for the Supreme Being. The Supreme Being is the highest reference of authority and is identified as “Onyankopon” or “Onyame” in Akan. The *Nyame* of the Akan is also known to have power over everything hence their reliance on him for deliverance. For instance, Gyaman was not defeated by Asante in battle and never became a vassal state to the Asante Kingdom despite the numerous warring encounters; this they attributed to the protection and help from the Supreme Being.

The extensive usage of the *Gye Nyame* could be attributed to the fact that the symbol has moved from being just a pictograph into an oral vocabulary. The expression, *Gye Nyame* is used by people in their daily conversations; the symbol is easy to relate with and since the Akan is very religious as posited by Mbiti and supported by Rattray, they find it expedient to interweave their daily conversations with it.³² The symbol also serves as a prayer to the Supreme Being and calls for his divine intervention in the issues of life. The symbol’s meaning ‘except God,’ gives all the power to *Nyame*, and that speaks volumes; sometimes people say *m’agyaɛ ama Nyame* (I have left everything to God) sometimes in exchanges and accusations and counter-accusations. Charles Marfo, Kwame Opoku-Agyeman and Joseph Nsiah concur by pointing out that *Gye Nyame*, signifies the omnipotence and immortality of God, the reason why people will leave their difficult matters in his hand.³³

Biblically, the book of Exodus 3: 7, 8, indicates the supremacy of God and his ability to deliver his people (the Jews) from their suffering in Egypt. According to the account God delivered his people and brought them out of Egypt with Moses as the leader. In verses 14 and 15, God answered Moses when he asked for his name and said his name was *Eheyeḥ asher Eheyeḥ* 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.³⁴ 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.³⁵ The deliverance of Gyaman from the numerous wars and seemingly safe passage through the forest was typical of the redemption people receive through Christ, in which Jesus came down from heaven to deliver us. The symbol, *Gye Nyame* was fashioned to communicate their story of deliverance, protection and continued existence in the face of dangerous situations because of the powerful security of *Nyame* (God).

Table 3: Responses on *Nyame nnu na mawu* symbol (identification, meaning, when it is used)

Picture E		
	Frequency	Percent
Name of symbol		
Cross	1	2.3
<i>Nyame nnu na ma wu</i>	42	95.5
Soul	1	2.3
Total	44	100.0
Meaning		
Because God can't die, I will also not die	9	21.4
God does not die so I will not die	28	66.7
Perpetual existence of God	4	9.5
Spirit of man when people die	1	2.4
Total	42	100.0

³² Daniel A Brown, “African Theology En Route: Papers from the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17-23, 1977, Accra, Ghana. Edited by Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979. X+ 214 Pages. \$7.95,” *Horizons* 7, no. 2 (1980): 353–54.

³³ Charles Marfo, Kwame Opoku-Agyeman, and Joseph Nsiah, “Symbols of Communication: The Case of Àdìnkra and Other Symbols of Akan,” *Language Society and Culture* 32 (2011): 63–71.

³⁴ Finis Jennings Dake, “Dake’s Annotated Reference Bible” (Dake Publishing, 1989).

³⁵ Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 African Scholars* (Zondervan Academic, 2010).

When used		
All times in life especially difficult moments	6	16.7
Life-threatening moments	15	41.7
When faced with a difficult situation	11	30.6
When you are downhearted	4	11.1
Total	36	100.0

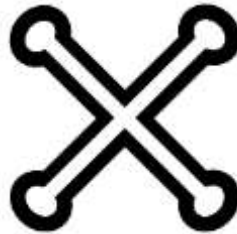


Figure 2: *Nyame nnnwu na mawu* symbol

Nyame nnnwu na mawu is a symbol of the Immortality and perpetual existence of God and for that matter the souls of the people who follow him. The symbol appears to be very popular among the respondents, 42 representing 95.5% identified it correctly with only 2 respondents representing 2.3% not being able to do so. This could be attributed to the fact that people in Africa are particular about death-related issues. Mark Shaw, corroborates with this position in “The Kingdom of God in Africa” and highlights that despite Egypt’s access to the 600 mile Nile River which feeds its farmlands and animals, it is obsessed with death and the afterlife.³⁶ Shaw posits that if anyone was called upon to sum up Egyptian civilization in terms of a single monument, “a tomb would be the inevitable choice.”³⁷ The great pyramids of Egypt are an elaborate one and one of their revered gods, Anubis was the god of embalmment. This shows how Africans pay attention to the dead. The word Adinkra which the symbols are named after means farewell or it was largely used when bidding farewell to the dead. Hitherto, it was associated with mourning the dead. On the symbol’s meaning which is “God does not die so I will not die”, 28 respondents (66.7%) were able to identify it rightly. The next group of respondents who followed closely also almost had the exact meaning-“Because God cannot die, I will also not die” 9 respondents representing 21.4%.

On its uses, 15 respondents (41.7%) and 11 respondents (30.6%) indicated that it was useful during life-threatening moments and when one was faced with difficult situations in life respectively. Declaring that because God does not die so you will not die encourages and emboldens the adherents to face life with the hope that no harm will befall him/her. Also, 11 respondents (30.6%) indicated that the symbol was useful when one is faced with difficulties in life. The symbol becomes a spiritual resource for the individual to draw strength and assurance from *Nyame* to face the difficulties of life and eventually overcome them. The symbol represents the belief in the perpetual existence of man’s spirit. The Africans view life as being circular unlike the Western concept of linear time and by implication the Akan belief is that death is not the end of human life.³⁸

Table 4: Familiarity of symbols to the respondents

Symbols Familiarity		
Symbols	N	Percent
Symbols Familiar with		
A Gye Nyame	110	100.0

³⁶ Mark R Shaw, *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A Short History of African Christianity* (baker books, 1996).

³⁷ Shaw, *The Kingdom of God in Africa*, 13.

³⁸ Ida Korkor Kumoji, “Adinkra: Integration of African and Western Cultural Visual Vocabulary,” 2005.

B Nyame Dua	87	79.1
C Onyankopon Adom Nti Birbiara Be ye yie	19	17.3
D Nyame Nti	43	39.1
E Nyame Nnwu na Mawu	38	34.5
Preacher ever used symbols in delivering a sermon	-	
Yes	56	50.9
No	54	49.1
Total	110	100.0
Found adinkra anywhere in the church		
Yes	43	39.1
No	67	60.9
Total	110	100.0
Symbols usually found		
Gye Nyame	33	76.7
Nyame_nti	5	11.6
Nyame_dua	17	39.5
Anywhere in the community where the adinkra symbol is found	-	
No	25	22.7
Yes	85	77.3
Total	110	100.0

The fieldwork revealed that the *Gye Nyame* symbol was very popular among the respondents (Table 6), an outcome that corroborates with Danzy.³⁹ Its popularity was 100% (110 respondents), this could be attributed to the fact that the symbol has moved from being just a pictograph into an oral vocabulary. The expression *Gye Nyame* could be heard in most conversations every day, thus, assuming prominence among its peers. The symbol is easy to relate with and since most Africans and for that matter Akan are very religious as posited by Mbiti and supported by Rattray, they find it expedient to interweave their daily conversations with it.⁴⁰ Also, it serves as a way of praying, by acknowledging and inviting *Nyame* to intervene in their situations. The symbol's meaning 'except God,' gives all the power to *Nyame*, and that speaks volumes; sometimes people say *m'agya ama Nyame* (I have left everything to God) sometimes in exchanges and accusations and counter-accusations. The expression, when used calms down tempers and leaves the matter for God who is seen as all-powerful and all-knowing to decide and to some extent shows who is saying the truth. Charles Marfo, Kwame Opoku-Agyeman, and Joseph Nsiah concur by pointing out that *Gye Nyame*, signifies the omnipotence and immortality of God, the reason why people will leave their difficult matters in his hand.⁴¹

To the Akan, *Nyame* is objective in his dealings with man and abhors mischief, so depending on him is safe and reliable. In the view of Robert Owusu Agyarko, the concept of God as the originator of the world and of man and the one who has supremacy over all matters is original to the Akan.⁴² This is firmly rooted in the religious beliefs of the Akan people of Ghana and most African societies. The symbol *Nyame nnwu na mawu* recorded 38 (34.5%), its popularity among the respondents is quite low. This could be attributed to the fact that the symbol is not normally used as the *Gye Nyame*. The complex nature of the symbol could also be a factor for the low popularity.

On the question of whether a preacher of the gospel ever use any *adinkra* symbol in his/her sermon to them before, 56 representing 50.9% said yes while 54 respondents representing 49.1% said

³⁹ Danzy, "Adinkra Symbols: An Ideographic Writing System."

⁴⁰ Brown, "African Theology En Route: Papers from the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17-23, 1977, Accra, Ghana. Edited by Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979. X+ 214 Pages. \$7.95."

⁴¹ Marfo, Opoku-Agyeman, and Nsiah, "Symbols of Communication: The Case of Adinkra and Other Symbols of Akan."

⁴² Owusu Agyarko, "God of life: Rethinking the Akan Christian concept of God in the light of the ecological crisis,"2.

no. Even though the majority said yes the difference is very small. This could mean that a greater percentage of the clergy in the study area lack a proper understanding of the symbols and may have different views about the symbols. The Adinkra symbol in addition to its deep theological and philosophical significance also has an aesthetic feature which makes people decorate walls in homes, churches and corporate places with it. The fieldwork also sought to find out the presence of the symbols in churches, 67 respondents (60.9%) indicated that they had not seen it in a church environment before while 43 (50.9%) claimed to have seen it in a church before. Ossom-Batsa and Appah report that some Christian religious bodies such as the Methodist Church of Ghana, the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, and the Roman Catholic Church of Ghana have either adopted some as logos or are included in the designs of clergy vestments. In some instances, they are incorporated into the architectural designs and liturgical art of the churches.⁴³ The absence of symbols in the architecture and the vestment of the church could be because of the lack of appreciation of the role that the symbols could play in the liturgy of the church. The respondents indicated that the common symbols found in the church were *Gye Nyame* 33(76.7%), *Nyame Nti* 5(11.6%) and *Nyame Dua* 17 (39.5%). These responses from the respondents show the strong attachment of the church to the *Gye Nyame* and *Nyame Dua* adinkra symbols. The church uses it to communicate the power of God that is available to protect them and ward off bad omens and thus calls on the faithful to worship him. As to the visibility of the symbols in the community, 85 respondents (77.3%) indicated that they could see some in the community. However, 25 (22.7%) said they did not see the symbols in the community.

Table 5: Respondents view on symbols that are usually found in the community

	N	Percent
Symbols usually found		
<i>Nyame Dua</i>	22	25.9
<i>Sankofa</i>	14	16.5
<i>Nyame Nwu Na Mawu</i>	12	14.1
<i>Nyame nti</i>	4	4.7
<i>Onyankopon Adom Nti Biribiara Beye Yie</i>	4	4.7
<i>Abosom</i>	1	1.2
<i>Akofena</i>	1	1.2
<i>Nyame biribi wo soro dwaneben</i>	1	1.2
Adinkra symbols communicate religiosity or belief in God		
No	16	14.5
Yes	94	85.5
Total	110	100

The Ntonso community is home to the Adinkra symbol and so one would expect the conspicuous display of the symbols. Danzy asserts that more often than not the symbols are not recognized for their unique meanings but rather for their aesthetic features.⁴⁴ In addition to the Adinkra Craft Village, there are scattered artisans who are into the printing of the symbols; the activities of those outside the centre are on a higher scale than that of the Centre. The fieldwork showed that *Nyame Dua* (25.9%), *Sankofa* (16.5%) and *Nyame Nnwu Na Mawu* (14.1%) were the 3 top symbols that the respondents could identify in the community. Also, 94 respondents (85.5%) indicated that the adinkra symbols communicate religiosity. The Akan are a very religious people and have a strong belief in the

⁴³ 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): 261–78.

⁴⁴ Danzy, "Adinkra Symbols: An Ideographic Writing System."

Supreme Being.⁴⁵ The adherents are convinced that there is an immortal Supreme Being *Nyame* somewhere who disciplines wrongdoers, blesses those who do good, and provides for the needs of people. Agyarko cites Bediako and Pobee as saying that God is not foreign to the Akan and maintains that *Nyame* is none other than the Christian God.⁴⁶

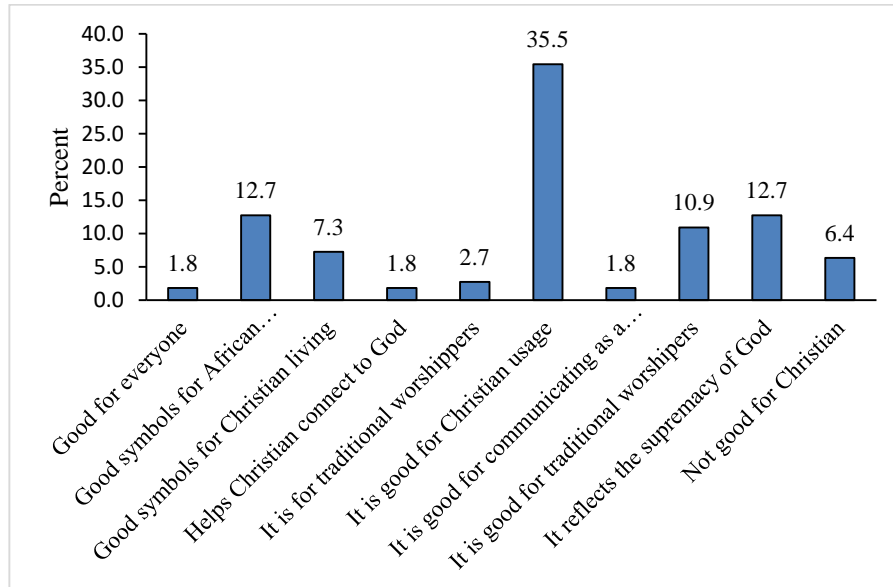


Figure 3: Christian perception of Adinkra symbols

On the perception of Christians regarding the Adinkra symbols in Figure 1 above, 35% of the respondents indicated that it was good for Christian usage, and 12.7% said it was good for African Christians. There were others who perceived that the symbols were not good for Christian usage: 6.4% not good for Christians, 10.9% good for traditional worshippers, and 2.7% it is for traditional worshippers. Regarding the concerns and perceptions of the respondents on seeing the symbols as not fit for Christian use Amoateng admits that symbolic theology will have some limitations. Amoateng intimates that people may entertain the fear that its close connections to traditional culture may possibly dwindle the connotation of Christianity as a new, better, truer religion.⁴⁷ Amoateng contends that this perception may in turn more easily foster unsolicited religious syncretism.⁴⁸

Ossom-Batsa and Appah quoting Jensen categorize the subject of early Christian art into four distinct groupings i.e. subjects borrowed from the pagan religious world that were given new Christian meanings, religiously neutral images based on traditional decorative motifs given particular Christian symbolic significance, narrative-based images drawn from favorite biblical stories and finally portraits of Christ and the saints, which occurred later.⁴⁹ The Adinkra symbols though might not have been created with Christianity in mind pointed to *Nyame* who is the same as the Christian God as observed by Bediako and Pobee as quoted by Agyarko.⁵⁰ Thus holding these symbols as Christian symbols may help them relate with their *Nyame* better than the Western symbols. The Apostle Paul in the Book of Acts 17:23

“For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship,

⁴⁵ Ronald Osei Mensah, “The Philosophical and Sociological Implications Behind the Adinkra Symbol ‘Nyàmé Ñwú Nà Mawù,’” *Mensah, Ronald Osei, The Philosophical and Sociological Implications Behind the Adinkra Symbol ‘Nyàmé Ñwú Nà Mawù’* (September 8, 2020), 2020.

⁴⁶ Owusu Agyarko, “God of life: Rethinking the Akan Christian concept of God in the light of the ecological crisis,” 6.

⁴⁷ Kofi Amoateng, “Engaging Theology and Theological Education in the Majority World: Recognizing Visual and Symbolic Theology from the Akan People’s Illustrations,” in *Global Forum on Arts and Christian Faith*, vol. 6, 2018.

⁴⁸ Amoateng, “Engaging Theology and Theological Education in the Majority World,” 40.

⁴⁹ Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, *Rethinking the Great Commission: Incorporation of Akan Indigenous Symbols into Christian Worship*, 264.

⁵⁰ Owusu Agyarko, “God of life: Rethinking the Akan Christian concept of God in the light of the ecological crisis,” 6.

I found also an altar with this inscription, To the unknown god.
What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you” (ESV)

The symbols, before the advent of Christianity, might have communicated something else but became clearer when Christianity came to Ghana. Much as the same way, these people in Athens were worshipping God through those displayed objects *Sebasma* in Greek but were redirected by Paul. This could be the situation for the adherents of the Adinkra Symbols based on the positions of Bediako and Pobee as quoted by Agyarko.⁵¹

Response from the Clergy on Adinkra symbols

In all, twenty (20) questionnaires were administered to the Clergy of which sixteen were males and four were females (Table 8). Female ministers appear usually few when compared to their male counterparts.

Table 6: Background Characteristics of Clergy Interviewed

Characteristics	N	Percent
Gender		
Male	16	80
Female	4	20
Total	20	100
Age		
21-30 years	1	5
31-40 years	11	55
41-50 years	5	25
51-60 years	3	15
Total	20	100
Denomination		
Mainline Protestant Churches	5	25
AICs	4	20
Charismatic	5	25
Pentecostal	6	30
Total	20	100
Education		
Primary	1	5
Secondary	10	50
Tertiary	9	45
Total	20	100
Size		
0-50	2	10
51-100	4	20
Above 100	14	70
Total	20	100

Most of the Ministers were aged 32-40yr (55%), 25% were 41-50yr, and 15% 51-60yr. Only one person was below the age of 30. The percentages of the ages are an indication that most of the Clergy were young. Seventy percent (70%) of the Clergy had a congregation above 100. Twenty

⁵¹ Owusu Agyarko, “God of life: Rethinking the Akan Christian concept of God in the light of the ecological crisis,” 6.

percent (20%) had a congregation numbering 51-100, and only 10% had less than 50 congregants. In terms of denominational representation of the clergy, Pentecostals were 6 (30%) while Mainline Protestant Churches and Charismatic were both 5 (25%). The African Instituted Churches (AICs) were 4(20%). In terms of education, most of the Ministers (50%) had up to secondary education, 45% tertiary and 5% primary education. The revolution in the growth of the church has seen many Pentecostal and Charismatic churches compared to AICs. According to Ositelu, all churches founded by Africans without direct links to “Missionary ‘godfathers’” are AICs.⁵² Although these African-based churches may have direct affiliation with the Adinkra symbols, the research area was not host to most of them.

Meanwhile, these African Instituted Churches have strong traditional bonds and important sources of social capital providing guidance and spiritual support.⁵³ Adewale observes that the AICs have significantly contributed to the expansion of Christianity in Africa and that their activities were a pure struggle to rediscover African Nationalism.⁵⁴ The educational level of AIC pastors is necessary as it conforms to what the bible admonishes believers in 2 Timothy 2:15 “Study to show thyself approved a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” Although close to half of them had tertiary education, more is expected as church leaders need to seek continuous growth in education which has the potential to increase church growth. Blackaby and Blackaby perceive pastoral education as being more critical and far more important than professional development.⁵⁵

Table 7: Identification, Understanding, Meaning, and Application of Symbols by the Clergy

	Name of Symbol	Meaning	When used
A	<i>Gye Nyame</i>	Except God Only God	All the time In a contentious state Times of trouble When counseling people in difficult situations When embarking on adventure When the situation is bad
B	<i>Nyame dua</i>	God's tree Protection of God The tree of God	For prayers and protection sacred place symbol It is used denote a holy or sacred place It symbolizes the presence of God and his protection It symbolizes the presence of the deity Praying and denotes a place of worship When someone needs protection When talking about God's goodness in relation to his provisions
C	<i>Onyame Adom nti</i>	By the grace of God all shall be well	Assuring yourself/ someone who want to give up in life
D	<i>Nyame Nti</i>	Because of God	All the time- talking to people about what God can do

⁵² Rufus Okikiolaolu Olubiyi Ositelu, *African Instituted Churches: Diversities, Growth, Gifts, Spirituality and Ecumenical Understanding of African Initiated Churches*, vol. 18 (LIT Verlag Münster, 2002).

⁵³ Sibusiso Masondo, “The Crisis Model for Managing Change in African Christianity: The Story of St John’s Apostolic Church,” *Exchange* 42, no. 2 (2013): 157–74, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1572543X-12341262>.

⁵⁴ Samuel A Adewale, “The African Church (Inc.), 1901-1986: A Synthesis of Religions and Culture,” 1988.

⁵⁵ Henry Blackaby and Richard Blackaby, *God in the Marketplace: 45 Questions Fortune 500 Executives Ask About Faith, Life, and Business* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2008).25.

			When telling or encouraging someone on the power of God
E	<i>Nyame nwu na mawu</i>		

According to Quarcoo, the Adinkra symbol shows that *Nyame* had been with the people from the beginning. This is evidenced in the fact that they interact with objects and symbols and that the introduction of the Bible and Christianity only came to confirm religiosity.⁵⁶ In identifying the symbols, 95% of the Clergy were familiar with the symbol *Gye Nyame* followed by *Nyame Dua* (65%), *Nyame Nwu Na Mawu* (25%), *Nyame nti* (20%), and *Onyankopon Adom Nti Biribiara Beye Yie* (5%). The symbols according to the Clergy are used in their daily interactions in instances such as counseling, praying, talking to people about God, depicting the holiness of God and in evangelism. Interestingly, 75% of the Clergy have ever used the symbol *Gye Nyame* in their sermons for various reasons including “demonstrating the power of God, God’s saving power, God’s deliverance and as encouragement for congregants to keep trusting God in everything”. This view of the clergy on the selected symbols is supported by Amoateng; he calls for an orientation toward missionary mediations that employ symbols to a large extent.⁵⁷ Amoateng calls on African theologians to employ symbols for their religious constructions since it is difficult to behold the religious life of an African without externals like gestures, symbols, and signs that depict deeper truths.⁵⁸

While some Clergy who have never used the symbols before, (20%) said they have no particular reason, 5% of them perceive that it has a traditional connotation (idol worship) and hence not fit for Christian use. On the whole, the Clergy perceive the Adinkra symbols to be good and useful for Christian use in everyday life and preaching.

Table 8: Symbols familiarity and usage by Clergy

	N	Percent
Symbols Familiar with		
<i>Gye Nyame</i>	19	95
<i>Nyame dua</i>	13	65
<i>Onyankopon Adom Nti Biribiara Beye Yie</i>	1	5
<i>Nyame Nti</i>	4	20
<i>Nyame Nwu Na Mawu</i>	5	25
Ever Used in Sermon Delivery	-	
Yes	15	75
No	5	25
Total	20	100
Symbol usually used		
<i>Gye Nyame</i>		
Reason for not using Symbol	-	
It has not occurred to me. His perceived to be related to idol worship too	1	20
No particular reason	4	80
Reason for using Symbol		
Demonstrating that it is only God has the power to make their dreams reality and not man (<i>Gye Nyame</i>)	1	6.7
Sermon that was aimed at encouraging the members of the supremacy of God and His ability to save them (<i>Gye Nyame</i>)	1	6.7

⁵⁶ Alfred Kofi Quarcoo, “*The Language of Adinkra Patterns* (Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, 1972). 57.

⁵⁷Amoateng, “Engaging Theology and Theological Education in the Majority World,” 38.

⁵⁸Amoateng, “Engaging Theology and Theological Education in the Majority World,” 38.

Many are the afflictions of the righteous but the love is able and He can deliver	1	6.7
Encourage the congregation about God's promise to do as promised	1	6.7
Our God is living so when we trust him in everything, he will surely do it (<i>Nyame nwu</i>)	3	20.0
Talking about eternal life	1	6.7
Telling the congregation about the fact that only God can do great things for them	6	40.0

Gye Nyame “except for God” is the symbol mostly known and used by the Clergy. *Gye Nyame* is symbolic of God’s omnipotence and hence people should not fear anything except God. This symbol could mean that “no one has seen the beginning of creations, nor will anyone live to see the end”. A similar observation is made by Quarcoo who believes that the symbol reflects the omnipotence and omniscience of God.⁵⁹ The attribute omniscience shows that God is all-knowing; He knows the past, present, and future. This position corroborates with that of Boaheng and Adomako, they indicate that the symbol highlights God’s omnipotence, omniscience and superiority.⁶⁰

Nyame Dua was the second most known symbol when it also came to the clergy. The response from the clergy on the familiarity with the symbol is not surprising as it speaks to their advantage when it comes to the need for people to revere the presence of God and the need to always come to the presence of God to access spiritual resources for daily life activities. The symbol symbolizes the presence of God where protection, deliverance and providence could be sourced.

“*Nyame nnu na mawu*” which literally means “God does not die so I will not die” According to Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al. suggest that it explains the immortality and perpetual existence of God.⁶¹ The soul in man is from God and will return to God when a person dies. This view is emphasized by Osei Mensah et al. They see a direct dependence of the people on God for both physical and spiritual needs.⁶² This is important for the Clergy who knew about the symbol hence its usage in their daily conversations.

⁵⁹ Quarcoo, A Debut of Ghanaian Traditional Visual Art into Liturgical Art, 57.

⁶⁰ Boaheng and Adomako, “A Costume Christology of Ghana’s Most Beautiful Reality Show,” 275.

⁶¹ Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Appiah and Nartey, “The Philosophy Behind some Adinkra Symbols and their Communicative Values in Akan,” 28.

⁶² Osei Mensah, “The Philosophical And Sociological Implications Behind The Adinkra Symbol ‘Nyame Nnu Na Mawu,’” 4.

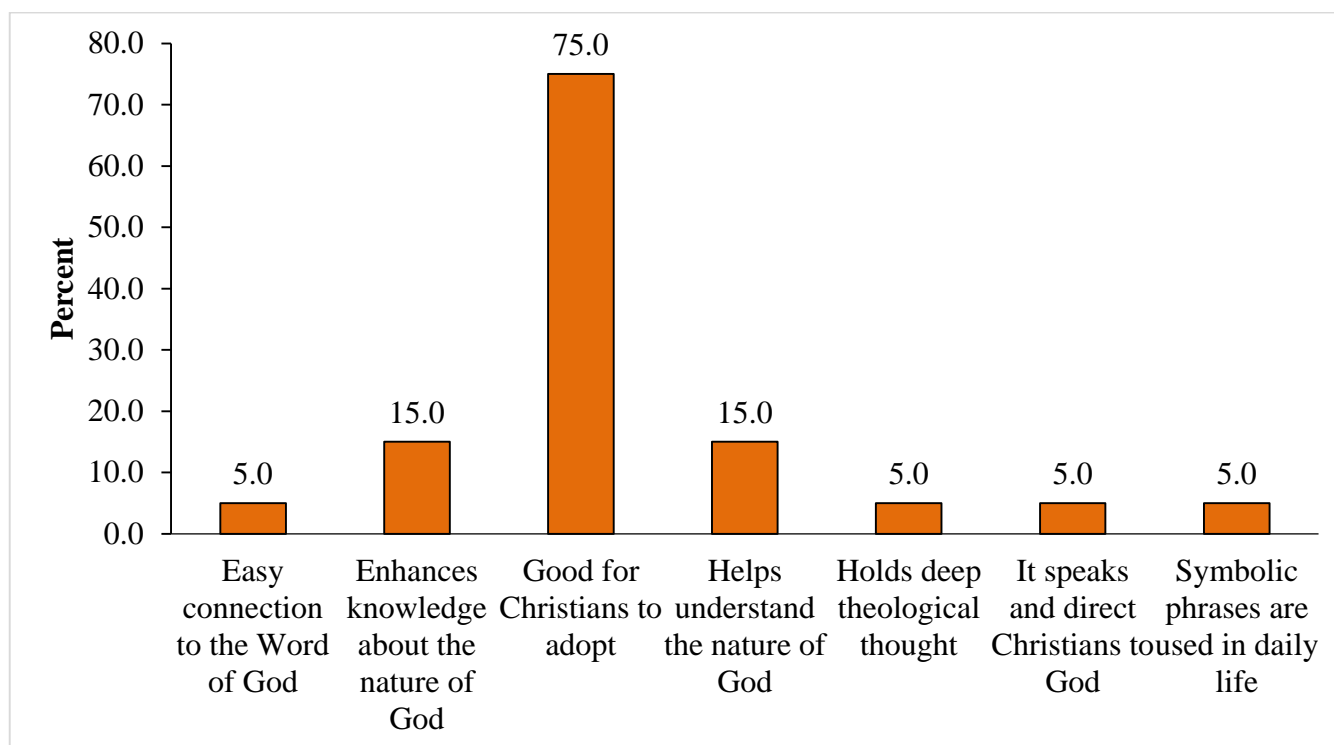


Figure 4: Showing the perception of Pastors regarding Adinkra Symbols

Further to the use of the symbols in the Church, the Clergy were asked about their perceptions concerning the Adinkra symbols. Figure 4 presents the various perceptions of the symbols to the group of Clergy interviewed in this work. A higher percentage (75) suggest that the Adinkra symbols are good for Christians to adopt while 15% of them think that the symbols enhance their knowledge or help to understand the nature of God.

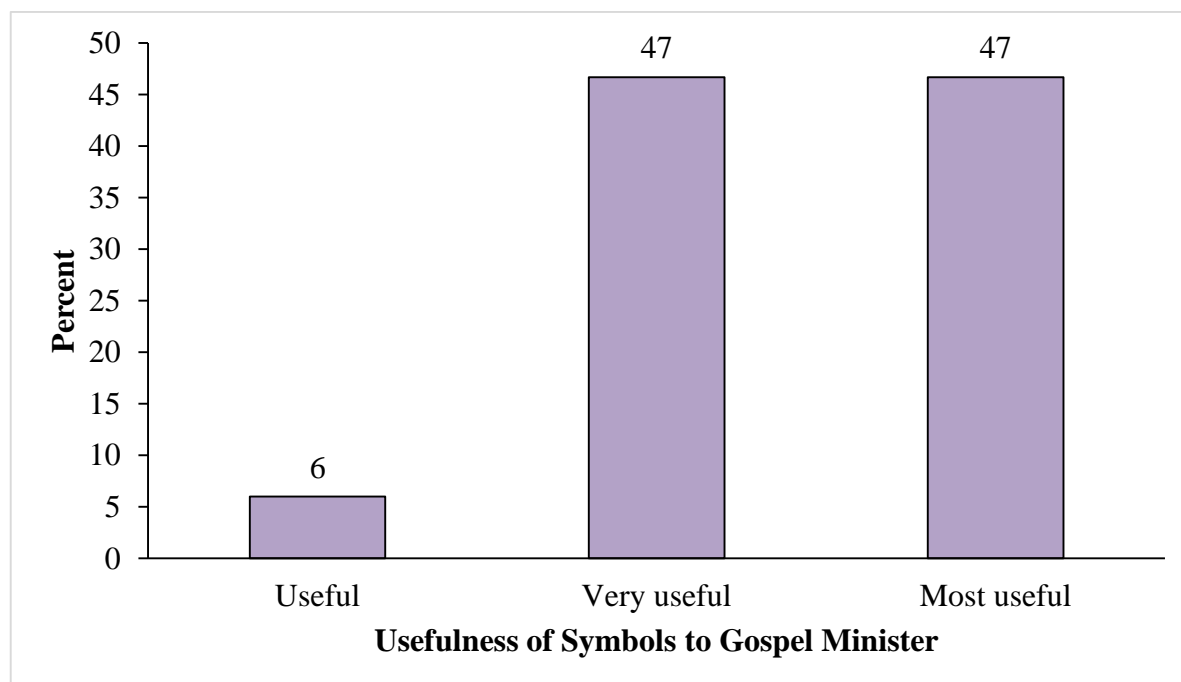


Figure 5: Showing perceived usefulness of the symbols

Figure 5 gives the usefulness of the symbols to the Clergy. While 47 of them rated it to be very useful, 47 also rated the symbols most useful. These ratings suggest that where necessary, the Ministers would adopt the use of Adinkra in their preaching/sermons. The figure shows that 94% of the clergy favors the symbol's adoption and use. This strong indication from the clergy that favors the adoption and use of the symbols in sermons was not seen in the responses of Christian respondents in the fieldwork. This could be a result of some resistance to the adoption and use of the symbols because of their historical origin. Ossom-Batsa and Appah observe that the integration of the Adinkra symbols into the worship life and liturgical art of the church has not been without challenges.⁶³ Ossom-Batsa and Apaah recount the resistance he faced from within the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations.⁶⁴ There still exist divergent views with regard to the symbols; most Christians still hold that Christianity is contradictory to the pre-Christian African tradition.⁶⁵ The church in Africa and Ghana is now faced with the task of reinterpreting their traditional religious culture in the light of Christian teaching.⁶⁶

Theological Reflection on *Gye Nyame*

Gye Nyame, is a symbol which 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.⁶⁷ Asamoah posits that the native sacred beliefs of the Akan depict the precise position of the omnipotent just like the biblical position of God.⁶⁸ "Onyankopon" or "Nyame" in Akan is the highest order of power and commands all the respect and authority. As earlier indicated in the previous chapter, the Gyaman people were never defeated by Asante in battle and never became a bond nation to the Asante State.⁶⁹ In an interview with the head of the Suma Traditional Area, he indicated to Amoateng that, the people of Gyaman believed that their ancestors owed their lives to God since he was the one who guided and protected them through their migration from Asante to their present location. The ascription of the smooth voyage of the Gyaman people to God in the dangerous jungles in those ages, as well as the numerous illnesses that endangered their existence, made them conclude that it all was the divine intervention of *Nyankopon* (God) who had saved them. The Supreme Being of heaven, who is incomparable in all spheres, had been gracious to them; the ancestors then began avowing his unparalleled majesty for the reason that they enjoyed his unrivaled and unmatched power of salvation

⁶³ Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, "Rethinking the Great Commission: Incorporation of Akan Indigenous Symbols into Christian Worship," 277.

⁶⁴ Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, "Rethinking the Great Commission: Incorporation of Akan Indigenous Symbols into Christian Worship," 277.

⁶⁵ Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, "Rethinking the Great Commission: Incorporation of Akan Indigenous Symbols into Christian Worship," 277.

⁶⁶ Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, "Rethinking the Great Commission: Incorporation of Akan Indigenous Symbols into Christian Worship," 277.

⁶⁷ Dickson Adom, "Adinkra: An Epitome of Asante Philosophy and History," *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 6, no. 14 (2016): 42–53.

⁶⁸ Emmanuel Foster Asamoah, "The Bible and Akan Traditional Religious Values: A Search For Dialogue," *Journal of Mother-Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics and Theology*, August 10, 2020, 81., <https://doi.org/10.38159/motbit.2020081>.

⁶⁹ Kofi Amoateng, "The Creedal Symbols of My Great Grandparents: The Adinkra Symbols Reveal the Theology of the Akan People of Ghana" (Asbury Theological Seminary, 2018).144.

throughout their journeys of life. The people experiencing God's protective power occasioned the mythology backing the "Gye Nyame" as a symbol.⁷⁰ This symbol expresses God's supremacy: 'God alone', 'apart from God, I don't fear anyone'. God alone basically indicates the adherent accepts God's supreme authority and the adherent does not fear what his/her adversaries can do but is ultimately concerned and dependent on the ultimate, God. This fundamental and root derivative meaning of the symbol conveys an indication that the "Gye Nyame" Symbol was fashioned after the experiences the people had with God and is to serve as a perpetual reminder of the supremacy of God.

The *Gye Nyame* symbol is used frequently and ubiquitously in Ghana and has been variously explained to mean 'Only God' or 'God alone'. The *Gye Nyame* symbol is a derivative of the saying "*Abode santann yi firi tete; obi nte ase a ɔnim n'ahyease, na obi ntena ase nkɔsi n'awiee, 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."⁷¹ The Akan people like all Africans are very religious and therefore had a relationship with God. Rattray informs that the referent God of the Akan people, the Akan, is the same as the God of the Bible.⁷²

Reflecting on the symbol on the basis of biblical text brings to light passages that corroborate 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 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 verses 14 and 15, God answered Moses when he asked for 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.⁷³ 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.⁷⁴ The deliverance of Gyaman from the numerous wars and seemingly safe passage through the forest was typical of the redemption people receive through Christ, in which Jesus came down from heaven to deliver us. The symbol, *Gye Nyame* was fashioned to communicate their story of deliverance, protection and continued existence in the face of dangerous situations because of the powerful security of *Nyame* (God). The *Gye Nyame* Adinkra symbol is a personification of the godly traits of all-knowing, all-powerfulness, and everlasting nature of *Nyame* among others.⁷⁵ It emphasizes that no one has authority other than *Nyame* and thus calls on people to revere only God. The symbol therefore requests for rigid monotheism, which is the acceptance that there is but only one God (*Nyame*).⁷⁶

Again, *Gye Nyame* symbol could be explained with the reply of the king in 2 Kings 6:27 the king replied to the woman by saying that if the Lord did not help her how was he going to be able to help her?". This clearly corroborates with the symbol that ascribes all power to *Nyame*. This verse showed that it was only God who could help the woman, the king was helpless and not in the position to help her. The historical antecedent of the symbol is one that shows appreciation for God and credence to the supremacy and omnipotence of God. The deliverance and protection that Gyaman received from God (*Nyame*) in their migration from Kumasi to Gyaman through the thick forest and the fact that they did not become vassals to the Asante Kingdom necessitated the creation of the symbol. They concluded that but for God, they would have become vassals to Asante or would not have survived the journey to Gyaman.

⁷⁰ Amoateng, "The Creedal Symbols of my Great Grandparents", 117.

⁷¹ Ossom-Batsa and Apaah, "Rethinking the Great Commission: Incorporation of Akan Indigenous Symbols into Christian Worship," 271.

⁷² Amoateng, "The Creedal Symbols of my Great Grandparents", 144.

⁷³ Dake, "Dake's Annotated Reference Bible."

⁷⁴ Adeyemo, *Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary Written by 70 African Scholars*.

⁷⁵ Boaheng and Adomako, "A Costume Christology of Ghana's Most Beautiful Reality Show," 275.

⁷⁶ Boaheng and Adomako, "A Costume Christology of Ghana's Most Beautiful Reality Show," 279.

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 on 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 to indicate their faith and reliance on God. 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 been 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 a further 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 correspond 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.⁷⁷

Theological Reflection on *Nyame nnu na mawu*

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.⁷⁸ This symbol, *Nyame Nwu Na Mawu* means "God won't die for me to die," and is a symbol that expresses the immortality of the human soul, expressing faith in God to preserve one's soul even after death. Kuwornu-Adjaottor et al explain that it is believed that during creation God the creator gave part of his soul, *okra* to mankind and that gave man life; and at death, the *okra* which is eternal goes back to God.⁷⁹ 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.⁸⁰ 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.⁸¹

The cosmological understanding at this juncture is that the Akan people have faith in the continuous survival of the soul (as God's creation) and that, when an individual dies, the soul still lives on. This God-themed symbol shows that the Akan people had serious thoughts 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. The Ghanaian society especially the Akan, believes in the Supremacy and

⁷⁷Amoateng, "The Creedal Symbols of my Great Grandparents," 263.

⁷⁸ Mensah, "The Philosophical and Sociological Implications Behind the Adinkra Symbol 'Nyàmé Ñwú Nà Mawù.'"

⁷⁹ Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Appiah and Nartey, "The philosophy behind some Adinkra symbols and their communicative values in Akan," 27.

⁸⁰ Osei Mensah, "The Philosophical and Sociological Implications Behind The Adinkra Symbol 'Nyàmé Ñwú Nà Mawù'" 4.

⁸¹ Osei Mensah, "The Philosophical and Sociological Implications Behind The Adinkra Symbol 'Nyàmé Ñwú Nà Mawù,'" 3.

the everlastingness of the Supreme Being - God. The belief that the Creator of the universe and mankind is immortal is held sacrosanct and therefore reflects the people's psyche.⁸²

Amoateng also suggests that the creators of this symbol had in mind to communicate the knowledge that God neither dies nor disappoints thus the need to believe in him for his constant protection and the sustenance of the race as enshrined in Malachi 3:6–7b which reads: “For I the LORD do not change; therefore, you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers, you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts.”

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”.⁸³ 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 relief of themselves from the task of defending 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 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.

CONCLUSION

This paper has revealed how the ideographical symbols i.e. Adinkra of the Akan people group help its users to socially relate with people and religiously connect with (*Nyame*) God. The paper makes a case for its adoption against the background that the level of literacy is low and thus makes it somewhat difficult for people to read and relate to the scriptures. Also, the familiarity of the people with these symbols makes it easier for them to understand when used for illustrations in homilies. Thus making a case for African symbolic theology which involves the use of cultural symbols to communicate biblical truths other than that of the Western

⁸² Osei Mensah, “The Philosophical And Sociological Implications Behind The Adinkra Symbol ‘Nyámé Nwú Nà Mawù’,” 3.

⁸³ Logan Murphy, “Exegetical Essay on Colossians 3:1-4,” Academia, accessed July 21, 2023, https://www.academia.edu/19468502/Exegetical_Essay_on_Colossians_3_1_4.

missionaries. The *Gye Nyame* and *Nyame Nnwu na Mawu* were the key symbols under consideration. The data from the study point out the appropriateness of the selected symbols for Christian use. The authors therefore hope that African theologians and clergy will adopt and use these symbols for the effective propagation of the gospel since symbols occupy a huge space in the epistemology and religious space of the African.

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ABOUT AUTHORS

Theophilus Effah Manu holds an MPhil in Religious Studies from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana. He is a Lecturer at the Ghana Chapter of the WorldWide Evangelical Seminary, Canada and the KingBridge Bible College. He is a strong advocate for the adoption and use of native symbols for theological discourses and an academic, conference speaker, a theologian and a missiologist.

Isaac Boaheng holds a PhD in Theology from the University of the Free State, South Africa. He is a Senior Lecturer in Theology and Christian Ethics at the Christian Service University, Ghana, and a Research Fellow at the Department of Biblical and Religion Studies, University of the Free State, South Africa. He has over hundred peer-reviewed publications.

Nathan Iddrisu Samwini holds a PhD in Islamic Studies from the University of Birmingham, UK. He is a Senior Lecturer and a former Dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Head of Department of the Department of Religious Studies at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology,

Kumasi, Ghana. He is also a Minister of the Methodist Church, Ghana and a past Bishop of the Tamale Diocese and currently the Superintendent Minister of the Nkoranza Circuit. He is currently the General Adviser of the Programme for Christian-Muslim Relations in Africa (PROCMURA) based in Nairobi, Kenya. He has written four books in interfaith studies and religious plurality and thirteen peer-reviewed publications and over thirty non-academic publications on sociology-religious matters.