ADINKRA IDEOGRAPHIC WRITING SYSTEM

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INTRODUCTION

Pre-colonial African societies are believed to have depended entirely on oral communication because it has been generally assumed they had not developed a recognizable form of writing (Goody, 1977, 1986). Even after phonetically-based and other writing systems were introduced through contact with outsiders, many African societies are believed to have continued to rely mainly on oral communication. Such critics of pre-colonial Africa tend to assume that writing takes only one form -- the phonetically-based form of writing, an example of which is the alphabetic system, and that all writing is linear. Non-linear and non-phonetically-based writing systems have come to be seen as inferior attempts at the real thing and, thus have been marginalized. Only recently has it been recognized that many writing systems in West Africa, the best known being those of the Vai in Liberia (Scribner and Cole, 1981; Pilaszewicz, 1985) and Mende (Bledsoe and Robey, 1986), for example, were developed outside of the Western context.

Writing is a system of conventional signs which can be used to store and transmit a specific content. All writing is information storage. While human memory can serve as a storage of information, throughout time, human memory has been found inadequate in storing all information. Writing system serves not only as adjunct for the storage of information. It also serves to broaden the scope and amount of information to be stored, and also facilitates the utilization of more efficient and independent storage media that enhance timely retrieval and transmission of the information by all those who can consult and decode it. If all writing is information storage, then all writing is of equal value. Each society stores information essential for its survival (Gaur, 1992).

Fraenkel (1965, p. 7) defines writing as "an acquired arbitrary system of visual marks with which people who know the represented language can communicate." Street and Besnier (1999) indicate that there are three major writing systems recognized as logographic (or ideographic), syllabic, and alphabetical writing systems. Hunter and Whitten (1976, p. 409), on the other hand, view writing as "communication by means of a system of conventional graphic symbols which may be carved, incised, impressed, painted, drawn, or printed in a wide variety of media." According to Hunter and Whitten (1976), writing systems may be grouped as those that are based on pictographs (pictorial signs or pictograms), ideographs (or ideograms), and phonographs (or phonograms). While pictographic and ideographic writing systems tend to be non-linear, phonographic writing systems tend to be linear.

Pictographic writings are recognizable pictorial representations. Although they may be highly stylized, there is a clear representational link between the symbol and the meaning. Pictographs represent things, not linguistic forms. Pictographs have a semantic rather than a phonetic value. If the conventions are understood, they can be read in any language (Hunter and Whitten, 1976, p. 409). In that respect, pictographs can be used conveniently to store and communicate information to a multilingual public or in environments where reliance on alphabetic-based writing is impractical (see Table 1).

Table 1: Pictograms and Ideograms

Ideographs or ideograms represent things or ideas, though not necessarily pictorially. Ideographic signs may be pictographic in origin, but they usually have broader ranges of meaning. Ideograms involve a closer relationship with language than pictograms in that the extensions of meaning assigned to the symbols follow the semantic domains of a language (Hunter and Whitten, 1976). Since their association with meaning is not mediated by the representation of sounds, they can be pronounced in any language. The numeral 5, for example, stands directly for an idea - a number, but does not have a phonetic value. It can be represented by a tally -- ///// or by V or the fingers (digits) on a hand. It can be pronounced *cinque* or *cinq* or *anum* as well as *five*. The word *five* is a phonetic symbol, while the numeral 5 has a semantic value. The musical notes, mathematical symbols such as infinity (∞) and greater than or equal to ($\geq$), some aspects of Egyptian hieroglyphic and cuneiform are often given as examples of writing systems that make use of pictographs and ideographs. Rock art and cave paintings and stained glass paintings are also well known examples of pictographic and ideographic writing systems. M. Màle (1919) is said to have viewed the medieval cathedral with its stained glass paintings, "as a book of stone in which were recorded for the ignorant all teachings of the Church in natural science, philosophy, morals, and history ... (Cited in Read, 1973, p. 24).

Writing systems are generally believed to be successors of the so-called proto-writing, i. e., early ideographic or mnemonic symbols. Gelb (1963), followed by Coulmas (1989), DeFrancis (1989), and others, distinguishes "full writing" systems from their "forerunners" as having gone beyond pictures/icons and mnemonic devices to a firm relation between symbol and sound.

A primitive [picture/icon] writing can develop into a full system only if it succeeds in attaching to a sign a phonetic value independent of the meaning which the sign has as a word. This is phonetization, the most important single step in the history of writing. In modern usage this device is called "rebus writing" (Gelb, 1963, p. 193-194).

Gelb attaches a developmental directionality to writing systems (p. 210) starting from picture writing through 'word-syllabic', and 'syllabic' to 'alphabetic' systems. With racist overtones, he considers alphabetic writing to have 'conquered the world' (pp. 183-189).

Phonologically-based script follows not ideas but the spoken linguistic forms (sounds of speech) for them. Phonological script has an intimate relationship with a language. It is focused on the minimal units of representation, that is, the graphemes of the system. Rebus writing, syllabic systems (e.g., logographs), and alphabetic writing systems are examples of phonologically-based scripts (Hunter and Whitten, 1976).

In an alphabetic system of writing, for example, one symbol or one letter is used to represent each significant sound (phoneme) in a language. The relationship between the visual and the auditory codes in the alphabetic writing is arbitrary. The letter does not have any inherent meaning on its own; it only represents a sound.

Most alphabetic systems of writing do not actually achieve the one sound to one symbol principle but do represent most of the sound system of the language with a combination of letters from a very small set of symbols. The English language, for example, has 26 letters that are used in combination to produce 45 phonemes. The symbol "c", for instance, is used to represent the following distinct sounds: [s] as in <u>c</u>ent, <u>c</u>enter or <u>c</u>ensus; [k] as in <u>c</u>alm, <u>c</u>ollege or <u>c</u>ost; and [tʃ] as in <u>c</u>hurch, <u>c</u>hin or <u>c</u>hapel. The combination of letters of the alphabet is best understood when it is in a linear form to be read from left to right (or vice versa) and up and down. But even that does not explain the logic behind spelling in the alphabetic system of the English language. As Diamond (1994) illustrates, what is the logic for spelling the word "seed" as we do instead of "cede" or "sied?" Or why the sound "sh" cannot be written as "ce" (as in ocean), "ti" (as in nation), or as "ss" (as in issue)?

Literacy on a mass scale is much enhanced in a writing system that uses very few symbols. It is in this sense that one may say the alphabetically-based system of writing facilitates mass literacy. On the other hand, in Mandarin Chinese, the logographic system of writing that utilizes syllables requires the use of over 1500 basic characters. Literacy based on the logographic system of writing was, therefore, in the past limited to the elites (known as the *literati*) of the society.

The writing systems, according to the orthodox view (e.g., Goody, 1977, 1986, 1987; Goody and Watt, 1963; Ong, 1982), follow an evolutionary order from pictographs through logographic through syllabic to the alphabetic system. It needs to be pointed out, however, that the pictographic, ideographic, and phonographic forms of writing do not represent inevitable stages in the development of writing as no direct evolutionary line can be drawn from the pictographic to the phonographic writing system (Fraenkel, 1965). As Coulmas (1996, p. 334) points out:

> The principal function of all writing is to convey linguistic meaning, but writing systems vary greatly in how they encode meaning. In purely phonetic transcription, access to meaning is mediated through sound representation, while a purely ideographic notation bypasses representation of sounds, encoding concepts instead. Actual writing systems belong to neither of these 'pure' categories, but are located somewhere along a continuum which ranges from sound-centered to meaning-centered.

Thus writing utilizes codes that may be put on a continuum of pictograms on one end through ideograms to phonograms on the other end.

Most writing systems utilize some combination of the principles involved in each of the forms of writing. For example, in writing the English language with Roman alphabets, use is made of symbols such as "?" ; : , ! and "." for punctuation. These symbols do not represent sounds

in the language. They have semantic value as they enhance meaning in the context in which they are used. Also, in order to facilitate international travel through airports, phonologically-based writing is often combined with pictographs to indicate telephones, access for handicapped people, and to direct people to toilet facilities on the basis of gender. Road signs often incorporate all three systems of writing.

Andrew Robinson (2009, pp. 142-143) sums it up succinctly thus:

> Contrary to what many people think, all scripts that are full writing operate on one basic principle. Both alphabets and the Chinese and Japanese scripts use symbols to represent sounds; and all writing systems mix such phonetic symbols with logograms. What differs between writing systems – apart from the forms of their signs, of course – are the proportions of the phonetic signs and the logograms. Many scholars of writing today have an increasing respect for the intelligence behind ancient scripts. Down with the monolithic 'triumph of the alphabet', they say, and up with Chinese characters, Egyptian hieroglyphs, and Mayan glyphs, with their hybrid mixtures of pictographic, logographic, and phonetic signs. Their conviction has in turn nurtured a new awareness of writing systems as being enmeshed within societies, rather than viewing them somewhat aridly as different kinds of technical solution to the problem of efficient visual representation of a particular language. While I personally remain skeptical about the expressive virtues of pictograms and logograms, this growing holistic view of writing systems strikes me as a healthy development that reflects the real relationship between writing and society in all its subtlety and complexity.

Writing as a means of communication has been constantly evolved, particularly due to the development of new technologies over the centuries. The pen, the printing press, the computer and the mobile phone are all technological transformations which have altered what is written, and the medium through which the written word is produced. More so with the advent of digital technologies, for instance the computer and the mobile phone, characters can be formed by the press of a button, rather than making the physical motion with the hand.

Recent research into art forms and other material culture of various African societies has revealed that some societies such as the Akan did indeed develop and maintain certain forms of writing prior to contact with Europe (Hau, 1959, 1961, & 1964; McLeod, 1976; McGuire, 1980). Hau, in a series of articles that appeared in the French journal, Bulletin d'IFAN, uses the ivory carvings and other art work to make the claim that writing pre-dated Islam and the Europeans in certain parts of West Africa. McLeod (1976, p. 94) notes "that images in use" in Asante and "elsewhere in Africa also have a verbal component: proverb images are found among the Bawoyo, possibly among the Barotse and, as Biebuyck has shown in great detail, many of the figurines used among the Bwami are used to call to mind certain aphorisms and, most importantly, the form of these images can vary within wide limits while still having the same aphorism as their basic referent." McGuire (1980, p. 54), to cite another example, describes how the Woyo people of Cabinda used pot lids to create "a pictographic language to convey their feelings about specific situations."

The development of writing in Africa seen as a whole certainly predates the histories of European colonialism and Islamic conquest. Among Africa's ancient script traditions are the world's oldest known scripts, including the Egyptian "sacred carvings", the hieroglyphs (since

ca. 3000 BCE), and the other scripts and literacy/literary traditions found in the old Nile Valley civilizations, including Hieratic, Demotic, Coptic, Old Nubian, and Meroitic (Baines 1983). Those ancient scripts that are still (or again) in use today, include Ge'ez, Nsibidi and Tifinagh. In the Horn of Africa syllabic Ge'ez developed since 500 BCE as the liturgical language and holy script of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and survived until today as the common script for Amharic and Tigrinya in Ethiopia and Eritrea (cf. Hailemariam 2002; Asfaha 2009; Ashafa, Kurvers and Kroon 2008).

Niangoran-Bouah (1984) and Asante (1992, p. 73) distinguish three writing systems in Africa: (1) pictographs or pictograms, used in such areas as Zaire, Gabon, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic; (2) ideograms or ideographs such as the *adinkra* and *abramɔɔ* (or *djayobwe*) systems in Ghana and La Côte d'Ivoire (the Ivory Coast), the *nsibidi* system of east-central Nigeria, and the *sona* and *lusona* systems in Angola and Zambia; and (3) phonologically or phonetically-based scripts (phonograms or phonographs) used in places such as Ethiopia (the Ge'ez system), Liberia (the Vai syllabic system), Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Cameroon. Dalby (1986) provides extensive examples of various writing systems that have been developed in Africa from the ancient pictograms and ideograms, which form the root of all writing, through to the contemporary indigenous and international efforts to represent the sound system of African languages syllabically and alphabetically.

The recent exhibition – *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art* – developed by the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington, D. C. in association with the Fowler Museum at UCLA, together with accompanying book of the same title (Kreamer, et al, 2007), recognizes Africa's long engagement with written and graphic systems as part of the broader global history of writing and literacy. *Inscribing Meaning* highlights how Africans use scripts comprising interrelated symbols as writing and graphic systems to encode and transmit meaning. Some of these scripts are phonetic alphabets, while others are ideographic (Kreamer, et al, 2007).

THE AKAN

The Akan

The term Akan has been used to cover a wide variety of ethnic groups who occupy a greater part of southern Ghana and the south-eastern Ivory Coast. The groups constituting the culturally and linguistically homogenous Akan ethnicity include the Asante, Fantse, Akuapem, Akyem, Okwawu, Bono, Wassa, Agona, Assin, Denkyira, Adansi, Nzima, Ahanta, Aowin, Sefwi, and Baoulé (see Map). Together, these groups constitute over 40 percent of the country's population (Dolphyne and Kropp-Dakubu, 1988; Bodomo, 1996); and they dominate about two-thirds of the country's land area as Ashanti, Brong Ahafo, Central, Eastern, and Western Regions, and parts of the north of Volta Region (see map below). What is believed to have been the first modern day Akan empire, Bono, was established in the western area of present day Brong-Ahafo Region of Ghana before 1300 AD (Boahen, 1966; 1977). The Akan have unique cultural traits and institutions that set them apart from the other ethnic groups in the country in particular and Africa in general. The most significant traits and institutions include, as Adu Boahen (1966; 1977) points out, a common 40-day calendar (*adaduanan*), common religious beliefs, marriage institutions, naming ceremonies, matrilineal system of inheritance, and an identical exogamous matrilineal clan system.

Map of Ghana Showing Akan Speaking Area

The Akan of Ghana and La Côte d'Ivoire incorporated the ideographic and pictographic writing systems in their arts in such media as textiles, metal casting, woodcarving, and architecture. The Akan use of pictographs and ideograms reached its most elaborate forms in the king's court. As Kyerematen (1964, p. 1), has written about the Asante, for example:

> the regalia of Ghanaian chiefs have been of special significance in that they have not been merely symbols of the kingly office but have served as the chronicles of early history and the evidence of traditional religion, cosmology and social organization ... [and] it has been customary for the regalia to be paraded whenever the chief appears in state at a national festival or durbar, so that all who see them may read, mark and inwardly digest what they stand for.

Among the Akan of Ghana the regalia of the kingly office included wood-carvings (e.g., stool - *adwa*, umbrella tops – *kyiniie ntuatire*, and staffs - *akyeamepoma*), swords (*akofena*), and clothing (e.g., *kente, akunintam* and *adinkra*). These items in the king's regalia made use of pictograms and ideograms. The sets of pictograms, ideograms and signs encoded in the Akan cloths (*kente, akunintam* and *adinkra*), gold weights (*abramoɔ*, singular, *mmramoɔ*, plural), wood carvings (e.g.

stools and staffs), pottery, and architectural designs are clearly understood, as they have meanings commonly shared by the masses of the population. These art forms carry proverbs, anecdotes, stories, and historical events through visual form.

In this book a neglected area in the study of Akan cloths -- their function as a writing medium (Tsien, 1962; Mason, 1928) and thus, a storage and communicative device - is discussed. The book takes the view that mutually interpretable significant symbols need not be limited to spoken and written alphabets and syllables which eventually are strung together in sentences and paragraphs. Instead, communication can be accomplished through the use of discrete graphical representation of commonly held ideas and views. In this way, ostensibly, "non-literate" societies may produce, through the use of their symbols and signs, a literature which pervades their environment by being emblazoned on their clothes, tools, and other common material artifacts.

The arts of a people offer an illuminating view of its culture, and hence of its thought processes, attitudes, beliefs, and values. The art of a particular culture can reveal ever-changing human images and attitudes, so awareness of a people's indigenous art, visual and cultural symbols can become an important medium for cross-cultural understanding. "Just as written documents [that utilize phonographs] materialize history in literate communities," as pointed out by Fraser and Cole (1972, p. 313), "so in traditional societies, art forms make the intangible past more real." Some of these art forms like the *adinkra* cloth of the Akan utilize pictograms and ideograms (see Table 1), and are pregnant with text that symbolizes ideas on several levels of discourse. The focus of this study is to utilize the writing system of pictograms and ideograms encoded in the *adinkra* cloth to decode some aspects of the history, beliefs, social organizations, social relations, and other ideas of the Akan of Ghana.

SYMBOLS: A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

Clothes are used all over the world not only for protection and modesty, but also for the purpose of constructing socially meaningful messages about oneself. Clothes may also be worn by certain people to make ideological, political, and other kinds of socially relevant statements. In effect, clothes constitute a nonverbal language system and thus are of obvious relevance to semiotic inquiry, revealing how connotation operates in one specific domain of material culture. As Kathryn Sullivan Kruger (2001. p. 11) explains in *Weaving the Word*:

The relationship between texts and textiles is, historically, a significant one.
Anthropologists have long been intrigued at the various ways in which cloth embodies
   the unique ideas of a culture. They can trace the history of a culture through the
   record of its textiles, "reading" cloth like a written text. Indeed, this cloth transmits
   information about the society which created it in a manner not dissimilar from a
   written language, except in this case the semiotics of the cloth depend on choice of
   fiber, pattern, dye, as well as its method of production.

To this end, numerous researchers have approached clothing (and cloths) as a semiotic, cultural, and emotive phenomenon involving communication and meaning (Simmel 1957, Finkelstein 1991, Gonsalves 2010). Indeed, clothes and adornments are a significant cultural form through which our bodies relate to the world and to other bodies (Roach and Eicher 1965, Storm 1987, Craik 2005). Further, in every society and culture, clothing and dress is a form of projection through which signs and meanings are expressed and contested (Robson 2013). Here

then, dress is a sort of sociocultural syntax that may be "read" for connotative meanings and alternative systems of interpretation.

This book draws its theoretical perspective from studies of semiotics (and/or semiology) and metaphoric analysis. In general terms, *semiotics* is the science of signs and symbols and how we use them in our lives to infer and communicate meanings. Meanings and identities do not exist only as mental phenomena 'inside' people. They always arise and develop by the mediation of material tokens or signs of some kind: words, images, sounds or other perceptible external marks organized into various forms of artefacts, texts, works, genres and discourses. The science of semiotics encourages a systematic awareness of how meanings are expressed and interpreted from the vast amount of available data to which we are regularly exposed. Semiotics can help to make us aware of what we take for granted in representing the world, reminding us that we are always dealing with signs, not with an unmediated objective reality, and that sign systems are involved in the construction of meaning (Chandler, 2001).

Communication in the form of writing is based on the use of arbitrary symbols. Every society - be it pre-literate, literate, or post-literate - uses symbols and signs as a complement to spoken language and adjunct to human memory. Symbols have evolved to the point of universal acceptance in such areas as music, mathematics, computers, travel, and many branches of science. It now appears that in some important areas there is an increasing need for an adjunct to sophisticated speech, and the use of new (and in some cases, the revamping of old) symbols and icons to ease communication and facilitate international understanding.

Symbols provide the means whereby human beings can interact meaningfully with their natural and social environment. Symbols are socially constructed, and they refer not to the intrinsic nature of objects and events but to the ways in which human beings perceive them. Ott (1989, p. 21) says the following about symbols:

> Symbols are signs that connote meanings greater than themselves and express much more than their intrinsic content. They are invested with specific subjective meanings. Symbols embody and represent wider patterns of meaning and cause people to associate conscious or unconscious ideas that in turn endow them with their deeper, fuller, and often emotion-evoking meaning.

Symbols are important as they create, change, maintain, and transmit socially constructed realities. Charon (1985) and Ritzer (1992) identify several functions of symbols. Symbols allow people to deal with the material and social world by allowing them to name, categorize, and remember the objects that they encounter. Symbols also improve a people's ability to perceive the environment. They improve a people's ability to think. Symbols greatly increase human beings' ability to solve problems. While lower animals depend primarily on instinct and trial and error, human beings can think through symbolically a variety of alternative actions before actually taking one. The use of symbols allows people to transcend time, space, and even their own persons, that is, symbols allow people to imagine alternative realities (Charon, 1985; Ritzer, 1992). These functions of symbols imply that symbols can be manipulated (symbolism) and, thereby, can be used to create or impede social change.

In politics, for example, a number of scholars have written about how political symbols are utilized to maintain established power, status, and resource differentials (Edelman, 1964, 1971, 1988; Evans-Pritchard and Fortes, 1967; Elder and Cobb, 1983; and Hayward and Dumbuya, 1984). It is not so much the symbols themselves that are significant in politics, but the meanings that

people attribute to them. A national or party flag is more than a piece of cloth; it is used to evoke feelings of great loyalty, hostility, support or resentment. In India's political struggle for independence from British rule, Mahatma Gandhi was portrayed as the semiotician who used clothing as a metaphor for unity, empowerment and liberation from imperial subjugation (Gonsalves, 2012; Tarlo, 1996). How one dressed was very closely related to Gandhi's vision not only of the means Indians should use to achieve independence but also of the type of nation India should become. Central to that vision was homespun cloth known as *khadi*. Gandhi believed that making *khadi* would provide employment for many Indians, and contribute to the country's self-sufficiency, and eventually result in *swaraj* or self-rule. He worked very hard to get every Indian to spin his or her own cotton thread and to weave *khadi*. He often stated that wearing *khadi* was moral duty, a sign that a person had transformed his or her life and was now devoted to "self-sacrifice," "purity," and "fellow feeling with every human being on earth" (Tarlo, 1996). In other words, Gandhi's appearance in home spun cloth put forth two important political messages - the message of self–sufficiency and liberation from British colonialism.

Social life can proceed only if the meanings of symbols are largely shared by members of society. If this were not the case, meaningful communication would be impossible. The survival of human life is facilitated by communication. The means of communication and its constant improvement and development have been a major factor in the growth of human civilization. Communication among individual members of a social group enhances mutual understanding as individuals convey ideas, mental pictures, and concepts among themselves by verbal and non-verbal means. Language, the most complex form of the use of symbols, has become the primary medium through which a society's concepts, elements, values, and beliefs are communicated. Semiotics is thus useful for both verbal and non-verbal communication.

Even though communication within and among social groups comprises verbal and non-verbal means, over time human communication has increasingly concentrated on verbal means. With the development and increased use of alphabetized writing, verbal expression has become fixed as visual marks that represent sounds and meanings, and has come to be seen as a rationalized method of communication. This visible form of communication, that is, writing, used to be the preserve of the privileged few in many societies - for example, the clerical elite in many societies and the *literati* of the ancient Chinese civilization. With the development of printing and mass production of texts using the alphabetic system of writing, the visible form of communication has been democratized. The development and expansion of formal schooling has further stressed the importance of phonetically-based forms of writing as the hallmark of literacy. Despite the popularity of phonetically-based forms of writing, "signs and pictograms are still under development and will in future become an absolute necessity for the fixing and transmission of a world-wide fund of knowledge" (Frutiger, 1989, p. 342) for their utility lies in their independence from language.

In Akan art, verbal and non-verbal signs are used to produce meaning, which leads to the creation of social relationships, systems of knowledge, and cultural identity (Bezuidenhout, 1998). But when one refers to '*adinkra* cloth' of the Akan the word assumes the status of a symbol. It is laden with connotations that far exceed the meaning of the arbitrary sign 'c', 'l', 'o', 't', 'h'. It is culturally and historically specific. It is even given a name: *adinkra (or ntiamu ntoma)*. Its meaning does not easily fit the connotations attributed to, let us say, the cloth used in the Maoist or Zairian clothing revolutions. In course of time, this connotative specificity of symbols gives rise to a variety of possible interpretations, both within and without the culture of origin.

The first recorded account of the existence of Adinkra symbols is from a drawing of an Akan celebration in Thomas E. Bowdich's book *Mission from Cape Coast to Ashantee*, published in 1819. The British government sent Bowdich to Ghana in 1817, and his book that came out of his expedition was the first European account of the Ashanti people. The drawing from the book does not explain the origins of the Adinkra symbols, but it does illustrate that the Adinkra symbols and their adornment on clothing was already an established practice of the Ashanti people by the early 19th century, if not much earlier.

Understanding the semiotics in the Akan *adinkra* cloth must strongly take into cognizance the Akan worldview. This is because for the Akan, there is no happenstance, and life is one continuous whole without any break. The Akan believe in the cosmic realms of the world (*wiase*) and the great beyond (*asamando*) across which the human soul transmigrates respectively in body and spirit in processes of birth, death and reincarnation.

AKAN CLOTH SYMBOLS

In the days before printing and formal schooling as we know them now, the Akan society in Ghana was believed to have utilized only oral methods of communication for the transmission of knowledge and ideas. The Akan must have placed emphasis on the ability to influence by verbal skills and through the art of public speaking. This does not mean that they did not appreciate and did not utilize some visual markers as forms of writing. The Asantehene, for example retained the services of Arabic scribes (*ɔhene krakye*), yet honored the orator (e.g., the *ɔkyeame*) more than the scribe.

In this study an attempt is made to show how the "pre-literate" Akan of Ghana used their textiles (*adinkra* cloth in this book) as one of the media in a highly complex system of fixing, storing and transmitting that which was thought or spoken with pictures, symbols, signs, and signals. Not only are the symbols and patterns in the Akan textiles (*adinkra*) regarded as aesthetically and idiomatically traditional; more importantly, the symbols and patterns in the textiles constitute a code that evokes meanings: they carry, preserve, and present aspects of the beliefs, history, social values, cultural norms, social and political organization, and philosophy of the Akan. As Patton (1984, p. 72) notes: "The verbal element of these cloths makes them visual metaphors. The application of a phrase or word to an object it does not literally denote, to suggest comparison with another concept, is a recurring aspect of traditional Akan art. During important public occasions such as durbar, this visual metaphor reinforces traditional leadership roles." Metaphor, in this context, is much more than a figure of speech. As Hermine Feistein describes it:

Metaphor ... is now considered to be an essential process and product of thought. The power of metaphor lies in its potential to further our understanding of the meaning of experience, which in turn defines reality. In art and language, metaphor urges us to look beyond the literal, to generate associations and tap new, different, or deeper levels of meaning. The metaphoric process reorganizes and vivifies; it paradoxically condenses and expands; it synthesizes often disparate meanings. In this process, attributes of one entity are transferred to another by comparison, by substitution, or as a consequence of interaction (Feinstein, 1982, p. 45).

Like symbols, metaphor is integral to our communication systems and is equally shaped by its context. Metaphor carries concepts and is essential to language and the communication of abstract thoughts. In viewing the *adinkra* cloth as metaphor, it enables us to make sense of how the Akan use the *adinkra* cloth and its symbols as visual markers to express their beliefs, attitudes and thoughts. This perspective makes it possible for us to see how the Akan link words and images or how the Akan construct meaning by metaphorically transforming words into visual images.

The seminal work by Rattray (1927, pp. 220-268), based in part on an earlier work by Bowdich (1819), identified names and the symbolic meanings of several of the symbols and patterns in the *adinkra* and *kente* cloths. Rattray, however, failed to recognize that these cloths served as a medium for communication. McLeod (1981, p. 143) recognized that each of the cloths, "and the way in which each was worn, served to communicate a distinctive message, and the subtleties of its significance were widely understood." However, he too failed to elaborate on the communicative functions of the *adinkra* and *kente* cloths.

Other people who have written about *adinkra* cloth and its symbols continue to provide an elaborate catalog of hundreds of *adinkra* symbols yet fail to address the ideas, events, and beliefs of the Akan that these symbols encode. Mato (1986), for example, provides an extensive number of symbols in the *adinkra* cloth and the proverbs and meanings associated with these symbols. He points out that

As an art of public display *adinkra* images carried aphorisms, proverbs, symbols and metaphors expressed through visual form. As carriers of abstract or tangible information *adinkra* images were firmly rooted in the proverbial literature of the Akan. As a communicative system *adinkra* images carried Akan traditional wisdom regarding observations upon God and man, the human condition, upon things spiritual as well as the common-place and upon the unavoidability of death. *Adinkra* stamps [symbols] are therefore an example of the penchant and skill of the Akan to set proverb or verbal statement into visual form (Mato, 1986, pp. 228-229).

Mato notes that the *adinkra* cloth is an important form of funerary clothing, as well as clothing for other festive occasions. In connection with funerary rituals, he discusses some aspects of Akan cosmology. Mato, however, fails to elaborate on what he refers to as "symbolic literacy" (p. 223) as he does not go beyond the limited discussion of Akan cosmology to address other concepts and beliefs of the Akan (e.g., political beliefs, attitudes about money, social

values) and the Akan social organization that the *adinkra* cloth and its symbols, as "symbolic literacy," write about.

The collection of *adinkra* symbols in this book represents an attempt to open up the neglected realm of these "pictograms" and "ideograms" to the world of the reader's imagination in an organized manner. The present study views *adinkra* symbols as a system of visual marks -- a system of writing -- with which the Akan communicate. These visual marks serve to record, store and communicate certain information about the Akan. The study elaborates on the communicative aspects of Akan textiles by interpreting the encoded meanings of the *adinkra* symbols and signs, and also argues that the set of pictograms and ideograms of the Akan, as a way of writing, has been in daily use as an aid to thought, a means of comprehension, and a method of bearing witness or authentication. *Adinkra* symbols draw extensively upon traditional expressive genres that include folk songs, riddles and quizzes (*abrɔme ne ɛbisaa*), poetry (*awensɛm*), stories (*anansesɛm*), drum poetry (*kyene kasa*), libation and prayer (*apaeyie*), oral history (*abakɔsɛm* or *mpaninsɛm*), funeral dirges (*nsubaa* or *sudwom*), and proverbs (*mmɛ* or *mmɛbusɛm*). The *adinkra* symbols are utilized in this study as a multi-vocal metaphor to interpret the contextual meanings and functional uses of the symbols and signs developed by the Akan in their textile production and other visual media. This study links the narratives associated with the symbols in order to discuss some aspects of Akan viewpoints on a variety of issues.

The names and the interpretations of these symbols may also be useful for framing hypotheses for sustained research which looks at Akan cosmology, myths, histories, rituals, early public taxation and accounting systems, religion, folktale, political organizations, the role of the military in society, and daily customs. For the Akan in particular, as Cole and Ross (1977, p. 9) have noted, the relationship between the visual and the verbal is one of the cornerstones of their aesthetics. The identification of symbols and patterns embodied in Akan textiles in this study is just a first step in understanding the complexities of symbolism in Akan visual arts. As Ross (1977, p. 25) further points out, the highly conventionalized verbal component in Akan iconography demands a greater exploration of language, patterns of nomenclature, etymology, and the use of euphemisms, similes, and metaphors to fully appreciate nuances of meaning the Akan attach to their visual markers.

Analysis of the textile symbols and patterns of the *adinkra* cloth provided in this study will facilitate the understanding of how the Akan use this medium and writing system to record and store their beliefs, history, knowledge, and accomplishments. Such an understanding may help explain some of the changes and continuities in, for example, the bureaucratization of chieftaincy and new sources of wealth that have occurred and continue to occur in the Akan society. This study contributes to the view that a language includes the full spectrum of color, symbol, and word; that textile art and language are inextricably bound together; and that drawing, printing or weaving a symbol in cloth can make a legitimate and exciting involvement with literature and indigenous knowledge systems. Understanding such indigenous knowledge systems may help adult literacy program planners, for example, to utilize a people's symbols and signs to facilitate reading and writing of phonetic system among adults. The study of *adinkra* cloth symbols can also illuminate and help in the analysis of social and political organization of the Akan as well as of the greater Ghanaian society. Such an analysis may have value more generally for anyone involved in symbolic analyses within particular societies or cross-culturally.

Adinkra Ideographic Writing in Public Art in the United States and the Diaspora

Designers in modern times use Adinkra symbols in creating and decorating other accessories than cloth. Other artisans/crafts people such as sculptors, carpenters, and architects, and fashion designers also use the symbols to design their products. The following pictures depict the use of Adinkra symbols in public and street art in the United States and the Diaspora.

Adinkra Fence at Jamaica Emancipation Park

Adinkra Tower in St Louis, Missouri

This sculpture incorporates ancient African symbols known as Adinkra. Adinkra are symbols, originally created by the Ashanti people of Ghana in West Africa that represent proverbs or aphorisms (a concise statement of a principal). They are used in fabric printing, pottery decoration, logos, and architecture. In addition to their decorative functions, these symbols convey messages of traditional wisdom, attributes, and aspects of life or the environment. Devotion, strength, and wisdom are just a few of the 20 Adinkra symbols featured in this sculpture. A floodlight inside the tower's base illuminates the tower from the

inside, allowing it to function as a beacon of positive energy and cultural encouragement. Commissioned by Arts in Transit for Metro Transit St. Louis.

The African Burial Ground National Monument in Manhattan commemorates the earliest and largest known black burial site discovered in the United States. More than 15,000 free and enslaved Africans who lived and worked in colonial New York were buried here between the mid-1630s and 1795. The Adinkra symbol in the picture is Sankɔfa – Go back to retrieve.

Black Lives Matter Street Mural, New York City

The first word, Black, was designed by Tijay Mohammed, a Ghanaian-born artist, and used vibrant Kente fabric design and Adinkra symbols (such as Gye Nyame and Dɛnkyɛmfunafu), which represent concepts like the Omnipotence of God, royalty, unity and legacy.