

# A Phase Lifter on Traditional Symbols in the Ghanaian Textile Industry

Josephine Aboagyewaa – Ntiri  
Department of Design and Technology Education, University of Education, Winneba  
P. O. Box 1277, Kumasi, Ghana  
[iluvfabrics@yahoo.com](mailto:iluvfabrics@yahoo.com)  
Tel. +233 242880027

## Abstract

The global textile industry has grown in the past couple of decades and is expected to continue growing. This paper discusses ‘Adinkra’ traditional symbols; meanings, uses in fabric designs and the next stage in fabrics production in textile industries in Ghana.

Out of a large number of documented Adinkra symbols, Adinkrahene symbol was chosen for this research experiment because of its leadership role over other symbols.

An expository research design was used to throw more light on design innovations and also to educate the public on contemporary fabrics. Some of the findings were that, less sophisticated tools and equipment were used in designing processes and the skills involved were not much strenuous.

**Keywords:** Adinkra, screen print, embroidery, embellishment, laser-cut

## 1. Introduction

Design philosophy in any culture pulls its identity from its traditions, society and technology, “its genealogy embedded with its localized and indigenous traditions. The perception of a unique worldview is rooted within the confines of its localized habitat” (Shastri, 2007, cited in Shalini & Sibicham, 2011:4).

Made in Ghana textile fabrics, in its visual and tactile presentation perpetuates to be a part of the cultural and ethnic belief of most Ghanaians. There are a lot of locally made fabrics in the Ghanaian market for various uses, starting from households and beyond. Names such as proverbs, idioms and popular expressions, motif and colour of textile fabric are crucial to the choice of selection made by consumers. Picton (2004: 31) concurred to this, ‘once the sights of the designers in the Netherlands were trained upon this region of West Africa they quickly learned that the illustration of local proverbs added to the interest in these fabrics’. Again, Fletcher (2010) has established that clothes are much more than the fibre and chemicals needed to produce them. They are unspoken language and symbols, communication of culture, newness and custom.

Adinkra has been a known word because of its extensive usage in Ghanaian community, more precisely the Akan tribe. It can be seen all over Ghana in many products like, building blocks, plastic chairs, furniture, pottery, souvenirs as well as clothes. According to Williams (2011) Adinkra is a system of symbols and communication based on the spirituality and culture of the Akan people of Ghana while Danzy (2009: 4) described Adinkra as a writing system, an ideographic script, a script that has symbols that represent ideas.

The previous Ghanaian cedi currency notes contained a number of these cherished symbols. Tetteh (undated) confirms this assertion by adding that many business institutions in Ghana currently use the Adinkra symbols as their company logo or identity.

Adinkra is a word used to designate symbols which have figurative meanings that are used to beautify colourful cloth and other products in West Africa, especially Ghana. The symbols have meaning which are said to be deduced from various angles of life. These include themes of proverbs of the people, eminent historical events, expressions of particular human attitudes, noted animal behaviours, plants and abstract shapes of inanimate and synthetic entities (Unique Speak, 2005).

Although, many designers have used and repeatedly reproduced Adinkra symbols from different media in their various professional fields, none of them have made serious and conscious effort to modify these traditional symbols for contemporary use. The main objective of this study was to provide an exposition into innovative and contemporary Adinkra based textile designs.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research design

Expository research design was used to allow for a clear description of the phenomenon of innovation in Adinkra symbol and designs.

## 2.2 Procedure for designing contemporary traditional symbols

Expository design study was adopted for this section of the paper. Goddard & Melville (2007) explained that this type of research is created basically on existing information and through intensive reading on the field; a researcher can often advance an important new insight. The paper was to inform, educate and instruct on how to perform a task. With this aim in mind, pictures of designs and written text were clearly used to explain each stage as illustrations are as important as written text.

The researcher wanted to come out with innovative designs from the already existing Adinkra symbols, Adinkrahene symbol was selected to start with. This decision was taken because ‘hene’ in Twi language means chief, so Adinkrahene means chief of Adinkra symbols. The Akan tribe has deep respect for its royals and chieftaincy related issues. According to Sarpong (1974:65) “for everywhere in Ghana, a person in authority is considered to be sacred. Akan chiefs are enstooled by being placed three times on the stool of their most renowned of their predecessors. From that time onwards their person becomes sacred and they are addressed as Nana (grandfather or ancestor) by all, irrespective of their age”.

According to MacDonald (2001), the Adinkrahene symbol (Figure 1) symbolises greatness, charisma and leadership. The Adinkrahene is considered the leader of all the Adinkra symbols.



Figure 1: The Adinkrahene symbol.  
Source: MacDonald, (2001)

## 2.3 Inspiration on modification of Adinkrahene symbol

The designer had inspiration from laser cut technology because this fabric technique is in vogue. The latest garment trends coming from the runways show that many fashion articles are cut with lasers and the demand for laser cut textiles is high.

### 3.1 Stages in design development (Adinkrahene Ba design)

- A. The chosen symbol was printed out on violet card (Figure 2). Divisions were made on it with a pencil and a ruler. A cutting knife was used to imitate laser cut on selected portions (red). A white sheet was placed under the cut-out work to bring out the new design (Figure 3). Many cut works were made but this was chosen for the final work by many colleagues. Lines were used to outline the edges of the design because the design was to be placed on white paper and without lines the design would not be visible. Few crooked lines were straightened up and all the individual shapes were bordered with lines (Figure 4).

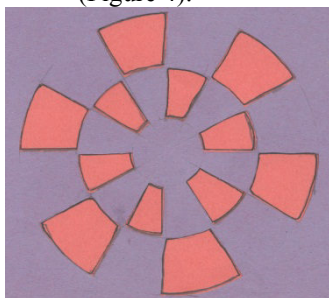


Figure 2: Source:  
Author's Own Construction

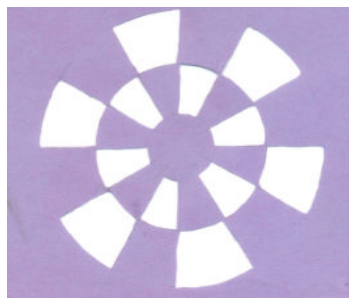


Figure 3: Source:  
Author's Own Construction

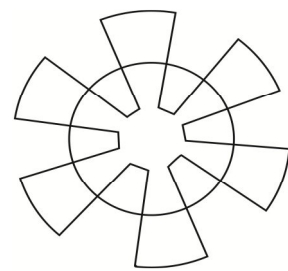
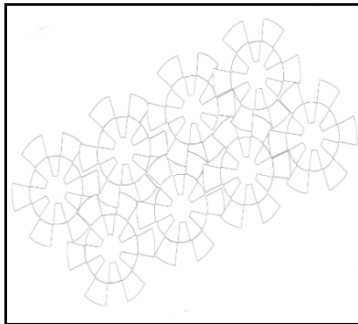


Figure 4: Source:  
Author's Own Construction

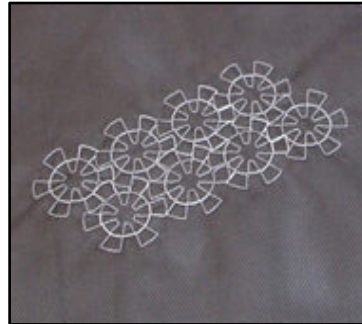
- B. Adinkraheneba was the name given to this new design (Figure 4). ‘Ba’ means a child in Twi language. So ‘Adinkraheneba’ is a child of Adinkrahene. In other words this design was created from the Adinkrahene symbol.

Two parallel lines were drawn. Duplication of layers was made on the design. Eight of the Adinkraheneba design was arranged in half drops with parallel lines as guide. The design was flattened to make all the

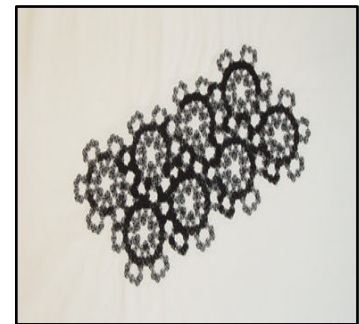
sections fused together as one image. ‘Adinkraheneba 1’ was the name given to this design (Figure 5). This design had been used for contemporary fabrics production.



**Figure 5: Source:  
 Author’s Own Construction**

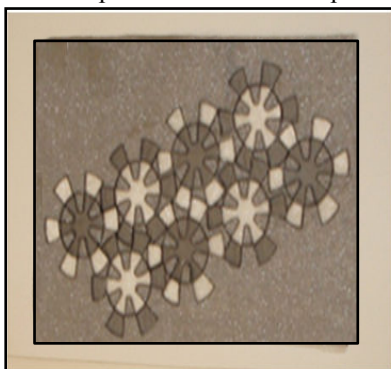


**Figure 6: Source:  
 Author’s Own Construction**

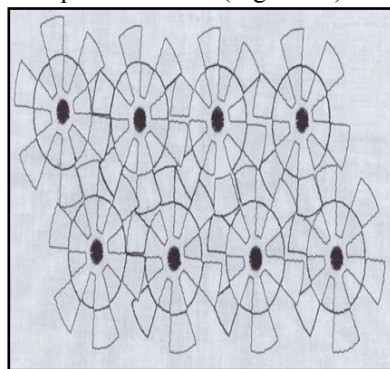


**Figure 7: Source:  
 Author’s Own Construction**

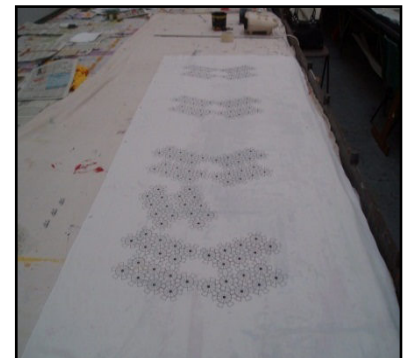
- C. ‘Adinkraheneba 1’ was digitized with ES Designer software. A single row of straight stitches was made and stitched. The design did not show out well so double row of straight stitches was digitized and stitched. These made lines in the design bold and visible. The design was stitched on light weight black polyester fabric with white embroidery thread (Figure 6).
- D. Rounded design stitches was selected and experimented with the design from the multi-head embroidery machine. Calico fabric and black embroidery thread were used (Figure 7). This means that other stitch types could be selected from the embroidery multi-heads and plays with.
- E. This stage exhibits imitation of laser cut in embroidered work of the design. Two plain light weight polyester fabrics were used. The colours were white and black. Black fabric was laid on top of the white. Embroidery stitches were made on the two together. Some portions of the black fabric were carefully removed to show the white under lining fabric (Figure 8). In order not to take consumers too far away from their memories about Adinkraheneba symbol which is characterised by circles, the next work (Figure 9) has been designed with similar shaded circle shape at the middle of each Adinkraheneba design. So that the individual can link and learn from known to unknown, as this theory has been confirmed by Santrock, (2001). The idea of jubilee spots was used to introduce these shaded circles into the design and again digitized. An example of this design is stitched on a medium white weight linen fabric in black embroidery thread design (Figure 9).
- F. Screen printing was made with design (Figure 9). This design was scanned and two designs were arranged close to each other and was used in the preparation of screen. An industrial black printing paste was used in the production of printed fabrics (Figure 10).



**Figure 8: Source:  
 Author’s own Construction**



**Figure 9: Source:  
 Author’s own Construction**



**Figure 10: Source:  
 Author’s own Construction**

- G. Digitized print: 100 % silk fabric in off white colour with black ink was used. The design was played with in a ruled vertical line. Ten designs were arranged, five on each side of the line. A design (Adinkraheneba) was scaled down to one third of the original size and fifteen of them were arranged at the middle portion of the two rows to fill-up the space in between them (Figure 11).



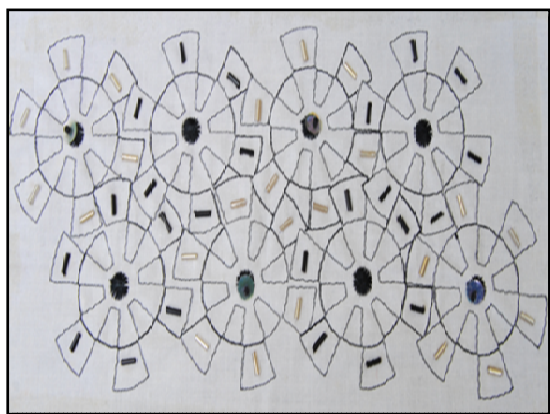
**Figure 11 Source:**  
**Author's own Construction**



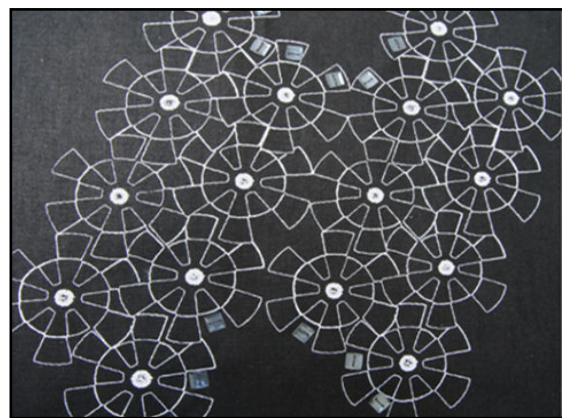
**Figure 12 Source:**  
**Author's own Construction**

In Figure 12, the researcher can be seen holding a digitized printed silk fabric with hand fagotten stitches used in joining two pieces of fabrics together. Ghanaian customers are used to hand embroidery.

- H. Embroidered and screen printed designs with embellishment; the skill of combining two or more fabric production techniques (Figure 13). Beads were arranged on an embroidered design and securely stitched in place in some selected portions of the design. (Figure 13 A). Screen printed fabric design has been embellished with sequins (Figure 13 B).

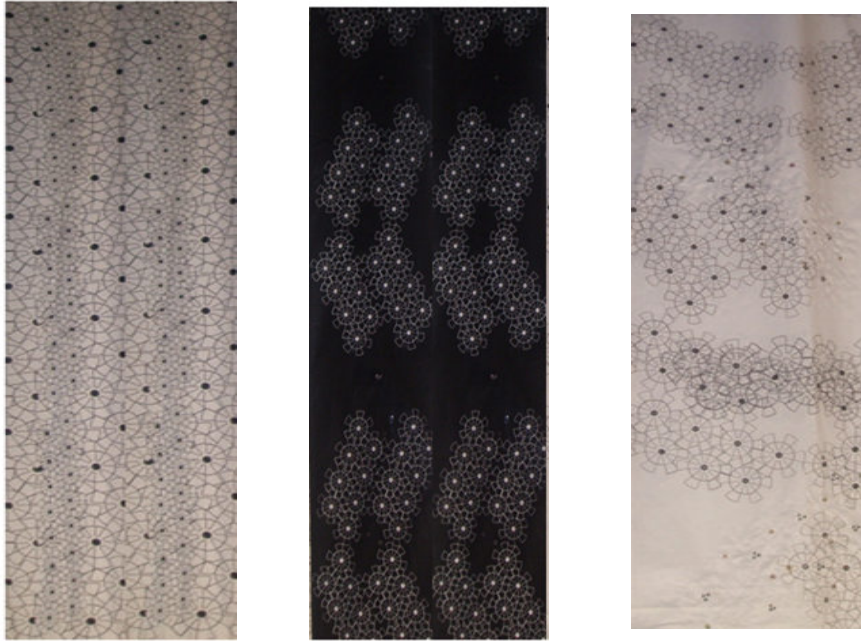


**Figure 13 A: Source:**



**Figure 13 B: Source:**  
**Author's Own Construction**

I. Some examples of fabric made from ‘Adinkraheneba 1’ design (Figure 14).



**Figure 14: Source:  
Author’s Own Construction**

J. The end product of ‘Adinkraheneba ’ design used as headgear and scarf in Figure 15.



**Figure 15A Source:  
Author’s Own Construction**



**Figure 15B Source:  
Author’s Own Construction**



**Figure 15C: Source:  
Author's Own Construction**



**Figure 15D: Source  
Author's Own Construction**

### Conclusion

Most communities and countries have upheld and used symbols for very long time with many reasons. Symbols like coat of arms and flags are cherished by belonged societies because it enfolds history and culture about their land of settlement. This relevant revelation about symbol has the power to unite the populace as one family.

Making contemporary designs form traditional Adinkra symbols serves as a continuity of culture and belongingness of a rich culture. If fashion and textile designers in Ghana wish to remain in the clothing business, then they must be innovative and abreast with time. Jennings (2011) buttress the above point by arguing that, if history is any signal, fashion means change. The skills and design strategies we make use of today will be seized by newer methods. Flexibility, the ability to acclimatize, and tolerance for uncertainty are becoming swelling if designers are to adapt to a changing world. This is an awakening call for the manufacturers to switch from dogmatic and stagnant approach to a higher technological advancement in designing and production.

However, with the new direction discussed in this study shows that it is possible and feasible to adapt the basic Adinkra symbols to other dynamic shapes and forms and then patterned into different combinations on different textiles for broader applications and uses. These can be done with relatively simple technology but its results can be profound in terms of patronage by consumers.

### Reference

- Danzy, J. (2009). Adinkra Symbols: An Ideographic Writing System. The Graduate School at Stony Brook University.
- Fletcher, K. (2010). Fashion and Sustainability. In M. F. Schultz (Ed). *Sustainable fashion – Issues to be addressed*, p 34-41. Kolding: Zeuner Grafisk.
- Glover, A. (1992), Adinkra symbolism. Accra: Artiste Alliance Gallery, Omanyeh House. Goddard, W. & Melville S. (2004). Research Methodology an Introduction. Lansdowne: Juta & Co. Ltd.
- Jennings, T. (2011). Creativity in fashion design: an inspiration workbook. New York: Fairchild Books.
- MacDonald, J. (2001). West African wisdom: Adinkra symbols and meanings. In Adinkra Symbols of West Africa. Retrieved 03/09/2012, from <http://www.adinkra.org>
- Picton, J. (2004). Black Style. New York: V& A Publication
- Santrock, J. (2001). Education Psychology. Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Shalini S. & Sibichan K. M. (2011). Tradition Fashion Interplay: An Imperative for Identity & Continuity. London: Fashion Colloquia.
- Shastri, A. (2007). 'Indigo in fashion' at Culture of Indigo-Exploring the Asian Panorama, Plant, Product', in Shalini S. & Sibichan K. M. (2011). Tradition Fashion Interplay: An Imperative for Identity & Continuity. London: Fashion Colloquia.

---

Sarpong, A. (1974). Ghana in Retrospective. Tema: Publishing House.  
Tetteh, A.V. (Undated). Adinkra - Cultural Symbols of the Asante people. Retrieved 07/09/12, from <http://www.ghanaculture.gov.gh/privatecontent/File/Adinkra%20Cultural%20Symbols%20%20the%20Asante%20People.pdf>  
Williams, J. K. (2011). The Language of Adinkra. New York Amsterdam News; Oct 27-Nov2, pg 28.  
Journey Executive Travel & Tours, (2012). Adinkra Symbols.  
[http://www.jett.com.gh/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=102&Itemid=138](http://www.jett.com.gh/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=102&Itemid=138)  
Unique Speak, (2005). Adinkra Symbols.  
<http://www.uniquespeakboutique.com/html/gallerylightingadinkra.html>  
<http://lasercutfabric.com/index.php/more-information-on-laser-cutting-fabric>

This academic article was published by The International Institute for Science, Technology and Education (IISTE). The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open Access Publishing service based in the U.S. and Europe. The aim of the institute is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the publisher can be found in the IISTE's homepage:

<http://www.iiste.org>

## CALL FOR PAPERS

The IISTE is currently hosting more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals and collaborating with academic institutions around the world. There's no deadline for submission. **Prospective authors of IISTE journals can find the submission instruction on the following page:** <http://www.iiste.org/Journals/>

The IISTE editorial team promises to review and publish all the qualified submissions in a **fast** manner. All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Printed version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

### IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

