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Adinkra Symbols as “Multivocal” Pedagogical/Socialization Tool

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Abstract

Adinkra symbols are ideographical representations of proverbs, philosophies, thoughts, and values of the Akans of Ghana. The symbols encapsulate the worldviews and keen observations of human behaviour, and the interactions between nature and humanity. Adinkra symbolic expressions may be carried through gestures/performance, verbal and/or visual representations and are thus very versatile. While each symbol has a basic meaning, it assumes expansive interpretations in different contexts of applicability making Adinkra symbols “multi-vocal”. Drawing on the concepts of “multivocality”, iconography and iconology, I demonstrate how Adinkra symbolisms are used to characterize social realities and communicate social ideals. Using my curatorial experience with exhibitions on the *Sankofa* symbol (lit. “go-back-for-it”), I illustrate the interface, convergence and, sometimes, the simultaneity of the different forms in which Adinkra symbolisms could be expressed. Against the background of the versatility of Adinkra symbolic expressions and their potentially varied contexts of interpretations, I would conclude that Adinkra symbols have the capacity to be powerful tools for teaching and social engagements.

Keywords: *Adinkra*, exhibition, iconography, iconology, multivocality, storytelling.

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Keywords: *Adinkra*, exhibition, iconography, iconology, multivocality, storytelling.

Résumé:

Les symboles Adinkra sont des représentations idéographiques des proverbes, des philosophies, des pensées et des valeurs des Akans du Ghana. Lesdits symboles englobent des visions du monde et d'observations attentives du comportement humain ainsi que des interactions entre la nature et l'humanité. Les expressions symboliques Adinkra peuvent être véhiculées par des gestes / performances, de représentations verbales et/ou visuelles et sont, ainsi, très polyvalentes. Bien que chaque symbole ait une signification fondamentale, il fait l'objet des interprétations extensives dans différents contextes d'applicabilité, ce qui fait que les symboles Adinkra sont «multi-vocaux». En m'appuyant sur les concepts de « multi-vocalité », d'iconographie et d'iconologie, je démontre comment les symbolismes d'Adinkra sont utilisés pour décrire les réalités sociales et communiquer les idéaux sociaux. Tout en utilisant mon expérience de conservateur avec des expositions sur le symbole *Sankofa* (traduit littéralement « retourner pour le/la reprendre [aux sources] »), je démontre l'interface, la convergence et, dans certains cas, la simultanéité des différentes formes dans lesquelles les symbolismes Adinkra pourraient être exprimés. Compte tenu de la polyvalence des expressions symboliques Adinkra et de leurs contextes d'interprétation potentiellement variés, je conclurais que les symboles Adinkra ont la capacité de servir d'outils puissants pour l'enseignement et les engagements sociaux.

Mots-clés: *Adinkra*, exposition, iconographie, iconologie, multi-vocalité, narration des histoires

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Introduction

Adinkra is traditionally the name of a mourning cloth of the Akans of Ghana (Asihene, 1978: 58; Anquandah, 2013:19). Unlike the popular traditional *kente* cloth which is woven, Adinkra is a stamped cloth. The Adinkra cloth is usually a plain cotton fabric on which various culturally meaningful patterns are stamped (Damuah, 1982: 13; Martino, 2018). These meaningful designs are known generally as Adinkra symbols. However, Adinkra now represents a repertoire of Akan symbolisms.

Various craftsmen including carvers, goldsmiths, brass castors and cloth weavers appropriate these otherwise cloth patterns to imbue their products with tradition and meaning (Antubam, 1963). This paper argues that some historical events and the creativity of traditional Akan artisans, for example, fostered the evolution of Adinkra symbols. The paper illustrates that the symbols are versatile and have the potential to be employed as a tool for teaching and socialization into Akan ideals.

Origin(s) of Adinkra symbols

There are divergent views about the origin of Adinkra symbols. Attempts to trace the origin of the symbols have elicited diverse opinions each with their own claims about originality and authenticity. Oral traditions maintained by some craftsmen in Asante (at Asokwa and Ntonso, the two principal centres of Adinkra designing) attribute the introduction of the Adinkra symbols to two mutually exclusive sources. Damuah, for example, observed the claim by some Asante artisans that the “very early craftsmen who used adinkra patterns in cloth learnt the trade from ‘Odomankom’—of God” (Damuah, 1982: 14; Danquah, 1944: 124). Some artisans, on the other hand, claimed the symbols were adopted from Gyaman (an Akan group found in present-day Cote d’Ivoire) as a commemoration of the defeat of their king called Kofi Adinkra (Damuah, 1982:13; Martino, 2018). In keeping with this claim, the king, Kofi Adinkra, provoked the Asante to war in 1818 when he made a replica of the sacred Golden Stool of Asante. Subsequent to the defeat of Gyaman, Asante artisans, it is claimed, discovered the patterns at the court of Gyaman.

While scholars support the historical narrative that attributes the introduction of Adinkra symbols to Asante, in particular to the aftermath of the 1818 battle with Gyaman, different opinions have been expressed about the origin of the symbols in general. Danquah, for example, expressed the view that Adinkra symbols were age-old Akan funerary ideographical symbols used to bid goodbye to the soul of the deceased (Danquah, 1944: 124). He therefore argued that the symbols were evidence of cultural remnants of the erstwhile great Sudanic Kingdoms from which the Akan had migrated

to their present locations. Rattray, however, suggested an Islamic source for the introduction of the symbols. He maintained that many of the symbols are Islamic in nature and might have come through contacts with Muslim merchants during the trans-Saharan trade with the Akan. He expressed the view that the symbols may originally have been amulet designs perhaps of the Tuareg Arabs (Rattray, 1927: 269-294). Although the actual origin of the symbols seems illusive, it is fair to assert that Akan artisans (especially Adinkra cloth stampers at Asokwa and Ntonso) have over the centuries invested creativity into Adinkra symbolism so that we might argue that they represent a uniquely Akan heritage.

The aims of this paper are two-fold. First, the paper throws light on how the visual representations and the associated meanings of Adinkra symbols can stimulate the imagination of its audience to appreciate their deeper cultural undertones. Secondly, the paper emphasizes the point that the symbols provide a repertoire of quintessential Akan heritage that allows for succinct and non-verbal expressions of complex ideas. To achieve these objectives, the paper explores some examples of the appropriation of the symbols and their cultural significance. The multiple meanings associated with Adinkra symbolisms a result of the dynamics of their use and circulation in different cultural spaces and time are also highlighted. The paper explores the concept of multivocality and attempts an analysis of the iconography and iconology (i.e. visual/verbal language) of the *Sankɔfa* symbol in particular. The concept of multivocality, as employed in this paper draws on the theories of materiality (Appadurai, 1986) and contextual narratives (Geertz, 1973). In this framework of thought, it is argued that cultural phenomena are better understood and evaluated within a particular milieu. Thus, in connection with the Adinkra symbolisms, while the Akan culture provides the background to understanding the traditions of the symbols, the artistic engagements of the visual and verbal language of the symbols validate the varied meanings associated with a particular symbol in different contexts of cultural spaces and time (Martino, 2018; Temple, 2010).

Iconographical and Iconological bases of Adinkra symbols: The Visual and Verbal Nexus of some Adinkra Symbols.

It noteworthy that the artistic ingenuities of traditional artisans who appropriate the Adinkra symbols in designing cultural artifacts have pushed the boundaries of Adinkra characters making it practically difficult to specify the exact number of Adinkra symbols at present. While Mato, for example, identified as many as two hundred and eighteen Adinkra symbols (Mato, 1987; Martino, 2018: 357), a survey of the historical work done on Adinkra symbolisms suggest a range of about fifty to sixty symbols that form the core

of traditional designs that are mainly figurative and traditionally meaningful (Damuah, 1982; Quarcoo, 1994; Rattray, 1927).

The study of the visual and graphical representation of the subject matter of artistic expression is what art historians refer to as iconography (Panofsky, 1955). The concept of iconography emphasizes content analysis of art to determine what a particular image may represent in nature or in practical life (i.e. social context). On the other hand, the analyses of the intended meaning(s) of these visual expressions constitute iconology. Thus, iconology emphasizes the process to identify the symbolic significance of images and motifs in relation to larger culture themes or essential tendencies of the human mind. The concepts of iconography and iconology are closely related and interdependent.

From the perspectives of iconography and iconology, an Adinkra symbol may have historical, allegorical, proverbial or religico-ritual significances that underpin its graphical representation, name and its meaning (Arthur, 2001). The appropriation of Adinkra symbols therefore engages the visual and the imaginations of their patrons, and appeal to their experience with Akan culture for meaning(s). Thus, Adinkra symbols may be considered generally as ideograms that euphonize or memorialize historical incidents; server as icons that represent some Akan cultural values; or artistic media that embody figurative and proverbial observations (Agbo, 2011). Creatively employed as metaphorical icons, an Adinkra symbol may euphonize a never-to-be-forgotten historical incident. An example is *obi nka obi*, which is represented by two fishes each of which has the tail of the other in its mouth (see Figures 2a and 2b). According to tradition, this symbol captures the tit-for-tat contexts in which Asante fought Gyaman when the copying of the Golden Stool by Gyaman so angered Asante. In effect the *obi nka obi* signifies the need for harmony particularly in an atmosphere where an action could potentially incite a reprisal reaction. Similarly, some Adinkra symbols are used to symbolize notable victories in the past and the incorporation of other communities to constitute the amalgamated Akan kingdom of Asante. The *Funtumfunafu* (an icon of siamese crocodiles signifying unity in diversity), and the *Kontre ne Akwamu* which signifies the incorporation of people of the erstwhile Denkyira and Akwamu kingdoms into the leadership of Asante (Quarcoo, 1994: 34; Damuah, 1982) have much visibility in ceremonial spaces in Asante.

Further, some Adinkra symbols memorialize notable individuals and their exemplary contributions to the society. *Ohenetuo* and *Gyau/Katakylie atiko* respectively symbolize the bravery of Asante kings to engage in battles of conquest, and the hair cut of an illustrious sub-chief of Bantama who was called Gyau (Quarcoo, 1994: 45-46). The import of these historically-

related Adinkra symbols is communicated through various media of artistic expressions including cloth patterns and regal paraphernalia such as linguist's staffs and ceremonial umbrella-tops at durbars and traditional ceremonies to perpetuate their memory (Yankah, 1995: 33, 97-98; Rattray, 1927: 236-268).

Furthermore, Adinkra symbols embody Akan cultural values, which are built on the collectively-shared traditions of origins and social responsibilities (Anquandah, 2013). The imagery or memories of these traditions are usually retained in verbal forms such as myths, proverbs, oaths and witty sayings, and are used as ideal flash points to guide social actions and interactions (Sekyi-Baidoo, 1999: 124-125). Traditional artisans draw on the cultural ideals and imageries evoked by these verbal forms to symbolize and visually express them in various material media. For example, the cultural ideals to uphold unity in diversity, and also to ensure harmony in a hierarchically structured chieftaincy system of Asante are respectively symbolized by the *funtumfunafu* (i.e. Figures 1a and 1b) and the *obi-nka-obi* Adinkra patterns (i.e. Figures 2a and 2b).



Fig. 1a: *Funtumfunafu*
(pictorial form in goldweight)

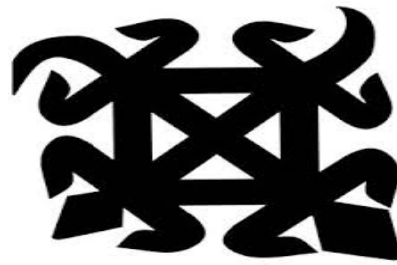


Fig. 1b: *Funtumfunafu*
(abstracted Adinkra form)



Fig. 2 : *Obi-nka-obi*
(pictorial form in goldweight)

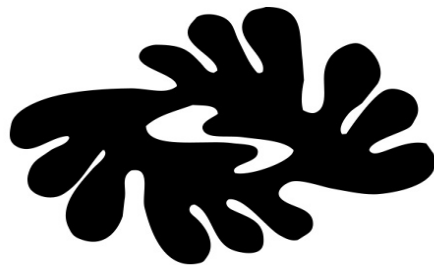


Fig. 2b: *Obi-nka-obi*
(abstracted Adinkra form)

These visual representations, in their formal expressions, bear a close resemblance to the themes of certain proverbs, or the objects of their referent

verbal traditions. However, some of the symbolic visual representations of these same Adinkra symbols may be rendered very abstract through stylizations of the form, perhaps due to the varying levels of flexibility and/or difficulty in depicting pictorial forms in such material media as wood, clay, metal and textile. For example, *Sankɔfa*, as an Adinkra symbol, is either pictorially represented as a bird with an out-stretched neck to the back to pick up an egg or abstracted into a heart-shaped design with some sorts of appendages (see figures 3a and 3b). Whether pictorial or abstracted in forms, Adinkra symbols are figuratively expressive.



Fig. 3a: *Sankɔfa*
(pictorial form in goldwight)



Fig. 3b: *Sankɔfa*
(abstracted Adinkra forms)

What does *Sankɔfa* mean? Exploring the ‘multivocal’ meaning(s) of an Adinkra symbol:

Figuratively, *sankɔfa*, represents at least two closely related Akan maxims that; ‘*Se eto w’akyiri a fa, na sankɔfa, yenkyiri*’, meaning ‘if it falls behind you, retrieve it, for the recovery of that which was neglected is of a virtue’ (Denteh, 1968: 1-2), and ‘*Tete wo bi ka, tete wobi kyire, nti sankɔfa, yenkyiri*’, meaning ‘the past has a lot to say, the past has a lot to teach, thus going back for something of the past is of a virtue’ (Quarcoo, 1994). In exploring the patterns of Adinkra as culturally meaningful, it is worthy to note that there is a symbiotic relationship, of a sort, between Adinkra symbols and their figurative/proverbial associations. Thus, as much as the iconology of *Adinkra* symbols (i.e. the intended meanings, usually expressed in verbal forms) influence their visual representations; the graphics of an *Adinkra* symbol similarly objectify a range of proverbs or witty sayings (Martino 2018; Yankah, 1995: 32-33). Interestingly, however, an *Adinkra* symbol may have many meanings in different contexts, and hence can be considered ‘multivocal’. Illustrating the multivocality of Adinkra symbols, the following conceptual interpretations/explanations associated with *Sankɔfa* are provided.

Sankɔfa as a concept is an appropriated symbol of history and identity particularly amongst the Africans in the Diaspora (Temple, 2010). *Sankɔfa* is perhaps the most popular symbolic ideological framework to have been

used to project the historical middle passage experience of the peoples of African descent in the diaspora, and the desirable reintegration of peoples of African descent back into the life of continental Africans (Temple, 2010). A significant tribute to this ideological framework are the *Sankɔfa*-inspired monuments at the African Burial Grounds, in Manhattan, New York in the United States of America. Although, the monuments exhibit many African symbols and other significant sculptures, it is the *Sankɔfa* collection that has a particular visibility encapsulating the historical trans-Atlantic trade in human beings to which global Africa is related.

In the early days of post-independent Ghana, the idea of *Sankɔfa* was adopted as a philosophical inspiration to draw attention to Africa's rich cultural past, to instill confidence in the African to manage the continent with capable hands. Many nationalist movements in that period actively engaged the symbol to express that idea that the past provides a guide to negotiate the present, and to build a desirable future (Anatsui, 1993). The allusion to *Sankɔfa* is therefore a call to reflect on some relevant aspects of the past (perhaps neglected) and rejuvenate them for both contemporary life and the future.

Similarly, *Sankɔfa* encapsulates the concept for historical reconstructions and interpretations. The emblem of the Historical Society of Ghana, for example, is the *Sankɔfa*. It is probably fair to argue that the symbol provides not only an appropriate culturally meaningful logo, but also serves as an ideal philosophical flash point to express the need for historical reconstruction and edification. In this spirit, some heritage studies projects in Ghana have adopted this historical reconstructive concept as a model to interpret cultural phenomena. For example, archaeological research carried out in Elmina by Christopher DeCorse, an American anthropologist, draws on the concept of *Sankɔfa* to interpret the findings of his study on the erstwhile local township of Elmina which was bombarded and razed down by the British in 1873 (DeCorse, 2001).

In the context of chiefly regalia, the *Sankɔfa* is one of the prominent traditional status labels. Every unit of the Akan chieftaincy such as the clan or court office are associated with status labels and paraphilia. One of the emblems of the Kyidom political division of Asante chieftaincy (i.e. the rear guards of the King of Asante) is the *Sankɔfa* (Ayensu 1997: 145).

With the varied meanings associated with Adinkra symbols, as illustrated with the symbolisms of *Sankɔfa*, drawing on the concepts of iconography and iconology, I demonstrate how an Adinkra symbol could be used as a teaching tool.

The Adinkra Project: illustrating *Adinkra* symbols as a versatile teaching tool.

In 2015, Lycée Français d'Accra Jacques Prévert (the French School in Accra) requested me to design a ten-hour teaching project. This was to teach two classes comprising children aged five and six years the values of the Ghanaian *Adinkra* symbols. To guide the teaching, I planned to:

- i) Select five *Adinkra* symbols, create interesting story titles for each of the symbols and then teach the significance of the symbols by means of visual aids and dramatic illustrations (see Figures 4 and 5 below).

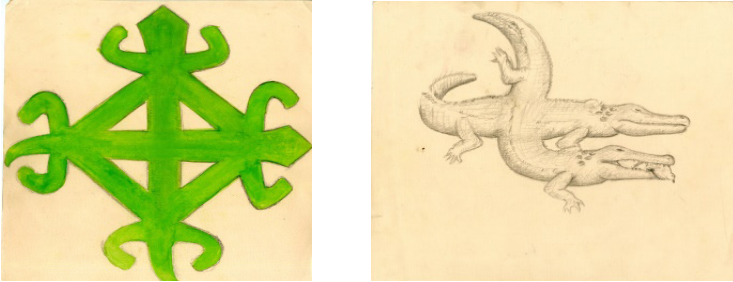


Fig. 4: Funtumfunafu; the Crokie-Gaitor story to convey the idea of unity in diversity.

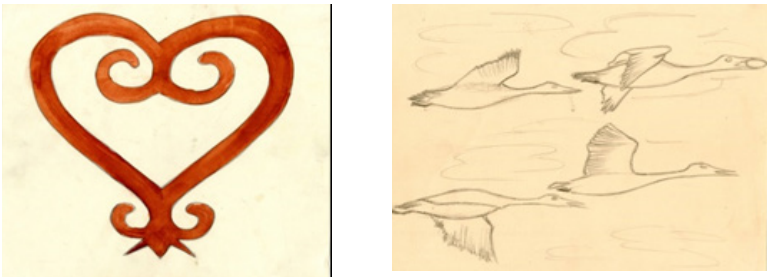


Fig. 5: Sankofa; the Oaky and Ganda story to convey the idea of carrying the treasures of the past into the future.

- ii) Perform a series of original story-telling sessions with the selected symbols. **Introduce an *Adinkra* symbol** at each one-hour session where the children would not only be the audience but also participants. To get the children actively involved, each of them would have a drawing pad and use lines, arcs and circles (as 'coded' *Adinkra* keys) to draw the particular symbol. The story-telling with the visual aids, gestures and short songs in call-and-response refrains would then follow.

With the above outlined approaches, my main objectives were to:

- a) Create the avenue to co-produce and share the experience of unraveling the meaning(s) of the selected *Adinkra* symbols.

b) Ultimately, getting the children to be familiar with the selected symbols and use these to explore their own creativity, each one of them would represent their favorite *Adinkra* symbols at the end of the project—putting all together as a graffiti parting gift for the story-teller.

Having successfully carried out the project and seeing the excitement it generated in both the children and the management of the school, I engaged a visual artist to create more colourful card-board illustrations for the various stories. Detailed texts were added to the drawings to mount exhibitions which targeted wider audience.

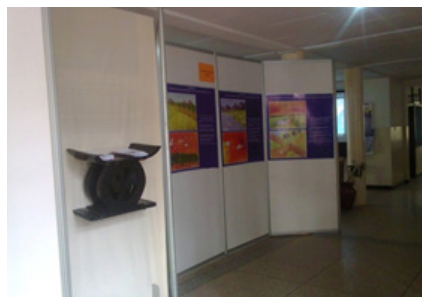


Fig. 6a: A set up for story-telling exhibition for pupils. **Fig. 6b:** An exhibition set-up displaying the Sankofa stool.

Furthermore, subsequent story-telling exhibitions were augmented with carved stools that bore respective Adinkra symbols. On *Sankofa*, in particular, the created story of migratory geese, *Oaky* and *Ganda* was showcased alongside a *Sankofa* stool (see Figures 6a and 6b). The story illustrates the symbol's wisdom which epitomizes the adage that the past has something for our attention and education; a rich heritage beneficial for our current existence, and a foundation for the future. Reflecting on the displayed figurative *Sankofa* stool, the exhibition has three subsections woven through drawing illustrations and poems. *Presentam* in the story represents the now and peopled with *Gandaguess*. While *Gombiland* with her teaming *Gombiguess* is the past that exist in our memories, *Visionsville* is the future hoped for. Ultimately, the need for cultural continuity is demonstrated as an essential creative agency; an obligation for a prevailing generation to ensure survival for the future where complementarity and mutual respect are the civic pillars.

The graphical illustrations of the complementary geese, Oaky and Ganda:

Subsection one of the exhibition illustrations.

Between the past and the future is the now; a present from the past.



Fig. 7a: *The Gombiguese of Gombiland*



Fig. 7b: *Gombiguese in flight for survival*

Oh, *Gombiland* of the memories, the gone-by land.

Oh, *Gombiland*, the land of the mighty oak trees and towering purple mountains.

Oh, *Gombiland*, the home of the *Gombiguese*, ganders' ancestors in Presentam to maintain.

Through years of endurance, *Oaky* the wise old goose, *Gombiland's* golden egg retains;

For posterity's assurance, *Gombiland's* nugget of wits and life remains.

From the now into the morrow is a present to take; a hope for the future.

Subsection two of the exhibition illustrations.

From the now into the morrow is a present to take; a hope for the future.



Fig. 7c: *The Ganderguess of Presentam*



Fig. 7d: *Oaky and Ganda on the move for Visionsville*

Oh, *Presentam*, the land of the now.

Oh, *Presentam*, the city of a thousand paths and winding rivers.

Oh, *Presentam*, the home of the *Ganderguese*, the link between the past and the future.

Through patient observation and keen adherence to *Oaky's* witty treasures, *Ganda*, the meticulous goose, the portals of *Visionsville* must access.

Visionsville, the land of unlimited possibilities, now in view to possess.

Subsection three of the exhibition illustrations.

For the breeds of the future, consider the deeds of the past and the fruits of today.

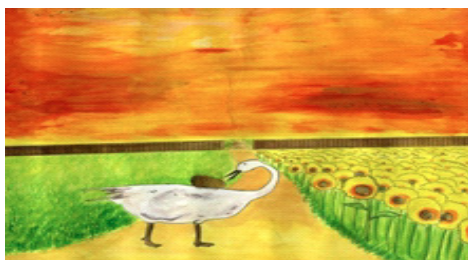


Fig. 7e: *Ganda at the portals of Visionsville without Oaky*

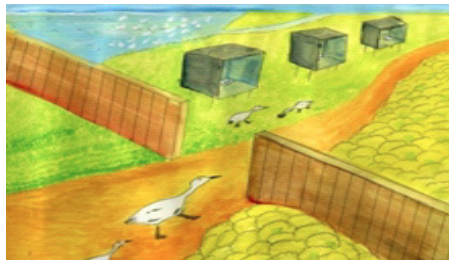


Fig. 7f: *The Visionguese of Visionsville*

Oh, *Visionsville*, the land of the imagination.

Oh, *Visionsville*, the land of unlimited possibilities.

Oh, *Visionsville*, the borderless city with a common motto in thousand tongues and reeds.

For *Visionsville*, hand-in-hand, hope and purpose dance into the future.

Complementarity and mutual respect, sure the civic commitment to citizenship of *Visionsville*.

After all, the goose and the gander are one and the same!

Conclusion

The different forms of presentation used for the *Sankɔfa* story-telling exhibition were inspired by the interface of Akan traditional symbols such as regal paraphernalia, and public ceremonial and ritual performances such as court oratory and dances. While Akan symbols have inherent meanings including with what they are associated, complemented with public or ritual performances, their significances are elaborated. In such visual displays and performative contexts, the visual symbolisms and the ceremonial verbal arts converge and are usually co-evocative. Further, while verbal artists frame

their performance on mythologies and stories of ancestors and cultural origin narratives, craftsmen create visual references such as totems and symbols to objectify the rather abstract mythological narratives. These insights from the relationships between traditional symbols and ceremonial performances, on the one hand, and interdependence between the traditional visual artisans and performers, on the other hand, could be an efficient guide to teaching cultural values.

In sum, reflecting on the figurative and historical value of the *Adinkra* symbols, many stories could be imaged. The stories could be graphically presented and/or performed to showcase their traditional/didactic values. It could therefore be argued that, with a sense of creativity and familiarity with the symbols, one could simplify complex cultural ideas and engage the imagination of people to internalize ideals vital for social harmony. With the *Sankofa* story-telling exhibition, as an example, we could explore the assertion that the present has its foundations in the past. Thus, in explaining present social situations, there is the need to reflect on the past while preparing for a desirable future.

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