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# Rethinking the Great Commission: Incorporation of Akan Indigenous Symbols into Christian Worship

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## Abstract

*Symbols are communicative tools with performative functions in all cultures. Apart from their decorative functions, non-Christian symbols adopted into Christianity have had a tremendous impact on Christian life since the early times, especially in liturgical practices. Through Western missionary activities, Ghana inherited Christian biblical-liturgical art as has been developed in the home countries of the missionaries. However, since the 1960s Adinkra symbols have been incorporated into Christian worship and theology, receiving attention within secular and religious circles because of their communicative potential. On the religious level, some churches have adopted them as logos or incorporated them into architectural designs and liturgical art. This paper seeks to investigate what motivates various missions to choose particular Adinkra symbol(s) and what they hope to achieve with them. Furthermore, it attempts a theological reflection on the communicative potential of artefacts in Ghanaian Christianity as a response to the "Great Commission. "We approach the subject from a historical, contextual, and theological perspective, using selected Roman Catholic and Methodist churches in Ghana as case studies. The study employed unstructured in-depth interviews and photo elicitations to trace the relationship between visual arts and religion, with particular emphasis on Christian visual arts and how they have informed Christianity in Ghana.*

## Keywords

*incorporation, symbols, mission, Adinkra, religious, theological.*

Apart from their decorative functions, "symbols," both secular and religious, generally are effective tools of communication which often speak louder than words. This has been the case for non-Christian symbols adopted into Ghanaian

Christianity. They have had a strong impact, especially in liturgical practices and doctrinal disputes.[1] According to Andrew F. Walls,

> by 1500 European Christianity possessed a coherent, largely homogeneous artistic tradition … There was a recognized range of appropriate themes of Christian art, and its iconographic register was settled. The Christianity which entered into engagement with the faiths of Asia and Africa was in confident possession of an artistic expression which had absorbed several European variations … In Asia it met artistic traditions shaped by other faiths; in Africa artistic traditions that seemed uncouth and barbarous, perhaps childish.[2]

However, the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century marked a complete turnaround in the relationship between the Christian religion and art, which has since shaped the opinion of many Christians.[3] Research reveals that the historic churches and the newer ones embrace different beliefs and practices, informed by their theology. Consequently, in attempting to contextualize their faith, they adopt one indigenous symbol or the other in liturgical praxis and church architecture.[4] Initially, missionaries did not tolerate new converts introducing traditional religious elements into Christian worship. Protestantism did not normally encourage the arts because they were suspicious that Ghanaian converts might place a magical value on indigenous works of art.[5] Thus, the form of Christian art introduced was predominantly devotional and an imitation of Western iconography, the most widely used Christian art being the crucifix.[6] In *The Missionary Movement in Christian History,* Walls points out that Western missionaries "had been moved by the power and mystery of African and Pacific art, without being able to adopt its indigenous significance or identity, its ritual or cosmological context."[7]

But the year 1950 witnessed an event Walls describes as having "prophetic significance." Cardinal Celso Constantini championed the Vatican exhibition of *Arts in*

1 Randy C. Randall, "The Reformation and the Visual Arts," (MA dissertation, Reformed Theological Seminary, 2007), 123, https://www.rts.edu/Site/Virtual/Resources/Student_Theses/Randall Reformation_ and_-Visual_Arts.pdf.

2 Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 9th ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004), 174.

3 Catholics, Anglicans and Lutherans were indifferent and continued to allow religious art in worship, while Protestants eliminated all art from their worship.

4 See "Christianity and the Arts," http://faithandthearts.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/ Christianity-and-the-Arts. pdf.

5 Olaomo A. Azeez, "Indigenous Art and Religion in Africa," *Global Journal of Human Social Science* 10:7 (2010), 29.

6 Ibid., 29.

7 Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History,* 174.

*Missions*, probably the most considerable celebration of Christian art from non-Western origin.[8] Following his experience with Asian arts, Constantini held the view that the new generation of Asian Christian artists presented a fresh vision of creation and of the Christian faith.[9] Consequently, instead of viewing local art as a threat to Christian integrity, he contended that they provided the same sort of preparation for the gospel that Greek philosophy did in the Mediterranean world. Walls claims that these ideas informed the advancement of the theology of adaptation that became "the conventional wisdom in Catholic missiology in the period that produced the Second Vatican Council."[10] The subsequent "publication of *Nostra aetate*, the Council's declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions furthered this agenda."[11] It aimed at the "incarnation of the Christian message in particular cultural contexts, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the Church, transforming it into a new creation."[12] The incarnation theology and its praxis of adapting the Christian message in particular cultural contexts brought about the promotion and integration of "authentic" African values or symbols, into the version of Christianity received from western missionaries.[13]

It is within this context that this paper seeks to rethink the Great Commission, considering the incorporation of Adinkra symbols into Ghanaian Christianity. Specifically, it examines how the adoption of Adinkra symbols provides an innovation in Ghanaian Christianity, consequently analyzing its impact on the faith community.

Fieldwork data for the study was collected between September 2014 and August 2015 through interviews and focus group discussions. Forty-five persons were interviewed; 20 were parish councillors and leaders of the Catholic and Methodist churches respectively, 15 were parishioners and ten clergy/ministers (Catholics and Methodists). Interviewees were selected using the snowball approach. We held two focus group discussions; each group consisted of seven people, selected from

[8] Then Secretary of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith *(Propaganda Fide)*.

[9] Celso Constantini, *Rèforme Des Missions Au XXe Siecle* (Paris: Casterman, 1960), 242. See Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History,* 174.

[10] Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History,* 176.

[11] Ludovic Lado, "The Roman Catholic Church and African Religions," *The Way* 45:3 (2006), 7, http://www.theway.org.uk/453Lado.pdf.

[12] Pedro Arrupe, "Letter to the Whole Society on Inculturation," in *Other Apostolates Today: Selected Letters and Addresses of Pedro Arrupe*, vol. 3, ed. J. Aixalax (Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1981), 172–81.

[13] Lado, "The Roman Catholic Church and African Religions," 7.

 

among the parish councillors and leaders of the Catholic and Methodist churches respectively. A content analysis approach was used to analyze both recurrent themes in the symbols and data from the field.

## Early Christian Art

Finney traces the earliest Christian art to the second or third century, before which time Christians did not produce anything that was "materially distinct, no art and no separate material culture in any form." He explains that the delay in the advent of Christian art was not as a result of "principled aversion to art, other worldliness or with antimaterialism" but rather the lacked of capital.[14]

Jensen[15] categorizes the subject of early Christian art into four distinct groupings. The first includes subjects borrowed from the pagan religious world that were given new Christian meanings, for example, images of the good shepherd, a fisherman, the seated philosopher, the praying person, depictions of meals, and harvest scenes. Most of these images have direct Greco-Roman parallels. The second group comprises religiously neutral images based on traditional decorative motifs given particular Christian symbolic significance, including doves, peacocks (an allegory of resurrection), vines and grapes, fish, boats, anchors, lambs, and palm or olive trees. In the third group, narrative-based images are drawn from favourite biblical stories. Popular choices were Jonah swallowed by the sea monster, Abraham offering Isaac, Noah in the ark, Moses striking the rock, Daniel with lions, Jesus' baptism, Jesus healing the paralytic, the shepherd carrying the sheep, the multiplication of the loaves, and finally portraits of Christ and the saints, which occurred later.

Jensen notes that the art of the second and third centuries draws primarily from the first three groupings; the messages conveyed by these images are "far more complex than simple identifications, and their language is symbolic rather than precise or specific."[16] Hence, theorizing about what the images mean is more like translating than decoding. While the former requires an appreciation of the culture or context of the message, the latter would be achieved by the application of a set of rules. According to Jensen, early Christian art was greatly influenced by the audience, the broader social context, and the teachings, practices, and values of the Christian community.

[14] Paul Corby Finney, *The Invisible God: The Earliest Christians on Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 101, 108.

[15] Robin Margaret Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 10, 17–19.

[16] Ibid., 17.

Finney,[17] on the other hand, categorizes the images of early Christian art under two broad themes of violence and dramatic forms of death from the Old Testament and the subject of deliverance, salvation, and redemption from the New Testament. Paintings of the former portray Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son, Jonah swallowed by a large sea monster, and Daniel cast into a den of lions, while that of the latter depict instances cited from Lazarus raised from his tomb, the shepherd carrying the sheep, baptism, the fisherman, the paralytic, possibly also the *orant* (the praying person). Finney shares in Jensen's assertion that these images are "symbolic specific" – relaying specific biblical messages to the original viewers.[18]

Beginning from the fifth century, Christian art was used for the instruction of the illiterate poor[19] to explain the scriptures and later to portray the theological issues of the period.[20] Ouspensky and Lossky[21] observe that the adoption of images similar to pagan deities or secular symbols was not suggestive of pagan influence on Christianity; rather, it was indicative of the "Christianization of pagan art." However, it must be stated that the use of Christian images had its challenges. It was associated with the problem of idolatry as evidenced in the iconoclastic controversy of the eighth century[22] and the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century.

## The Legacy of Early Christian Missionaries and the African Cosmology

St Peter's Basilica in Kumasi displays a typical example of Christian art inherited from the Europeans. During its dedication in 1947, a variety of symbols that were foreign to the Ghanaian context were embossed on the ceiling and mosaic paintings on the windows of the cathedral.

Juxtaposing the role of art in the early church to this scenario, the question of the meaningfulness of the foreign symbols to the African context becomes imperative.

17 Finney, *The Invisible God,* 198.

18 Ibid., 188.

19 Joseph Leo Koerner, *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 137.

20 Randall, "The Reformation and the Visual Arts," 19.

21 Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, ed. and trans. G. R. H. Palmer and E. Kadlouboysky (New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1999), 28.

22 The Iconoclastic controversy raised two significant questions with regard to the use of images: Are images of God (or animals or people) permissible? And can the function and veneration of icons be substantiated? see Randall, "The Reformation and the Visual Arts," 24.

Walls puts it that "Christian art needs vernacular expression, a sense of locality."[23] Symbols serve as "food for thought,"[24] and are significant tools for communication in the African context. Indeed, symbols, representation, and communication are interlinked. Consequently, "there has to be a representation that is in consonance with the receiver's reservoir of knowledge; be it a signal, a sign, a symbol or even a word. When a receiver does not understand the representative meaning of a symbol, communication cannot be said to have taken place."[25] Therefore, Santayana states,

> any attempt to speak without speaking any particular language is not more hopeless than the attempt to have a religion that shall be no religion in particular … Thus every living and healthy religion has a marked idiosyncrasy. Its power consists in its special and surprising message and in the bias which that revelation gives to life. The vistas it opens and the mysteries it propounds are another world to live in; and another world to live in – whether we expect ever to pass wholly over into it or no – is what we mean by having a religion.[26]

In the light of the significant role Christian art played in the early Christian community, the following observations by Yannoulatoes become imperative: "Have we offered the people of the primal world-views the best we have? Have we made available to them all of the twenty-century-old tradition of the church, not least that of the first centuries when Christians lived in a comparable climate of primal world-views?"[27]

## The Incorporation of Akan Indigenous Symbols into Christian Worship

Dzobo classifies Ghanaian indigenous symbols into six categories based on their usage. These are Adinkra symbols, stool symbols, linguist symbols, linguist staff symbols, religious symbols, ritual symbols, and literary symbols.[28]

[23] Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History,* 173.

[24] Paul Ricoeur, "The Symbol: Food for Thought," *Philosophy of Cognitive Science* 4:3 (1960), 196–207.

[25] Bonachristus Umeogu, "The Place of Symbols in African Philosophy," *Open Journal of Philosophy* 3:1A, (2013), 11.

[26] George Santayana, *Reason in Religion*, cited by Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, ed. Clifford Geertz (New York: Fontana Press, 1993), 87, https://isites.harvard.edu/fs/docs/icb.topic152604.files/Week_4/Geertz_Religon_as_a_Cultural_System_ pdf.

[27] Anastasios Yannoulatoes, "Growing in Awareness of Primal World-views," in *Primal World-views: Christian Involvement in Dialogue with Traditional Thought Forms*, ed. J. V. Taylor (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1976), 75–76.

[28] N. K. Dzobo, "African Symbols and Proverbs as Source of Knowledge and Truth," in *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies 1*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye (Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1992), 87, http://www.academia.edu/10823364/Person_and_Community.

Varying positions are held with regards to the origin of the Adinkra symbols. In the first instance, it is told that Adinkra, King of Gyaman (now Ivory Coast, West Africa), was defeated and slain in battle at the beginning of the 19th century by Nana Osei Bonsu Panyin, King of Ashanti.[29] Acheampong adds to the story that Adinkra, King of Gyaman, a vassal state to Ashanti, incurred the anger of Ashanti by copying the golden stool of Ashanti.[30] It is believed that the designs used by Osei Bonsu Payin were afterwards copied from the column of King Adinkra's stool and the cloth he wore at the battle in which he was slain.[31] Another school of thought is that in ancient times the kings of Ashanti, Denkyira and Tekyiman, wore cloths with the designs now known as Adinkra, which their guild of designers were the first to design. Rattray expresses the view that the Ashantis borrowed the Adinkra designs from Mohammedans from North Africa and gave them names and meanings to suit their own needs.[32] In contemporary times, Adinkra symbols have received much attention within both secular and religious circles because of their symbolism.[33] On the Christian religious scene, they have been adopted as logos and are also included in the designs of some clergy vestments. In some instances, they are incorporated into the architectural designs and liturgical art of the churches.

## Labadi Methodist Church

The Emmanuel Church in Labadi was formally opened on the 9 August 1967. It was principally opened to serve a few Methodists who had moved from Akan-speaking areas to Accra. They were later joined by dynamic members in the vicinity. Quarcoo points out that the uniqueness of the Emmanuel Church lies in the incorporation of Adinkra symbols into its biblical-liturgical arts.[34] The patterns were incorporated along the walls of the two long sides of the building (see Figure 2).[35] Since the renovation and expansion of the chapel in 1995, the symbols can now be found along one side of the building.

[29] R. S. Rattery, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 264.

[30] Peter Acheampong, *Christian Values in Adinkra Symbols* (Kumasi: University Pringting Press, 2007), vii.

[31] Angela Christian, *Adinkra Oration* (Accra: Catholic Press, 1977), 3.

[32] Rattrey, *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, 265.

[33] Christian, *Adinkra Oration*, 4.

[34] K. Quarcoo, "A Debut of Ghanaian Traditional Visual Art into Liturgical Art of the Christian Church of Ghana," *Research Review* 4:3 (1968): 56. http://archive.lib.msu.edu/DMC/African Journals/pdfs/Institue of African Studies Research Review/1968v4n3/asrv004003004.pdf.

[35] The idea of incorporating the Adinkra symbols into the liturgical art of the Emmanuel Methodist Church was mooted by Mr A. C. Denteh, in collaboration with the architect, Mr. B. A. Sackey.

**Figure 1.** *Foreign symbols displayed on the ceiling of St Peter's Basilica Cathedral, Kumasi* [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

The symbols used are, from left to right: *dweninmmɛn* – the sign of a lamb (humility, and divinity); *mmusuyide* – sacrifice; *nsoroma* – the eight-ray sun or star; *Gye Nyame* – God is the answer, or except God; and *fihankra* – the household.

According to Quarcoo, the symbols were used in such a sequence as to form a type of sentence. "God; son of the sky, sacrifice, ram and household." When properly arranged it reads "God's son became a sacrificial lamb for the household."[36] This is the core of the Christian message. Apart from the Emmanuel Methodist Church, which has the Adinkra symbols arranged on a side of the wall to form a sentence, the concepts of the Adinkra symbols in the other churches, though beautifully arranged, can only be interpreted in isolation.

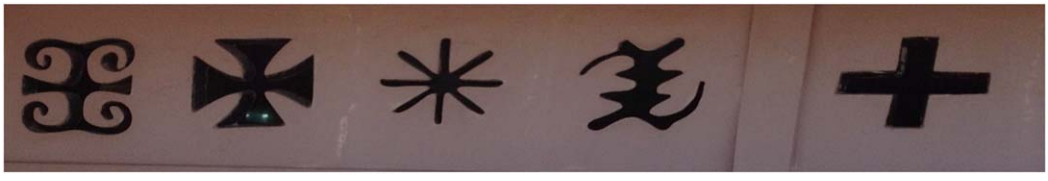

**Figure 2.** (a, b, c, d, e). *The Adinkra motifs along one side of the wall which could be seen both from within and outside the church* [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

[36] Quarcoo, "A Debut of Ghanaian Traditional Visual Art into Liturgical Art," 56.

**Figure 3.** (a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, j). *A picture of the Adinkra symbols at the Sanctuary of the Holy Spirit Cathedral, Accra* [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

## Holy Spirit Cathedral, Accra

Ten Adinkra symbols were introduced into the liturgical art of Holy Spirit Cathedral in Accra in 1995 when the cathedral was renovated (see Figure 3). From left to right, the symbols are *fihankra* – the household (safety, Security); *mate masie or ntesie* – I have heard and kept it (symbol of confidentiality); *Nyame biribi wɔ soro* – There is something in the heavens (symbol of hope in God's providence); *hye woaɛnhye* – unburnable (symbol of imperishability of the human soul); *Gye Nyame* – God is the answer, or except God; *Nyame dua* – God's alter (symbol of the presence of God); *pempamsie* – preparedness (symbol of steadfastness, readiness to serve); *dweninmmeɛn* – the sign of a lamb (humility and divinity); *Ohene Aniwa* – the King's eyes (symbol of vigilance and watchfulness); and *adwo*-Calmness (symbol of peace).[37]

The idea of incorporating the symbols was mooted by Fr Fred Hahn (SVD), who thought there should be symbols that communicate the idea of God in the Ghanaian context. He was a German missionary and the financial administrator of the Accra Diocese, at the time under the leadership of Archbishop Andoh.

## St Peter's Methodist Church, Ashiaman

A total of 26 Adinkra symbols were incorporated into the liturgical art of the Ashiaman Methodist Church in 1995 (see Figure 4). They are located at the front of the gallery and sanctuary around the communion rail. A few symbols are also embossed on the floor of the chapel. This was introduced by the Rt Rev. Yedu-Bannerman, who was then the minister-in-charge (1994–1995). He describes the Adinkra symbols as "thought symbols" that express the Akan philosophy. He asserts that the Christian faith will gain deep roots when it engages with the cultural

[37] G. F. Koju Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor: Rereading the Adinkra Cloth Symbols of the Akan of Ghana* (Accra: Afoaks Printing Press, 2001).

**Figure 4.** *A section of the front view of the Sanctuary of St Peter's Methodist Church, Ashiaman.* [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

and philosophical views of the people. His intention for incorporating the Adinkra symbols was to relate the religious and ethical messages they carry in his homilies.[38]

### St Peter's Basilica Cathedral, Kumasi

Sarpong recounts that St Peter's Cathedral, until its renovation and rededication in 2000, had only foreign or non-Ashanti artistic and aesthetic designs. During the renovation, he incorporated Ashanti symbols into the liturgical art of the cathedral (which can be found on the windows and furniture at the sanctuary), but retained part of the mosaic or European symbols to express the universality or catholicity of the church. According to Sarpong, stained glass formed part of the liturgical aspect of the cathedral (all telling stories and expressing liturgical convictions and ideas). In the course of time, artistic and aesthetic designs of altars, copulas, designed doors, and stained glass windows were all borrowed and introduced into the liturgical art of the church depending on the places the church found itself to aid the worship life of the believers. Therefore, he proposed the idea and introduced the Adinkra symbols as a replica of the foreign symbols that he thought the Asantes could better relate to (see Figure 5).[39]

## Christian Values in Adinkra Symbols

This section discusses five Adinkra symbols incorporated into Christian worship in the light of the biblical tradition and the impact of this innovation on the faith community. These are *fihankra*, *Gye Nyame*, *mmusuyide*, *Nyame biribi wɔ soro*, and *funtumfunafu dɛnkyɛmfunafu*.

[38] Rt Rev. Yedu-Bannerman, interview granted to researchers on 14 June, 2015.

[39] Most Rev. Peter K. Sarpong, interview with researchers, 10 December 2014.


**Figure 5.** (a, b, c, d, e, f). *Adinkra symbols displayed on the windows of both sides of St Peter's Basilica Cathedral* [Colour figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

## *Fihankra* (Figure 2, e)

*Fihankra* has been explained variously as a fortified house,[40] compound house,[41] and complete circuit house or enclosed dwelling.[42] It is derived from the Akan expression "*Yebisa sɛ ḳyerɛ me asomasi ne fie, nnyɛ ne sika dodo a כשכ*," which is literally translated to mean "We ask to be shown one's house, not how much money one has." It is a symbol of safety, security, solidarity, and brotherhood.[43] Acheampong states that, unlike open houses, which are opened to vulnerability, people in enclosed houses have security. Enclosed houses also enhance the cordial relationship of its inhabitants. He relates these virtues to Matthew 12:25 and Psalm 133, which admonish Christian believers to live in love, peace, and harmony.[44]

[40] Christian, *Adinkra Oration,* 7.

[41] Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor*, 164.

[42] Acheampong, *Christian Values*, 29.

[43] Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor*, 164.

[44] Acheampong, *Christian Values*, 29.

Quarcoo further explains that the sign of the household is a reminder of the universal brotherhood. This is again the message of the church, which is also a Ghanaian value expressed visually. Christian theology underlines this same idea: the sons of God are marked out by love for one another as expressed in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:33).[45] The significance of the symbol is that all who enter the house of God should live as people of one household. Christian[46] also relates the concept of *fihankra* to the biblical text of Ecclesiasticus 22:19: "A frame of wood bound together in the foundation of a building shall not be loosed: so neither shall the heart that is established by counsel." This also demonstrates the security Christians have in the Lord. Quarcoo sums it up:

> A synthesis of the idea depicted by the signs in the minds of those who enter the chapel should be a great means of impressing on them the reality of the God they seek to worship. Above all, the identity of the "indigenous God" to the Christian God appears to be revealed. The curtain is raised and the disillusion that often comes to the Ghanaian Christian in times of crisis may also be mitigated.[47]

## *Gye Nyame* (Figure 2, d)

*Gye Nyame* has been explained as Except God or God is the answer. It is also derived from the Akan aphorism "*Abɔde santann yi firi tete; obi nte ase a ɔnim n'ahyɛase, na obi ntena ase nkɔsi n'awieeɛ, Gye Nyame,*" which literally translates as "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."[48] The symbol reflects the omnipotence and the omniscience of God. Acheampong posits that the omniscience of God is that attribute by which God knows all things past, present, and future.[49] Quarcoo also asserts that

> the sign "Gye Nyame" has a lot more to say than is usually assigned to it. It is the greatest single "little sign" which epitomizes the attributes of the God of all creation. He is eternal, hence the spirit of man is eternal. Although, He died, He lives and the Atonement makes man alive. As long as God exists man lives, and it is He alone who has final jurisdiction over the spiritual self of man.[50]

Acheampong identifies a correlation in the qualities of God with regards to his providence and care as demonstrated by the *Gye Nyame* symbol and Matthew 6:26, 31–33.[51] Similarly,

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

46 Christian, *Adinkra Oration,* 7.

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

48 Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor*, 128.

49 Acheampong, *Christian Values*, 1.

50 Quarcoo, "A Debut of Ghanaian Traditional Visual Art into Liturgical Art," 57

51 Acheampong, *Christian Values*, 1.

Christians[52] relate the concept of *Gye Nyame* to the biblical text of Ecclesiasticus 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.[53]

### *Nyame Biribi wɔ soro* (Figure 3, c)

*Nyame biribi wɔ soro* has been explained as meaning "there is something in the heavens, Lord let me have it." It is derived from the Akan aphorism "*Nyame biribi wɔ soro na ma ɛmmɛka me nsa*," which literally translates as "God, there is something in the heavens, let it reach me." According to Arthur, this symbol was hung above the lintel of a door for the chief to touch three times while repeating the words of the aphorism as he went out to carry out his duties each morning. It is a symbol of expectation and hope in God's providence.[54] Acheampong identifies a connection between the Adinkra concept of *Nyame biribi wɔ soro* and the Christian understanding of hope in God's providence. He buttresses this assertion with the following texts: 1 Corinthians 2:9; Hebrews 11:1; Jeremiah 29:11; and 1 Peter 1:3–5.[55] The significance of the symbol lies in humanity's dependence on God for love, harmony, peace, forgiveness, purity, and justice. And again, Christian[56] relates the concept of *Nyame biribi wɔ soro* to the biblical text of Ecclesiasticus 1:11–13, 22: "The fear of the Lord is honour and glory, and gladness and a crown of joy. With him that feareth the Lord, it shall go well . . . and in the days of his death, he shall be blessed."

### *Mmusuyide* (Figure 2, b)

*Mmusuyide* has been explained to mean a sacrificial item. It is derived from the Akan aphorism "*Kerapa yɛ Nyame ahoboa; ɔte sɛ ɔkra, ɔkyiri fi na ɔkram fi te sɛ pɛtɛ nti na Nananom de no yi mmusuo*," which literally translates as "Sanctity is part particle of the good; it is like a cat; it abhors filth and it clears filth like the vulture, that is why it is used to drive away evil and diseases."[57] Christian notes that "a cloth stamped with the *musuyide* design lay along the side of the King of Ashanti's bed, and that the first act he

[52] Christian, *Adinkra Oration*, 5.

[53] Acheampong, *Christian Values*, 1.

[54] Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor*, 138.

[55] Acheampong, *Christian Values*, 9.

[56] Christian, *Adinkra Oration*, 31.

[57] Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor,* 132.

performed each morning when he rose, was to place his left foot on the cloth three times. The number three, it will be recalled, is a sacred number in Akan."[58] Acheampong asserts that *musuyide* is a symbol of religious sacrifice or purification associated with an offering to a deity, with the hope of gaining favour or avoiding adversity. The idea of purification is deeply rooted in the instincts of humanity and in various religious traditions.[59] Christian theology underlines this same idea. Acheampong juxtaposes the Old and the New Testaments and draws attention to the difference between the idea of purification and sacrifice. While he associates ritual washing as a form of purification to the old covenant (Heb. 9:18–22), purification is attained through the blood of Jesus Christ under the new covenant (Heb. 10:12–14).[60] Quarcoo points out that *musuyi* (sacrifice) is a familiar occurrence among the Akan; consequently, the idea that the Son of God as a ram, *dwennimmen*, was sacrificed is comprehensible.[61] And Christian sums up the correlation between the concept of *musuyi* and the Christian understanding of purification with a quotation from Psalms 5:3–5, which is a prayer requesting purification or the removal of evil by God the sanctifier.[62]

### *Funtumfunafu Dɛnkyɛmfunafu* (Figure 5, d)

This symbol has been explained variously as meaning unity in diversity, common destiny,[63]democracy, and unity of purpose.[64] It is derived from the Akan expression "*Funtumfunafu, Dɛnkyɛmfunafu, wɔn afuru bɔ mu nso wodidi a na wɔrefom efiri sɛ aduane ne dɛ ye di no menewa mu*," which literally translates as "A two-headed crocodile fights over food that goes to a common stomach because each relishes the food in its throat."[65] According to Arthur, this symbol stresses the oneness of humanity in spite of cultural diversity. It also emphasizes the need for the recognition of individuality in relation to one's membership in society. He argues that while community interests are to be pursued for the common good, individual rights, interests, passions, and responsibilities must be respected.[66] Acheampong acknowledges that

58 Christian, *Adinkra Oration*, 4.

59 Acheampong, *Christian Values*, 5.

60 Ibid.

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

62 Christian, *Adinkra Oration*, 9.

63 Acheampong, *Christian Values*, 16.

64 Arthur, *Cloth as Metaphor,* 152.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

the values of this Adinkra symbol are also imbibed in Christian theology. He draws an analogy between the Akan concept of unity and the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:14–18, 18–20). It is about partnership in a common enterprise that goes beyond race, ethnicity, and gender.[67]

## Adinkra Symbols in Worship: Implications for the Great Commission

From the data presented above, four major themes emerge that help us appreciate Adinkra symbols as tools for communicating the gospel in the Ghanaian religio-cultural context.

### Points of convergence between indigenous art and Christian faith

The study revealed several points of convergence between the Adinkra symbols and the Christian faith. These include the concern with the "inner being," "divine existence," and promotion of community, which resonates in both the pre-Christian culture and the Christian religion. According to some of the clergy and laity, indigenous symbols help them conceptualize their ideas and deepen their understanding of the Christian experience by offering new ways of seeing, hearing, and thinking about the gospel message and faith in God.

Evidence from the narratives suggests that the incorporation of the Adinkra symbols creates a sense of belonging to the faith and enables the clergy to contextualize the knowledge they acquire in their theological training. They then see the church as an expression of community – *fihankra*. Additionally, the symbols communicate the message of the gospel to the elderly while serving as tool for learning for children.

### The sacred and the profane

The sacred and profane are two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by humanity in history.[68] For Mircea Eliade, space is heterogeneous; it comprises the sacred and the profane: "When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also a

[67] Acheampong, *Christian Values*, 16.

[68] Mircea Eliade, *From the Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1959), 161.

revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the non-reality of the vast surrounding expanse."[69] In this regard, sacred art must be "provocative when it is concerned with clearing the way to matters of faith."[70] In our interaction with the faith communities (Catholic and Methodist parishes and congregations, respectively) some informants recounted their difficulty in relating to the symbols because of their use in the secular world as institutional logos, designs on cloths and chieftaincy paraphernalia. They therefore perceive the symbols as belonging to the "profane" space.

In the light of the religious and moral values embedded in the Adinkra symbols and their significance in providing a setting for reflection on the divine, there is the need for the symbols to connect with the liturgy and the word. Hence, training of church leaders and believers should include the role of indigenous symbols in worship. Dzobo aptly points out that "a sound understanding of African patterns of thought and feeling requires an appreciation of the nature and function of symbolism as a medium of communication in African culture."[71]

## Symbols as decoration

Kenneth Schmidt points out that visual arts or symbols act as the silent witness of transcendence.[72] But what do the visual arts in the churches under review really say? The study revealed that although these symbols have been incorporated into the liturgical art of the churches and cathedrals over the years, they are seen to be more decorative than theological elements to be appropriated. The observations of T. S. Eliot and Benedict XVI become imperative. While the former states that "art without intellectual content is vanity,"[73] the latter emphasizes the need for harmony between the art, the purpose, and the message of the word.[74] Thus, adequately engaged, Adinkra symbols could be employed as expressions of God's word "to teach, rebuke, correct, and train unto righteousness" (see 2 Tim. 3:16). An approach

69 Ibid., 162.

70 Beat Rink, "Art from the Christian Point of View" (2009), 8, http://www.crescendo.org.

71 Dzobo, "African Symbols and Proverbs," 83.

72 Kenneth Schmidt, "The Silent Witness: The Visual Arts in the Service of the Church" 5:2 (2006): 17, http://www.cune.edu/resources/docs/Issues/fall2006/5article2.pdf. 17.

73 Michael Capps, "Modes of Worship: Music in Liturgy," *Image* 49 (2006), 41. See Randall, "The Reformation and the Visual Arts," 129.

74 Randall, "The Reformation and the Visual Arts," 129. Benedict's test was in reference to music. However, it also applies to the visual arts.

toward achieving this goal is to relate the messages conveyed by the symbols in homilies.

## Challenges and limitations to mission

The incorporation of Adinkra symbols into the worship life of the churches under review has not been without challenges. Sarpong recounted resistance from within the Catholic Church and other Christian denominations.[75] This reflects the divergent views people hold with regards to the subject. In our interaction with parishioners and congregants, the view that Christianity is contradictory to the pre-Christian African tradition was prevalent. This position alludes to the fact that the transmission of Christianity in Africa essentially entails the complete elimination of the pre-Christian primal religions of Africa, "giving the new means taking way the old."[76] This point of view indicates the challenge some African Christians face in reinterpreting their traditional religious culture in the light of the Christian teaching. Furthermore, the non-Akan members of communities in the cosmopolitan churches struggle to engage the symbols because of their different cultural backgrounds. There is therefore also the need to incorporate non-Akan symbols into the liturgical arts of the cosmopolitan churches and the importance of education for both parishioners and the clergy.

Notably, evidence from the narratives reveals that the older generation of Christians with Akan background appreciate the Adinkra symbols better than the younger generation because the contemporary Ghanaian educational system is theoretically oriented, with little attention to the visual arts. Although people appreciate the beauty of the symbols, they are not able to relate to them and, consequently, the relevance to their socioreligious life is quite minimal.

In conclusion, the incorporation of Adinkra symbols into Ghanaian Christianity offers an opportunity for new insights into indigenous theology. Indeed, the symbols have the potential to serve the church in Ghana in a meaningful way. However, in our survey and observation of the Ghanaian religious scene, art plays a very minimal role in the religious thought, reflection, or worship life of many Christians. Among the laity and the clergy of both the Methodist and the Catholic churches, we observed a mixed reaction with regard to the impact of the Adinkra symbols on the Christian community.

[75] Sarpong's experience is somewhat representative of that of other practitioners of inculturation in Ghana.

[76] Dietrich Westermann, *Africa and Christianity: The Duff Lectures, 1955* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 94.

Our survey reveals that there are several Christian churches that have also engaged the Adinkra symbols in the architectural designs of their churches. We are of the opinion that, with proper orientation, this could be a tool for deepening theological reflection on Ghanaian Christianity. This calls for the establishment of a mission centre to promote the study of sacred art and its engagement in Ghanaian Christianity.