



Adinkra Symbols and Political Communication: Analysing President John Mahama’s Inaugural Apparel on 7th January, 2025.

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Received: 10/08/2025	Abstract
Accepted: 05/10/2025	<i>The Akan people regard Adinkra symbols as profound metaphoric representations of their worldview, encapsulating wisdom, values, and identity. The study investigates how these traditional visual symbols transcend cultural artistry to function as potent tools of political communication in Ghana. Focusing on President John Dramani Mahama’s inaugural apparel on January 7, 2025, the study analyses the Adinkra symbols embedded in his attire to uncover their deeper socio-political meanings. Anchored in Visual Rhetoric and Semiotics, the study employs a qualitative analytical approach to interpret how the symbols convey messages of leadership, unity, resilience, and divine guidance. The study revealed that four Adinkra symbols—Dwennimmen (ram’s horns), Sankofa (go back and get it), Gye Nyame (except for God), and Nyame Dua (altar of God)—most prominently featured on President Mahama’s inaugural apparel. The findings demonstrate that the symbolic and socio-political implications of the Adinkra symbols extend beyond aesthetics, and powerfully communicate messages of leadership, cultural identity and national unity within Ghana’s political landscape. The study advances understanding of how indigenous visual forms shape political narratives, inspire civic pride, and redefine communication in Africa’s democratic spaces.</i>
Keywords: Adinkra symbols, inaugural ceremony, socio-political discourse, symbolism, visual rhetoric.	

1. INTRODUCTION

The use of symbols as communicative tools dates back to the earliest human civilisations. Ancient societies such as the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans employed symbols to represent beliefs, ideologies, and cultural identities. Symbols not only convey ideas but also embody doctrines and emotions, often evoking strong responses. Colleen (2006, p. 1) defines symbols as “objects or signs that stand for something beyond themselves.” Similarly, Barnard and Woodburn (2024) argue that symbols are valuable assets in shaping power structures and sustaining ideological beliefs. Their communicative force is evident in contexts such as national flags, which inspire patriotism, or the crucifix, which embodies deep spiritual significance for Christians.

Symbolism involves the use of signs, literary devices, and artistic expressions to convey abstract concepts, values, and emotions (Agbo, 2006). While symbols may be open to interpretation, they effectively communicate people's surroundings, intentions, and identities, often prompting strong reactions. Yankah (1995), for example, recounts how a chief dissatisfied with a court's ruling used clothing worn inside out and sandals on the wrong feet as symbolic protest—a silent yet powerful challenge to authority. From the Stone Age figurines representing fertility (Colleen, 2006) to modern abstract designs, symbols have remained one of humanity's oldest forms of communication.

In Ghana, symbols permeate cultural life, particularly through art, dress, and ritual. They often convey distinct messages when worn or displayed at important ceremonies (Abubakari, Amankwah & Mensah, 2024a, 2024b). Colours, for instance, are deeply symbolic: white signifies purification and celebration (Quainoo, 2022; Gopaul, 2007; Onuman, 2011); black connotes mourning but also ancestral power and maturity (Asamoah-Gyadu, 2013); red represents mourning, sacrifice, and resistance (Anyiams Creations International, 2013; Gopaul, 2007); yellow and gold symbolise wealth, nobility, and divine presence (Gopaul, 2007); while blue evokes tranquillity and spirituality (Anyiams Creations International, 2013). Such meanings reveal the communicative richness of Ghanaian culture, where symbols are not merely decorative but encode spiritual, political, and social values.

A central form of Ghanaian symbolism is the Adinkra symbols of the Akan people. These visual motifs, inscribed on cloth, pottery, and architecture, embody proverbs, historical events, and philosophical wisdom (Essuman, Adom, Asare-Aboagye & Panin, 2024; Dzokoto, Hill, Twum-Asante & Hayfron, 2018; Kuwornu-Adjaottor, Appiah & Nartey, 2016). Each symbol carries a distinct meaning—wisdom, unity, leadership, resilience, or spirituality (Aboagyewaa-Ntiri & Vijayan, 2016)—making them powerful communicative tools in both traditional and contemporary contexts. Though traditionally worn by royalty and spiritual leaders, Adinkra symbols have transcended ceremonial settings into fashion, design, and national politics, symbolising the enduring relevance of Akan philosophy.

Inaugural ceremonies in Ghana provide a particularly important platform for symbolic communication. Constitutionally held on 7 January after elections, presidential inaugurals mark the renewal of the covenant between citizens and their leader, functioning as both legal and cultural rituals (Kyei et al., 2017; Trosborg, 2000). As Partey, Sarfo-Adu, Addo-Danquah, and Bonku (2018) and Ankrah, Dominic, and Opoku (2018) note, these ceremonies are highly anticipated national events where the president communicates not only policy directions but also unity, vision, and identity. Scholars describe Ghanaian inaugurals as “majestic moments” in which the president embodies the institution of the presidency and appeals to both national and international audiences ((Kyei et al., 2017). Presidential inaugurals constitute more than constitutional ceremonies; they are also cultural rituals that reaffirm political legitimacy and collective identity (Kyei et al., 2017; Trosborg, 2000). In this context, presidential attire operates as a medium of visual rhetoric, transmitting symbolic meanings that reinforce cultural heritage while shaping socio-political discourse. Although several studies have analysed Ghanaian presidential inaugural speeches (e.g., Chinwendu & Botchwey, 2017; Ankrah et al., 2018; Partey et al., 2018; Kyei et al., 2017), relatively little attention appears to have been given to non-verbal rhetorical elements, particularly clothing and symbolic design. Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the Adinkra symbols featured in President John Dramani Mahama's apparel during his inauguration ceremony on January 7, 2025. The study, thus, addresses the following research question:

What are the symbolic and socio-political implications of the Adinkra symbols in President John Dramani Mahama's inauguration apparel on 7 January 2025?

1.1. Adinkra Symbols as a Communicative Tool

The Akans of Ghana use both verbal and nonverbal communication, much like any other language. Non-verbal language is represented by symbols, whereas verbal language is

spoken. According to Yankah (1995), domestic symbolism is a surrogate language in which the spoken word is interpreted as a customary sign. When a message is transmitted from the speaker to the addressee via a third party, this is known as communicative mediation. According to Agyekum (2006), Akan semiotics that are represented in artistic artefacts such as gold weights, wooden staffs, stools, and textiles are a blatant expression of prevailing views. Additionally, popular proverbs, idioms, and maxims serve as visual representations of Akan semiotics, which express the Akans' principles of behaviour, cooperation, initiative, historical events and allusions, social and religious norms, as well as their political and judicial elements in a clear and nonverbal manner.

In Akan culture, *Adinkra* associates a specific symbol with a distinct meaning (Essel & Opoku-Mensah, 2014). *Adinkra* symbols are artworks that serve as metaphorical memory anchors for the Akan people, preserving cultural values, beliefs, and historical experiences (Appiah-Kubi et al., 2021). The *Adinkra* is a proverbial, idiomatic, nonverbal communicating symbol that may eschew straightforwardness but is imminent in the brevity of expression. Its use elicits rhetorical interpretations that rely on the contextualization of specific *Adinkra* symbolism through circumstantial evidence. *Adinkra* symbols, deeply rooted in Akan culture, serve as powerful communicative tools, conveying complex ideas, values, and philosophies through visual representation. These symbols encapsulate metaphors, proverbs, and historical narratives, allowing individuals to express abstract concepts such as wisdom, strength, unity, and spirituality without the use of words. Beyond their aesthetic appeal, *Adinkra* symbols function as non-verbal language, used in various forms of communication, including textile design, architecture, and ceremonial objects.

1.2.Theoretical Framework: Visual Rhetoric and Semiotics

Visual rhetoric is concerned with how visual images convey meaning, persuade, and reflect the culture from which they emerge. Unlike traditional rhetoric, which privileges spoken or written language, visual rhetoric emphasises symbolic representation through images, designs, and other non-verbal signs (Foss, 2005). According to Magdy (2008), visual communication falls within the domain of rhetoric because it persuades audiences through the integration of imagery and language. Visual rhetoric can be understood in three interrelated ways: (1) as a field of scholarly inquiry, (2) as strategies and principles guiding visual design, and (3) as a communicative mode that constructs meaning through visual representation (Alim & Rahim, 2021; Foss, 2005). In this study, these perspectives are applied to examine the *Adinkra* symbols embedded in President John Dramani Mahama's inaugural apparel as rhetorical strategies that communicate cultural identity and socio-political values.

Closely connected to visual rhetoric is semiotics, the study of signs, symbols, and processes of signification (Alim & Rahim, 2021; Ma, 2008; Barthes, 1977). Semiotics explains how meaning is encoded into symbols and later decoded by audiences within cultural and communicative contexts. In the case of *Adinkra*, meanings are deeply rooted in Akan cosmology, ethics, and social philosophy (Yankah, 1995). Visual rhetoric and semiotics provide a robust framework for this study. They enable us to analyse Mahama's apparel not merely as clothing but as a visual text that embodies cultural heritage, negotiates political identity, and communicates persuasive messages in Ghana's socio-political discourse.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design, which was appropriate for exploring the meanings and socio-political implications of cultural symbols within a political context. Both primary and secondary data sources were used. The primary data comprised a visual analysis of images and videos from the inauguration ceremony, with a focus on the *Adinkra* symbols featured in President John Dramani Mahama's apparel. The secondary data involved scholarly articles, books, and cultural archives documenting the meanings and historical significance of *Adinkra* symbols in Ghanaian society. In addition, official speeches and media reports on the

inauguration event were reviewed to contextualise the broader socio-political interpretations of the symbols.

The study purposively focused on four Adinkra symbols—*Dwennimmen* (ram's horns), *Sankofa* (return and get it), *Gye Nyame* (except for God), and *Nyame Dua* (altar of God)—which were the most prominently featured in the President's outfit.

The analysis was conducted through textual and content analytical methods, supported by semiotic principles. Specifically, the study adopted Roland Barthes' framework of denotation, connotation, and myth-making to unpack the layered meanings embedded in the symbols. This approach allowed the research to examine not only the literal representations of the symbols but also their cultural, spiritual, and political connotations, and how they contribute to broader narratives of nationhood, resilience, and divine guidance.

To minimize researcher bias in the interpretation of the symbols, triangulation was employed. Interpretations were cross-checked with scholarly works, cultural archives, and oral explanations from Akan cultural custodians. Media commentaries and public discourse surrounding the inauguration were also considered, offering insights into how different audiences—citizens, political actors, and commentators—interpreted the symbolic choices of the President.

While this study provides an in-depth exploration of President Mahama's inaugural apparel, it acknowledges certain limitations. First, it focuses on a single event and does not conduct a comparative analysis with the inaugural costumes of other Ghanaian presidents, which could reveal patterns of continuity or change in the political use of Adinkra symbols. Second, the study relies largely on interpretive analysis and documentary sources without incorporating broader empirical methods such as audience surveys or interviews with political stakeholders, which could provide further insights into reception and meaning-making. Nonetheless, these limitations provide avenues for future research.

In sum, this methodology combines visual, textual, and semiotic approaches to critically examine how Adinkra symbols functioned as communicative codes in President Mahama's apparel, framing them as persuasive acts of visual rhetoric in Ghana's socio-political landscape.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Symbolic and Socio-Political Implications of Adinkra Symbols in Mahama's Inauguration Apparel

During his inauguration on January 7, 2025, President-elect John Dramani Mahama wore a traditional white Agbaza, intricately embroidered and featuring four distinguished Adinkra symbols: *Dwennimmen* (denoting humility and strength), *Sankofa* (emblematic of learning from the past), *Gye Nyame* (symbolising the supreme power of God), and *Nyame Dua* (representing the Tree of Life, purity, and divine blessings) (See Figure 1).



Figure 1: Selected Adinkra Symbols (Source: Ghanaweb)

His attire fused cultural heritage with profound symbolism—the white fabric signified purity and victory, while the Kente accents underscored Ghana's rich cultural identity. The ensemble incorporated key elements of Ghanaian tradition, including Ashanti Kente, Agbaza, and a northern cap, thereby reinforcing national pride and cultural unity. The ensuing discussion examines the symbolic and socio-political implications of these emblematic representations.

3.2. Dwennimmen

The Dwennimmen (See Figure 2) Adinkra symbol embodies the dual qualities of humility and strength, encapsulated in the phrase "ɛkyerɛ ahobrease ne ahooɔn" (meaning "it signifies humility and strength"). The name originates from the combination of two Akan words—"dwen" (ram) and "nimmen" (horns)—symbolising the resilience and fortitude of the ram, an inherently strong animal known for its remarkable humility. In Akan culture, *Dwennimmen* represents a fundamental virtue that emphasises the importance of humility, modesty, and equilibrium in human interactions.

**Figure 2: Dwennimmen**

Berger (2022) asserts that semiotics involves conveying messages through various symbolic codes. The *Dwennimmen* symbol, often featured on Kente cloth or the linguist staff of esteemed individuals, as seen in the President's attire, conveys a profound message. It signifies that, while he possesses considerable authority and strength, he remains committed to humility in leadership and service. Regardless of one's power, strength, or differences, it is imperative to remain humble and serve others with humility. The use of this symbol is particularly significant given that values such as humility, respect, trust, unity, obedience, discipline, truth, and generosity form the foundation of Ghanaian communal life (Kyei et al., 2023; Osei-Tutu et al., 2023).

3.3. Sankofa

The concept of *Sankofa* originates from the Akan tradition and is a combination of two words: *san*, meaning "to return," and *kɔfa*, meaning "to take." It symbolises the importance of reflecting on the past to gain wisdom for the present and the future. In Akan culture, *Sankofa* is highly esteemed, representing the need to learn from history, preserve cultural heritage, and progress with informed understanding (Ofosu-Asare, 2024).



Figure 3: Sankofa

It is a symbol that signifies or informs the Ghanaians about the importance of looking back into history and bringing back cultural heritage and values that are diminishing or left behind. Learning from the past is seen as being particularly important in educating the young generation about things from the past they can make life better for them or to correct mistakes they have made because of modernisation. Sankofa is used to teach important life lessons such as respect for elders, cultural heritage, and community values. Sankofa guides community development initiatives, emphasising the importance of preserving cultural heritage while embracing progress (Ofosu-Asare, 2024; Kramer, 2023; Zamblé, 2023). As stated in the President's speech, he promises to be honest with the citizens, and makes sure he makes use of the second chance he has been given to learn from his own previous mistakes and the mistakes the Akuffo Addo government. In visual rhetoric, a picture should go beyond its function as a sign, symbolic, and the picture is indirectly connected to the thing being referred to (Foss, 2005). The Sankofa symbol as used in the president's costume presents a powerful concept that embodies his resolve to learning from the past, honour the heritage of previous governments, and moving forward with wisdom. It could also be seen as an accentuation of the people's decision to vote for him to be president a second time. In this sense, his election as a president is an illustration of the people returning to something in the past that they needed for the future.

3.4. Gye Nyame

Gye Nyame (See Figure 4) is also an Akan symbol which most commonly used in our everyday lives. Literarily, it means "unless God", a phrase which brings out the people's reliance of God, especially in difficult times (Ossom-Batsa & Apaah, 2018). The symbol also brings out the Akans' belief about the supremacy of God and his centrality in their lives. For the Akan, the symbol means that that there is a creator who created them and whose power has no equal. The *Gye Nyame* symbol serves as a tool for teaching about Akan culture, traditions, and values (Acquaye, Appiah & Sai, 2021). It provides a unique opportunity for students to learn about the rich cultural heritage of the Akan people. The *Gye Nyame* symbol provides a window into the history and traditions of the Akan people. It offers a unique opportunity for students to learn about the past, its cultural significance, and its continued relevance in modern times (Asante, 2020).



Figure 4: Gye Nyame

Among Ghanaians, the most widely recognised symbol of wisdom is *Gye Nyame*, which translates to "except God," (Apaah, 2024) signifying God's supremacy and omnipotence. This symbol is not only expressed through textile designs and architectural structures but is also incorporated into traditional Ghanaian furniture pieces (Appiah-Kubi et al., 2021). The *Gye Nyame* symbol conveys the idea that nothing can be accomplished without the involvement of God, the supreme being (Mensah, 2023). Its presence on the President's ceremonial attire reflects his deep reverence for God and his dependence on divine guidance. Symbolically, the President-elect communicates that his actions and decisions are anchored in faith. This interpretation aligns with a core message of the President-elect's campaign, which highlighted that addressing Ghana's pressing challenges requires not only human effort but also divine wisdom and intervention. As Appiah-Kubi et al. (2021) note, *Gye Nyame* is fundamentally a religious symbol, crafted by the ancestors of the Akan people of Ghana to embody their spiritual experiences and pass down their faith to future generations.

3.5. Nyame Dua

Nyamedua (tree of God) is a sacred and revered symbol in the Akan culture (Kquofi et al., 2022; Biney, 2018), which is prevalent in Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Often depicted as a stylised tree or a staff with a twisted or curved shape, the symbol is also known as "Nyame Biriw". The symbol's name is derived from two words, *Nyame* (*God*) and *dua* (*tree*). The Akan see the symbol as referencing the "Tree of God" which is his altar of worship or his presence (Platvoet, 2012). *Nyamedua* is a symbol of the supreme God, *Nyame*, in the Akan culture (Sarbah & Adjei, 2024). It represents the connection between the physical and spiritual realms. The Akans put a black pot with purslane leaves in it under the Tree of God which signifies their place of worship. It was also under the Tree of God that they performed any purification rites (Appiah-Kubi & Aabaa, 2019). The *Nyamedua* symbol is, thus, typically used to signify worship, spiritual cleansing and protection.

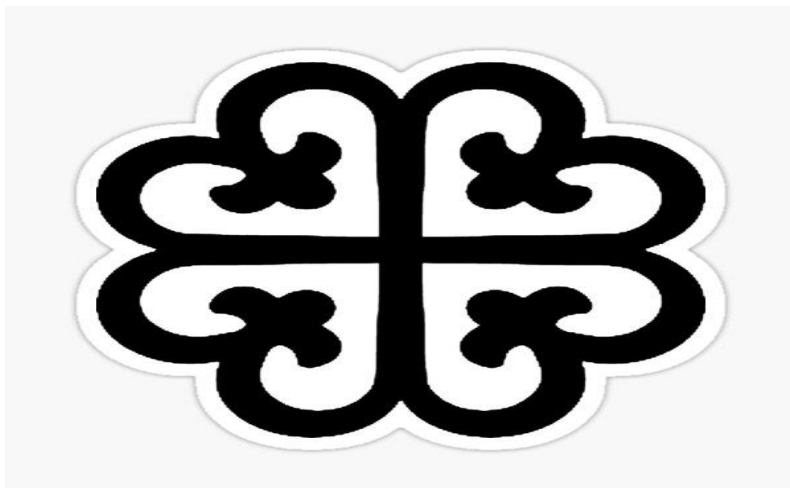


Figure 5: Nyame Dua

The *Nyamedua* symbol holds deep spiritual and philosophical significance for the Akan and all Ghanaians who understand it (Effah-Manu, Boaheng & Samwini, 2025). When printed or painted into their fabrics or on the walls of shrines or palaces, the symbol signifies that there is a God who alone must be worshipped. The President-elect's use of the symbol can be seen as a way of utilizing the powerful imagery of the Divine. The Nyamedua represents the link between the mortal world and the spiritual realm, and symbolises the Akan people's belief in a higher power and their desire to connect with the divine. Again, the symbol is often linked to the Akan people's ancestral heritage and their connection to their forebears. President Mahama therefore uses this symbol to show his connection with God. It suggests an attempt to show himself as one who, by being connected to God, is cleansed and protected. Again, when used, the Nyamedua can represent a person's pursuit of wisdom, knowledge, and insight. Thus, the President-elect depicts himself as a person who is connected to the world of the Divine and who is able to rule in wisdom.

The Nyamedua looks like a tree stump which has three or more branches coming together. Due to that design, the symbol can represent *strength*, *resilience*, and *adaptability*. It represents a person's ability to withstand challenges and difficulties. President-elect Mahama uses this imagery to communicate the idea that, like the surviving tree stump, he also has a strong and resilient character. Peterson (2017) stated that visual rhetoric is an important element to increase the effectiveness in conveying the message to the audience and metaphors are presented in any advertisement and are often produced entirely through visuals.

4. CONCLUSION

The study explored how Adinkra symbols function as communicative tools within Ghana's socio-political context, focusing on their use in President John Dramani Mahama's inaugural apparel on 7 January 2025. Employing a qualitative approach framed by visual rhetorical and semiotic analysis, the research examined the symbolic meanings of the Adinkra designs and their socio-political implications. The findings revealed that the selected symbols were not incidental but deliberately chosen to celebrate Ghanaian cultural heritage while simultaneously communicating persuasive messages of unity, resilience, and divine guidance. These themes reflect how President Mahama strategically employed visual symbolism as a form of political communication to shape public perception and reinforce national identity. This study therefore demonstrates that Adinkra symbols are not merely cultural artefacts but active rhetorical devices that bridge tradition and modern political discourse. By highlighting the intersection of culture, identity, and leadership, the study contributes to broader scholarship on visual rhetoric and African political communication.

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