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Visual nexus of Akan adinkra symbols: Some selected works of three contemporary Ghanaian artists

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Abstract

The paper sought to identify and examine the works of selected contemporary Ghanaian artists who incorporate Akan adinkra symbols into their paintings to portray Africanism. The study employed the qualitative case study research method using snowball sampling to select three artists and their works which are heavily laden with Akan adinkra symbols. Data were obtained through interviews, observation, review of documents and examination of artefacts. Content analysis was used in analysing the data. The findings indicate that all three artists have distinctive aesthetic significance for incorporating Akan adinkra symbols in their works. They consistently and vigorously engaged in incorporating adinkra symbols into their artistic productions and exposes the overwhelming sacred symbolism of these traditional symbols. It is recommended that other upcoming Ghanaian contemporary artists should inculcate Ghanaian traditional symbols and images into their artistic practices and write extensively on their works.

Keywords

Adinkra symbols,
Akan, contemporary
Ghanaian artists,
painting, visual
nexus

1. Introduction

The Akan Adinkra symbols have been in existence for centuries, have gone through a series of transformations, and are used in many art forms. Many artists including sculptors, textile designers, ceramists, graphic designers, and goldsmiths have explored and experimented with the use of Akan Adinkra symbols in their works (Arthur, 2001). The symbols and their meanings have transcended time, yet they have adapted to the social, cultural, and historical changes that characterise modern Ghanaian society. Today, Adinkra symbols can be found in many different art forms including; painting, textiles, ceramics, graphic design, sculpture, and jewellery. Yet, many people do not know the names and meanings of these symbols and even artists who used these symbols in Contemporary Ghanaian painting (Amoako, 2015).

African alphabets were born out of an oral storytelling tradition and have grown up in a variety of forms across the African continent and the Diaspora (Adom, 2010). Some of the communication systems were created several thousand years ago and inextricably linked to the cultural ideas from which they came from (Arthur, 2001). The Akan 'Adinkra' symbols stand out as one of these writing systems in Africa. Adinkra symbols are pictograms and ideograms which have come to be well known as cultural-linguistic symbols of the Akan people of Ghana and began to be used around 1800s (Arthur, 2001). The symbols through stylised pictures convey the philosophy of the Akans, and the culture to which they belong. Stylistically, Adinkra symbols are based on various observations and associations between humans and objects, flora and fauna scenes, the human body and its parts, and elements of nature, geometric and abstract ideas (Arthur, 2001). There are hundreds of adinkra symbols. They represent ideas such as the nature of the universe, political beliefs and organisation, social, economic and ethical values, and aesthetics as well as ideas relating to family (Angela, 1977). Adinkra is an Akan (Twi) word which literally means 'goodbye' or 'farewell' (Adom, 2010). These symbols do not only represent specific ideas and proverbs, but are also related to other forms of Akan art such as brick laying (building houses), metal crafts, wall paintings, weaving and wood carving, all of which can display versions of these symbols in their work (Adom, 2010). As to the origin of these symbols, there has so far not been a conclusive or definitive answer (Angela, 1977). A Ghanaian scholar on Adinkra symbols, Quarcoo (1994) attempts to make sense of the oral accounts that have led to Asante-Gyaman, Bowdich, and the Bron theory. Quarcoo further claims that Adinkra was obtained after the Asante defeated the state of Denkyira, which ruled over

the Asante, in the Osei-Ntim War in 1701. Quarcoo explains that the Asante were first introduced to Adinkra when it was made by graphic designers for the kings of Denkyira, Takyiman, and Asante. However, the Asante had not acquired the technique for making Adinkra since it was made for them. So, when Asante people defeated the Denkyira nation, which included the Dormaa, it was believed, the Asante learned the Adinkra art from craftsmen that were captured during the war (Quarcoo, 1994).

From another point of view, Danquah (1944) postulates that the name Adinkra may have not come from Adinkra Kofi or Adinkra Panin. Danquah believes that the word 'Adinkra' comes from the Akan word *nkra* or "*nkara* meaning message or intelligence since the Asante believed that the ancestors carried messages to and from God (Danquah, 1944). Therefore, the symbols may have been named Adinkra because the Akans believed that Adinkra cloth the dead wore sends some sacred messages to God (Danquah, 1944). Also, it is believed that Adinkra could have come from the exile of the Asantehene, Prempeh I, by the British because he refused to give them the golden stool. When Prempeh I was sent into exile, he was wearing the cloth usually called *ntiamu ntoma* (stamped cloth), the original name for Adinkra cloth. However, after he was exiled, the cloth became known as *adinkra ntoma*, or parting cloth (Arthur, 2001). Many Adinkra cloth producers still refer to the cloth as *ntiamu ntoma*, which supports that the change in name was possibly based on this event but was not the first and only name given to the cloth (Danquah, 1944).

1.1 Adinkra Symbols in Contemporary Art Space

In art world discourse, contemporary art appears in bursts of a special usage in the 1920s and 1930s, and again during the 1960s, but it remains subsidiary to terms such as modern art, modernism, and, after 1970, postmodernism that highlight art's close but contested relationships to social and cultural modernity (Terry, 2010). Contemporary art achieves a strong sense, and habitual capitalisation, only in the 1980s. Subsequently, the usage grew rapidly to become ubiquitous by 2000 (Okwui, 2009). Contemporary art is now the undisputed name for today's art in professional contexts and enjoys widespread resonance in public media and popular speech (Terry, 2010).

From Okwui and Okeke-Agulu's (2009) contemporary point of view, Africa is a multiplicity of cultural spaces, shaped by social forces and political and

economic conditions that do not privilege one way of conceptualising an African identity. And in this framework, contemporary African art includes issues of fascinating and productive contradictions which enliven debates on what it contests. The Authors further affirm that contemporary African art denotes a field of complex artistic production, research, interpretation, and a repository of rich intellectual discovery at the intersection of the shifting models of cultural, political, social, and epistemological analyses in which African is meaningfully interpreted. Contemporary African art is flourishing. Shifts in the production, distribution, institutions, and publics of contemporary art have contributed to its expansion into the networks of global artistic practice. Today, African traditional symbols do not depart from the norms and tactics of contemporary art from the perspective of Ghanaians. Akan Adinkra symbols have gained global recognition and many contemporary Ghanaian and non-Ghanaian artists continue to explore its intrinsic values, symbolic expressions, and aesthetic values (Okeke-Agulu, 2009). These symbols have gone through many transformational stages that encapsulate the rare potency it receives at the hands of many artists. Contemporary African art implies the existence of an artistic landscape of some coherence, one that has discernible durability, and which justifies the label as applied to the works of those artists grouped under the various thematic rubrics (Okwui, 2009).

Hughes (2006) believes that the idea of grouping Ghanaian artists is an anomaly because of its complexity. The artistic landscape of Ghana is made up of a variety of styles (Hughes, 2006). This stylistic pluralism may be due to several factors and influences such as ethnicity, religion, education, westernisation, globalisation and aesthetic preferences of the individual artist under consideration. Hughes continues to posit that, in the field of symbolism and the traditional backings in contemporary or modern Ghanaian art, a distinguishable group of Ghanaian independent artists are those who are conceptually inspired by African symbols and traditional forms such as Adinkra symbols, Adinkra motifs, traditional stools, sculptures, and ideas about African identity. Oku Ampofo and Vincent Kofi are pioneer Ghanaian sculptors who borrowed extensively from traditional African concepts of stylisation, emphasis, distortion and Adinkra symbolism (Hughes, 2006). Public commissions of relief murals, panels, busts and monuments of Saka Acquaye, reveal the traditional African practice of the artist's duty to the State. Owusu Ankomah uses in his prints and paintings colossal male figures superimposed on ideograms and Adinkra symbols. Through an acute reductive system of visual selection, Ankomah attains profundity with suspended shapes

that defy gravity and attains a metaphysical significance (Hughs, 2006). Martin Dartey, greatly influenced by traditional African art, uses his knowledge in African history as leverage to deliver sociopolitical themes in his paintings (Hughs, 2006). Undoubtedly, Adinkra symbols have transcended deeply into the Ghanaian contemporary art scene and it keeps gaining solid grounds in the minds of many artists from local and in the Diasporas.

Rhoda (2009) also ascertains that another prominent Ghanaian artist who extensively swims through the gamut of Adinkra symbols and traditional themes is Rikki Wemega-Kwawu, a self-taught painter, who has spent almost 28 years employing symbols in his abstract colossal canvas painting and installation works. Rikki superimposes and juxtaposes Akan Adinkra symbols in a vertical and horizontal grid of lines on his canvas. He transcends the cultural and philosophical ideas of the symbols into the metaphysical world. Rhoda continues to claim that Wiz Kudowor is another renowned Ghanaian contemporary painter who dwells massively in incorporating sacred symbols from the Ewe society, the Akan Adinkra symbols, and other foreign signs and symbols. Wiz continues to swim within the gamut of abstraction, impressionism, and figurative expressionism, and employs a variety of brilliant colour which makes his works appear multi-coloured scenes captured on the canvas. His composition encompasses human figures juxtaposed and superimposed with other sacred symbols. Undoubtedly, abstracted, and condensed colour fields act as a delicate veil in Wiz Kudowor's pointillist figuration of idealized forms (Amoako, 2015). The Adinkra symbols have received many motivational impacts on many Ghanaian contemporary artists. These artists have been able to spearhead this contested territory with fabricated identity and create authenticity to project/promote their works. Therefore, the paper sought to identify and examine the works of selected contemporary Ghanaian artists who incorporate Akan adinkra symbols into their paintings to portray Africanism. And explores some characteristics of African culture or Ghanaian traditional culture that can be traced through societal practices, oral storytelling and institutions of the African diaspora.

2. Methods

The study employed the qualitative case study research method that allows for intensive analysis and description of works of the selected artists of the study. Three contemporary Ghanaian artists namely Brother Owusu – Ankomah, Rikki Wemega – Kwawu and Wiz Kudowor and some of their paintings were

purposively sampled for the study, based on their rigorous engagement in using Akan Adinkra symbols for most of their artistic interventions. These painters were selected because of their proficiency in use of adinkra symbols in their paintings. Again, the fact that the study focused on the aesthetic values of adinkra symbols, they are better placed in providing accurate data about the nexus of Akan adinkra symbols and the aesthetic significance and philosophical rationale in their works. Data for the study were primarily gathered through interviews from the three selected Ghanaian contemporary painters; Brother Owusu Ankomah, Rikki Wemega-Kwawu and Wiz Kudowor, direct observations, review of documents and examination of artefacts. Direct observations were carried out in the respective studios that enabled better understanding of their painting styles and techniques and preferred medium. Review of documents centred on exhibition catalogues and brochures and critiques on their works. Examination of artefacts was mainly on the selected paintings incorporated with adinkra symbols. Both verbal and visual data that were recorded and captured with the aid of audio and video recorders were evaluated by content analysis.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Three Contemporary Ghanaian artists and the usage of Akan Adinkra Symbols

3.1.1 Brother Owusu – Ankomah

Owusu-Ankomah is one of the leading contemporary African artists from Ghana. He was born in 1956 in Sekondi, Ghana, a year before the country's independence from British colonial rule. He studied at Ghanatta College of Art in Accra from 1971 to 1974. The artist then had a variety of study trips in Europe from the year 1979 to 1985. He moved to Bremen, Germany (1986), where he now lives and works. Since 1976, Owusu Ankomah has exhibited in Africa, Europe, the USA, South America, and Asia (Brown, 2011). For over 20 years, Owusu-Ankomah's paintings have remained unchanged in appearance, since most of his themes and works are informed by these sacred adinkra symbols (*Blackmun, 2005*). The Asante system of Adinkra signs and symbols provide recurring motifs for the artist's large canvases. Owusu-Ankomah's recent paintings deal with scientific, technological, metaphysical and spiritual facts and truth, the evolution of the human consciousness, the nonlocality of the soul and its eternal progression (Hans-Werner, 2014). Owusu Ankomah (personal communication, 14 March, 2015), believes emphatically that there have been other ancient advanced civilisations before Egypt who were adepts in sacred geometry, this informed

him to begin employing some of these symbols into his productions. Owusu-Ankomah has recognised and presented in his latest works (Figure 1: Microcron Kusum No.3) more crop circles, his way of bearing witness to the truth underlying the fact that “we are not alone in the universe”, that “we have been visited and still being visited” (Owusu, 2014). Between 2004 and 2008, he cultivated the lifestyle of a hermit, reflecting, meditating and researching, coining the word Microcron (Hans-Werner, 2014). The artist had discovered the ultimate symbol, the symbol of symbols with its accompanying theory and philosophy that he also calls the Microcron (Hans-Werner, 2014).

Some selected works of Brother Owusu Ankomah



Figure 1: Microcron Kusum No. 3, Acrylic on Canvas, 2011, 135 x 175

(Courtesy of October Gallery, London, UK, 2015).

Figure 1 shows the painting Microcron Kusum No. 3, which begins his new series called the Microcron. Owusu-Ankomah infuses a composition with a greater complexity as intricate shapes resulting from the overlap of the human forms. It has a wider range of symbols such as sacred geometry, crop circles, astronomical symbols for planets (vector pack), zodiac signs, oriental ideograms, zoomorphic (having the attributes, form, or shape of an animal), and anthropomorphic forms (human form of an object). The symbols are juxtaposed with the Adinkra and other African graphic forms and syllabary – touch and clash, activating the shallow space of the canvas into sometimes a dizzying and joyful jazzy rhythm. Owusu Ankomah (Personal communication, April 16, 2015) explains that, Microcron Kusum No. 3 is the sumptuous canvas of varied blues,

which sing, echoing the sound of the spheres.

The entire body of the figure is wrapped in both foreign symbols and Adinkra symbols such as *Adinkra Hene* (literally mean king of all Adinkra), *Akoma* (literally mean the Heart), and *Aya* (literally means a symbol of endurance). These sacred symbols in my work encapsulates the potency and urgency for connecting myself with the deep thought-provoking meanings behind the symbols. Centrally, the figure has been positioned on the canvas. It has a turquoise shade of blue, gently lifts his right hand in a humble gesture of blessing or acknowledgement to the constellation of the Microcron, which stands out in sharp contradistinction from the rest of the canvas, apparently because of the whiteness of the orbs, the constellation broken with red and gold orbs.

Microcron Kusum No. 3 in Figure 1 shows the Microcron constellation in their usual strident, bright colours, standing out from the rest of the canvas, formally, not distorting, disrupting or compromising the aliveness of his canvases, which have been the artist's stock-in-trade from yesteryear. It could, however, be interpreted as epitomising or condensing the field's pulsating vibrancy and energy from the collisions of fragmented forms and the positive and negative shapes – the Dance of the Universe – bringing them all to a focal point. Owusu's (Personal communication, March 3rd, 2014) explains that:

Kusum, is a Ghanaian word, a Twi word. *Kusum* literally means a place of mystery. It a place where the gods meet. It is a place of ritual. All these places that I'm mentioning are not local. It is in us. It is in our consciousness, that is *kusum* in itself. It is in our consciousness that we go on this journey of discovery. But then, life becomes a ritual. All the small things that we do in life are rituals. Saying the right thing. Because if you are a shaman, if you are a magician, then you must have the right mixture of positions, the right mixture of ritual language... So life in itself is a ritual in which we must perform well and perform humbly, in that we respect the other, and love the other.

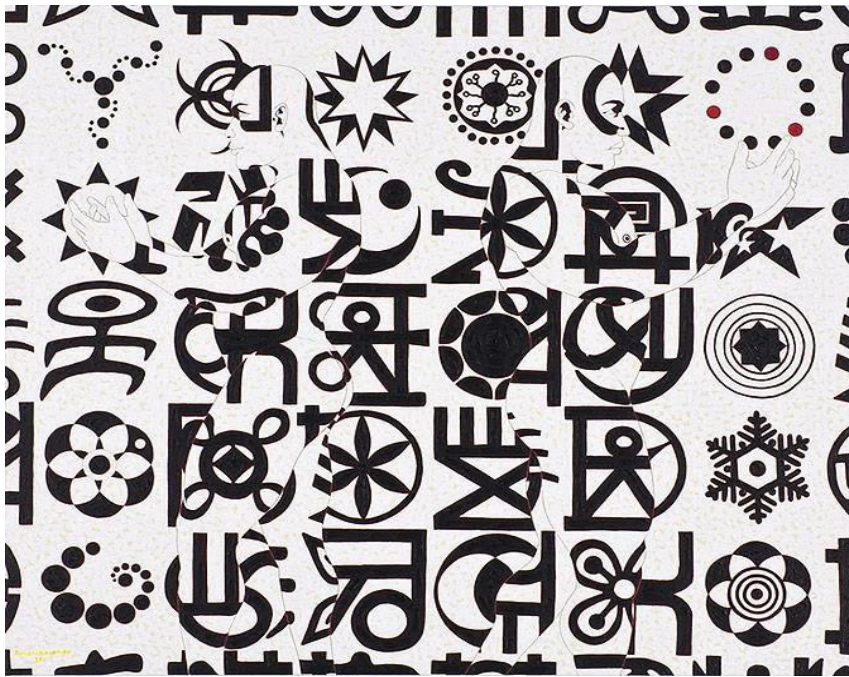


Figure 2: Microcron - Kusum No. 7, 2011, Acrylic on Canvas, 170 x 200,
(Courtesy of October Gallery, London, UK, 2011).

Figure 2 shows a painting titled Microcron-Kusum No. 7. It is a total composition of Adinkra symbols, foreign symbols including; zodiac signs, oriental ideograms, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic, and Microcron symbol - These sacred symbols such as the zoomorphic forms encompass the attributes of form or shape of an animal. While the anthropomorphic forms capture human forms of an object and the oriental ideograms express an abstract idea through an iconic form, including an iconic modification of pictographic characters. The figures are heavily embedded in the vertically and horizontally gridded symbols that appear almost indistinguishable from the surface of the canvas. This begins the search for the ubiquitous figure(s) of Owusu-Ankomah, which ends up in an ecstasy of joy when the figures are discovered. There is a preponderance of curvilinear shapes which echoes the curved contours of the well-built bodies. The arrangement of these symbols creates infinite movement within the work and it calls for the attention of the viewer instantly. Indeed, the application of the repetitive black and white colour decorations on the bare skin of the naked bodies creates three dimensional forms on the flat surface of the canvas.

Also, these two figures within the painting are athletic, modeled realistically and etched in their decorative symbol's fragments on their bodies but tense. The figure on the left reflects the old-self of the figure on the right. The old-self, because of lack of proper understanding or spiritual illumination, fails to grasp the phenomenon of the Microcron. He is still pursuant of the philosophy of the Microcron, which seems to elude him. Owusu Ankomah's (personal communication, March 3rd, 2015) postulated that:

The Microcron is a word that I created myself. The Microcron is...As we journey from the microscopic, up to the macroscopic, and now comes another word that I created myself, to the ultramicroscopic worlds. We have solar systems, we have stars, we have galaxies, we have the universe and what is new on the block. Physicists, talk about the universe. I come and say ok, there are dimensions of universes. All of these culminate into a ball of light and these balls of light are in systems. Circular systems, circling each other, until these systems reach infinite and that is the Microcron.

3.1.2 Rikki Wemega-Kwawu

According to Rikki (Personal communication, April 13th, 2015), he is an internationally renowned Ghanaian Painter and Installation Artist born on February 3, 1959, in Sekondi, Ghana; and a childhood bosom friend of the artist Owusu Ankomah. He had his secondary education at St. John's School Sekondi, Ghana. Rikki had his Sixth Form education at St. Augustine's College, Cape Coast, Ghana. A devoted painter since 1981,, though he is an alumnus of the prestigious Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Skowhegan, Maine in 1998. In 2008, he was an Adjunct Professor in Art at the New York University – Accra Campus, where he taught Post-Colonial Studio Practices (Wikipedia contributors, 2022). He is noted for his famous 1981 Black Jesus portrait, which turned into prints and postcards. He writes on art, engaging in social, philosophical, and metaphysical discourse. Rikki Wemega-Kwawu has exhibited in Ghana, Italy, London, and Denmark and across the globe. Rikki's works do not confine themselves to any mode of style, easily switching from abstraction, figurative expressionism, impressionism, and minimalism to realism and vice versa. The focus of Rikki's work for many years has been his bold exploration into traditional Ghanaian geometric and colour symbology and other indigenous African design systems and forms. He was mentored by professor Ato Delaquis, and the late Ato Cobrah. Rikki believes in the transformative power of art. Rikki is a passionate proponent of the spiritual and aesthetic advocator by acknowledging the significance of traditional African art in African and Western

traditions.

Some selected works of Rikki Wemega-Kwawu



Figure 3: Blue Symphony, Acrylic on Canvas, 163cm. x 133.50cm, 2003
(Courtesy of Rikki Wemega-Kwawu, 2015)

The subject matter in Figure 3 is “Duafe”, the hand-carved wooden comb, literally known as “Afro comb.” In this geometric, semi-abstract composition, Rikki attempts to capture the spiritual essence of the comb, the traditional comb is positioned frontally and as an asymmetrically flattened form within a fractured shallow space. From Rikki (Personal communication, April 1st, 2015), “the comb motif is fragmented (cubism) and re-arranged on the canvas along Mondrian’s neoplastic vertical and horizontal axes.” The work reveals a combination of multiple images of symbols, overlapping planes, and transparent harmonies, creating the illusion of a complex interwoven field with cold colour. He aims at a resolution of opposites: asserting the flatness of the picture plane and at the same time creating three-dimensional spaces. Wemega-Kwawu paints the richly keyed colour directly onto the canvas with gestural strokes. Rikki employs technique that stimulates the axed marks on the carved wood and with closely related colour values and luminous colourful greys. He creates the illusion of overlapping planes and transparencies, affecting a discrepancy between what the viewer perceives. These optical mysteries cause a push-pull effect. The painting embraces pivotal perspective points which seem to be in constant change. A dynamic, pulsating motion, co-existing with static stillness and calm:

stability in revolution. The overall composition is pulled together by the subtle spatial shifts that focus attention on the edges of the planes, colour repetition and contrasts.



Figure 4: "Adinkra Oration – I", Oil on Canvas, 46" X 27" 1989
(Courtesy of Rikki Wemega-Kwawu, 2015)

From Rikki (personal communication, April 2, 2014), *Adinkra Oration*, shown in Figure 4, reveals that:

A composition of Adinkra symbols such as *Akoma* (Literally means the heart), *AdinkraHene* (King of all Adinkra Symbols), *Mpatapo* (Knot of reconciliation), *Aban* (the fence, symbol of strength and authority), *Akokonan* (Leg of a hen). A symbol of nurturing coupled with discipline), *Hwehwemudua* (Measuring rod, symbol of high quality and excellence), *Epa* (Handcuffs, a symbol of slavery, law and order), and *Osram ne Nsoromma* (Moon and Star, symbol of faithfulness, and fidelity), that move in both horizontal and vertical axes on the canvas. Painting is at once abstract, geometric, ornamental, and expressionistic swimming through the gamut of Akan Adinkra symbols with overwhelming subject matter embedded in them.

In this painting, Rikki associates the symbols used from their traditional contexts and isolates them in his paintings as objects and forms for aesthetic

contemplation. His painting depicts symbols with the background colours, either projecting or subduing the symbols on the backgrounds. The Adinkra symbols are revolving as arranged on one main symbol positioned at the centre of the canvas, creating the illusion of revolution of the stars within the universe. The artist created a variety of colours including, warm colours and cool colours with brilliant schemes, making the work appear much more colourful. The work mimics a traditional draught game, which is locally known as *dame*, a type of game that is designed to look like a puzzle played by two players, as stated by the artist. The arrangement of the *Akoma*, *Epa*, *Akoko Nan*, and *Aban* symbols within the painting directs the eyes and minds of the viewer. It goes clockwise and anticlockwise depending on the viewer's position.

3.1.3 Wiz Kudowor Edinam

Kudowor (Personal communication, March 4, 2015), was born in 1957 in Accra, Ghana. He was trained at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology-. He holds a BA (Hons) degree in Fine Art. His work experience includes six years of art teaching (1981-1987) and full-time professional practice – combining Sculpture, Design, Textiles and Serigraphy for the past 29 years of his life. Wiz is a member of the Artists Alliance gallery and a founding member of the Society for Contemporary Art in Ghana which was formed in September 1997 in Accra, Ghana. Wiz has designed public works including murals at the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park, Nestle Ghana Ltd. Accra, and Volta Hotel, Akosombo (*Akyeampong, 2012*). His works are widely collected into both private and public collections in Ghana and worldwide. He has some awards to his credit. These awards include the Mobil award for most outstanding student in painting (1981) at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology and the First prize, Ace Gallery Juried Exhibition, Ohio- USA (*Adeyemi, 2005*). Throughout Wiz's career as a renowned Ghanaian Contemporary artist, he has exhibited his exquisite talent and creative works through numerous exhibitions both at home and abroad since 1981, including USA, UK, Canada, Netherlands, Japan, Malaysia, Turkey, Germany, and South African. He has been involved in numerous artistic and cultural workshops, educational lectures and other associated artistic events.

Some selected works of Wiz Kudowor Edinam



Figure 5: "Puzzle of Truth I", Acrylics, 123cm x 104cm

(Courtesy of Edinam Kudowor, 2015).

The painting titled 'Puzzle of Truth I' in Figure 5 reveals a composition of three curvilinear, circular, and spherical Adinkra symbols moving at a diagonal angle, creating an illusion of falling or descending symbols on a puzzle carpet lying on the ground. The work captures three figures with their heads covered in a scarf. Each is attached to one of the Adinkra symbols respectively. The symbols are 'Biribi wo soro' (something in heaven), 'Ntesie mate masie' (I have heard and kept it), and 'Bese Saka' (a sack of cola nuts). Wiz further explained that these selected Adinkra symbols possess a deep sacred meaning that connect with the form and shape of the symbol linking it to feminism, as the selected symbols exhibit some female qualities symbolically. The multicoloured painting (Figure. 5) displays warm colours that include shades of yellow, red, orange, red-orange and cool colours in shades of green, blue and purple. These colours create a high sense of aggression and brilliancy that cause the eyes to move throughout the canvas. The painting depicts a female's beauty, hidden in these three selected symbols. The shape, form, curves, contour, lines, colour and dots define the feminist nature of these sacred symbols (traditionally female figure are link with the curves, circles and spheres based on its artistic appearance). The work exposes the extraordinary beauty implanted in women with their vital role played within the traditional cultural heritage. In this sense, the viewer allows

his/her emotions to revolve in and out of the painting, recognizing the shape and form of the symbols which mimic some features of the female figure. The viewer then absorbs some of the characteristics of the female's stature, based on how these sacred symbols are captured in shape, line, colour and form of the symbols respectively. Undoubtedly, the power and energy within these symbols transcend the viewer's minds beyond the physical realm. Wiz continues to explain that the inculcation of these selected Adinkra symbols emphasize a strong recognition of female power within the traditional cultural heritage, and the role they play for the entire society.



Figure 6: “Respect Life, it is a Gift”, 2014, Acrylic and markers on canvas, 10 x 12 cm

(Courtesy of Imago ipunm, 2015).

From the artist's perspective, art serves as a measure that defines the world as a podium to explore and express the inner emotion of what life is all about. The power of the universe supersedes everything that gives room for the existence of a creator, the originator of life, and issues of transformation in human lives. This painting (Figure 6) portrays an exaggerated 'Gye Nyame' (Expect God) Adinkra symbol. The entire background of the work is demarcated in different colour schemes. It has a rough-textured surface, while the symbol is centered proportionally and exaggerated on the canvas. The painting is supported with

four strokes of rectangle blocks of colour. Two of these strokes are distributed equally on the left and right sides of the symbols. The symbol itself is painted in black, tinted blue, tinted yellow and red with dots of white on them. The work depicts supremacy. This sacred symbol performs within the colony of Adinkra Symbol. It further sends the viewer's mind to search for the original form and shape of the *Gye Nyame* (Expect God) symbol making the viewer aware that there is an originator.

3.2 The Visual Nexus among the Akan Adinkra Paintings of Owusu-Ankomah, Rikki Wemega-Kwawu and Wiz Kudowor Edinam

The works (Figures 1,2,3,4,5&6) of these prominent artists revealed their deep conceptual philosophies and aesthetic expressions that back their artworks. These thoughts are based on the title of their works, tools, materials, styles, techniques and philosophies. Out of the interview conducted it was observed that both Wemega-Kwawu and Owusu-Ankomah derive their concepts and philosophies from their traditional cultural heritage, precisely the Akan Adinkra symbol and other Akan traditions. These two artists encapsulate and link the inculcation of Adinkra symbols in their paintings to the metaphysical realm of life. To Owusu-Ankomah, his works move the physical world to the infinite world. Every sacred symbol in his painting submits itself to the cosmic force within the universe. The moon, stars, the sun and other heavenly bodies keep constellating, as the symbol keeps growing and evolving from time to time, day to day and year after year and century after centuries to the infinite world. He keeps swimming through his traditional symbols that are the Adinkra symbols, fused with the foreign symbols. His paint is a matter while the space is an infinite canvas. Consciousness then becomes the artist.

Oluwatoyin (2014) supports the philosophy of Owusu-Ankomah that:

Brother Owusu-Ankomah's art is a mystic searching through a universe of symbols in quest of perception of the unity of cosmic possibility. His journey through the metaphysical world is seen as one that is rooted in an immersion of Adinkra symbols of his native Ghana. However, moving through symbols from various world cosmologies, entering symbols is created by himself and eventually culminating in his vision of cosmic possibility. The visual and philosophical form to him coined the term Microcron. (p.14)

Moyo (2014) also concurs that:

Brother Owusu-Ankomah's paintings encompass the spiritual purifications of all the Akan Adinkra symbols. It unfolds the deep meanings behind the symbols; his black and white paintings transcend the minds of his viewers to the metaphysical codes of the ancestral realm and elude their minds from any unwanted thoughts that might conflict with their thinking energies. (p.30)

However, Wemega-Kwawu's works explain the Adinkra symbols in a greater concentration. With the use of Adinkra symbols, many invading outside thoughts are dispelled. The symbol serves as an intimate reminder, bringing in closer touch and mental view of the object being addressed. The Adinkra symbol in his work has been used to express eternal truths for ages. Because of their atavism, their goal is to help raise the individual consciousness in meditation to attain oneness with God, the Lord of the universe (Moyo, 2014). As we connect with Him, we are led to the awareness that we are cosmic beings beyond life and death. We can perceive our wholeness and interconnectedness to one another the earth and our inner self (Moyo, 2014).

Moyo (2014) justifies that the true power within Wemega-Kwawu's works is well captured from the African traditional themes. Wemega-Kwawu employs his native ancient mystical symbols and signs which are archetypal forms deeply embedded in the collective unconscious, which according to C.G. Jung, the Swiss psychoanalyst, is an inherited inner realm belonging to the whole human race, past, present, and future. These symbols such as the Adinkra carry with them the entire individual and collective wisdom of man in history, prehistory, and history to come.

Moreover, the study ascertained that, on the part of Wiz Kudowor, the artist employs the Adinkra symbol with other decorative signs and symbols, inscriptions, texts and numerals from different countries (including; Asia, China, and Eastern part of Africa). He always links the power and energy in his work to both the metaphysical and the ancestral realm. From this context, it is deduced that Owusu-Ankomah, Kudowor and Wemega-Kwawu, undoubtedly link the power and energies within the Adinkra symbol to the constellation of the universe and sustain its strength on the surface of their canvas. From the incorporation of Adinkra symbols in Ghanaian paintings, it is disclosed that Owusu-Ankomah began to introduce Adinkra symbols early in his career as an artist. He began to develop a symbolic language that he used to connect human

figures with different signs and symbols. Initially, there were Adinkra signs used by the ethnic group of the Asante in his homeland Ghana. Later he began to include other foreign symbols referring to other cultural backgrounds. He invented his symbol that encircled and encompassed the figures in his painting. At the same time, his figures seemed to disappear in a network of symbols that only gradually became visible to the attentive observer. Also, his figures are captured in naked, muscular men covered with symbols (Hans-Werner, 2014).

Similarly, Wemega-Kwawu explains that he began to use these Adinkra symbols back in his childhood. The artist started developing and introducing the Adinkra symbols in his paintings. He started painting them as a form of textile clothes which appears to be similar to the rich traditional royal cloth worn by the kings and queens within the Akan society. The symbols were always composed on the vertical and horizontal axis which moves closely in line with the ancient traditional print works of the Akan. Notwithstanding, Wiz Kudowor started developing and painting Adinkra symbols connecting female figures and other decorative symbols at the early stage of his career as a visual artist. The artist's painting stands to convey the sensual emotions within humanity and the entire environment. Also, his works encapsulate the essence of life and the link between sacred symbols and that of human behaviours

Moreover, the study shows that most of Kudowor's paintings with symbols comprise texts, newspapers, sacred inscriptions, and human forms. His works, as observed in Figure 7C, are influenced by two main interests, the human form as a transformational agent and ancestral wisdom. The transformational agent is highly derived from Ghanaian traditions. The Ancestral wisdom is the sacred symbols, especially the Adinkra symbols and the Ewe signs and symbols. Kudowor enjoys working in brilliant multiples of colour schemes, which range from warm to cool colours.

These three prominent contemporary Ghanaian artists have viciously dedicated their creative energies to painting sacred symbols, most especially the Adinkra symbols. Their paintings portray some similarities in the way they work. The paintings of these artists show the themes, concepts, titles and philosophies. The three artists have some differences and slight similarities in the composition of their paintings. The Adinkra symbols are displayed on their canvases, especially looking at the choice of colour schemes employed. To Wemega-Kwawu, he never incorporated human figures connecting symbols on the same canvas because he saw these symbols to be potent, sacred, purified and possessed a great

power to stand on their own when painted. The symbols are composed in both vertical and horizontal axes on the canvas. Wemega-Kwawu's works (Figure 7B) bring the role of colour to suffuse the room where his works can be mounted. In an actual sense, the painting with a reflection of light gives illumination and elicits visual intimacy and emotional immediacy, thereby providing a visual shamanistic experience for the viewer. The artist also dwells in multiple colour schemes when it comes to the painting of these Adinkra symbols. Wemega-Kwawu uses monochromatic schemes such as black, white, ultramarine blue, red and occasionally greens.

However, Owusu-Ankomah employs these sacred symbols in connection with male figures on his canvas. His compositions (Figure 7A) are gridded columns of Adinkra symbols with other foreign symbols overlapping and interlocking muscular human forms in some form of motion – seem consistently rigorous, exquisitely rendered explorations of light and movement. His symbols are arranged in both vertical and horizontal axes. The muscular figures are superimposed and interlock with the abstract design forms. They float on and swim in seas of fragmented shapes and designs on the canvas. Owusu Ankomah always limits his colour schemes when painting these sacred symbols.

Houghton (2014, p.86) postulates that "Owusu Ankomah adopts the simplest of all palettes to emphasize the signs, painted in black upon a white background, echoing their traditional printed fabrics." Owusu Ankomah added that the black-and-white colours of his paintings, like chromatic polarities, serve to establish the parameter of light and dark in his works. Instead of painting the figures to appear three-dimensional or sculptural, Owusu Ankomah rather explores the interaction of large and small areas on his canvas by juxtaposing flat colour, resulting from the human figure superimposed over the horizontal and vertical arrangement of the symbols. Also, the study signals that Wiz deploys these sacred symbols with other foreign signs and symbols, inscriptions, text, newspapers, and female figures. His compositions (Figures 7C) are dominated by female figures. Wiz's paintings are connected with sacred symbols and other decorated signs and symbols in monochromatic and multiple colour schemes. He arranges these symbols in both vertical and horizontal baselines. Figure 7(A, B & C) presents some of the selected works of the three.

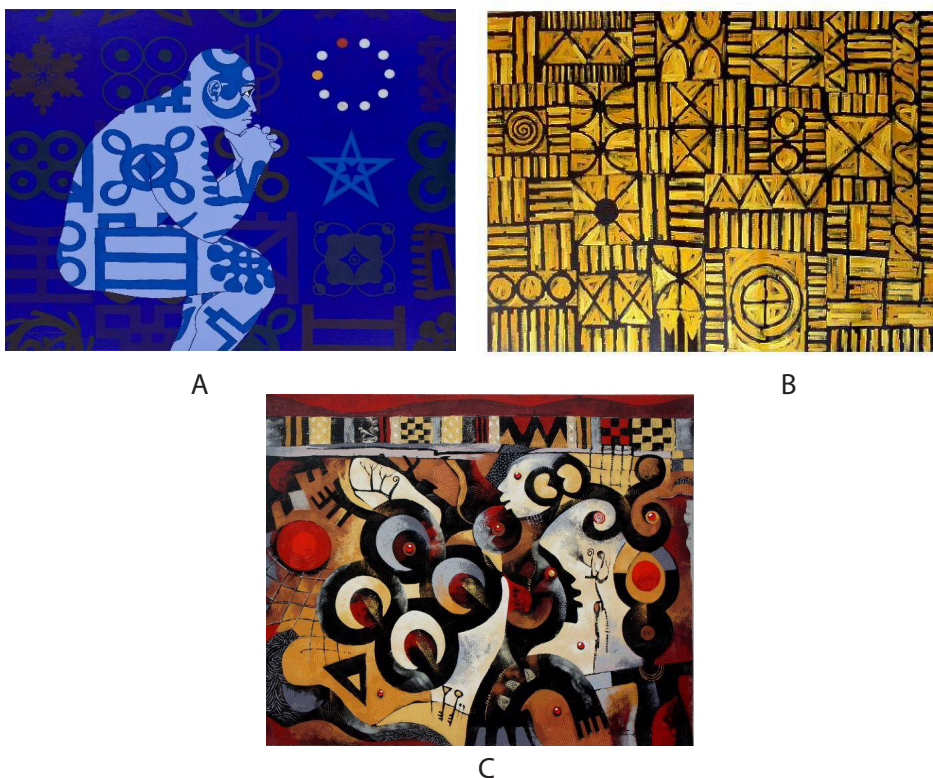


Figure 7(A, B & C): Juxtaposition of the three artists' works and their colour schemes
(Courtesy of the Researcher, 2015).

4. Conclusion

The study reveals that the three Ghanaian Contemporary artists, namely Owusu Ankomah, Rikki Wemaga-Kwawu, and Wiz Kudowor Edinam, use Adinkra symbols such as; "Gye Nyame" (Expect God), "Akoma" (The heart), "Biribi wo soro" (Something is in heavens), "Ntesie mate masie" (I have heard and kept it), "Bese Saka" (a bunch of cola nut) as sacred symbols which through stylised pictures convey the philosophy of the Akan people of Ghana. These symbols carry the collective wisdom of man as in prehistory, history and history to come. Often Adinkra symbols are not recognized for the messages that they communicate but rather their aesthetic features.

The study unfolds that the three selected contemporary Ghanaian painters distinctively exhibit an overwhelming symbolic significance and the beauty of the aesthetic values of these sacred symbols goes beyond what is normally embraced or known within society. It is made known that the aesthetic qualities

of these symbols send the viewer's mind to a spiritual world of happiness when they keep wondering how beautifully these symbols are being created with lines, shape, forms and colour, yet hold many proverbs and wisdom. Moreover, it is shown that some of these sacred Adinkra symbols can be categorised into feminine, and masculine considering their unique aesthetic appearance in shape, lines, form, and colour when observed critically. Respectively, these characteristics have a direct link with the naming of these Adinkra symbols.

The study further confirms that these three contemporary Ghanaian artists have a distinctive way of composing their symbols. For example, Owusu-Ankomah employs these sacred symbols in connection with male figures on his canvas. His compositions are gridded columns of Adinkra symbols with other foreign symbols overlapping and interlocking muscular human forms in some form of motion – seem consistently rigorous, exquisitely rendered explorations of light and movement. While Rikki Wemega – Kwawu never incorporates human figures connecting the symbols on the same canvas. He saw these symbols as potent, sacred, and purified that possessed a great power to stand on their own when painted. On the side of Wiz Kudowor, the artist deploys these sacred symbols with other foreign signs and symbols, inscriptions, text, newspapers, and female figures. His compositions are dominated by the female figures connecting the sacred symbols and other decorated signs and symbols in monochromatic and multiple colour schemes. These contemporary Ghanaian artists have massively engaged in using Adinkra symbols in their artistic practice to elevate Akan Adinkra symbols across the global art space. The study recommends these Akan Adinkra symbols possess a strong aesthetic and symbolic significance that need to be incorporated into the young upcoming Ghanaian artists to emulate the examples of these three contemporary painters, and continue to inculcate Adinkra symbols into their artistic productions and write extensively about their works and make their writeup readily available for wider public consumption.

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