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## Sartorial symbolism and national identity construction of Ghana's Speaker of Parliament robes

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### Abstract

*The study examines the design structure, symbolic content, and national identity constructs embedded in the Speaker of Parliament's robes across Ghana's major political epochs. Anchored in a qualitative historical research design. With the aid of expert purposive sampling technique, the study engaged six key stakeholders with specialised institutional and cultural knowledge through semi-structured interviews complemented by archival photographs of the parliamentary robes of present and past parliament speakers. Thematic and visual analysis constituted the methods of data analysis. The findings revealed that the design structure of Ghana's parliamentary robes is firmly rooted in the British Westminster parliamentary tradition, reflecting the country's colonial legislative inheritance and the desire for institutional continuity, formality, and global parliamentary legitimacy. The Eurocentric forms of parliamentary robes have not been adopted uncritically; they have been deliberately glocalised through the incorporation of Ghanaian national colours and Adinkra symbols. These indigenous elements function as visual signifiers that embed Ghanaian philosophies, values, and collective memory into the robes, thereby transforming them into hybrid dress fashion that simultaneously references colonial legacy and cultural reclamation. Consequently, the speaker's robe emerges as a performative artefact that symbolically positions the speaker as both a neutral constitutional authority and a culturally grounded national figure. The study concludes that Ghana's parliamentary robes serve as dynamic visual instruments that continuously negotiate and express the nation's evolving democratic identity. It recommends the formal archiving, documentation, and preservation of these robes as significant national heritage artefacts.*

### Keywords

Parliament,  
Robe,  
National identity,  
Sartorial,  
Symbolism,  
Speaker of  
Parliament

## **1.0 Introduction**

Within Ghana's democratic framework, sartorial practices function as a form of political communication that shapes public perceptions and legitimises government. As Warritay (2017, p. 51) observes, indigenous fabrics carry deep social meanings, that signal identity, status, and occasion. While dress often serves aesthetic or personal-expressive purposes, its symbolic potency and capacity to construct national identity remain under-examined in the legislative arena. Existing scholarship has predominantly foregrounded the executive arm of government, interrogating presidential dress fashion choices as a vehicle for nationalism and rhetoric (Essel, 2019b; Navei & Donkoh, 2022). In contrast, the symbolism and identity construction embedded in the Speaker's parliamentary robes, tracing their evolution from colonial imposition to contemporary adaptation, have attracted limited critical attention. Scholars contend that sartorial choices act as conduits for power, allegiance, and cultural dialogue, prompting reflection on identity, governance, and collective belonging (Essel et al., 2023; Essel, 2019b; Miller, 2005; Allman, 2004).

Constitutionally, the Speaker occupies the third-highest position in the nation under Articles 101 and 57(2) of the 1992 Constitution. For that matter, his choice of dress for parliamentary business is crucial. This aligns with Ghana's Cultural Policy (2004), which positions state institutions as key sites for transmitting cultural identity (p. 12). Within this context, the Speaker's robe is central to this study. What the executive arm of government (presidents) wears has received scholarly interest. Essel (2019b) highlights the dress-fashion politics of presidents since independence, and Navei and Donkoh (2022) demonstrate how presidential sartorial choices during the COVID-19 pandemic mobilised nationalist sentiment. Parliamentary studies in Ghana recognise the enduring influence of colonial sartorial legacies (Essel et al., 2023; Ayensu & Darkwa, 2019) but have not examined their transformation or contemporary cultural significance. This omission is especially urgent amid intensifying national debates on decolonising state institutions, led by Speaker Alban Bagbin (2021) and a broader Pan-African discourse demanding the dismantling of colonial aesthetic hierarchies in governance. Moreover, the dominance of Eurocentric narratives in fashion scholarship continues to marginalise indigenous political sartorial knowledge (Rabine, 2002; Sarpong, 2012). Systematically documenting and interpreting the Speaker's robes, therefore, constitutes an act of epistemic and cultural reclamation that has the tendency to challenge entrenched scholarly biases.

In response to these critical gaps, this study examines the design structure, symbolic content, and national identity constructs embedded in the Speaker of Parliament's robes across Ghana's major political epochs. By interrogating how these garments communicate authority and cultural identity within the legislative space, the research contributes essential knowledge to the interdisciplinary fields of political communication, cultural studies, and fashion scholarship. It seeks to advance the argument that understanding parliamentary fashion choices is indispensable for comprehending how Ghana displays its sovereignty, heritage and democratic values in the public sphere.

## **2.0 Review of Related Literature**

### **2.1 Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored in symbolic interactionism, a sociocultural theory initially conceptualised by Blumer (1969). Symbolic interactionism holds that individuals engage with both social and material objects, including dress, on the basis of the meanings those objects convey. Such meanings are never inherent; they are produced, negotiated and continuously reshaped through interactions and shared cultural understandings. In the specific setting of Ghana's parliamentary system, the speaker's ceremonial robe operates as a highly symbolic artefact that is imbued with political, cultural, and historical significance. As a form of visual communication, the robe transmits layered narratives of authority, governance, national identity and socio-cultural continuity. It functions not merely as a robe but as a semiotic device that encapsulates the state's institutional ideals and collective memory. Therefore, symbolic interactionism provides a strong way to analyse how different people, like lawmakers, citizens, and organisations, understand the Speaker's robe and the meanings behind its design and structure. In this view, dress is a communicative tool that conveys ideologies, power relations, and identity rather than serving a solely functional purpose (Miller, 2005; Essel, 2019a).

### **2.2 Dress as Symbolic Communication, Diplomacy, and Cultural Expression**

Dress transcends its utilitarian function to operate as a potent system of non-verbal communication, encoding social meanings, values, and identities. Theoretical frameworks, especially Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969), assert that individuals and institutions engage with objects according to socially constructed meanings, which are established through interaction. When applied to dress, this theory explains how garments transform into symbolic vessels that communicate power, status, allegiance, and cultural worldview (Miller, 2005). In the Ghanaian context, this communicative function is deeply embedded in indigenous textile traditions. Fabrics such as *Kente*, *Adinkra*, and *Fugu* (smock) are not mere adornments but complex texts that signify ethnic affiliation, social hierarchy, philosophical concepts, and life stage transitions (Dzramedo, 2009; Danso et al., 2019). The symbolism embedded in these textiles, especially through colour and motif, is culturally specific and deeply resonant. As Antubam (1963) and others have documented, colours in Ghanaian aesthetics have profound connotations: gold for royalty and wealth, red for sacrifice and passion, black for spiritual potency and unity, and white for purity and victory (Essel, 2019b; Claire, 1980). This rich semiotic system forms the foundational language upon which contemporary political dress in Ghana often draws.

In Ghana, especially in the executive arm of government, there is a long history of using clothing strategically to send political messages and build the nation. From the immediate post-independence era, figures like President Kwame Nkrumah consciously employed indigenous attire as a tool of "fashion diplomacy," using *Kente* stoles and Northern smocks to visually forge a unified national identity out of diverse ethnicities and project African sovereignty on the global stage (Essel, 2019; Yorke, 2015). This practice established a powerful precedent, linking nationalistic sentiment to sartorial choice. Subsequent scholarly works have tracked this tradition, analysing how presidential dress during inaugurals, state events, and even crisis communication, such as President Akufo-Addo's use of local prints during COVID-19 broadcasts, serves to mobilise public solidarity, promote local industry,

and reinforce cultural legitimacy (Navei & Donkoh, 2022; Essel, 2019b). However, this research recognises conflicts and inconsistencies, such as the occasional choice of Western business clothing, which critics argue shows a disconnect from the cultural nationalism that the government says it supports. This body of work firmly establishes dress as a key instrument in the Ghanaian political arsenal, yet its analytical gaze has remained overwhelmingly fixed on the executive, leaving a parallel analysis of legislative symbolism underdeveloped.

### 2.3 Parliamentary Dress culture

Globally, parliamentary dress codes are recognised as visual articulations of authority, national identity, and sociopolitical values. Within global legislative systems, the robes worn by parliamentary figures, especially presiding officers, function as a powerful symbolic language that communicates dignity, legitimacy, and collective identity (Allman, 2004; Miller, 2004). European traditions historically influenced parliamentary dress, particularly through the use of robes and wigs, which were initially introduced as expressions of elitism and political order (Fry, 1856). Revolutionary periods, however, saw a shift toward national clothing as states sought to assert sovereignty and cultural pride, leading to the adoption of garments that reflected the unique identities and values of the nations emerging from colonial rule (Akou, 2004). Across African parliaments, the politics of dress continues to generate debate. Despite its cultural acceptance in everyday public life, Kenyans have contested indigenous dress as inappropriate for formal legislative proceedings (Muturi, 2019). Contrastingly, South Africa maintains a flexible and culturally inclusive dress code, allowing both Western suits and traditional apparel, provided that decorum and the dignity of the House are upheld. In Ghana, dress symbolism is deeply rooted in historical and cultural expression. From pre-colonial times, garments such as *kente*, *batakari/smock*, and *Adinkra* cloth have signified social status, ethnic heritage, and political power (Bowdich, 1819; Essel, 2019a). Colonialism, however, imposed Western sartorial standards, shifting the wardrobes of political elites away from indigenous fashion (Sarpong, 2012). Post-independence leadership, particularly under Kwame Nkrumah, sought to reclaim national identity by intentionally promoting indigenous dress as a political and diplomatic statement (Yorke, 2015). More recently, academic discourse has increasingly interpreted clothing in political arenas as a form of *fashion diplomacy*, a strategic medium through which nations strengthen cultural messaging, global visibility, and soft power (Essel, 2021). Ghanaian political dress, whether presidential or parliamentary, therefore extends beyond aesthetics to function as a communicative tool influencing national sentiment, international perception, and the cultural economy. Scholarly attention disproportionately focuses on the executive arm of government, despite the growing literature on political dress in Ghana. There is a noticeable gap concerning the evolution, symbolism, and contemporary meaning of legislative dress, specifically the Speaker of Parliament's robes, which reflects the values and traditions of Ghanaian governance and may influence public perception of the legislative body, particularly in how these robes are perceived during official ceremonies and their role in representing the authority of the Parliament.

### 3.0 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach, utilising a historical design to examine the dress culture of the Speakers of Ghana's Parliament from 1951 to 2023. The study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, seeking to understand the symbolic meanings and identity constructions embedded within parliamentary robes through the lived experiences and expert interpretations of key stakeholders. Data were collected through archival and

field photographs and semi-structured interviews. The defined population for the study comprised expert stakeholders connected to the Speaker's Robes and its institutional and cultural context. Six (6) participants were purposively sampled based on their institutional roles and expertise. They comprised a Speaker of Parliament (1), Clerks of Parliament (2), a parliamentary robe designer (1), and cultural experts (2), all with a minimum of twelve years of relevant experience. The inclusion of the Speaker was critical due to the Speaker's role as the principal wearer and symbolic embodiment of parliamentary authority. Clerks of Parliament were included because the Clerk's Department is institutionally responsible for parliamentary protocol, including the custody and management of speakers' robes. The robe designer was selected as the creative authority responsible for conceptualising and producing the garments, offering insights into design intentions, material choices, and symbolic encoding. Cultural experts from the Centre for National Culture and academia were included to provide authoritative interpretations of indigenous symbols, regalia traditions, and national cultural signifiers embedded in the robes. Although the participants were limited in number, the specialised nature of their roles justified a small, expert-driven sample, which is consistent with qualitative and historical research traditions that prioritise depth, contextual insight, and information-rich cases over size (Patton, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). A thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to interview transcripts to identify patterns and meanings, while visual analysis was used to systematically examine design elements in the robes. The integration of these analytical strategies ensured a robust, multi-layered interpretation of the data. The study adhered to rigorous ethical standards, including prior institutional approval, informed consent, and guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity for participants, thereby ensuring the integrity and credibility of the research process and findings.

## **4.0 Results and Discussions**

### **4.1 Design Structure, Symbolism, and Identity Construction in Ghana's Parliamentary Robes**

This section analyses the design structure, symbolic meanings, and national identity constructions embedded in the Speaker of Parliament's robes in Ghana. It presents a discursive interpretation of perspectives gathered from parliamentary clerks, a Speaker of Parliament, cultural experts, and robe designers on the dress culture of Speakers in Ghana's Parliament. The research categorised the parliamentary robes for the Speakers of Ghana's Parliament into two primary types: the first type is ceremonial robes (Figure 1), which are only worn at formal state events and important national events, like Independence Day celebrations, the inauguration of the Head of State, and the Speaker's inaugural ceremony. The second category comprises *procedural robes* (Figure 2), which are worn during routine parliamentary sittings.

#### **4.1.1 Ceremonial Robes**

Speakers' ceremonial robes (Figure 1) are designed primarily to visually distinguish the Speaker from other Members of Parliament and to embody the grandeur, dignity, and solemnity associated with significant national and state functions. These robes are not worn during regular legislative sessions; instead, they are only worn during ceremonies where symbolism, authority, and national representation are important. This suggests that

ceremonial robes function beyond their immediate utilitarian role as official robes. They operate as carefully curated visual texts that negotiate the intersection of administrative governance, creativity, and cultural identity. Through this balance between administrative regulation and artistic expression, the ceremonial robes of the Speaker emerge as potent symbols of parliamentary authority, continuity, and national identity within Ghana's democratic framework.



**Figure 1:** Rt. Hon. Ebenezer Hughes (*left*) Rt. Hon. D.F. Annan, (*centre*) Rt. Hon. Bagbin (*right*) adorned in speaker's ceremonial robe for parliamentary duty.

Source: (Parliament of Ghana, 2023)

#### **4.1.2 Parliamentary Procedural Robes for Speakers of Ghana**

The Speaker of Ghana's Parliament wears parliamentary procedural robes (Figure 2), which are a unique type of parliamentary official dress that was carefully designed to balance symbolism, function, and institutional continuity. Within the operational context of Ghana's Parliament, procedural robes are expressly designated for the Speaker's use during routine parliamentary duties. By long-established convention, the Speaker is expected to dress in a manner that visually and symbolically differentiates the officeholder from other Members of Parliament. This differentiation is central to parliamentary order, as dress becomes a visual marker of authority, impartiality, and procedural oversight.

#### **4.1.3 Distinction between the Speaker's procedural and ceremonial robes**

Ceremonial robes are only worn on state occasions, national holidays, and very formal events. Procedural robes, on the other hand, are meant to be worn often and used in a practical way in the legislative chamber. As illustrated in *Figure 2*, the procedural robe occupies an intermediate position between everyday parliamentary robes and full ceremonial regalia. It retains key elements of formal symbolism while remaining suitable for the demands of regular sittings.



**Figure 2:** Speakers' Procedural Robe  
Source: (Parliament of Ghana, 2023).

Procedural robes (Figure 2) in structure closely resemble ceremonial robes but are generally less elaborate in design. Their construction incorporates both surface and structural decorative elements. Surface embellishments, like embroidery, appliqué, and printed motifs, are added to the garment after it has been made. Structural decorations, on the other hand, are added during the process of making the fabric. This deliberate combination ensures that procedural robes retain the dignity, authority, and symbolic status of the Speaker's office while also providing the practicality and comfort required for daily legislative functions. Further insights from interviews indicate that procedural robes are also subject to institutional and contextual considerations. A participant from the Clerk's department explained that:

...procedural robes for Speakers and Clerks are used regularly for parliamentary duties. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, several procedural robes were kept in stock, allowing any Speaker to select from available options. However, heightened concerns regarding comfort, hygiene, and adherence to COVID-19 safety protocols necessitated a shift towards procuring personalised procedural robes tailored to individual Speakers (Interview with key member of the Clerk's Department, December 2, 2023).

This highlights how procedural robes not only fulfil symbolic and functional roles but also adapt to changing institutional practices and public health considerations within parliamentary administration. Several surface and structural designs are used for the

production of the speakers' procedural robes, which appear similar in design structure to that of the ceremonial robes. However, the parliamentary ceremonial robes have more decorative embellishment than the procedural robes. This distinction is evident in *Figure 3*.



**Figure 3:** Distinction between the Speaker's procedural (*Right*) and ceremonial robes (*left*)  
Source: (Parliament of the Republic of Ghana, 2023).

The procedural robes worn by the Speaker of Ghana's Parliament, as illustrated in *Figure 3 (left)*, are typically crafted from silky fabric and feature a flat hood. They come with distinctive arms that extend from the open, elbow-length sleeves and fasten across the shoulders, draping toward the centre of the garment. These robes are traditionally black, reflecting the colour of the black tricorne hat, a symbolic item dating back to the 18th century that pays homage to British Westminster parliamentary customs. Similarly, in the context of Ghana, it was designed to visually emphasise the Speaker's unique status in the chamber and has remained largely unchanged since its adoption in Ghana.

The responsibility for the production of ceremonial robes resides officially with the Clerk's Department of Parliament. However, the design and production process extends beyond administrative oversight and involves collaborative creative engagement among various stakeholders, including designers, artisans, and parliamentary officials. As revealed by one of the study's participants, who is a Ghanaian parliamentary robe designer and served as the creative director for Speaker Bagbin's 2021 inaugural robe:

*"The Clerk's Department of Parliament is officially in charge of the production of ceremonial robes for Speakers. Inasmuch as I am the creative director, we did group work and I fronted it. We have a think tank group that fronted this work. A lot of thought went into it, and there was a lot of liaison between us and Parliament to produce exactly what Parliament wanted, with a creative touch."  
(Interview with robe designer, October 2, 2023)*

This account revealed the collaborative nature of the robe production process. Although the Clerk's Department provides institutional direction and authority, the involvement of a dedicated think tank comprising designers and creative professionals allows for extensive deliberation and interpretive input. Continuous consultation with parliamentary authorities ensures that the final garments meet formal institutional requirements while simultaneously integrating aesthetic refinement and culturally resonant symbolism.

#### **4.2.1 Design Structure of Parliamentary Robes for Speakers**

Ghana's parliamentary robe is made similarly to the British Westminster system robes. This design is a direct result of the colonial administration. This origin is confirmed by the parliamentary standards of the United Kingdom, where the *Companion to the Standing Orders of the House of Lords* and its procedural guides say that the presiding officer must wear a certain type of court dress, a black gown, during proceedings. The present custom is a tradition that comes from the courts and the aristocracy. Interview data confirms that this model was not merely adopted but was institutionally transplanted into the then Gold Coast Legislative Assembly. As one Speaker of Ghana's parliament incisively reflected,

"The gown we wear is not a Ghanaian invention; it is a colonial inheritance, a uniform of authority that preceded our own sovereignty. Ghana was colonized and the gown is one of the things they left us, ... the gown is the costume of the Crown of the United Kingdom..."

This acknowledgement by the Speaker highlights a critical historical continuum that the vestimentary codes of the Westminster Parliament provided the primary semantic and structural vocabulary for formal authority in the emerging Ghanaian legislature. Participants confirmed that this model had a substantial impact on the initial legislative assemblies in the Gold Coast and persisted in parliamentary practices following independence. This perspective corresponds with the informational materials from the Parliament of Ghana, which recognise that, despite the country's adoption of a unicameral legislative system, its institutional frameworks and practices are still closely aligned with the Westminster tradition (Lentz, 2008). Former Speaker Peter Ala Adjetey similarly described the Ghanaian legislature as a complex institution firmly rooted in Westminster parliamentary conventions (Parliament, 2004, p. 11). A participant from the Clerk department of Parliament corroborated these perspectives, intimating that:

Ghana is operating a Westminster Model of parliament, or was fashioned around it. When parliament was inaugurated during the legislative assembly, speakers travelled under state sponsorship to learn the culture of the British parliament to be practiced in Ghana. The dress code of the speakers, a gown as it is now, was handed over to us by colonial masters, and so the speaker (Alban Bagbin) rightly referred to it as a colonial cloak. And as far as I have been here [parliament], I have seen a considerable number of speakers use to be wearing the gown and the wig for a longer period in our history (Interview with a participant from the Clerk Department, December 2023).

Collectively, the study participants' accounts confirm that British traditions unquestionably influence the structural design of parliamentary robes in Ghana. It is further observed that the aesthetic forms of both procedural and ceremonial robes continue to bear a strong resemblance to contemporary Speaker cloaks used in the United Kingdom, as shown in Figure 4. This continuity reveals the enduring symbolic presence of colonial heritage within Ghana's legislative dressing practices.



**Figure 4:** United Kingdom House of Commons Speaker's ceremonial Robe (*left*), Ghana's Parliamentary Robes for Speakers(*Right*).

**Note:** *left image* from U.K. parliament, <https://youtu.be/hxwFcWEMd-Y?si=oMr4jpWKV0JlgMbW>; *Right Image* from Parliament of Ghana (2024).

As shown in Figure 4 (*left*), which presents the Eurocentric structural form of the Speaker's robe, it revealed that the foundational design is rooted in long-established British parliamentary tradition. In the context of Ghana, robe designers typically adopt this traditional British framework as the starting point, given its global association with parliamentary authority, dignity, and continuity. Based on the British model, Ghanaian parliamentary robe designers actively interpret and innovate upon this structure to create garments that simultaneously honour parliamentary conventions and express local cultural identities. Consequently, Ghanaian parliamentary robes, though structurally modelled after the Westminster Parliament style, display notable cultural adaptations, as illustrated in Figure 4 (*left*). These adaptations are not superficial additions but intentional design interventions aimed at indigenising the robe while maintaining its institutional symbolism. The features include the use of silk for the robes, hoods, and characteristic wing-like extensions that fall from the open elbow sleeves. Structurally, the garment is fastened over the shoulders and drapes centrally along the body, creating a controlled yet dignified silhouette that reinforces the authority of the office while allowing ease of movement during parliamentary proceedings.

There is deliberate incorporation of vibrant Ghanaian textiles, locally inspired patterns, and ornamental details. The embellishments, often derived from traditional woven motifs or

symbolic colour palettes, imbue the garments with a distinctive Ghanaian visual language, transforming the robe from a purely European artefact into a hybrid ceremonial garment. While the underlying form of the robe retains its Eurocentric foundation, the creative reinterpretation demonstrated by Ghanaian robe designers results in a ceremonial robe that balances the preservation of inherited parliamentary tradition and the assertion of Ghana's cultural agency. This versatility is evident in *Figure 4 (right)*, where the robe integrates culturally resonant elements, distinguishing it from its British root. The process, therefore, reflects not only fashion adaptation but also cultural negotiation, producing unique Ghanaian parliamentary regalia that symbolise both historical continuity and contemporary national identity. A parliamentary robe designer further intimated the following:

...a detailed observation of the Speaker's robe reveals that it is predominantly constructed from high-quality fabrics such as wool, silk, or polyester; that is exactly what we use in producing the Ghanaian robes for speakers. These materials are typically rendered in dark colour palettes, most notably black, symbolizing solemnity, reverence, and the formality expected within parliamentary spaces. The structural form of the robe is full-length and loose-fitting, allowing comfort and ease of movement while preserving the dignified and commanding presence of the wearer (speaker). In alignment with the British parliamentary design template, the robe features a double-breasted front that is intentionally left open. The collar and cuffs are often adorned with distinctive detailing, including contrasting fabrics such as velvet appliqué or decorative Ghanaian textile prints. Additional ornamental features such as hoods or stoles are commonly integrated into the design (Interview with Parliamentary Robe Designer, October 2, 2023).

The robe designer's explanation offers vital details about both the craftsmanship and the semiotic functions embodied in the Speaker's robe. In this context, the deliberate selection of prestigious fabrics and colours is not merely an aesthetic preference but a practice that aligns the garment with the longstanding global traditions of legislative dignity, authority, and institutional prestige. This design logic resonates with Blumer's (1969) theory of symbolic interactionism, which posits that meaning is constructed and communicated through shared symbols. Within this framework, the robe functions as a culturally and politically charged signifier, conveying the gravitas of parliamentary leadership while reinforcing collective interpretations of power, decorum, and legitimacy. The full-length silhouette and flowing form serve not only practical purposes but also reinforce the wearer's elevated status within the parliamentary chamber. The embellishments subtly merge inherited British ceremonial traditions with indigenous cultural aesthetics, producing a visible dual identity. These elements frequently carry embroidered institutional insignia, national emblems, or parliamentary symbols that communicate the Speaker's authority and position within the hierarchy of governance. The internal lining of the robe further contributes to its visual impact through the use of contrasting colours, typically red or black, thus heightening the ceremonial appeal. While the foundations clearly draw on British parliamentary and judicial dress, reflecting Ghana's colonial heritage, the purposeful

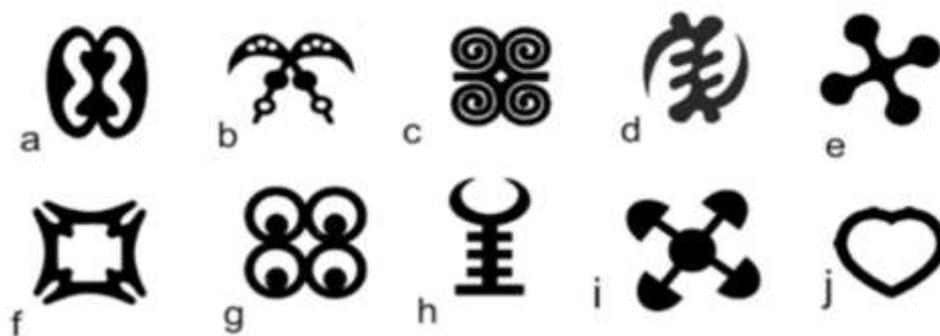
inclusion of local design motifs symbolises cultural reclamation and adaptation. The fusion of imported and indigenous elements positions the Speaker's robe as a dynamic garment that embodies both continuity of institutional tradition and assertion of national identity.

#### 4.3 Symbolic Meanings Associated with Ghanaian Parliamentary Robes for Speakers

Ghana's parliamentary logo (Figure 5) and graphical representation of the parliamentary mace (Figure 6) are prominently featured in the design and embellishment of the robes for speakers of parliament. These main visual representations are packed with Ghanaian cultural symbolism in relation to the power of the state, the parliament, and their overall authority. The official parliamentary logo (Figure 5a) features ten adinkra symbols (Gye Nyame, Dwanimimmen, Akofena, nkɔnsɔnkɔnsɔn, tabono, Akoma, Fihankra, Akoben, Mate masie, and Akoma ntoaso), a representation of the parliamentary mace and the edifice of parliament.

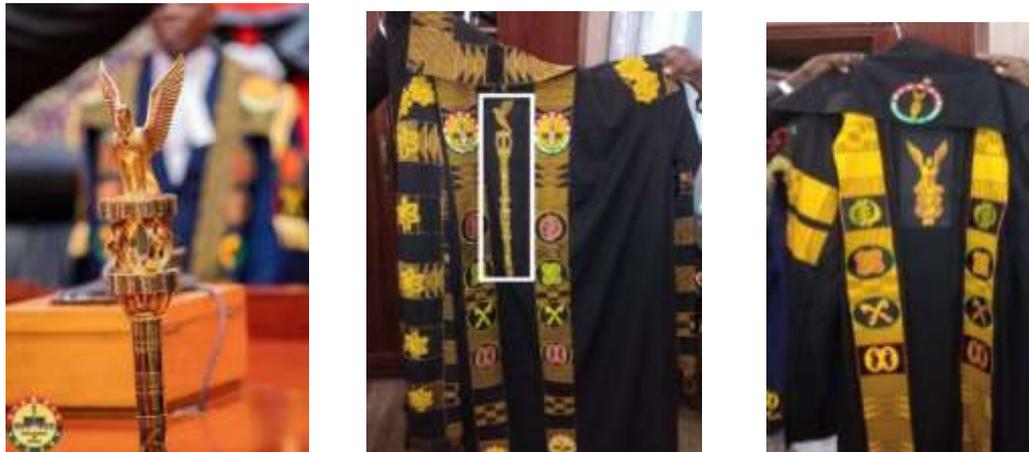


**Figure 5a:** Official Logo of the Parliament. Current Version (Left), Earlier version in embroidery (right). Source: (Parliament of Ghana, 2023).



a. Nkonsonkonson b. Akofena c. Dwennimmen d. Gye Nyame e. Tabono  
f. Fihankra g. Ntesie h. Akoben i. Akoma ntoaso j. Akoma

**Figure 5b:** Adinkra Symbols found in the official Parliamentary Logo of Ghana



**Figure 6:** The Mace of Ghana's Parliament. *first from left* Mace itself, and the two Embroidered versions on the right. Source: (Parliament of Ghana, 2023).

The design choices for the robes are not arbitrary; rather, they encode layered meanings that reinforce Parliament's authority. Specifically, the robes communicate two interrelated connotations, symbolic and national identity constructions, through which the power, values, and collective identity of the Ghanaian state are visually articulated. The incorporation of traditional Adinkra symbols is the most salient feature of these robes. A cursory look at the robes in *figure 4 and figure 3* reveals that they are not arbitrary aesthetic choices but carefully selected ideograms, each bearing profound philosophical axioms central to Ghanaian, particularly Akan epistemology. The Adinkra symbols translate abstract societal values, faith, the importance of learning from the past, and excellence into visible form. As one Speaker's testimony confirms:

There are those traditional Adinkra designs with very important meanings in the robes, mostly talking about some values that we as Ghanaian people treasure. Essentially, the symbols are things meant to bring us together to imprint those in our minds and our conduct... many of these things are not portrayed, or manifested and they are not being practiced and inculcated in the youth. If they were, you would see that we would be having a very peaceful and harmonious society. Many of such symbols are inscribed in the gown I use for ceremonial occasions. The symbols are meant to bring us together, they function as a unifying force, symbolically connecting the nation's leaders to the cultural heritage of the people they represent. (Interview with a Speaker of parliament, July 2024).

The statement from the Rt Honourable Speaker reinforces the cultural significance of traditional Adinkra symbols in the design of parliamentary robes worn in the Ghanaian Parliament. Adinkra symbols, which form part of Ghana's rich cultural heritage, each carry deep meanings related to values, wisdom, and social harmony. Adinkra symbols are not merely decorative elements; they are imbued with philosophical meanings and are integral to Ghanaian culture and identity. As the Rt Hon. Speaker points out, these symbols 'talk about some values that we as Ghanaian people treasure.' The use of these symbols in

parliamentary robes serves as a reminder of the values that are central to Ghanaian society, such as unity, peace, and respect for tradition. The incorporation of Adinkra symbols into the robes demonstrates Parliament's active role in preserving and promoting Ghanaian cultural identity. This role is particularly important in a post-colonial context, where the reclamation of indigenous symbols and practices is seen as a way to assert national identity and sovereignty (Arthur, 2017). Functionally, these symbols operate on a symbolic level as a unifying force. By adorning the Speaker, the personification of parliamentary authority, with culturally endemic motifs, the robe performs a critical symbolic alchemy. It connects the contemporary, often Western-derived, institution of the state legislature directly to the indigenous cultural heritage of the people it represents. This sartorial practice transforms the Speaker's body into a site where tradition and modernity converge, symbolically grounding state power in a local worldview and fostering a sense of shared cultural legitimacy. The robe thus becomes a conduit, symbolically connecting the nation's leaders to the cultural heritage of the people. A parliamentary robe designer further contends:

The symbols in the garment of the speaker are symbols that the parliament of Ghana has adopted and are using in their logos for official duties. So the official logo of parliament has an adinkra symbol surrounding the logo. The logo is designed in a circular form with the Parliament of Ghana building enclave in the middle and the maze of parliament at the centre of it. The symbols at the top of the logo in a red background are the most important ones (Interview with a Ghanaian parliamentary Robe designer, October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

The official symbol of Ghana's Parliament (*see figure 5a*) is a composite design made up of three distinct sections: an upper band of four principal Adinkra symbols rendered in white on a red background; a central section depicting the parliamentary maze and the House of Parliament (edifice) in black on a yellow background; and a lower section featuring additional Adinkra symbols (*see figure 5a*) rendered in white on a green background, selected for their symbolic meanings. The analysis of the parliamentary logo reveals that each adinkra symbol institutionalises a specific symbolic meaning within Ghana's legislature. The symbols and their ascribed meanings are presented in order of their visual reference. Figure 5b.a presents the Adinkra symbol *Nkɔnsɔnkɔnsɔn*, which signifies strength through unity and interconnectedness. Visually depicting linked chains, it conveys the principle that 'people are stronger when they work together.' Within the context of Ghana's Parliament, interview data from a Clerk's department official and a parliamentary robe designer confirm that this symbol is one of four principal Adinkra symbols featured in the upper section of the parliamentary logo (Figures 5b and 7). Here, it is interpreted as representing the core values of cooperation, cordiality, and interdependence that underpin parliamentary work. The findings further reveal that *Nkɔnsɔnkɔnsɔn* is the most frequently utilised Adinkra symbol in the design of procedural robes for Speakers of Parliament, appearing in the majority of robes analysed (Figure 7). This prominence aligns with the symbol's direct connection to the Speaker's constitutional role. This explanation was provided by the participant cultural expert:

*Nkɔnsɔnkɔnsɔn* is a unification symbol and that is the role the speaker plays in parliament... There are two sides of parliament and the speaker is expected to play a middle role of unifying both sides. The symbol, therefore, embodies the idea that, despite disagreement, both sides of the house are interconnected and aim for national development. Thus, the linked chains of *Nkɔnsɔnkɔnsɔn* visually reinforce the Speaker's duty to unify all sides of the house for a common goal (Interview, 14th August, 2023).

In a context where Parliament is structurally divided along partisan lines, the Speaker is constitutionally positioned above factional allegiance and charged with moderating debate, maintaining order, and ensuring procedural fairness. The use of *Nkɔnsɔnkɔnsɔn* visually encodes this responsibility, projecting the Speaker as the symbolic nexus that binds opposing sides into a single legislative body. The symbol communicates a non-verbal message that disagreement is a natural component of democratic practice, yet such differences are ultimately subsumed under a shared commitment to national development.

The cultural symbolism incorporated into the Speaker's robe is deliberate and conceptually grounded. In particular, the inclusion of *Nkɔnsɔnkɔnsɔn* signifies unity, mutual respect, and coexistence amid disagreement. The symbol represents the Speaker's constitutional role as a neutral judge between the two sides of Parliament, based on the natural relationship between the two sides of the house. Its presence emphasises the expectation that parliamentary debates, though inherently contentious, should be moderated to sustain harmony, collective responsibility, and democratic balance in the pursuit of national development.



**Figure 7:** Depiction of Adinkra Symbol *Nkɔnsɔnkɔnsɔn* in Parliamentary robes for speakers [in white circular and rectangular shapes] (left and right). Source: (Parliament of Ghana, 2023).

Akofena (Figure 5b(b)), also known as the War Sword is a symbol of crossed swords deeply rooted in Akan culture and widely recognised as a symbol of authority, leadership, and power. As noted by cultural experts and corroborated by Opoku (2017), the Akofena is

traditionally used during the swearing-in ceremonies of presidents and chiefs in Ghana to signify the power and authority bestowed upon the leader. This symbol is not merely decorative; it carries profound cultural meaning, representing the ability to protect, lead, and make decisive judgements on behalf of the people. In the words of the robe designer, it represents the authority of the state and that of Ghana's Parliament. The Akofena symbol is used in robes for speakers of parliament (see figure 8). The symbol is interpreted as an emblem of legitimate power, responsibility, and the mandate of Parliament to exercise governance within the framework of constitutional order. In an interview with a cultural expert, a profound interpretation of the use of Akofena in the speaker's robe was interpreted as follows:

...the two swords crossed, known as *Akofena* is usually given as a souvenir to warriors or people who are victorious in Indigenous Ghanaian society, that was what led to the creation of that Adinkra if you are to juxtapose this in a parliamentary context and to find out if it has a role. The speaker is more of a squadron leader and they are supposed to represent the law machinery of the country, and so his position is more of a frontline one when it comes to decisions for the state. The interest of parliament is for Ghana and parliament is anchored on fighting for the good people of Ghana in shaping policy direction and having oversight responsibility on the government structure. The speaker requires such an adinkra symbol in the robe in line with fighting to make the right decisions for the state. The speaker is also the third in command in the government structure; he holds authority (Interview with Cultural Expert, August 13<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

Building on the Cultural Expert's interpretation, the findings affirm that the incorporation of the Akofena Adinkra symbol into the Speaker's robe is a deliberate and symbolically charged design decision. Within the parliamentary setting, Akofena transcends its martial origins to represent authority exercised through constitutional mandate rather than physical force. It visually affirms the Speaker's role in directing parliamentary affairs, maintaining checks and balances, and defending democratic principles. In this sense, the symbol signifies leadership in ideological, legal, and moral struggles, underscoring the Speaker's responsibility to uphold justice, accountability, and the collective interests of the Ghanaian state.

*Dwaninimmen* (Figure 5b.(c)), translated as the horns of the Ram, embodies the dual principles of strength and humility, representing the constitutional power of parliament. As one study participant noted, 'you need strength and cooperation to make laws' (Interview with Robe Designer, 4th October 2023). The symbol thus reflects the necessity of wisdom and might in legislative functions, an alignment supported by scholarly literature indicating it represents concealment, humility, strength, wisdom, and education (Sarah et al., 2022).



**Figure 8:** Depiction of Akofena symbol [in yellow and white rectangular shapes] in Parliamentary robes for speakers. *Source: (Parliament of Ghana, 2023).*



**Figure 9:** *Dwaninimmen* (left & centre), and *Gye Nyame* (right) symbols incorporated in the Ghanaian parliamentary robes for Speakers (in blue demarcation). *Source: (Parliament of Ghana, 2023).*

The *Dwaninimmen* symbol within the parliamentary context reflects the intellectual resilience, moral restraint, and judicious leadership expected of Parliament as an institution. Its broader relevance is evidenced by its adoption by several educational institutions in Ghana, including the University of Ghana, where it similarly represents disciplined strength, scholarly excellence, and reflective wisdom. As intimated by the participant robe designer:

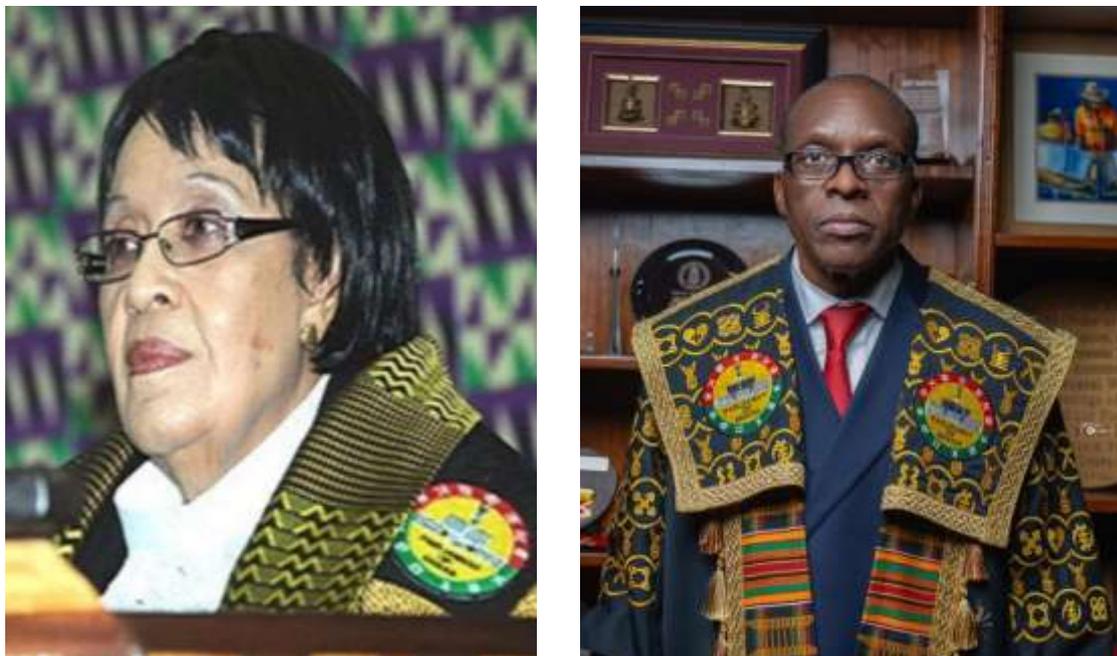
...the parliament of Ghana is essentially created to make laws for the state, and in discharging this core mandate, there is a need to fundamentally incorporate wisdom, you need strength and cooperation to make laws (interview with Robe Designer, 4<sup>th</sup> October, 2023).

The view of the respondent, Robe designer, sits in context with Sarah et al., (2022) that the ram's horn symbol represents concealment, humility, strength, wisdom, and education. The use of Dwannimmen as a design in the robe reflects not only its aesthetic appeal but also its profound symbolic meaning. Dwannimmen embodies the balance between strength and humility, making it a powerful motif in textile design. By incorporating this symbol into robes, designers are able to infuse garments with a deeper message that resonates with Ghanaian values. The Dwannimmen motif transforms the Speakers robe into more than just clothing; it becomes a wearable affirmation of endurance, resilience, and the harmony between humility and power.

The Gye Nyame symbol (see figure 9), which translates to 'Except God', is prominently featured at the centre of the Adinkra symbols in the upper section of the parliamentary logo (Figure 5a). Holding deep spiritual significance, it represents the omnipotence and supremacy of God. As noted by a cultural expert respondent, its central placement within the logo is intentional, symbolising Parliament's authority. The Gye is ultimately derived from divine power. This positioning reinforces the belief that all legislative functions operate under God's guidance and sovereignty, imbuing parliamentary duties with a sense of moral accountability and spiritual legitimacy. The design of parliamentary robes conspicuously incorporates the Gye Nyame symbol, reflecting its profound meaning, as illustrated in Figure 9. The Gye Nyame symbol on the Speaker's robes and in the parliamentary logo is meant to show that God is more powerful than the government and parliament in Ghana. The symbol conveys the belief that all power ultimately derives from God, reinforcing ideals of divine accountability, justice, and humility in leadership (Opoku, 2017; Mensah, 2019).

Akoma Ntoaso's 'Linked Hearts,' shown in Figure 5b(i), operationalises the principle of collective unity within the parliamentary chamber. Literally meaning 'a joining of hearts', it symbolises agreement, togetherness, and a shared charter. This concept, which aligns with the Zulu philosophy of Ubuntu, demonstrates the need for collective resilience and mutual humanity in parliamentary proceedings (Asamoah, 2023). Fihankra (Compound House), illustrated in Figure 5b(f), institutionalises the 'fie' values of security and solidarity. Etymologically derived from the Akan words 'fie' (house) and 'hankra' (compound), the symbol represents the traditional enclosed homestead. Within the context of Parliament, it embodies the safety and security of the institution, promoting a sense of brotherhood, completeness, and unified solidarity (Willis, 1998). Mate Masie, shown in Figure 5b(g), enshrines the values of wisdom and integrity. Translated as "what I hear, I keep," it reminds members of Parliament of the importance of prudent listening, thoughtful communication, and the preservation of confidentiality in parliamentary proceedings. Akoben (War Horn), illustrated in Figure 5b(h), represents vigilance and a call to action. Literally meaning 'war-

signalled horn', this symbol historically signalled the assembly of people for action. Within the parliamentary context, it stands as a symbol of collective readiness, vigilance, and wariness (Willis, 1998). Tabono, depicted in Figure 5b(e), symbolising the oar, reinforces the principles of collective effort and shared direction, evoking the proverb that "a single oar cannot row a boat." The modified Akoma (Heart with Cross), shown in Figure 5b(j), combines the heart symbol with a Christian cross to show patience, understanding, and agreement. As explained by a participant from the Clerk's Department, this adaptation reflects how "Mother Ghana has a big heart to tolerate all forms of beliefs and practices... Parliament adopted the original Akoma adinkra and modified it with the cross signifying the religious components" (Interview, 17th October 2023). This hybrid symbol thus explicitly encodes a principle of institutional religious tolerance within the parliamentary tradition. Collectively, these symbols form a coherent philosophical framework, projecting the legislature's foundational values of unity, strength, divine sovereignty, prudent communication, vigilance, and tolerance. All the parliamentary robes for speakers feature the official logo of parliament (see figure 10). The logo is a big part of the robe's design identity, not just a decoration. It is sewn and appliquéd onto the robe. Its placement and repetition significantly shape the stylistic composition, surface ornamentation, and overall visual appeal of the robes. In this way, the logo functions as a powerful visual device through which parliamentary authority, institutional continuity, and national identity are asserted and communicated within the legislative space.



**Figure 10:** The Official Logo of Parliament depicted in Parliamentary robes for Speakers (Rt. Hon. Banford Addo (left) and Rt. Hon. Bagbin (right)). *Source: (Parliament of Ghana, 2023).*

Symbolically, the incorporation of the parliamentary logo serves as a constant visual reminder of the constitutional mandate and sovereignty vested in Parliament as the

supreme law-making body of the Republic of Ghana. The depiction of the logo in the Speaker's robe culturally transforms it into a mobile embodiment of the institution itself, projecting legislative authority, procedural impartiality, and national unity. As articulated by a participant robe designer, "the logo thus mediates the relationship between the individual officeholder and the enduring institution of Parliament, ensuring that personal identity is subsumed under institutional authority."

Beyond the logo of parliament is the incorporation of the architectural edifice of the House of Parliament (see Figure 11) into the design of one of the Speaker's gowns, specifically that of Rt. Hon. D. F. Annan. This design feature is unique to this particular robe and represents an intensified symbolic gesture. The inclusion of the parliamentary edifice visually anchors the Speaker's authority to the physical and institutional seat of legislative power, reinforcing the inseparable connection between the office of the Speaker and the parliamentary institution itself. In symbolic terms, the architectural motif extends the narrative of institutional permanence, stability, and legitimacy, thereby deepening the robe's role as a visual conduit for parliamentary identity and authority.



**Figure 11:** Speaker D.F. Annan's Ceremonial Robe depicting the House of Parliament.  
Source: (Parliament of Ghana, 2023)

The incorporation of the parliamentary building into the robe's design reinforces the Speaker's connection to the legislative institution and visually anchors the office within both the physical and ideological space of the House, serving as a continual reminder of the Speaker's responsibility to uphold the integrity and authority of Parliament. The parliamentary mace, prominently positioned at the centre of Ghana's legislative chamber and symbolically perched atop the building (see Figures 6 and 11), was represented on many of the robes. In the account of the robe designer, the mace:

Represents a significant emblem of authority and institutional tradition...as a central object within parliamentary proceedings. The mace signifies the legitimacy and operational capacity of the House. Parliamentary sessions cannot be formally conducted in its absence, this is telling of its essential role in affirming legislative

authority (Personal Communication with Parliamentary Robe Designer, *October 2, 2023*).

While the mace is widely recognised for its ceremonial function and visual grandeur, it also embodies the deeper constitutional and democratic principles that govern parliamentary procedure in Ghana. The presence of the mace serves as a constant reminder of the rule of law, order, and the enduring traditions that form the foundation of the legislative system. The current Mace of Parliament was created in 1960, the year Ghana became a republic. The use of mace in designing parliamentary robes for speakers is evident in the robes of the Rt. Hon. Alban Bagbin, Rt. Hon. Bamford Addo, Rt. Hon Peter Ala Adjetey, Rt. Hon. Sekyi Hughes, and Rt. Hon. D.F. Annan.

In accordance with the Standing Orders of Parliament, Order 62(1)(a), the mace is a symbol of authority, great respect and reverence in the chamber, which “stands upright before the table during a sitting of the committee of the whole House or at the consideration stage of a bill when the mace stands tilted.” It is a silent protector of power that stands tall before the Clerk's Table at every House session, except on certain parliamentary occasions such as Committee of the Whole House meetings and Bill Consideration stages, when it tilts slightly but symbolically.

Colour plays an integral role in designing the robes, and they are accompanied by their symbolism. The majority of the robes revolve around the national colours of Ghana: red, gold, black, and green. This is even more evident in the account of one of the robe designers that

...The colour choice for the embroidery design of the yoke of Speaker Bagbin's Ceremonial robe was gold on a black fabric, the choice of the colour gold hinges on the huge symbolic significance of gold as a mineral and its cultural importance to the state. In an attempt to show power and authority, the fringes on the edges of the cap were depicted with a gold colour to show something distinctive, separating the higher office from the subordinate. We used the fringes to create that huge distinction between the speaker and the clerks of parliament... Also, the choice of red for the speaker's lining is based on our artistic expression and the need to represent the seriousness, the rise in adrenaline, and the passion that the colour red symbolizes. Psychologically, we believe when the speaker wears the gown it compels him to discharge his duty diligently in the spirit and history of patriotism (Interview with a parliamentary robe designer for speakers of Ghana, November, 2<sup>nd</sup> 2023).

The deliberate incorporation of national colours is a pervasive strategy, as evidenced by the majority of parliamentary robes. This practice is not incidental but a deliberate act of sartorial patriotism, weaving the nation's emblematic colours into the very fabric of its governance. A revelatory interview with a parliamentary robe designer gave an important perspective on this intentional design philosophy. The designer's account elucidates a multilayered approach to colour application:

The selection of gold embroidery on a black field for the yoke of the Speaker's ceremonial robe is explicitly linked to Ghana's identity. Gold is not merely a hue but a direct reference to the mineral central to the nation's historical and economic narrative, formerly the Gold Coast. Its use connotes cultural heritage, inherent value, and the prestige of the state, thereby transferring these qualities to the office of the Speaker. The selection of gold embroidery on a black field for the yoke of the Speaker's ceremonial robe is explicitly linked to Ghana's identity. Gold is not merely a hue but a direct reference to the mineral central to the nation's historical and economic narrative, formerly the Gold Coast. Its use connotes cultural heritage, inherent value, and the prestige of the state, thereby transferring these qualities to the office of the Speaker (Interview with Parliamentary Robe Designer November 2, 2023).

The designer further articulates how colours are employed to codify institutional hierarchies. The application of gold fringes on the Speaker's cap is described as a deliberate visual strategy to create that huge distinction between the speaker and the clerks of parliament. The use of a nationally significant colour to delineate spaces in the decorations establishes a clear, non-verbal syntax for authority, distinguishing the supreme office from subordinate roles. Most profoundly, the choice of red for the robe's lining is attributed to a blend of artistic expression and calculated symbolism. Red is deployed to represent seriousness, the rise in adrenaline, and passion. The designer posits a psychological dimension, believing the garment actively influences the wearer's conduct: 'When the speaker wears the gown, it compels him to discharge his duty diligently in the spirit and history of patriotism.' Here, colour transcends visual communication to become an instrument of embodiment, intended to shape the mindset and performance of the office-holder, linking his actions to a historical continuum of national service.

#### **4.4 National Identity Construction of the Parliamentary Robes for Speakers in Ghana**

The parliamentary robes worn by Speakers in Ghana function as deliberate visual instruments for the construction and communication of national identity. Although formally imposing and structurally Eurocentric, the robes derive their symbolic power from the intentional integration of colour and indigenous iconography (adinkra symbols), which collectively articulate authority, cultural continuity, and national consciousness.

The robes are striking visually, primarily because of the deliberate selection and integration of colours and symbolic motifs within the fabric and overall design. These elements play a crucial role in expressing the identity, authority, and cultural symbolism embedded in Ghana's parliamentary robes for Speakers. As concurred by deGraft-Yankson (2020), in the Akan societies of Ghana, colour extends beyond scientific categorisation; it is understood and interpreted through its connection to elements found in nature. This cultural lens assigns meaning to hues based on their resemblance to natural phenomena, thereby imbuing the robes with deeper layers of national identity significance as revealed by one of the study participants:

...the Speaker's Robes is carefully created with the national colours, the choice of colour red connotes the blood of Ghanaian ancestors and the toil they went through in their struggle for independence, Red was used to put the speaker into a reflective and commemorative mood, knowing how important the office he holds is dear to the heart of many Ghanaians... the colour Gold was used to depict the riches or wealth of Gold Coast, Ghana... the black is essentially the symbol of emancipation and unity in the struggle against colonialism (Interview with a parliamentary robe designer, November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2023).

In this context, the choice and combination of symbols and colours in the Speaker's robes do not merely enhance visual appeal but also construct identity, authority, and alignment with Ghanaian aesthetic traditions. There is a consensus among participants that the designs on the parliamentary robes for speakers carry a significant dimension of national identity. This phenomenon is because the robes incorporate elements such as adinkra symbols and national colours. This reflects Ghanaian cultural practices and fosters connections with Ghanaian citizens, thereby contributing to transformation and the existing body of literature (Navei & Donkoh, 2022; Warritay, 2017; Adrover, 2015; Aris, 2007; Miller, 2005), as these designs serve to reinforce a sense of belonging and pride among the populace. While the overall structure of the robes is foreign and the dress structure of speakers appears eurocentric, it is the Ghanaian-inspired embellishments that imbue the robes with a distinctly Ghanaian character. In an interview, a cultural expert emphasised the following:

...when you are talking about Ghanaian identity construction, it means, they must dress to reflect Ghanaian identity. At the moment, they don't have any specific dress code that binds them to dress in a specific manner, and clearly, it is not all of them dress to reflect Ghanaian Identity. Some dress in suits and ties others do Ghanaian wear like printed fabrics... Their convention is not specific and that has always been a problem for Ghanaian identity construction. You see... the gown and suit basically is an exotic costume and goes specifically with a tie, so you can't be in Ghana and dress like a European and take off certain elements, they are not making it compulsory though, but if you want to go Eurocentric then you must do so on specific occasions not on regular basis, considering the fact that parliament is a Ghanaian institution of state. But I have seen some adinkra symbols on the vestment of the speakers that communicate some Ghanaian ideals, and its good (Personal Communication with Cultural expert, August, 17<sup>th</sup>, 2023).

It is evident from the statement of the cultural expert that Ghana's robes for speakers of parliament have looked more Eurocentric over the years; however, the speakers' robes are embedded with indigenous colour prints, embroidery, and patterns that are meaningful. They mark life events, social status, age, gender, occupation and more. Although there are a couple of reasons for wearing dresses, the parliamentary robes for speakers, in the words of Speaker Rt. Hon. Alban Bagbin, are worn to reflect the pomp and pageantry of parliament

and also distinguish the speaker from other members of parliament. However, the most conspicuous part of the robe is the designs embedded in it. In an interview with one of the robe designers for the Parliament of Ghana, it was recounted that:

... In creating the speaker's robe, we normally use black as the background material, and carefully select symbols for the designs sanctioned by the clerk department of parliament that have Ghanaian cultural connotations for detailing... For instance, Rt. Hon Bagbin's cloak appears to be together but there is a cap to it, when you look at it, it appears together but it can be detached. We did customized embroidery on the shoulder parts with carefully selected symbols from the official logo of the Parliament of Ghana, the yoke side and the sleeve. The other designs were inspired by the adinkra symbols that I saw in a burglar-proof during the lockdown period (Interview with a robe designer, November, 2<sup>nd</sup> 2023).

A similar account was made by a cultural expert:

Ghanaians are very sensitive and are very aware of Adinkra symbols due to their history and relevance in Ghanaian identity construction. Adinkra symbols communicate. For instance, when Akofena is used or when a chief or person in authority is seen with a sartorial representation in an Akofena symbol, people portray different characters towards them. This is a symbol of authority, hence its usage in speakers' robes tells and communicates a strong message to the viewing public (Interview with Cultural expert, 14<sup>th</sup> August, 2023).

The comments herein referred to emphasised the Ghanaian sense of identity in the construction of sartorial identity and leadership by example through clothing. The speaker's dress paves the way for the Ghanaians (parliamentarians) to gladly follow suit. In the scheme of the democratic dispensation of Ghana, Speakers occupy a high-ranking portfolio (Articles 57(2) and 60(11) of the 1992 constitution). Therefore, the speaker's adornment of robes with indigenous Ghanaian symbolism conveys meaning to the Ghanaian identity construction. This resonates with Adrover's (2015) assertion that leaders strategically rely on the optical and sensorial powers of dressing to draw attention to their authority. Amidst the identity construction dimensions expressed by the participants regarding the speakers' robes, the participant Speaker expressed worry despite the cultural and national significance of the robes:

I am particularly worried, because some of the Robes of the past speakers are not here in parliament, it appears some take them along, and also the culture of speakers dying with the robe has made us lose a number of them, but we still have some. I don't want to die with the robe anyway, hahahha (Interview with Speaker 1, 22<sup>nd</sup> July, 2022).

It is evident from the Speaker's response that, while participants acknowledged the cultural and national identity embedded in the Speaker's attire, the Speaker himself highlighted a

pragmatic and institutional challenge, the apparent disappearance and loss of historical robes. His comment draws attention to the fragile continuity of material heritage within Parliament, pointing to a practice where outgoing Speakers either retain their robes or are buried with them. This parliamentary cultural norm of burying speakers with their robes, though rooted in parliament's traditional significance, inadvertently results in the erosion of tangible institutional memory. In the account of one of the participants who is cultural expert:

...I think that practice is detrimental to the survival of parliament's rich history... we cannot continue to bury speakers with robes that are of national symbolic importance. I witnessed that of Peter Ala Adjetey, and for me, it looked too strange. We are at the edge of losing such important national artefacts of historical importance (Interview with a cultural expert, October 23<sup>rd</sup> 2023)

Based on the account of the cultural expert, burying speakers with parliamentary robes is a reflection that is not merely logistical but indicative of a broader tension between personal legacy and national heritage preservation. The Speaker's humorous remark, "I don't want to die with the robe anyway," serves as a subtle critique of this precedent, signaling his intention to break with the tradition in favour of maintaining the robes as part of Parliament's historical archive. His statement emphasises the identity and symbolic weight these robes carry, not just as a dress but also as repositories of political history and cultural identity.

From an institutional perspective, the absence of robes worn by past Speakers may hamper efforts to visually trace the evolution of Ghana's parliamentary culture and the dress fashion choices that defined different parliamentary eras. It also shows that these robes could have been used to tell a bigger story about governance, tradition, and symbolism in the country, illustrating how the visual representation of parliamentary attire reflects the values and historical narratives that shape Ghana's political landscape. The concern raised by the Speaker thus points to an urgent need for policy interventions around the archiving, documentation, and preservation of significant cultural artefacts in state institutions.

Furthermore, the concern echoes a subtle call for a shift in how institutions treat material culture, advocating a movement from individual ownership to collective memory. This gesture is not just administrative; it is symbolic of a desire to institutionalise legacy, not only through written records but also through visible, enduring objects like the robes, which embody Ghana's evolving democratic identity.

## 5.0 Conclusions

Ghana's parliamentary robes for Speakers function far beyond ceremonial dress fashion; they operate as complex visual and cultural symbols through which authority, legitimacy, and national identity are constructed, communicated, and sustained within Ghana's parliamentary visual culture. Both ceremonial and procedural robes are based on the British Westminster parliamentary tradition, which shows how Ghana's colonial past has shaped its laws. This Eurocentric foundation, characterised by the gown's structure, fabric choices, and formal conventions, has remained largely consistent over time, signalling continuity, institutional stability, and alignment with global parliamentary norms. However, this inherited form has not been passively retained. Instead, it has been deliberately reinterpreted and localised by a Ghanaian creative agency.

The study also highlights a functional distinction between ceremonial and procedural robes, revealing how symbolism is calibrated according to context. Ceremonial robes amplify grandeur, national representation, and historical continuity, while procedural robes balance dignity with practicality, adapting even to contemporary realities. This adaptability confirms that parliamentary dress culture is not static but responsive to changing institutional and social conditions.

The careful addition of local symbols, especially Adinkra symbols, national colours, and familiar designs, to the robes makes them tell stories about Ghanaian values, beliefs, and shared history. Adinkra symbols, namely *Gye Nyame*, *Dwanimmen*, *Akofena*, *Nkɔnsɔnkɔnsɔn*, *Tabono*, *Akoma*, *Fihankra*, *Akobɛn*, *Mate masie*, and *Akoma ntoaso* encode ideals of unity, authority, humility, wisdom, divine accountability, tolerance, and collective responsibility. Their strategic placement on the Speaker's robe symbolically aligns parliamentary authority with indigenous epistemologies and moral frameworks, grounding state power within Ghanaian cultural consciousness rather than solely within colonial vestiges.

Colour emerged as another critical semiotic device in the construction of national identity. The dominant use of Ghana's national colours, red, gold, black, and green, was shown to operate psychologically, culturally, and historically to evoke sacrifice, wealth, emancipation, unity, and patriotism. The study demonstrates that colour is deliberately deployed to influence perception, hierarchy, and even the comportment of the Speaker, reinforcing the seriousness, gravitas, and moral weight of the office.

Furthermore, the robes consistently incorporate the official parliamentary logo, the mace, and, in specific instances, the edifice of Parliament, serving as mobile embodiments of the institution itself. These visual elements put institutional continuity ahead of individual identity, making the Speaker not just a person but also the living embodiment of parliamentary authority and constitutional order. In this sense, the robe mediates the relationship between the individual officeholder and the institution of Parliament.

A significant concern emerging from the study relates to the preservation of parliamentary robes as material heritage. The practice of Speakers retaining or being buried with their robes poses a tangible threat to institutional memory and national heritage. Without careful planning and the implementation of archiving, documentation, and conservation policies, Ghana could lose important artefacts that tell the story of how its parliamentary dress culture, leadership, and national identity have changed over time.

Parliamentary robes of Speakers in Ghana are powerful sartorial texts situated at the intersection of politics, culture, history, and identity. While their structural form reflects colonial inheritance, their symbolic content represents conscious cultural reclamation and identity assertion. The robes simultaneously embody continuity and transformation, preserving inherited parliamentary authority while asserting Ghanaian cultural sovereignty. As such, they stand not merely as garments of office but as enduring symbols of Ghana's evolving democratic ethos, cultural resilience, and national self-definition.

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Dr Samuel Donkoh is a distinguished teacher at Fettehman Senior High School, where he has dedicated his career to art education. His research critically examines textiles and fashion policies through the pivotal lens of decolonisation, seeking to reframe narratives and practices within the Ghanaian and broader African context. As the National Secretary of the Art Teachers Association of Ghana, he provides strategic leadership in shaping art pedagogy and advocating for the profession nationwide. Dr. Donkoh's work bridges the gap between classroom practice and policy, ensuring that the teaching of visual arts remains both culturally relevant and progressively orientated. His contributions continue to influence a new generation of educators and students in the field.

Osuanyi Quaicoo Essel is a scholar-practitioner and Professor of Fashion and Textiles Education at the University of Education, Winneba. His work employs decolonial perspectives to reframe colonial legacies, centering African knowledge systems to document the continent's contributions to global fashion, textiles, and art. As a textile designer and sculptor, he bridges theory and practice, currently partnering on a handloom project empowering Ghanaian youth and women. By integrating scholarship with community engagement, Essel champions cultural conservation and sustainable development, challenging historical narratives to advance global recognition of Africa's artistic and textile heritage.

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