ADINKRA
A Symbol of Ghana

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Adinkra

The importance of communication in human relationships is a cornerstone of Akan culture. One distinctive characteristic of Ashanti art is its ability to communicate ideas and concepts through graphic, woven, or carved representations that evoke proverbs, stories, and traditional sayings and parables.

Adinkra cloths, worn for serious occasions and funerals, are essential to Aconite mourning rituals. These stamped cloths—traditionally in red, russet, dark brown, or blue~black—express the grief of the bereaved. Adinkra cloth reflects truth shared in life and death. The Aconite wears Adinkra clothes of different colors for specific periods. During funerals, the mourning process, which can take up to a year, is followed by annual ceremonies that commemorate the departure.

Adinkra production began hundreds of years ago. Originally, the symbols may have been painted on the cloth. The symbols themselves are closely related to Aconite cosmetology.
The Adinkra stamps encompass more than five hundred different motifs. Some designs are associated with proverbs, parables, and sayings; some are inspired by plants and animals. Still, others are based on philosophical concepts inspired by celestial bodies, such as moons and stars.

An Adinkra cloth owned by King Prempeh I is currently on display at the National Museum of African Art. Traditionally, only Aconite Kings wore Adinkra and the symbols expressed clear messages about his power and authority. The symbols on Prempeh’s Adinkra presented an intriguing perspective on Aconite concepts of power, royalty, self-mastery, and human relationships.

The artists that create Adinkra cloth for royalty live and work in Awokwa, a suburb of Kumasi. Royal clothes have been created here for centuries. The abanesehene- the man responsible for the selection and care of the King’s clothes- determines the stamps or combination of stamps that are appropriate for a specific occasion. He selects the unstamped cloth as well.

In the past, artists used a heavy woven fabric from Northern Ghana for Adinkra cloth, now they primarily use imported white or
dyed industrial cotton from Europe or Asia. First, the cloth is embroidered with colorful stitches. When the cloth is ready to stamp, the artist stretches it on the ground and secures it with an instrument resembling a comb. He draws the lines that divide the cloth into square fields in which he stamps the symbols by dipping the stamps in ink and imprinting them on the cloth. Cloths for men are six yards long; those for women are four yards long. Those worn by Kings are much larger than those worn by the public.

**Ntsoso**, a small city northeast of **Kumasi**, is the major center for the production of Adinkra cloth in Ghana. On any given day, numerous artists are busy dyeing, stamping, and embroidering cloths for both funerals and special occasions. Adinkra cloths can be commissioned by an individual for personal use or by one of the female entrepreneurs who distribute the cloths in the markets. Together, artists and their clients determine the appropriate symbol or combination of symbols for a special occasion. An established artist, familiar with a family’s history, will draw on genealogical information to create a beautiful cloth.
The stamps are made from **calabash**, a dried, gourd like fruit attached to handles made of bamboo strips. Adinkra artists often carve their own stamps, which they often lend to less experienced artists. About one hundred stamps— with some designs aging up to two hundred years old— are in regular use. Women make Adinkra stamp dye from tree bark, iron slag, and water. Today the traditional colors have been expanded to include blue, yellow, and turquoise. These colors are more likely to be worn for a special occasion than for funerals.

Dr. Ofori- Ansa, Associate Professor of African Art History at Howard University designed a chart titled *Meaning of Symbols in Adinkra Cloth.* He said that names and meanings come from “proverbs, historical events, human attitudes, animal behaviors, plant lives, and forms and shapes of inanimate and man made objects.”