

## PAN-AFRICAN ARTISTIC REFLECTIONS IN KWAME NKRUMAH MEMORIAL PARK

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper attempts to make an in-depth visual analysis of the monumental freestanding sculptures at the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park (KNMP) and the frieze that clothes the museum next to his figurative sepulchre to establish its symbiotically symbolic relationship with the coalesced adinkralization (using adinkra motif designs) and Egyptology in promoting the African nationality and unification agenda. Again, it addresses some wider politico-cultural metaphorism and rhetorical issues emerging from the freestanding sculptural arrangements in the entire park resulting from the intercourse of Egypto-Ghana artistic cultural exegesis. It also examines the costuming of the sculptures in blending Egyto-Ghana dress culture in projecting the ideologies of Nkrumah's proposed common continental African unitary government.*

**KEYWORDS:** Adinkralization, Egyptology, symbology, Pan-African aesthetics, unity, costume

### INTRODUCTION

Over a century ago, a man once lived who thought far ahead of his contemporaries. He thought of the unthinkable and stopped the seemingly unstoppable ills in his bespoke country — Ghana which imparted on his continent. Harboured a forward-looking developmental ideologies and principles backed by pragmatic steps in achieving such an African continent developmental agenda, he set up an ideological institute. The institute sought to propagate his ideologies to the people of the continent. Though not a saint, his enviable legacies and ideologies has imprinted on the political landscape of Africa to the extent that it becomes incomplete living his name unmentioned in Africa's political history and unification thought. He was named Osagyefo Dr Kwame Nkrumah. A memorial park was built in 1992 to honour his great political, socio-cultural and economic achievements. The park comprises of a mausoleum, museum, bronze statuesque of Nkrumah, percussionists, horn blowers and a gift shop. Occasional strutting of peacocks in its horticultural landscape spiced with the flow of the fountain is an awesome sight to behold.

The site was formerly earmarked as a ground for heroes/heroines of Ghana (E. Kwao, personal communication, May 7, 2014). According to Abbey (2008) developing the place as Nkrumah's final resting place was the brainchild of the Acheampong led National Redemption Council and Supreme Military Council whose regime spanned from 1972 – 1978. But it was finally built and unveiled by Rawlings' Provisional National Defence Council in July 1 1992. Rawlings confessed that the most meaningful monument Ghanaians can build to the memory of Nkrumah is to continue the battle he begun for the restoration of historical destiny of Africa (Alomele & Okutu, 1992). Present in the sculptures arranged in the park are powerful blends of Ghana's adinkra symbology,

metaphorical presentations and Pharaonic artistic canons producing a contextual and unifying effects of great interest to African art history scholarship.

### **Genesis of Ghana's Sculptural Adinkralization**

The use of a symbol in the Adinkra family is worth a thousand words. Adinkra symbols are crafted with utmost precision and unique identity in the pudding of Ghanaian philosophical thoughts and ideologies, cultural values and beliefs. They independently offer hint on Ghanaian worldview of cosmic understanding, religious and secular beliefs, flora and fauna plus their relationships with each other. Fashioning of these symbols was greatly inspired by these tangible and intangible materials. Based on these overt inspirational variables of adinkra, it could be grouped into symbols that depict: celestial bodies, flora and fauna, human body parts and non-figurative shapes (Ofori-Ansa, 1999; Arthur, 2001; Danzy, 2009). Like any system of writing, the non-verbal communicative pungency of adinkra are dissolved in its proverbial and idiomatic messaging that may eschew straightforwardness but imminent in brevity of expression. Its usage prompts interpretational rhetoric dependent on the circumstantial contextualization of a particular adinkra symbology. Adinkra links a particular symbol to a unique meaning in the culture of the Akan.

Scholars and researchers are unclear about the exact origin of adinkra designs. Some allude that the practice originated from the Gyaman people of Ivory Coast while others trace it to the Asantes (part of Akan ethnicity) of Ghana. According to Ofori-Ansa (1999) the Asantes captured Nana Kofi Adinkra, the then Gyaman king (Glover, 1969), including his subjects who doubled as craftsmen, upon defeating them in a battle in 1818 (Willis, 1998). He adds that the Asantes eventually learned the adinkra cloth printing from the captives by circumstance of ethnic war and named the cloth after the king hence the name "Adinkra cloth". Other historians question the veracity of this historical account since king Adinkra was beheaded at the war front, perhaps, it was his cloth design together with his subjects who were captured contributed to the perpetuation of Adinkra cloth in the Asanteland (Arthur, 2001; Danzy 2009). Bowdich's theory offers a more credible evidence that proves that the Akan did not copy the adinkra cloth ideology from the Gyaman since the so-called Asante-Gyaman war occurred a year after the arrival of Bowdich in 1817. In his book titled *Mission from Cape Coast to Ashantee* in 1819 Bowdich recorded some Akans costumed in a decorative stamped cloth (Willis, 1998) that imitates Adinkra symbology. He visited Gold Coast (colonial name of Ghana) in 1817 and collected the said information before the supposed war in 1818.

From this long held historical account, adinkra printing is situated as a 19<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon. Mato (1986) suggests that since the Asantes had early contact with Islamic symbology through trade and other social interactions, it might have influenced their creation of adinkra symbols. However, present day Ghana is composed of mosaic of ethnic cultures which trace their origin within and outside Africa (Essel, 2014). The Gas traces their migration history from Israel (N. Okokurobour Kwesi Agyemang IV, personal communication, May 17, 2013), the Akans, Ethiopia (Abyssinia), Egypt, Chad, Libya, Djenne and Timbuktu (Aryeety, 2002). Undoubtedly, the migration event was not a one-off event but witnessed occasional settlement in places that interest them. Consequently, it sounds logical to theorize that they might have experienced different shades of cultivated artistic cultures including symbol creation. It is an established fact that Egypt was the first centre of artistic civilization throughout the ancient world (Adams, 2002; Getlein, 2002).

Besides, Egypt features in the migration story of some ethnic groups in Ghana, therefore, it is not an erroneous conclusion that symbol creation, fabric construction and decoration techniques such as adinkra printing is, perhaps, an enculturated Egyptian experience refined and practiced in Ghana and possibly not a nineteenth century art. Many European scholars have tried to separate Egypt from the rest of Africa due to her rich artistic civilization and historic achievements. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770 – 1831), a German philosopher, de-Africanized Egyptians in his dehumanizing classification of Africans as people without history. The scholarly argument by the black scholars and researchers restored Egypt to Africa (Gaither, 2001).

According to Delaquis (2009) there is no direct linkage between Adinkra and Islamic writing as some scholars have proposed. She explains that Adinkra bears ideographic (characters that represent an idea or concept) nature and employs the stamping technique of printing while Islamic writing is calligraphic and syllabic in nature. A comparative analysis of Egyptian hieroglyphs and adinkra symbols establish a stronger symbiotic relationship between the two since most African glyphs made use of symbolic pictograms. Biko (2011, p. 57, March) avers that:

“The gaps separating Ancient Egypt from modern African societies are often rendered negligible through the resilience of cultural memory. Hence, the various writing systems of living African cultures follow a similar pattern of development in their common employment of the glyph system. This can be seen in scripts of the Mende (Sierra Leone), Loma (Liberia), Bamum (Cameroon), Nsibidi (Efik/Igbo) and Mum. The Soma (Zambia and Angola), Gicandi of the Gikuyu and the Adinkra system of the Akan (Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire) were undoubtedly inspired by a parallel mentality.”

When the Asantes mastered the craft, they developed more symbols and improved on the symbology of the designs which were used in printing through the use of the stamping technique and dyes extracted from plant sources (adinkra aduro). Initially the Adinkra cloth was the preserve of the kings, royals and priest/priestesses. Its usage has transcended beyond this and also as funeral cloths. Interestingly, many wearers of adinkra cloth nowadays may care less about its symbolisms, and therefore ride on the back of its aesthetic pursuit (Sumaila, 2013).

Adinkra symbols are common in all aspect of two-dimensional and three-dimensional Ghanaian Visual Art. Textile products, graphic art, paintings and sculptures are often embellished with Adinkra. Sometimes it serves as a source of creative inspiration for designers. The symbols have evolved in creation and meaning-making in consonance with the social, religious and historical changes that characterize modern Ghanaian society.

At the dawn of formal school art education in the 1920s, the artists were panting for artistic platform for rewriting Africa’s Ghana history in art with greater inspiration from their cultural nuances. Pioneering artists of the time began to use the country’s cultural symbolisms in re-engaging emotions and reinterpreting the arts against its wobble pedestal as idolatrous presented in the eye of the European scholars. Going by the Akan proverb which says “If your adversary is imitating your dance s/he awkwardly skews his/her waist”, it was, and continues to be incumbent upon Africans to tell their own story in objectifying the truth. Antubam (1963, p. 157) theorizes that the “strength of a people’s greatness lies in their ability to keep alive, in the dark secrecy of symbolism, the cherished truths and values of their life.” After all the elders say “the dance of a fowl will never be attractive in the eyes of a hawk”. By walking his talk, Kofi Antubam was the

foremost Ghanaian nationalist state sculptor and painter who introduced Adinkra motif designs into contemporary sculpture. His works such as *the presidential chair*, *state sword* and murals that adorn public building tells it all. This precedence has become a touchstone for emulation by modern Ghanaian artists.

### **Egyptological Concepts in Sculptural and Textile Art**

Ancient Egyptians were noted for their artistic dexterity fueled greatly by their religious beliefs and practices. They had a polytheistic background, belief in life-after-death and revered their pharaohs (Croix, Tansey, Kirkpatrick, 1991; Adams, 2002; Getlein, 2002). The beliefs and practices featured in their art including sculpture and textiles done to serve the living and the dead. Though much of their textile products could not survive the wear and tear of the weather for posterity, the permanence of sculpture detailing has immortalized how the materials were fashioned and used as body adornment in the construction of Pharaonic identity and meaning-making. Sculptures captured the dead alive, and were characterized by rigidity of poses, frontal stance and majestic stride of the left foot in most male standing figures while seated figures had their hands resting on the laps with a forward gaze.

Colossal sphinxes guarded the tombs, and were ceremonially costumed in headgear or cloak on the head and occasionally with Pharaonic crown of Upper, Lower or united Egypt. Waist covers that stretched to the knee were prevalent in almost all male standing human figures. Sculptures whether in-the-round or relief employed the hierarchical scale of human figure rendition whereby figures were maximized or dwindled according to social class of royalty. For instance the pharaohs appeared larger followed by the queens, other officials and servants smaller especially in group sculptural compositions. Figures in relief composition assumed horizontal linear position in presentation style with respect to social order. Reliefs flourished on the walls of the tombs and smaller statues placed in the tombs. All these artistic canonic presentation were ways of ensuring continuity of life in the underworld as the pharaohs passed on.

### **Looking at the Park with Egypto-Ghana Art Traditions**

The entire KNMP is a logical corollary of syncretism in Egypto-Ghana philosophical thought that has resulted in creating a remarkable self-referential Pan-African aesthetics and artistic formal eclecticism. Its Afrological semiotic power remains unsilenced in the revelation of antiquity yet relevant in the aesthetic universalism of black Africa. A cursory visual analysis of the park reveals the overt fusion of Egyptian and Ghanaian cultural symbology. Situated by the John Evans Atta Mills street in Accra and facing the Supreme Court, the park opens up historiographical reminiscence of African nationality and unification agenda Nkrumah preached. To get the full multicultural aesthetic enjoyment from the bounty of eclectic styles and unitary themes, it is prudent to begin the visual journey from the main entryway directly opposite the Supreme Court of Ghana upon entering the park (plate 1). From this view, a squatted paragon of a fourteen-man processionally arranged bare-chested horn blowers wear melancholic facial expressions in a way suggestive of mourning atmosphere. Positioned in a serpentine orderliness, there are seven horn blowers at each side of a wide pavement that symmetrically delineates the procession. Facing the cohort on each wiggle queue playfully stands a percussionist— a *gogi* player on the left and a drummer on the right.

Through costuming of the percussionists the sculptors explore Nkrumah's home-grown political virtuoso character in unifying the savannah north and coastal south of the new nation state – Ghana on the eve of independence. The *gogi* player rooted in *fugu* and tunic tucked in what appear to be a footwear, and with a gentle musical opening of the mouth demonstrates much northern cultural characteristics whereas the old looking bare-chested male figure costumed with a cover cloth at the waist and clenched to drum sticks against the face of the two talking drums positioned in front of him depicts southern Ghana cultural characteristics (plate 1). Talking drums were and continues to be poetical communicative relics of southern Ghana. At *durbars*, talking drums may offer appellation in praise of a chief, inform and education the gathering.

Following the processional mourners, a puissant and imposing figure of Nkrumah (plate 2) stands in a “vigorous marching pose with a fully stretched hand in forward movement above the shoulder pointing to his proposed glorious dreamland of African political unification where there is a common African currency, market, citizenship, central bank, inter-states African communication and transportation linkage — through airways, roadways and waterways.” (Essel, 2014, p.48) The toga-like costuming worn over the *agbada* (round neck shirt) and the *ahenema* (native sandals) combinations coupled with the uniquely iconic pose of this heroic statue readily invites spontaneous spectatorship. Evidently, such a costume that constructed Afrological Ghana dress identity remains a ceremonial dress cultural tradition for all presidential swearing in ceremonies since independence in 1957 though this dress culture at a point in time experienced a deviation.



**Plate 1: Detail of Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park from the main entryway opposite the Supreme Court, Accra. 2014. Photographed by authors.**





**Plate 2: Detail of Nkrumah's bronze statue mounted on a pedestal at the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park, Accra. 2014. Photographed by authors.**

For instance, President Edward Akuffo-Addo wore suit, trouser and tie combination during his swearing in October 1 1969. Like a sphinx, Nkrumah's freestanding statue guards his tomb. Behind the enigmatic figure of Nkrumah looms an emblematic sculptural architectonic tower representing his sepulchre (plate 3) in which his remains were finally interred. Structurally, it resembles a quadrupled sword-like figure whose height is more than twice the height of Nkrumah's mounted statue on a pedestal (plate 2). Ceremonial sword in traditional Ghanaian society symbolizes authority of a ruler. It features at the top right hand side in the design of the coat of arms signifying the authority of the presidency. During presidential swearing in ceremony, the double-bladed state sword (*Akofena-nta*) is held in taking oath of office. Nkrumah commissioned Kofi Antubam, a nationalist state artist to design the state sword. It is symbolically sculptured with *Nyame-tumi* (God's power), *Fawoho* (freedom), *Bi-nka-bi* (justice) and *Adehye borobɛ* (royalty and sovereignty) adinkra symbols and conjoined at the top of the sword by a five-point star signifying oneness and loadstar of African freedom (Abbey, 2008). So, constructing a mausoleum mimetic of a state sword becomes an ingenious cultural heritage preservation apparatus. Decorated with ashy patches of quality stone, the proportionate negative hollow spacing evenly woven into the structure drives the eyes to navigate around the inner and outer perimeters for a full visual inspection. Its windows filled with horizontal blades resemble the *owuo atwedie* (depicting inevitability of death) symbol. Quist (2008) says the mausoleum carries a more poetic signification than any national architecture and besides resembles a truncated tree suggesting the abrupt end to Nkrumah's progressive political kingdom unification business initiated in Africa. The uncooperative attitude of some African governments at the time towards the attainment of this goal forced Nkrumah to lament. On May 5 1962, he said some African governments "are seeking economic shelter under colonialist wings, instead of accepting the truth – that their survival lies in

the political unification of Africa” (Nkrumah, 1962a, p.2). In his view, by engaging in that business African governments “compromise their independence of thought and actions”. (Nkrumah, 1962b, p. 19)

Connecting the mausoleum to the museum that harbours his personal life accoutrements, including memorable photographs, paintings, furniture, walking stick, metallic casket (used for his burial Nkroful) and some of his dress costumes, is a straight directional spacious path. A more striking frieze (plate 4), painted in white, clothes the front part of the museum.



**Plate 3: Detail of Nkrumah's sepulchre (mausoleum) at Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park, Accra. 2014. Photographed by authors.**



**Plate 4: The full detail of the frieze that clothes the museum at the Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park, Accra. 2014. Photographed by authors.**

### The Frieze

Symmetrically halved at the topmost centre of the entrance (of the frieze) to the museum is a three composed human heads embraced by an eagle with flexibly opened wings, and bejeweled in the neck by a five-point star while the beak faces the left (plate 5). The frieze (plate 4) consists of plethora polyhedral human figures, rectilinear forms, circular shapes of multifarious iconographic privileges forcing a more philosophic implication of Egypto-Ghana artistic cultural intelligence yet unlocking fundamental cultural truth of African Art as potent vehicle for physical, spiritual, economic and psycho-social survival. It was technically cast in thirty-nine rectangular slabs – nineteen each at a side and the centrality of the frieze forming a single largest slab on top of the entrance. At each side of the entryway is flanked at the top and down parts by two long horizontal beams decorated with *mate masie* (depicting wisdom and knowledge), *fawoho* (symbol of freedom), *bi-nka-bi* (connoting justice) adinkra motif designs and a combination of rhombic and short vertical strokes in a repetitive format.



**Plate 5: Detail of the three human heads embraced by an eagle placed at the topmost centre of the frieze, Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park, Accra. 2014. Photographed by authors.**

Divided by the entrance, each side accommodates eleven human figures. Three of the figures at each side bear feminine physiognomy (plate 6 and 7). With legs widely opened apart, the feminine



figures (two each at a side in this case) carry in their hands containers that possibly represent reliquaries. Of the eleven human figures, three males bang drums in the armpits; two facing each other firmly grip a vertically positioned pole on top of which an adinkra motif named *Nyame nnwu na mewu* (symbol of life-after-death) sits (plate 6). Life-after-death is a belief that fuelled indigenous African art for centuries as eternity-driven discipline. The remaining feminine figure with a spear is sandwiched by two other male figures holding spears in the left-hand and shield-like objects in their right hand. Appearing at the far right stems a veil headed figure with a linguist staff. On top of the staff sits a hand holding an oval-shaped object suggestive of an egg (plate 6). This totemic staff though subdued in comparison to the *Nyame nnwu na mewu* staff, throws light on the delicateness of life and power. Perspectival space engineered in the work is demonstrated by the overlapping of the figures and the use of receding triangulated shapes denoting pyramids, trapezoidal shapes indicating thatched houses and summer huts. Pyramids are historically Egyptian relics whereas adinkralization of art could be associated with Ghana. Objects that resemble burning flame juxtapose the entrance. Juxtaposition of trans-African artistic iconography in capturing Africa's contribution to the world of art in the frieze by the sculptors namely Kofi Setordji and Wiz Kudowor shows their pedigree as African artists.

Again, through costuming of the human figures, the sculptors typify Pharaonic dress culture as in the veiled figure at the far end in plate 6. In northern Ghana, donning of hat made of horns is very rampant therefore, figures with costuming of that kind may represent the savannah north. At a glance, the entire frieze seems symmetrical but a close up look reveals much asymmetric tendencies. There are variations in the figural activities at the left side of the entrance. For instance, the position of the drummers at the right hand side is taken over by horn blowers; the *Nyame nnwu na mewu* is also substituted by *Sankofa* and four repetitive *Denkyemfunefu* (symbol of adaptability and endurance) conspicuously absent at the right hand side of the entrance. Besides, *Akofena* (sword), a totemic staff appears at the far left (plate 7). With a careful scrutiny of the entire frieze (plate 4), it could be observed that two distinct human figures – one that far right and the other at the far left are more pronounced in height and structure. Likening this schema to ancient Egyptian presentational canons, we could conjecture that these two figures represent the leadership.

Right from his engagement with politics in Gold Coast, he began to preach “sankofa” (a return to fetch the goodies in the past). “Although Nkrumah’s Pan-Africanism was defined by the rhetoric of continental political emancipation and unity, his advocacy of cultural nationalism served as a prime catalyst for the widespread celebration and official spectacularization of Ghana’s indigenous cultures. He promoted what is generally referred to as the Sankofa (go back and pick) ideology as the basis of the country’s modern identity.” Okeke-Agulu (2013, p. 63).

Characteristically, all the human figures are bejeweled; wear masked faces and have beaded eyes. Though rendered in simple planes, the composition creates interesting positive and negative spatial dynamics that highlight their courtly royal morose servitude to the deceased, Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah. Suggested by their facial details and figural mannerisms, their expressive sentimentality is nothing of jollification but a demonstration of an excruciating painful bereavement. The facial abstraction of the masks in the frieze cements Nkrumah’s dignity, nobility and his unequalled audaciousness with which he fought for Ghana’s independence and African emancipation. He maintains that “The independence of Ghana is meaningless unless it is linked with the total

liberation of the African continent.” Sculpting the human figures with masked faces speaks volumes of African artistic language. African masks became a major catalyst and the Himalaya in the birth of cubism, a twentieth art movement. Masks entertain, educate, inform and celebrate outstanding personalities including ancestors. They carry religious and aesthetic power as demonstrated in the frieze.



**Plate 6: Detail of the left hand side of the frieze,  
Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park, Accra. 2014. Photographed by authors.**

As a socialist-democrat yearning for African unity government, he laid the benchmark for which the progress of the continent including Ghana should be assessed. Nkrumah declared on December 24 1957 that: "We shall measure our progress by the improvement in the health of our people; by the number of children in school, and by the quality of their education; by the availability of water and electricity in our towns and villages, and by the happiness which our people take in being able to manage their own affairs. The welfare of our people is our chief pride". The question of whether these benchmarks set by Nkrumah have been achieved by African unilateral governments is not the focus of this paper but all these positive nation building ideologies proposed were transcribed in the execution of a memorial park for his honour presenting him as an anticolonial and Pan-African hero. His exogamous relation with of Fathia of Egypt was a way to demonstrate that Africans must not be divided by artificial boundaries but they should look inward and see themselves as one people.



**Plate 7: Detail of the right hand side of the frieze,  
Kwame Nkrumah Memorial Park, Accra. 2014. Photographed by authors.**

He willed for African unity for progressive development. The entire artistic symbology and Afrological aesthetics captured in the entire park provides mnemotechnical assistance in grasping the concept used in exploring the marriage between Egyto-Ghana artistic philosophical cogency in preaching African unity. Nkrumah is gone with his negritude-inspired vision of black universalism, but, is Africa in expectation for his second coming?

## CONCLUSIONS

Adinkra and totemic symbology expressed in Ghanaian ethnic art traditions was transposed into contemporary art, and also surfaced in Ghanaian modern art with idealized stylizations. Antubam was the foremost artist in experimenting with this heritage in the design of state artifacts. Other artists followed suit. One of the finest Ghanaian architects, Dr. Don Arthur, the designer of the KNMP also imbibed the cultural rudiments, relevant histories, and experiences in his creation. Emerging from the same school of thought, Setordji and Kudowor's synchronization of Adinkra and totemic symbology together with Egyptian artistic representational canons and stylistic orientation of the dead Pharaohs produces a picturesque effect that celebrates African artistry and culture in the design of the frieze. Through costuming of the figures viewers are better informed of the varying cultural backgrounds explored in suggesting oneness. Besides, the use of Ghanaian symbology associated with governance, authority, peace, justice, wisdom and unity makes the marriage between Egyto-Ghana artistic cultures preach the African unity Nkrumah solicited for.

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