

**THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS BEHIND THE
ADINKRA SYMBOL ‘NYÀMÉ ÑWÚ NÀ MÀWÙ’**

Ronald Osei Mensah

*Department of Sociology and Anthropology
University of Cape Coast, Ghana
Email: ronald.mensah@stu.ucc.edu.gh*

Charles Obeel

*School of Continuing and Distance Education (SCDE)
University of Ghana*

Pearl Adiza Babah

*Department of Social Science
Accra College of Education, Ghana*

ABSTRACT: *It has become very necessary that we highlight on some adinkra symbols but particularly the Nyàmé ñwú nà màwù’ symbol. In recent times, the use of adinkra symbols has become sparingly in use all in the name of modernization and the downgrading of old customs and traditions. Because of these emerging trends in our Ghanaian society, it has become crucial and relevant for us to reignite the insightful meanings of these symbols into our Ghanaian societies and what they stand for in our day to day activities as humans. The adinkra symbols have rich cultural relevance in pre-modern times, modern times and post-modern times. The symbol Nyàmé ñwú nà màwù, simply means “God never dies, therefore I shall not die”. This gives hope and assurance to people even as it inspires them of their human existence. Literature from scholars who have written extensively on the subject were reviewed. Philosophical and sociological implications were drawn from these literatures in bid of applying them to human existence and living. It has been realized that this symbol serves as a way of communicating. It is therefore encouraged by the study that these adinkra symbols particularly Nyàmé ñwú nà màwù, should be used often in our local and traditional settings in order to inspire our society and the generations to come to have that hope and confidence in their existence that so far as God exists and not dead, they also exist. By doing this, as a country our youth and people would be motivated to work hard to promote national development because these symbols and their meanings redefine their human existence and inspire them to aspire.*

KEYWORDS: Nyàmé ñwú nà màwù, adinkra, philosophical, sociological, culture

INTRODUCTION

The Adinkra is a collection of African traditional symbols used by the Akan people of Ghana and some part of West Africa like Cote d'Ivoire. The Akan Ghanaian word, Adinkra means "saying good-bye to one another when parting." or simply "farewell". But as it is often the case in human associations, saying good-bye or farewell brings mixed feelings, in most cases there is optimism with the bright thought and cheering hope of meeting again someday, somehow.

Sapir (1949) posited that just as unlettered and primitive people have an economic basis of life, however simple in its operation, such a life is strictly comparable to the economic machinery so largely that it orders the life of a modern civilized society. He also stated that, just as they have attained a definite system of religious beliefs and practices, to traditionally conserved modes of artistic expression, to the adequate communication of thought and feeling in terms of linguistic symbols, so also, they appear everywhere as rather clearly articulated into various types of social groupings. Sapir was of the view that no human assemblage living a life in common has ever been discovered that does not possess some form of social organization.

When people categorize experience with language they share the experience with other people in diverse ways which include the use of semiotics - nonverbal communication. Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols of a particular language and society; and the interpretation of symbols and their impact on people, may vary from culture to culture. Language itself is a system of symbols as stated by Aristotle; The Great Philosopher working in language some 2500 years ago, stated that spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. Symbols are the replica of the meanings of words, things, actions, emotions, behavior, and ideas of a people within a particular culture. People's actions can be motivated and guided by symbols and their meanings (Agyekum, 2006, 122).

Gamble and Gamble (1999,132) quoted the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, "He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret, if his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore". What the researchers mean is that our creative problem-solving abilities are often challenged as we seek to make sense out of communication situations. Thus, they posited that, the term nonverbal communication designates all the kinds of human responses which are not expressed in words; nonverbal communication is more extensive than just communicating with our bodies and appearance. That is why this paper seeks to find out the philosophical basis for the Adinkra symbol 'Nyàmé ñwú nà màwù'.

Problem Statement

It has been widely accepted that there are many epistemologies among many ethnic peoples around the world. Peoples philosophical orientations has given them many epistemological backgrounds on how they lead their life. There are many Akan proverbs relating to 'Nyàmé ñwú nà màwù' of

which some are ‘yebewu nti yenna’, ‘wonnim owuo a hwe nna’, ‘owuo tiri mu ye den’, ‘abuburo nkosua, adee a ebeye yie nsee da’, ‘Nyame nkuu wo a wonwui’, ‘wonwui a wonnim nea wobonya’ among others. In recent times, the philosophy behind these notable symbols have been compromised and not well defined. This paper therefore gives a detailed meaning of ‘Nyàmé ñwú nà màwù’, the philosophy behind it, its relevance and sociological implications.

Significance of Paper

To say God won’t die for me to die is to assert that the only way I can die is for God to die. This paper when read by researchers and audience gives hope and reignite the feeling among people in all walks of life to persevere and work hard because there is life. It encourages people to work hard towards their life goals without thinking of death because as long as God lives they also live to fulfill their destinies. This paper will also serve as a theoretical document or piece for any individual who want to research in this area or other related field.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A symbol could be defined as a creation that represents a message, a thought, proverb etc. When a set of symbols is attributed to a particular group of people belonging to a particular culture, these symbols become a window to the understanding of aspects of their culture. Thus, symbols express beliefs, practices, values, etc. One of such sets of symbols (of expression) is the *Àdìnkra*. *Àdìnkra* symbols, along with their meanings and the messages they seek to communicate, are basically archetypal and metaphorically coined patterns of the Akan people of Ghana, particularly the Asante people. The referent term, *àdìnkra*, which means ‘bidding farewell/ goodbye’ in Akan, is composed of two words; *dì* ‘to eat’ or ‘to discuss’ and *ñkra* ‘message’. From the literal meanings of the individual words making *àdìnkra*, it is important to note that each of the symbols involves recognition and acknowledgment of specific message. That is, the purpose of *àdìnkra* is to send particular messages across and so it is important that each message is understood by target recipient(s).

Indeed, symbols are not unique to the Akan people. Various communities with a common culture or a sort of shared identity (code of practice) could have a set of symbols of expression, the use of each of which invokes the sending of a particular message (Frutiger, 1991). There are even those we can classify as universals; that is their representations have the same or similar connotations across cultures. For instance, the dove is seen as a representation of blessing and/or good fortune while the owl is seen to indicate bad omen across many cultures. Presently, some symbols of expressions are considered as having a universal appeal; their meaning or what they stand for seem to have a universal recognition and so they are appropriately used as such. This paper therefore presents the philosophical basis of the Adinkra symbol ‘Nyàmé ñwú nà màwù’

Nyàmé ñwú nà màwù



Figure 1. The Adinkra symbol Nyàmé ñwú nà màwù

Nyàmé ñwú nà màwù, meaning ‘as long as God lives, I shall not die’, explains the immortality and/or perpetual existence of God. It also signifies the dependence of the Akan people on God and the fact that one resides in (the bosom of) God for life; that is for spiritual and physical well-being. Thus, if God is immortal, one is immortal as well. Specifically, the cosmological thought here is that the Akan people believe in the perpetual existence of the soul (as God’s creation) and that, when one dies, the soul stays alive eternally.

Literal meaning: I will die only when God is dead.

Symbolic meaning: Immortality and perpetual existence of God.

Background: It is believed that the ‘okra’ (soul) is part of God’s soul giving to mankind. This gives man life; and at death, the ‘okra’ which is immortal returns to God. Because the ‘okra’ is part of God, it can only die when God himself is dead. However, since God does not die, the ‘okra’ cannot also die.

Philosophical Lesson: This Adinkra symbol is said to have direct association with belief in the Supreme Being, the cult of the ancestors and life after death in the Akan society. The symbol signifies spiritual protection and perpetual existence. This translates the optimism of users who may feel invincible and possibly derived from such optimism the courage and resilience required in the face of the hardships and dangers faced in life.

Application to contemporary living: People’s belief in the Supreme Being (God) is still intact today. Christians, Muslims, and Traditional Worshippers are convinced that there is an immortal Supreme being somewhere who punishes wrong doers, blesses those who do good, and provides people with all their needs and therefore He should be worshipped and revered.

DISCUSSION

Sociological implications of Nyàmé ñwú nà màwù symbol in the Ghanaian context

The Ghanaian society especially the Akan, believes in the Supremacy and the everlastingness of the Supreme Being - God. They also believe that the human being is composed of body (honam), spirit (sumsum), and soul (okra/kra). To the Ghanaian, the symbol “Nyàmé ñwú nà” translated as “God will not die; so, I will also not die” in other words ‘until God dies, I will not die’ represents the continues existence of the spirit and soul of an individual even after life on earth. The belief that the Creator of the universe and Mankind is immortal, is held in sacrosanct and therefore reflects the people’s psyche.

At the individual level, a person believes that there is no way another human or spirit medium (be it witchcraft, sorcery, or necromancy) can kill him or her without the express authorization from the Supreme Being. Even when God has sanctioned that a person dies, the spirit and soul which are the two most important aspects of that individual return to him (God). It is therefore fruitless for someone to wish to kill another, when that individual cannot get access to the victim’s spirit and soul to destroy. The individual therefore becomes fearless in his or her quest to uphold that which is right and shuns evil, knowing that his or her destruction does not lie in the bosom of any mortal but the Almighty alone.

At the family level, the symbol reaffirms the watchful eyes of ancestors who continually intercede for their living descendants. It is a truism in traditional Ghanaian societies that when individuals live good lives they are considered ancestors. Evil doers are not given the ancestor accolade and are soon forgotten. But ancestors are believed to have the power to intervene in the lives of the living; punishing evil and rewarding good.

At the group level, the continuous naming of children after parents and family members or other worthy individuals ensure the continuous use of their names and in effect their persona. For example, Otumfour Osei Tutu I, founder of the of the Ashanti (pronounced Asante) Kingdom, died in 1717, that is over three centuries ago but his name is still mentioned in present day Ghana because of his descendant, King of Ashanti now, who ascended the Golden Stool from 1999 till date and bears the same name Otumfour Osei Tutu II.

At the National Level, the continuous mention of “our fathers” in the Ghanaian Pledge, those who led the struggle for independence, a popular CPP song sang in honour of the first President of Ghana Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, composed by RR of Blemabii Band of Ghana Empire Secondary School with words like “Nkrumah Never Dies, He Lives Forever More” attest to the fact that Ghanaians believe that though the human body may die, the soul and spirit will live forever.

Politically, in Ghana today, the issue of *Founder's Day* or *Founders' day* dragged for a while until the Nana Addo Danquah Akufo Addo's government decided to fix a founders' day on August 4, and celebrate Kwame Nkrumah's day on 21st September. This brought to a rest the 'tug of war' that was going on about whether the apostrophe was before or after the 's'.

It is evident from all that has been said that indeed '*Nyàmé òwú nà màwù*' 'if God indeed is not dead, a person may never die'.

The relevance of the symbol to the Ghanaian Society

There are numerous lessons one can learn from the use of the symbol "*Nyàmé òwú nà màwù*".

Firstly, it reminds the Ghanaian of the existence of the Supreme Being - God. That he is the Immortal one and Omnipresent. And that none can be compared to him. Also, it reveals that God is the all-powerful for a person cannot do anything if it is not the will of God. Again, the symbol encourages bravery. It makes a person 'bold, and resolute. Laugh to scorn / The power of man' as Shakespeare will put it, for 'for none of woman born' can harm a person's spirit and soul. (Shakespeare, Macbeth Act 4 Sc 1). The symbol teaches loyalty to the Almighty God. He is the only one that a person can completely trust and rely upon. Another importance of the symbol is that it portrays the culture and traditions of the Ghanaian people especially, the Akan tribe. The symbol is embossed in clothes, stools, linguist staff, among others. The symbols are adopted or borrowed by institutions to represent who they and what they stand for.

SUMMARY

Adinkra is a collection of African symbols but not an entity or a separate symbol on its own. It has a lot of African symbols in it particularly *Nyàmé òwú nà màwù*. It has been realized that this symbol serves as a way of communicating. It brings hope of long life, joy and blessings. It gives us the reassurance that we depend solely on God and once God is alive forever so we are. It gives us that hope of long life. It also gives us that total conviction that there is life after death because *Nyàmé òwú nà màwù*.

CONCLUSION

The Adinkra symbols particularly the '*Nyàmé òwú nà màwù*' symbol of the Akan people in Ghana shows clearly that, God has been among them and operated among them from the very beginning. Their interaction with the spiritual through objects and symbols like stones, trees, water, etc. has been part of their very existence. The introduction of the bible and Christianity only came to confirm their religiosity. The psychology behind the symbols and their relation to God, implies that there is a religious instinct in all human beings – an inherent striving towards a relationship with someone or something that transcends human power (a higher force or being). It has been realized that Akan nonverbal communication manifests itself in diverse ways, the *adinkra* symbols are among the few most recognized nonverbal communications modes in Akan.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the insightful literature and revelations, it is therefore recommended by authors that, the saying '*Nyàmé òwú nà màwù*' should be advertised and well explained to our youth and generation,

so that the relevance and social importance of it would be made manifest in our day to day dealings and above all national development through the motivation attached to it. The African is therefore encouraged to pay close attention to traditional symbols and oral traditions. This is because they contain invaluable information about life; both past and present. For it is “when we know where we come from that we will know where we are going”.

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