



Art and its histories

Ghana: Adinkra workers

Gabriel Kwaku Boatye

We are from one family. We are 36. We have twenty males and sixteen females in the whole family. We work together. The males do the printing, and the females do the dyeing.

Narrator

Although blind, Kwadwo Amofa pounds the bark. Joseph Kofi Nsiah is also a member of the family. He has a key role in creating new designs for Adinkra symbols. He reinterprets the traditional symbols and invents new ones.

Gabriel Kwaku Boatye

My father started in 1928, now he's still working. He's still alive. He has been working for more than 60 years. When I am going to school, after classes, I came and helped him because when he dies, we are going to represent him, so that the work will not go off. It exists. So we have to follow him by his rules, his laws, any order he give to us, we have to obey because he is the boss. When he say he teach us again, nobody will help us. This is a small cloth for a female. You wear it in this way. They open their legs and put the cloth back, to cover their body in this way. And the other one for the blouse, and the other one for the top. That's for the female. And the man, the man can wear, the man can wear, that is black cloth. For example, this is a mourning cloth. Just open it, and put your left hand in and bring the hand, right hand out, fold it up to your arms and tie it to you. Now you can go - wherever you want to go!

Narrator

Dark red and black cloths are worn for funerals, especially Adinkra cloths, printed with symbols chosen for their meaning.

Gabriel Kwaku Boatye

The head of the family must be in the red, then others in the family who are....., will also wear. Only to show to people that they have lost an important person. They have suffered a loss of a relative. All others can wear dark colours.

Narrator

Modern, printed cloths are also used for solemn occasions. Here, the ram's horn symbol has been interpreted for Christian use.

Man

This is a small family, who are Catholic, and we have lost our beloved father on the 29th of November. So, we buried him yesterday and came for the Thanksgiving at the Cathedral.

Narrator

Could you tell us why you chose that particular Adinkra print?

Man

It looks like a sign of victory, which our father has won on earth here. Because it is only Jesus who brings victory. Therefore, it is a symbol of victory, our father has won on this earth. That's why the design is like that.

Gabriel Kwaku Boatye

I used my own mind to prepare this much. This is 'Gye Nyame'

Ident: Gye Nyame

And that is the first symbol, because Adinkrahene was the king of the symbols.

Ident: Adinkrahene

Gabriel Kwaku Boatye

'Sankofa' - 'Go back to your roots'. This is a new symbol, we call it 'change your life'. This is another 'Sankofa', it's new.

Ident: Kramo bone amma yeannhu framo pa

Gabriel Kwaku Boatye

This one, you call it, 'Kramo bone amma yeannhu kramo pa', 'You cannot tell a good from a bad'. Mr invents this one. You call it '.....' 'Enemies Around Me'. Whether you are poorest or richest, you have an enemy, no matter who you are.

Narrator

When did you design this?

Man

Ok, maybe you are a bad man. You want to change to be good, but if you be a good man, then God comes to protect you. This is '.....', 'Accept the Lord', because God protects Heaven and Earth, and everything therein, so no-one is greater than God.