

## “*Tete wɔ bi ka, tete wɔ bi kyere*”<sup>1</sup>: The remaking of a church community through Adinkra symbolism

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### Abstract

This study set out to explore a Christian Church community's perception of how indigenous philosophies, values and spiritualities encoded in Adinkra symbols influence the making of a church community. The study examines the following: (i) How the symbols, rituals and language embodied in Adinkra symbols have been incorporated into the Grace Presbyterian Church, West Legon, Accra (ii) How this community reconciles both worlds and (iii) How the coming together of two parallel traditions-African and European shape the experiences of the church community. Multiple approaches including semi-structured interviews, photo and video ethnography were employed for data collection (N=30). Key observations made from this study include the repackaging of the typical Reformed approach to worship and the creation of a productive and explorative space for the construction of new religious meanings and experiences.

**Keywords:** Indigenous philosophies, Adinkra symbols, church community, reformed tradition

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### Introduction

The past few years have witnessed an increased interest and public visibility of African philosophy and spirituality encoded in Adinkra symbolism globally. This is evident in the adaptation of these symbols in response to democratic renewal discourse (Jacobs 2020). Additionally, to communicate an aspiration of unity between some Western iconic brands and the wealth of culture, heritage and ancestry of Africans and the diaspora (“Ghana's Adinkra symbols”). In contemporary times, Adinkra symbols have gained much currency in Ghana (Ossom-Batsa and Apaah 261). Adinkra symbolism is one of the six classifications of Ghanaian indigenous symbols (Dzobo). These symbols, which convey socially constructed values and spiritualities are applied to different settings and contexts to make social, political, economic and religious statements (Amoateng 14). Within the secular sphere, several Adinkra symbols have been adopted as institutional logos to promote national identity and foster national integration. Arthur notes that, historically, Adinkra symbols have built on tradition and incorporated new ideas and symbols based on changes occurring in Ghanaian society. A few illustrations could be cited: The Adinkra symbols for Mercedes Benz, Volkswagen and Toyota; symbols of social class, status, wealth and prestige, show some of the technological changes and the new vocabulary that have been introduced into the country (Arthur 54). ‘*Bɔ wo bo ban*’ (Protect yourself) and ‘*Sankofa wo rɔba*’ (Go back for your rubber condom) symbols have been developed for the HIV/AIDS awareness program. Another recent use of Adinkra symbols is found in the initiative of the Environmental Protection Agency of Ghana, ‘*Akobɛn*’ (Warhorn), implying a call to action and volunteerism (Arthur 55).

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: “The past has something to teach and offer”. It refers to the wisdom, traditions and practices indigenous people and local communities. The saying implies that retrospection provides lessons from the past that can positively impact the future.

Over the past three decades, the religious culture of the Catholic, Historic Mainline (Protestant) and some Pentecostal churches have exhibited these symbols unapologetically. Thus, offering the Ghanaian Christian landscape distinctive symbolic expressions that serve as important sources of spirituality, values and theological expressions. This development underscores a significant shift in Ghanaian Christianity; from the tradition of Christians disassociating themselves from any representation of the African culture to one of appreciation for socially constructed values and spiritualities. We concur with Amoateng that, “the pervasive use of the symbols...communicate loudly about how the church in Ghana is contextualizing new meanings to the Adinkra symbols and using them for godly rhetoric in contemporary Ghanaian religious and theological spaces” (Amoateng 147). This initiative builds on “the groundwork for understanding the links that are subtly constructed between Akan traditional beliefs and Western... theology; ... the coming together of two parallel traditions-African and European” (Obeng 243). That notwithstanding, the complexities of religious semiotics and the rhetorical use of systems of meanings within Ghanaian religious communities, remain largely unexplored. Also missing from the extant literature is a careful examination of how the values and spirituality encoded in these symbols relate to the experiences of adherents and the implications for building a church community.

Drawing on research conducted in the Grace Presbyterian Christian church, West Legon, Accra, in 2022, the current study builds on previous research by examining how these symbols influence the making of a church community. This subject has become especially relevant today given the “need to bridge the gap between the two parallel worlds” (Obeng 243): African and Western modernity. This study is part of a larger study which set out to explore semiotic dimensions and symbolic expressions of indigenous spiritualities and values. The study focuses narrowly on how Akan Adinkra symbols influence the making of a church community. This qualitative study is driven by ethnographic research methods. Fieldwork data for the study was collected in 2022 through multiple approaches including semi-structured interviews, photo and video ethnography, focus group discussions and participant observation. Study participants included twenty lay church members, ten leaders and clergy of the Grace Presbyterian Church, West Legon, Accra (N=30). Two focus group discussions were held; each group consisted of seven people, selected both randomly and through the snowball sampling method, from the leaders and laity of the congregation who have been part of this church community for not less than three years. A content analysis approach was used to analyse both recurrent themes in the symbols and data from the field.

### **The Study Area: A Brief Historical Overview**

The Grace Congregation, West Legon, Accra, is one of the local congregations of the Ga Presbytery of the Presbyterian of Ghana (PCG).<sup>2</sup> The congregation was birthed in 1994 with six (6) adult members and twelve (12) children. The idea to establish a church at West Legon, then, a fast-developing community near the University of Ghana was prompted by the relocation of the Thompson Family (Presbyterians) from Nima (a suburb of Accra) to their new residence at West Legon. Due to the distance and inconveniences involved in travelling to Nima for church services, they agreed with a few Presbyterians around to start a congregation in the locality. The first and

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<sup>2</sup> The Presbyterian Church of Ghana is part of the World Reformed Family. The church is structured into courts. The church is governed by ‘The General Assembly’ at the highest court. This is followed by Presbyteries. Each consists of a number of districts. The districts are also constituted of a number of local congregations, which form the base of the church.

subsequent church services were held in Thompson's garage from 1994 to 1998. Many eminent personalities who had also relocated to West Legon joined the church at this stage. Over time, they attracted other professionals who had also relocated there and artisans (carpenters, masons, electricians etc.) who worked in the community, through evangelization. This remains the texture of the current congregation of over five hundred members.

The congregation grew in leaps and bounds necessitating the need for a bigger and permanent place of worship which was completed and inaugurated in 2016, during the tenure of Rev. Prof. Cephas Narh Omenyo, also a lecturer at the University of Ghana. Beyond the technological advancement, the Grace congregation invests in liturgical architecture which comprises of the rugged cross, modern African art, Greek symbols and Adinkra symbols, which conspicuously adorn both the interior and exterior of the church building. The Adinkra symbols "epitomize the appreciation and reconceptualization of Ghanaian indigenous values and spiritualities in the worship life of the congregation".<sup>3</sup> This development provides a lens through which to explore three interlinked questions. How have the Adinkra symbols, rituals and language been incorporated in the Grace Presbyterian Christian church community? How does this Christian church community reconcile both worlds? How do the values and spiritualities encoded in these symbols shape the African Christian experience?

### **Positionality**

A study of the modulation of Adinkra symbolism in the worship life of the Grace Presbyterian Christian church can be undertaken from many perspectives. It can be written by a Ghanaian irrespective of his/her religious background, in light of the heightened interest in Adinkra symbol in contemporary times. It is also possible that a member of the Grace Christian community who feels very uncomfortable with the introduction of indigenous cosmologies and philosophies into Christian thinking would reflect on his/her experiences. Similarly, this phenomenon could be studied by an outsider (a non-member of the Grace Christian church), who is an African traditional religious practitioner or scholar. My perspective is none of the above. I am looking at the phenomenon as an involved outsider. Although I am not a member of the Grace Congregation, I come to this exploration as a Ghanaian of the Akan ethnicity, who is also a female, ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, young, married, a scholar in the Humanities, a learner but also a voice of authority in this line of research.

My multiple identities are shaped by my upbringing in a traditional setting where indigenous symbols, proverbs, values and spiritualities were common knowledge and a significant part of our informal education, a training I received alongside my Christian upbringing. These formative years were characterized by various kinds of struggles to bridge the gap between these two parallels tradition-African and Western modernity. At the time, Christian voices rose distinctively and poignantly against cultural adaptations. "The prevailing understanding ha[d] been that to be a true Christian [was] to separate oneself from anything that represents the Ghanaian culture" (Amoateng 147). This situation reached its climax when my native name was dropped because I was named after my paternal great-grandmother, who was a traditional priestess. According to the Christian teaching I received, names and the person one is named after possessing spiritual properties and a potential blessing or otherwise, hence a source of concern. Such struggles were marked by social exclusion and disconnect from my

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<sup>3</sup> Interview granted the researcher on August 15, 2022.

ancestry. A quotation from Kwaw Ansah's *Heritage Africa*, a film situated in the colonial setting in Ghana, premiered in 1989 aptly captures my struggles:

I think that while an African in school is taught the meaning of the scripture, the bible and the Quran, while he is taught to take pride in other people's values, he should for example know the meaning of the pouring of libation...I think a man must know where he comes from to help him find his bearings...When I was born, I was named Kwesi Atta Bosomefi and my name had meaning. Kwesi means a Sunday born, Atta means a twin, and Bosomefi means an illustrious ancestor is born again. And I started school and I was christened, I began to learn the English language along with all the values that come with it. Then I began to feel that, well my name was well, perhaps, the very sound of it was primitive and inferior. So, I anglicised it, Kwesi became Quincy, Atta became Arthur and Bosomefi became Bosomfield. What's in the name...I feel like an alien in an ancestral home, like a man without heritage, I can't even relate to my own mother anymore. I suppose I know more about other people's values than what I can really call my own. Karl Marx, Napoleon Bonaparte, George Washington, oh, yes, you name it, anything foreign to me and I will readily claim knowledge of and pride in it. Perhaps, that is what makes me an intellectual and enlightened...[but]who am I?" (Ansah 1:47:04 - 49:21).

My MPhil studies in Contextual Theology at the University of Oslo marked a turning point in my life as a Ghanaian and a Christian. It provided me with the tools to appreciate the fact that every society has survived over the years based on the knowledge they have of their environment. This knowledge is embodied in the language, norms, behaviours, and values developed over the years and transmitted either orally, in written forms or through symbols and signs. Most importantly, human societies gather knowledge basically for two purposes: survival and development. Following my ministerial training and commissioning in 2008, I reflected deeply on how theological education furthers the course of survival and development in Ghana.

During my early years in pastoral ministry (2011-2014), I worked in one of the Church's seminaries, training Presbyterian ministers and Church leaders. Once again, I witnessed the disconnect between Christianity preached and our existential realities as Africans. These experiences necessitated my desire for creative ways of engaging with the vast knowledge of Ghanaian culture, to explore the nexus between Christian religiosity and being an African. I am an instrument of decolonizing such knowledge, standing on the shoulders of such scholars and Christian practitioners as Kwame Bediako, Peter Kwasi Sarpong, Joseph Yedu Bannerman etc.

The biases in my stands are many. That notwithstanding, an effort has been made to paint a fair and yet involved picture of the making of a church community through Adinkra Symbolism. As an involved outsider, I am privileged to the above-mentioned insider's knowledge systems. Nevertheless, my gender may present a varying dimension to the way and manner in which some involved insider information may be understood and analyzed. The female perspective in this study would not only provide a different viewpoint to a male study in this area "but would pay specific attention to some peculiar problems of female African researchers" (Amenga-Etego 11). Where possible, secondary sources are crosschecked with other sources.

## Vitalizing Theological Discourse on Adinkra Symbols in the Grace Presbyterian Church (GPC), West Legon

Christian symbols and art have always been part of the story of the Christian faith (Jensen, *Understanding Early Christian Art* 10, 17-19). Ghana acquired Christian biblical-liturgical art as it had been created in the home nations of the missionaries through the activity of Western missionaries. However, Adinkra motifs have been interwoven into Christian liturgy and theology since the 1960s because of their communicative potential (Ossom-Batsa and Apaah 261). The Ghanaian Christian Protestant landscape is no exception. Amoateng writes about the use of Adinkra symbols for godly rhetoric in the Methodist Cathedral in Winneba, in the Central Region of Ghana (Amoateng 147). Also of importance is the modulation of Adinkra symbols into the biblical-liturgical art of the Emmanuel Methodist Church, Labadi, in 1967, a total of 26 Adinkra symbols introduced into the Ashaiman Methodist church in 1995 (Ossom-Batsa and Apaah 268-270), and the attempt by Grace Presbyterian Church, West Legon, to express their Christian religiosity using symbols that speak to them; symbols that they can easily relate to. Hull advances that:

There is a demand, a strongly felt need, that these religious symbols should be personally integrated with the lives and meanings of religious believers, so even when a traditional symbol like The Apostles' creed is said, there is an expectation that the believer will 'make it his own' by reading into it his religious pilgrimage by appropriating it into his sense of religious truth and significance (48).

Significantly, Omenyo's initiative received affirmation from the leadership and laity of the Grace Christian Church community. Two Adinkra symbols were settled on: (i) *Gye Nyame*, variously translated as "Except God" (Arthur 191) and "The final decision is with God and not humans" (Amoateng 116). (ii) *Nyame Biribi no Soro* [*ma me nsa nka*] "*God, there is something in the heavens [let me receive it]*" (Amoateng 157). This initiative was however not without challenges. A lay leader of the Grace Presbyterian Church, West Legon offers some insight:

Initially, people struggled with the idea of incorporating the Adinkra symbols into the worship life of the congregation. We often associate the symbols with 'fetishism' because they are usually used by the chiefs, and people identify chieftaincy with idol worship: The local chiefs put on the cloth with all these symbols for libation pouring and other rituals associated with indigenous religious practices. When you visit the Chief's palace these symbols are all over the place but not in the church. So, people see them as 'fetish' instead of being Christian symbols. Moreover, our Ministers identify with the cross and not the Adinkra symbol.<sup>4</sup>

This view resonates with the position of some Ghanaian Christians who are non-members of the Grace Christian Church community: "Is this the Church of Christ? Why would a church introduce Adinkra symbols into its liturgical architecture? This is not right; the symbols tilt towards idol worship and so it's not helpful for the church to engage with them."<sup>5</sup> This theological standpoint though old (Westermann 94), points to the need for thorough theological interrogation of the nexus between Christian religiosity and the African heritage. In his work, *West African Religion*, Parrinder notes that "in many West African languages, convenient categories exist for this consideration" (16). In the same vein, Bediako asserts that "we cannot understand the fortunes of Christianity in Africa if we ignore

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<sup>4</sup> Interview granted to researcher on August 15, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Interview granted to researcher on November 15, 2022.

the impact of the continent's primal religious background" (*Christianity in Africa* 192). For the Grace Presbyterian Church, West Legon, this has meant a periodic education of the entire congregation on the Adinkra symbols and the making of a Church community.

### Conceptualizing the Adinkra Symbols in the GPC: Gye Nyame and Biribi wɔ soro

This section addresses the question of how the *Gye Nyame* and *Biribi wɔ soro* symbolic expressions of faith, the rituals and language embedded in them have been incorporated into the worship life of the GPC. Discourses on the origin, the socio-cultural and religious relevance of the *Gye Nyame* and *Biribi wɔ soro* symbols are hardly novel.



Figure 1, *Gye Nyame*

*Gye Nyame*, meaning 'Except God,' is variously interpreted as "Only God," "the final decision is with God, [not humans]" (Amoateng 116) and 'God is the answer (Ossom-Batsa and Apaah 272). This symbolic representation of faith gains prominence in Akan religious cosmology, largely understood within the framework of "the omnipotence, omniscience, and the immortality of God" (Willis 114). According to Arthur, this faith symbolism is drawn from the Akan aphorism: "*abɔde santaan yi firi tete; obi nte ase a onim n'ahyeease, na obi ntena ase nkosi n'awie, Gye Nyame*. Literally translated as, "this great panorama of creation dates back to time immemorial; no one lives who saw its beginning and no one will live to see its end, except God" (191). Amoateng posits that the *Gye Nyame* symbol was created to recount the story of survival in fatal contexts because of *Nyame's* gracious and merciful safekeeping (Amoateng 116). For Arthur, the *Gye Nyame* symbol reflects the Akan belief in a Supreme Being who is referred to by various names-e.g., *Ɔbodɔde* (the Creator), *Nyame* (One that Satisfies), *Onyankopɔn* (the great friend), and *Twedɛampɔn* (the dependable one). Acheampong underscores the correlation between the qualities of God's providence and care as expressed in the *Gye Nyame* symbol and Matthew 6:26, 31-33 (1). This study supports and extends these observations in the appropriation of faith in *Nyame's* providence and care as contextualized within the Grace Christian community and its impact on the church community's experiences.

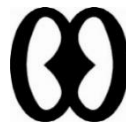


Figure 2: *Biribi wɔ soro*

*Biribi wɔ soro* explained as "There is something in the heavens," is derived from the Akan aphorism, "*Nyame, biribi wɔ soro na ma ɛmmɛka me nsa*," which literally translates as "God, there is something in the heavens, let it reach me." Arthur notes that *Biribi wɔ soro* is an expression of hope, expectation and aspiration (Arthur 208). Within the Akan religious panorama, the symbol demonstrates human limitations and the need to rely on a higher power. The significance of the symbol therefore lies in humanity's dependence on God for sustenance in relation to one's peace, justice, purity, forgiveness

etc. Amoateng asserts that “in the understanding of some traditional Akans, ...*Nyame, biribi wɔ soro*, was an instrument of prayer... which carried the ability to communicate the desired prayer to God when they were invoked by touching” (Amoateng 123).

In my fieldwork, I learned that beyond the symbolic expression of hope and expectation in God’s providence, the Akans tried to receive that which was hoped for from the heavens. In my interactions with the current minister-in-charge of the Grace Presbyterian Church (subsequently identified by the pseudonym, Djan) I gathered that *Nyame, biribi wɔ soro*, brings to the fore the role of specialized people who the Akan society perceived as skilled and competent; having the capacity to access that which is in the heavens. Djan notes, that *soro* translated as the heavens is not the physical *soro* but the unseen. Drawing from the example of the Akwapim (a sub-group of the Akans), he states that the concept *Osɔfo* (priest) implies the one who accesses or receives that which is in the heavens on behalf of a community or a people (Djan). In his work, *Priesthood in Context: A Study of Priesthood in some Christian and Primal Communities of Ghana and its Relevance for Mother-Tongue Biblical Interpretations*, Ekem remarks that:

Whereas *akɔmfo* (traditional priests) are specially called and possessed by Akan deities, who communicate their wishes through them at an immediate level, this is not so with *asɔfo* (Plural of *Osɔfo*) ... *Asɔfo* can best be described as officiating lay people or active servants of deities at shrines, who act on the instruction of possessed *akɔmfo*. It is the *asɔfo*’s duty, however, to make sure that all divine directions through the *akɔmfo* are carried out...*Asɔfo* are not, therefore, first-hand recipients of divine inspiration but executioners of it (47).

Drawing from the above conversation, it suffices to say that the *Gye Nyame* and *Biribi wɔ soro* symbolic expressions of faith had pre-Christian uses and implications that were an embodiment of language and rituals. Kwakye observes that “over the years, the symbols have evolved from being symbols of an ethnic group to become national symbols. They seem to have also evolved in their meanings. Making it also possible for Christians to redefine what these are.” While the Presbyterian Church of Ghana does not have a written policy towards these symbols, it finds a lot of expressions in its ministry. For instance, Presbyterian ministers have adopted and embossed the *Gye Nyame*, *Som Onyankopon* (Worship God), *Mmara krado* (symbol for Law and Order) and *Nsaa* (representing excellence, genuineness and authenticity) in their stoles, as an expression of trust in God’s providence.<sup>6</sup>

While the church’s theology on these symbols is redefined within the framework of Christian thinking, Djan maintains that “it doesn’t take away the Ghanaian perception of our vulnerability and the need for a spiritual support, as well as the authority and role of *Asɔfo*; a terminology which was adopted for Akan Christian ministers at the inception of Christianity in Ghana”. He explains: “Ministers are referred to as “*Nyame nipa*’(Man or woman of God); ones who access that which is above for the congregation.” He adds that “Today, this trend has heightened, as captured in such local parlances as “*Odi hye nkɔm*” meaning “Prophet (man/woman of God), prophesy to us,” and “*me wura sunsum wiase*,” (I access the spirit world)” (Djan). Unsurprisingly, the laity is expectant of a word from God, for indeed, “there is something in the heavens, tell us... where is God in all these challenges and economic difficulties” (Djan).

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<sup>6</sup> ‘Clerical Vestments for Agents of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana.’ Recommendations presented to the 2021 General Assembly.



In view of this, the ritualization of religious practices is increasingly gaining ground in the Ghanaian religious landscape often evidenced in the concept of *Akwankyerɛ* (Spiritual Direction) (Degbe 270-289). Closely associated with *Akwankyerɛ*, is the spoken word or language: incantations, prayers, utterances and declarations. For Job 22:28 puts it that: “You will also declare a thing, and it will be established for you. So, light will shine on your ways”. Language and rituals therefore, go together. Not all believers have the skill to access this power, that is where the role of *Asɔfo* become imperative. Djan and Kwakye aptly underscore the interconnectedness between religion and power in the Ghanaian religious landscape: “for us, religion is power” (Djan) and “our religiosity is tied to the issues of power” (Kwakye).

## Observation and Interpretation

There was a lot that I learnt from the Grace Presbyterian Christian Church. However, this section focuses mainly on observations related to the current study. My presentation is therefore limited to the questions under exploration.

### Key Observations

Repackaging of the typical Reformed approach to worship

Construction of new religious meanings

Emphasis on tangibles: An emerging trend

Constructing identities in the making of a church community

#### i. Repackaging of the typical Reformed approach to worship

This finding is in keeping with Jensen’s observation of “The Arts in Protestant Worship”, discussed within the framework of “the process of change, responding to cultural forces of all kinds including ethnicity of a congregation, its social location, ...and even important historical event” (“The Arts in Protestant Worship” 360). This study supports and extends Jensen’s observation with an emphasis on patterns of change identified in the Grace Christian congregation. In this case study, the repackaged approach to worship is not simply about the symbolic representation of Adinkra symbols in the liturgical art of the church community. The symbols have become visual metonyms that invoke the affirmation of the deep philosophical and spiritual realities of the worshippers. Understanding the interpretations of members speaks to how the Reformed Christian community has understood the adherents’ lifeworlds and positioned themselves to accommodate the African Christian orientation, understood as follows:

“We Africans do not believe in abstract theologies. Abstract theologies do not make meaning to our people. Our people are talking about issues of power and things must be visible. They must be able to relate to something” (Kwakye).

Drawing on his years of experience as a minister, Djan made the following observation:

Being a typical Reformed person, we pray in the name of Jesus and that is enough. However, I have grown to understand that irrespective of one’s religiosity and status, many still believe



that there is something greater and powerful (*biribi nɔ soro*) that they must access for protection, to make them overcomers overall the challenges in their workplace, family, society and the pursuance of their individual carriers. Faith is therefore closely linked to 'ritual' performances. In the Grace congregation, our 'rituals' are mainly prayers, anointing and the Holy Sacrament.

The appropriation of 'ritual' performance as evidenced in the Grace Christian Congregation is largely dependent on one's anxieties and challenges. Djan's example is illustrative: "In some instances, I say a prayer or prayer plus anointing. There are some people after engaging them, I administer the Holy Communion because the inner man tells me this ritual of Holy Communion will settle all that you have said."

The observation at the Grace congregation testifies to the importance of visual manifestations of God "so long as viewers might be edified or God might be glorified" (Jensen, "The Arts in Protestant Worship" 362), but most importantly, that rituals can be strengthening in the search for security in various life situations. Worth noting is the shift in theological standpoint evidenced not only in the liturgy but also in Djan as a result of his encounters and appropriation of these rituals: "I have grown to understand that irrespective of one's religiosity and status, many still believe that there is something greater and powerful (*biribi nɔ soro*) which they must access..."

## **ii. Construction of new religious meanings**

Listening to many accounts of adherents, it became clear how the visual representations, along with the rituals and language they embody create a productive and explorative space for the construction of new religious meanings and experiences. Constructing new religious meanings entails adopting traditional expressions of faith and developing creative methodologies to address existential concerns. Djan shares his experience of journeying with an adherent who had been placed under a curse:

A lady approached me and indicated that she was under a curse because of a challenge she had with some folks. She inquired if she should get it reversed the traditional way...but, I assured her of God's deliverance reminding her of our hymn "*Mo mma yen Agyenkwa so, efise woayi yen ndua bo*" (Let us exalt our Savior [Christ], because he has removed our curse.) She affirmed her faith in the words of the hymn. After some teachings, I led her to denounce what necessitated the pronouncement of the curse. She was made to understand the power of her declaration. I then sealed her declaration with the Holy Communion because it is a powerful ritual in such circumstances.

Jensen aptly notes that "today...many worshipping congregations seem to have questioned the Protestant maxim "word alone" ...Now congregations are filled with energy. They are active, excited, and hoping to be filled with joy, emotionally touched or spiritually enriched" ("The Arts in Protestant Worship" 360).

## **iii. Emphasis on tangibles: an emerging trend**

Another theme in the narratives was the emphasis on tangibles (something that one could touch and relate to), as an emerging trend. During my fieldwork I observed that anointing has caught up with the church; basically, administered to address the deep spiritual hunger of members to access that which is in the heavens. Djan notes: "These rituals have become add-ons that we cannot do away with." Kwakye puts it: "For African Christians, you take this off and people will resort to some extra

source of power.” I observed that the ritual of anointing gains prominence during the dedication of homes, rented apartments, vehicles, and infant baptism:

Even when it comes to dedicating cars and buildings, they request for prayers. In about three occasions, after the prayer was said, the people themselves said *Papa, I have anointing oil, do I bring it to seal the prayer?* That is a clever way of saying or reminding you that the prayer is not enough or complete without the ritual of anointing (Djan).

Djan states:

I came to meet a tradition in Grace where children being baptized are also anointed. The oil is made ready in a bowl by the baptismal font as part of the preparation. On one occasion, after the act of baptism, I forgot to do the anointing, and my assistant minister whispered to me “Papa anointing *no o* (a reminder to anoint the child)” and I found a way of adding it on.

During our interaction, I gathered that the quest for anointing, following a child’s water baptism is part of the search for a double portion of blessing. It’s worth mentioning that ritual performances are not limited to anointing, they are given varying expressions. Kwakye recalls his experience of dedicating a house:

As part of the ceremony, the minister uses the fist to knock at the door three times, while declaring the words: “Open the gates of righteousness, I will come into it and I will praise the Lord.” On this occasion, I used the Bible instead of my fist. This was not a liturgy that I had written out. I only used my inspiration. Three years later, I was requested to dedicate another house in the area. This time, I used my fist instead of the Bible to knock at the door. The house owner (Lady) walked up to me and said: “no, no, no, Papa, please use the Bible just like you did for my brother’s house. I was surprised at how people could remind the ‘ritualists’ of the right rituals to perform. To conclude the dedication of the house, I found a way of mystifying the ceremony when I went inside.

According to Kwakye, this emphasizes the importance of the tangibles for African Christianity. I John 1: 1- 3 captures this succinctly, “that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled concerning the word of life...that which we have seen and heard we declare...” Vlčková makes an important observation; Ritual certainty rooted in corporeality, traditionalism, form, and dogma can be both a reinforcement and a trap. When this assurance becomes irreversible and unquestioned, it might turn into a trap. Ritualism, the emptying of the inner content and meaning of the ritual and executing ritual acts without participants identifying with their content, can result through unilateral clinging to tradition, form, doctrine or unreflected performance of exterior actions. A person's uncertainty, unwillingness, or resistance to exercising responsible discernment may be concealed by clinging to the outer form, tradition, and doctrinal components (41-42).

#### **iv. Constructing Identities in the Making of a Church Community**

Unvaryingly, data from the field underscore the connection between the modulation of Adinkra symbols in the Christian church community and its implications for their self-understanding. An informant noted that:

These symbols help our self-understanding of the universe and our place in it. *Gye Nyame* underscores the interconnectedness of our identity with God while *Nyame, biribi wo soro* speaks of our hope in God and the need to access divine blessings. Our self-understanding implies that the issue of access rests on some skilled and specialized people, but the laity has the responsibility to listen to them (specialized people) and perform the accompanying rituals, which manifests in all our rites of passage. At birth, we name our children and perform accompanying rituals connected to *Gye Nyame*. At each stage in life, rites are performed that link with our identity. Those rituals also identify us from all other beings and give us a sense of community, therefore I am because we are. In the community and our maker, we find our identity.

The study showed that beyond the communal level, individual members subscribe to other Adinkra symbols, their associated values and spiritualities which speak to their self-understanding. The following example by a lay leader of the GPC is a good entry point into this discussion:

I have a lot of Adinkra symbols at home. The *Fibankra* (symbol of protection, safety, security, solidarity and unity) *Asase ye duru* (symbol of power, divinity, providence, and importance of Mother Earth for human life) and *Gye Nyame*. These are a reminder that our total dependence as a family for our wellbeing must be on God who is the ultimate; without whom we can do nothing. Besides, no matter how high I rise in terms of my career, and status in society, my feet rests on the earth. Therefore, I ought to be careful how I treat people and walk through this life (Baafi).

Baafi's (Pseudonym for the lay leader) comment illustrates how his self-understanding is closely linked to *Nyame*, the Creator, but also to the *Asaase* (Mother Earth) and other humans. Indeed, a practical demonstration of this interconnectedness to others, leads to "such social and moral virtues as hospitality, generosity, concern for others, and communal feeling" (Gyekye). Baafi notes that the interconnection of his identity with other humans is re-enforced by two Adinkra symbols that are unapologetically embossed on the walls of his building: *Ananse Ntentan* (meaning spider's web; a symbol of wisdom, craftiness, creativity, and the complexities of life), which serves as a reminder that he is not an island but connected to others. Hence, the need to be mindful of how he treats others. *Ese ne Tekrema* (Teeth and Tongue, symbol of interdependence, unity and harmony), from the Akan aphorism *Ese ka tekrema nso wote bo mu*, which literally translates as "the teeth bite the tongue sometimes, yet they continue to live in harmony" (Arthur 213).

One may rightly conclude that, for the members of the GPC, the meaning of life is linked to transcendent or spiritual concerns, a sense of self-worth, self-justification, and purpose as well as one's interconnectedness with the other (community). If indeed the shared experiences are true, as many respondents acknowledged, then the best way to ground the knowledge and understanding of God amongst a people is to make the faith take root through the time-tested traditions and categories of their forebears. Amoateng notes that, this does not imply a disconnection with the global theological actors, but rather, it contributes to ensuring that there is a mosaic of theological expressions around the globe (Amoateng 198). Moreover, this goes a long way to shape the experiences of the Christian church community concerned.

## Conclusion

Observations made in this study strongly suggest the rising consciousness and strongly felt need for religious symbols to be integrated into the lives and meanings of religious believers. Within the GPC, the integration of Adinkra symbols is underway. Of importance to this study has been how the rituals and language embedded in the Adinkra symbols have been incorporated into the worship life of the GPC. It is commendable that the dialogue between the Akan indigenous symbolic expressions of faith and Western theology is creating a productive and explorative space for the construction of new religious meanings that speak to the worldview of Ghanaians. Nevertheless, the danger remains that the “unilateral clinging to tradition, form, doctrine or unreflected-upon performance of external actions can lead to ritualism, emptying the inner content and meaning of the ritual, and to performing ritual acts without participants identifying with their content” (Vlčková 41). Although tangibles are essential for African Christianity, they are never a substitute for walking the Christian talk. The study therefore, endorses the view that modernity does not necessarily mean a rejection of a people’s traditions and values, but rather, builds on them while searching for new ways of dealing with contemporary challenges (Amoateng 197).

Noteworthy is the ongoing theological articulation within Ghanaian Christianity, which simultaneously shows the dynamic configurations that shape the making of a church community. Dialogue with the indigenous epistemological orientations of Adinkra symbols provides one of the vantage points from which Ghanaian Christians might comprehend God, and “His ways for their Christian development and church relevance” (Amoateng 198). For the Christian church community whose story is told here, we need to recognize their creative ways of meaning-making. The incorporation of Adinkra symbols into the liturgical art and clerical vestments of agents makes visible the possibility of doing or teaching theology through African inherited godly traditions in the church setting. Most importantly, periodic education on the Adinkra symbolism can be a crucial strategy to enliven and sustain this conversation within the Ghanaian Christian landscape. In the interest of the larger missionary task of reaching the world with the Gospel, this invites innovative ways of “clarifying and demonstrating the universal and academic significance of grassroots theology (Bediako, *Jesus in Africa* 18).

For further research, the church is a communal expression of our faith which is personal. If the symbols are significant in that space, there is the need to explore how people experience, internalize and express them in their personal lives. There is also the need to theorize this; to predict how these symbols assume a different meaning and how these meanings play out in people’s lives. Further research may also explore how Adinkra symbolism impacts, experiences outside of the church, in terms of the social, political and economic spheres of life.

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