

“Problem-Posing Education” Teaching, Learning, Connecting Lesson: Adinkra Symbols

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Disciplines: Arts, Cultural History, Sociology, Linguistics

Class level: Basic 7-9

Keywords: Ideograph, pictograph, cultural history, tradition, funerals, grief, celebration cloth

Narrative Description of the Module: *Adinkra* symbols are one of the traditional textile patterns of the Ghanaian culture. These symbols developed in the Ashanti kingdom of present-day Ghana during the 17th century. Each symbol proclaims a desired human value. Like a bulletin board or billboard that conveys messages to all passersby, *adinkra* symbols use pictures to record, guide, direct and order society interactions.

Educational Objectives:

1. Students will explore how cultural symbols bind their community together in a common heritage.
2. Students will develop a sense of “critical consciousness” through engaging in active learning strategies through which they discover the relevance of their education to their lives.
3. Students will learn to ask questions that expand their understanding of the world.

Student Outcomes: Students will be able to:

1. Assess the significance of symbols in promoting national identity.
2. Use digital media efficiently and ethically to analyze a problem, to discover pertinent information, and to supply logical, informed decisions.
 - NaCCA Ghana, Common Core Social Science Standards, Basic 7-9
 - Strand 3: Sense of Purpose; Substrand 3: Cultural and National Identity: B9/JHS3.3.3.1.1. Assess the significance of symbols, music and ceremonies in promoting national identity.
 - Core Competencies: Critical Thinking and Problem Solving (CP), Communication and Collaboration (CC), Digital Literacy (DL)

Materials List: Internet access, paper, pencil, yam or potato pieces to carve, paint for printing.

Main theme: *Adinkra* symbols record and reveal the values of Ghanaian culture.

Audiovisuals to implement, e.g. electronic links:



Adinkra Symbols

Source: Nomad Creativity Consultancy (Fair Use)



Adinkra "Celebration" Cloth

Source: FAMSF Explore the Art—Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Classroom Introduction/Student Reading: From the 17th century to the turn of the 19th century, the Ashanti people dominated much of the area that is now Ghana. One of the most sacred symbols of the Ashanti kingdom is the Golden Stool. The Golden Stool is similar to a European king's throne as a seat of power. The Ashanti believe that the Golden Stool fell from the sky into the lap of the Osei Kofi Tutu I, the first king of the Asante Confederacy in the 17th century. The Ashanti fetish priest blessed the stool and declared that "the people must preserve and respect [the stool]...and the Asante people would disappear from history if ever the Golden Stool were taken away from them" (Rain Gods 2011).

The Ashanti learned that the king of the Gyaman, Nana Kofi Adinkra, had created a copy of their sacred symbol, the Golden Stool. To retaliate, the Ashanti fought Nana Adinkra's army in the west, today's Côte



The Golden Stool covered in pure gold and turned on its side on a chair seat. Note the golden statues and bells in front of the stool.
Source: Rain Queens of Africa 2011

D'Ivoire, defeated the Gyaman, and captured Nana Adinkra and his counterfeit stool. To express his sorrow at this defeat, Nana Adinkra created *adinkra* or "goodbye" cloth by stamping special symbols on woven cloth. He wore this cloth to his execution in Kumasi. The Ashanti appropriated his "*adinkra*" cloth as a war trophy and added their own symbols.

To make *adinkra* cloth, artists carved symbols into pieces of calabash gourd and attached each to a handle

to make a stamper. They mixed an ink from iron slag and tree bark, dipped the stamper into the ink, and printed on cloth, often in non-symmetrical patterns.

At first, only royals and religious leaders could wear the resulting cloth and, then, only on special occasions (Alabi n.d.). Later, *adinkra* cloth gained use for funeral clothes.

Three calabash stampers: Ram's Horn (Humility, Strength), Adinkrahene (Greatness, Leadership), Ya Mawu (God's Supremacy)



Over the centuries, the Ewe in the Volta Region borrowed *adinkra* symbols from the Ashanti and created hundreds of their own. Each symbol represents “intangible fables, proverbs, folktales, songs and phrases” (Dancy 2009). These symbols and other arts and cultural products, such as kente cloth designs, encode a rich communicative symbol system. Therefore, labeling Ghanaian culture as an “oral” tradition underestimates the clear evidence of advanced cultural development.



Making calabash symbols



Printing with foam stamper



Old outside printing scene

VOCABULARY

Ashanti	a major cultural group in western Ghana
Asante	the traditional area ruled by the Ashanti
Akan	the cultural group and its confederacy
Twi	the language of the Ashanti
Nana	King, in Twi
Kofi	Friday born man, in Twi
Adinkra	“Goodbye” in Twi, cultural symbols that teach a life lesson, or cultural expectation
Stool	a throne or seat of power for Ghanaian ethnic groups
Fetish priest	A traditional religious leader who mediates between ancestral spirits and the living, predicts the future, and provides traditional medicinal cures.

Writing, field work, experiential activities:

1. One of the first steps of critical thinking is nurturing a sense of wonder. Students could practice “wondering,” e.g. “I wonder how other symbol systems, such as Morse code or cuneiform, developed.” OR “I wonder what Ghanaian drumbeats communicate.”
1. Students could investigate the meanings of several *adinkra* symbols and choose one that represents them, i.e. their character and aspirations. They could explain their



choice to the class, learn to draw it, cut it out in foam, yam, or potato as a stamper, and use ink or paint to print and create personal stationary or a book cover.

2. Students could research, design and create a unique *adinkra* symbol. They could write a description of its meaning or use the symbol in an original story.
3. West Africans carried their culture with them when they were captured and transported as slaves to the Western hemisphere. In Charleston, South Carolina, USA, Philip Simmons, the great metalworker artisan and blacksmith, used *adinkra* symbols in his work (*See the gate above*). Students could survey their community and list all the places they see *adinkra* symbols, e.g. on a molded plastic chair. They could find other evidence of the dispersion of *adinkra* symbols in world art or compare them to similar symbols in other cultures. Source: https://charlestonmag.com/features/simmons_ironwork
4. Students could discuss and list the human attitudes and behaviors that are missing from *adinkra* symbols. Why do people reject these? What attitudes and behaviors lead to healthy communities?
5. King Adinkra created this cloth to say “Goodbye.” In what ways could you express sadness, mourning, and grief?
6. Students could study and discuss the concept of ideographic writing systems that represent concepts as opposed to phonetic and alphabetic systems, in which letters represent sounds of speech or “true scripts.” Discuss how the theoretical designations appear to prefer one system over another.
7. Students could study Egyptian hieroglyphics, modern traffic signs, Chinese and Japanese ideograms, Sumerian cuneiform, and other non-phonetic systems.
8. Students could design a brand-new alphabetic system or ideographic system for the class.
9. Students could interview family members as to generational knowledge of symbols of family importance and document the stories and family lore related to the symbols.
10. Today, many Ghanaians wear both hand-printed and factory-printed “celebration” *adinkra* cloth for funeral services. The color of celebration cloth is either black and white or black and shades of red. Students could study Ghanaian funeral traditions, particularly the use of cloth to unite and comfort the family group.

Evaluation of student projects: In order to measure the efficacy of this project:

1. Teachers will discuss expectations with students to set up for success at the outset.
2. Students will engage in:
 - a. Self-assessment: In a paragraph, students could explain how their engagement in studying *adinkra* allowed them to expand their knowledge both of Ghanaian culture and that of other communities.
 - b. Peer Review: Students may develop a peer-review process or rubric by which to evaluate each other’s projects. Consider the two options in the Edutopia article, “I like that...” and “Rose/Thorn/Bud” (Hernandez 2016).

Resources:

AAN. N.d. *Adinkra* symbols. An Afroetic Narrative: A Third Eye Perspective From the Worldwide Underground. <https://afroetic.wordpress.com/adinkra-symbols>

African Defense Forum, Staff. 2022. Nana Yaa and the War of the Golden Stool. 15 August. <https://adf-magazine.com/2022/08/nana-yaa-asantewaa-and-the-war-of-the-golden-stool/>

Alabi, Jasmine. N.d. List of Adinkra symbols and Their Meanings in Ghana. Yen News. <https://yen.com.gh/109014-list-adinkra-symbols-meaning-ghana.html#109014>

Anonymous. N.d. The History of Visual Communication: Ideograms. <https://www.historyofvisualcommunication.com/02-ideograms>
(Older students might appreciate <https://www.historyofvisualcommunication.com/10-the-computer>. It's sophisticated and relevant!)

Babbitt, Wm., Lachney, M., Bulley, E., and R. Eglash. 2015. Adinkra Mathematics: A study of Ethnocomputing in Ghana, *Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research*, 5(2), 110-135. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17583/remie.2015.1399>

Here's a very cool resource. Who wants to try it? This article touts a Ghanaian study of ethnomathematics with JHS students.

BBC World Service. N.d. The Story of Africa: West African Kingdoms. www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features/storyofafrica/4chapter1.shtml

CIRB. 2004. Ghana: The Distinction Between a Fetish Priest and a Chief/Chieftain, Especially Regarding What is More Privileged in the Community; Likelihood of Physical Punishment or Reprisal for Refusing to Accept the Position of Fetish Priest. Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board, July 20. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/41501c097.html>

Danzy, Jasmine. 2009. *Adinkra* Symbols: An Ideographic Writing System. *Master's Thesis*, Stony Brook University. <https://dspace.sunyconnect.suny.edu/bitstream/handle/1951/48176/000000570.sbu.pdf>

Hernandez, Michael. 2016. *Evaluation Within Project-Based Learning*. Edutopia website, 6 June. <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/evaluating-pbl-michael-hernandez>

Owusu, Heike. 2000. *Symbols of Africa*. Sterling Publishing.

Rain Queens of Africa Staff. 2011. The Queen Mother and the Golden Stool of Ashanti. Rain Queens of Africa, March 10. <http://RainqueensofAfrica.com/2011/03/the-queen-mother-and-the-golden-stool-of-ashanti/>

Student feedback for the lesson plan:

1. The project helped me to...
2. The directions were easy/hard to follow in these ways...
3. I need/needed guidance to...
4. Other strong resources I discovered that could add to this project are...