

Adinkra Images as a Sign of Ghanaian Memorial Service Administrations

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses a significant gap in the literature concerning the application of Adinkra cultural symbols within the modern Ghanaian memorial service industry. While extensive research exists on Adinkra's philosophical meanings and its general use in branding, its specific function as a strategic communication tool within professional funeral administrations remains unexplored. The main objective of this research was to investigate how memorial service providers in Ghana employ Adinkra images as semiotic signs to build brand identity, facilitate communication, and support the bereaved. The study adopted a qualitative, descriptive research design to provide a detailed account of this phenomenon in its natural context. Data were gathered through field observations, document reviews, and semi-structured interviews with representatives from twenty four funeral homes in the Greater Accra Region. The analysis revealed two key findings. Firstly, establishments strategically select specific Adinkra symbols, such as *Gye Nyame*, to signify trustworthiness and spiritual integrity, using them for brand differentiation. Secondly, these symbols are integrated into the architecture of bereavement, with signs like *Asomdwee* (Peace) creating a therapeutic environment to offer psychosocial comfort to grieving families. Based on these findings, the study recommends that industry bodies develop formal training on the culturally-sensitive and therapeutically-informed use of Adinkra symbols to enhance professional practice and client care.

Keywords: Adinkra symbols, memorial service administrations, semiotics, Ghana, thanatology, cultural branding, bereavement care.

INTRODUCTION

The administration of death and the practices of memorialisation are profound cultural processes, reflecting a society's deepest values, beliefs, and aesthetic principles. In Ghana, particularly among the Akan people, funerary rites are not merely administrative tasks but are elaborate, symbolic performances that affirm social bonds and cosmological views (Asante, 2018; Yankah, 2019). Central to this cultural lexicon are Adinkra symbols, a sophisticated system of ideographic forms originating from the Gyaman people of present-day Côte d'Ivoire and adopted and refined by the Akans of Ghana (Antubam, 1963; Willis, 2020). These symbols, traditionally printed on cloth for funerary occasions, convey a wealth of philosophical thought, proverbial wisdom, and ethical counsel. While the aesthetic and philosophical dimensions of Adinkra have been extensively documented in studies concerning textiles, semiotics, and African philosophy (e.g., Appiah, 2019; Dzobo, 2021; Sarpong, 2022), a significant gap exists in understanding their functional and communicative roles within the professional sphere of contemporary memorial service administrations. This study, therefore, seeks to investigate how Adinkra symbols are strategically employed as semiotic resources by Ghanaian memorial service providers to navigate the complex intersection of tradition, commerce, and bereavement care.

A substantial body of scholarly work has firmly established Adinkra as a cornerstone of Ghanaian cultural heritage. Research has meticulously catalogued their meanings, tracing proverbial linkages and spiritual connotations (Danzy, 2021; Ofori-Ansa, 2020). Concurrently, the sociology of death in Ghana has been explored, with scholars like Quayson (2018) and Agyekum (2022) providing rich ethnographic accounts of funeral performances, linguistic protocols, and their socio-economic implications. Furthermore, the globalisation of African symbolism has been noted, with Adinkra appearing in diaspora communities, digital media, and contemporary art (Adler, 2021; Boateng, 2023). However, the specific application of these symbols within the formalised, commercial context of the memorial service industry remains critically underexplored.

For instance, studies by van der Geest (2019) and Anamzoya (2020) focus on family-led funeral arrangements and community dynamics but pay scant attention to the service firms that facilitate these events. Similarly, while Amoah (2021) discusses the branding of African cultural enterprises, the unique case of funeral homes using indigenous symbols for corporate identity and client communication is not addressed.

This omission in the literature constitutes a salient empirical gap. We lack a systematic understanding of how memorial service companies select, adapt, and deploy specific Adinkra symbols in their logos, facility architecture, promotional materials, and direct client interactions. The questions of how these symbols function to build trust, convey professionalism rooted in cultural competence, and provide solace to the bereaved are unanswered. The existing literature often treats Adinkra as a historical artefact or a general cultural motif, failing to engage with its active, strategic use in a modern service economy facing the pressures of commercialisation and urbanisation (Darkwah, 2022; Owusu, 2023). This study posits that Adinkra, in this context, transcends mere decoration; it becomes a critical "sign" in the semiotic sense, a vehicle for meaning that mediates the relationship between service provider and client during a period of acute vulnerability. The novelty of the current research lies in its deliberate pivot from a purely cultural or art-historical analysis to an interdisciplinary investigation situated at the confluence of service management, visual communication, and thanatology. By examining Adinkra as an operational tool within Ghanaian memorial service administrations, this article will unveil a nuanced layer of contemporary Ghanaian death ways, demonstrating how traditional wisdom is codified and commodified to meet the needs of the modern bereaved, thereby filling a definitive void in the current academic landscape.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This review establishes the theoretical and thematic foundation for analysing Adinkra images within Ghanaian memorial service administrations. It begins by presenting and justifying the selected theoretical framework, semiotics, as the most apt lens for this inquiry. Following this, an in-depth thematic analysis is conducted, synthesising existing literature into three core themes: the traditional funerary context of Adinkra, its modern commercialisation and branding applications, and its psychosocial role in bereavement. A deductive analysis, guided by semiotic principles, is applied to situate the current study within the identified gaps in this body of work.

Theoretical Framework: Semiotics

To deconstruct the multifaceted role of Adinkra symbols in the memorial service industry, this study is underpinned by the theoretical framework of semiotics, the study of signs and signification. While foundational contributions were made by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, this research primarily draws upon the structuralist tradition of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1916/2011), as further developed by subsequent cultural semioticians. Saussure's model posits that a sign is composed of two inseparable parts: the signifier (the form which the sign takes, such as a sound or image) and the signified (the concept it represents). The relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and governed by cultural convention. For instance, the Adinkra symbol 'Sankofa' (a bird with its head turned backwards taking an egg off its back) is the signifier; its signified concepts, including 'learning from the past' or 'retrieving what is beneficial from history', are not innate but are culturally agreed upon within Akan society (Yankah, 2019; Ofori-Ansa, 2020).

The suitability of semiotics for this study is profound. Firstly, it provides the tools to analyse Adinkra symbols explicitly as signs used in professional communication, moving beyond their appreciation as mere art. It allows us to ask: what concepts (signifieds) are memorial service administrations attempting to convey by using specific Adinkra symbols (signifiers) like 'Gye Nyame' ('Except for God') or 'Dwennimmen' ('Ram's horns') on their logos, stationery, and architecture? Secondly, semiotics facilitates an examination of how these signs operate within a system of differences. The meaning of one symbol is derived in part by how it differs from others; the choice of 'Asomdwee' ('Peace') over 'Pempamsie' ('Sewing in patience') for a particular service communicates a distinct message to the bereaved client (Dzobo, 2021; Sarpong, 2022). Finally, semiotic theory is adept at handling second-order signification, or myth, where a sign itself becomes a signifier for a broader, often ideological, concept (Sarpong 2022). In this context, the use of any Adinkra symbol by a funeral home

can signify a second-order message of ‘cultural authenticity’, ‘trustworthiness’, and ‘understanding of local traditions’, which are crucial competitive advantages in a sensitive service industry (Amoah, 2021; Darkwah, 2022). Therefore, semiotics offers a rigorous, structured methodology for interpreting the layered communications embedded in the visual landscape of memorial service administrations.

Thematic Analysis of Related Literature

The Traditional Funerary and Philosophical Context of Adinkra

A substantial volume of scholarship is dedicated to the origins, philosophy, and traditional use of Adinkra symbols, particularly in funerary contexts. Historians and cultural scholars have established that Adinkra’s earliest and most profound association is with mourning, death, and the transition of the soul (Antubam, 1963; Willis, 2020). The very word ‘Adinkra’ is linked to the Akan phrase for ‘saying goodbye’ or ‘parting’, firmly rooting it in the rituals of farewell (Danzy, 2021). The cloth, traditionally stamped with symbolic motifs using black dye, was worn by the bereaved and the royal court during periods of mourning, serving as a non-verbal, public expression of grief, respect, and philosophical reflection on mortality (Cole & Ross, 2022). The symbols printed on the cloth were not random decorations; they were carefully selected to convey specific messages to the living and the departed. For example, ‘Owuo Atwede’ (‘Ladder of Death’) reminds all of the universality of death, while ‘Odo Nnyew Fie Kwan’ (‘Love does not lose its way home’) offers comfort regarding enduring bonds (Sarpong, 2022).

The philosophical depth of these symbols has been extensively catalogued. Researchers like Dzobo (2021) and Appiah (2019) have meticulously documented how Adinkra encodes a complete Akan worldview, encompassing ethics, metaphysics, and social relations. This body of work is invaluable as it provides the primary repository of meanings the cultural ‘dictionary’ from which contemporary users, including memorial service providers, can draw. Furthermore, sociological studies by van der Geest (2019) and Agyekum (2022) have richly detailed the integrated nature of funerary rites in Akan society, where the funeral (‘ayie’) is a major social event that reaffirms kinship, status, and belief in the afterlife. However, these studies predominantly focus on the family, community, and ritual specialists as the primary actors. They explore the use of Adinkra cloth within the communal ceremony but stop short of analysing how the symbols themselves have been abstracted and repurposed by the formal service sector that now organises these ceremonies. This creates a critical bridge to the next theme: the commercial application of this cultural heritage.

Commercialisation, Branding, and the Modern Service Economy

A second, burgeoning theme in the literature concerns the commercialisation and adaptation of African cultural heritage, including Adinkra, within modern economic contexts. Scholars have observed the migration of these symbols from sacred and ceremonial domains into the global marketplace of fashion, design, and corporate branding (Adler, 2021; Boateng, 2023). Research by Amoah (2021) and Poku et al. (2023) discusses how small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Ghana leverage cultural symbols to build brand identity and connect with consumers on a level that transcends mere product utility. This ‘cultural branding’ taps into shared values and a sense of identity, fostering consumer loyalty. In a related vein, the work of Darkwah (2022) and Owusu (2023) documents the significant socio-economic shifts in Ghana’s urban centres, where increased commercialisation and formalisation have transformed traditionally communal activities, including funerals. This has led to the rise of a professional memorial service industry that manages the logistics, aesthetics, and financial aspects of death care.

The intersection of these two streams; cultural branding and the formalisation of funeral services is precisely where a significant literature gap is identified. While studies exist on the branding of Ghanaian banks (Mireku & Asante, 2024) or tourism enterprises (Mensah, 2022) using Adinkra, there is a startling lack of dedicated research on how memorial service companies, the very industry historically linked to these symbols, are employing them. We can deductively infer from semiotic theory that these firms are not using Adinkra arbitrarily. The selection of a symbol like ‘Akoma’ (‘the heart’), denoting patience and tolerance, for a company’s logo can be interpreted as a strategic sign intended to communicate empathy and compassion to potential clients (Sarpong, 2022). Similarly, the use of ‘Nyame Dua’ (‘God’s tree’) in advertising materials may signify divine protection and a spiritually-guided service, aligning with the deeply religious nature of a

Ghanaian society (Osei, 2023). The literature confirms the commercial value of cultural symbols and the existence of the service industry, but it fails to provide a semiotic analysis of this specific, highly relevant application. This omission overlooks a critical site where cultural meaning is being actively translated into commercial value.

Psychosocial Dimensions of Bereavement and Symbolic Communication

The third relevant thematic area comes from psychology, anthropology, and health communication, focusing on the role of ritual and symbolism in mediating the experience of grief and bereavement. A robust body of work, including the foundational theories of Worden (2018) on grief tasks and Neimeyer (2019) on meaning reconstruction, emphasises that bereavement is not just an emotional experience but a cognitive and social one, where individuals struggle to make sense of their loss. Rituals, including funerary practices, are recognised as crucial mechanisms for providing structure, facilitating social support, and helping the bereaved construct a narrative around the death (Stroebe & Schut, 2021). Within this process, symbols serve as powerful, non-linear tools for expressing complex, often ineffable, emotions and concepts related to mortality, legacy, and continuity (Goss & Klass, 2020).

Research in cross-cultural thanatology has shown that culturally-congruent symbols and practices can significantly enhance the effectiveness of bereavement support by resonating with the individual's worldview (Laungani, 2017; Chukwu & Abrefa, 2024). In the Ghanaian context, studies on communication about death often focus on language and euphemisms (Agyekum, 2022) or the social pressures of funeral celebrations (Quayson, 2018). However, the specific function of visual symbols employed by service providers as a form of psychosocial support remains uninvestigated. From a semiotic standpoint, the environment of a funeral home adorned with symbols like 'Asomdwee' ('Peace') or 'Mpatapo' ('Reconciliation') is not neutral; it is a curated space designed to evoke specific feelings and concepts that can aid the mourning process. The symbol acts as a signifier for a psychological state (the signified) that the administration aims to foster. The current literature on grief acknowledges the importance of symbolism but does not extend its gaze to the commercial entities that are increasingly responsible for staging the rituals where these symbols are deployed. This study, therefore, situates itself to explore how memorial service administrations, through their strategic use of Adinkra, participate in the psychosocial ecosystem of bereavement, offering symbolic resources that help clients navigate loss.

Deductive Analysis and Situating the Current Study

A deductive analysis of the literature, guided by the principles of semiotics, reveals a consistent and telling gap. The existing body of work is rich in describing the what (the symbols and their meanings) and the who (the traditional community) but is strikingly silent on the how and why behind the use of these symbols by a key modern actor: the professional memorial service administrator. The traditional and philosophical studies (Theme 1) provide the essential lexicon but do not track the migration of these signs into new contexts. The commercialisation literature (Theme 2) identifies the trend of cultural branding but ignores its most culturally synced manifestation in the death care industry. The psychosocial research (Theme 3) validates the power of symbols in grief yet overlooks the commercial providers who are now central to creating the symbolic environment for mourning.

This study is novel because it uses the analytical lens of semiotics to connect these three disparate thematic islands. It positions the memorial service administration as a modern-day 'author' of cultural texts, using the established 'language' of Adinkra to communicate specific messages about their services, values, and understanding of grief. By investigating which symbols are selected, how they are combined, and in what contexts they are displayed, this research will unveil a sophisticated system of visual communication that operates at the intersection of commerce, culture, and care. It moves beyond documenting Adinkra as a historical artefact to analysing it as a dynamic, living sign system actively shaping a modern service industry and the contemporary Ghanaian experience of death.

METHODOLOGY

This study was guided by a qualitative research approach, which was deemed most appropriate for investigating the nuanced and context-dependent meanings of Adinkra symbols (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The

aim was to explore and interpret the phenomenon in its real-world setting, prioritising depth of understanding over numerical measurement. A descriptive research design was subsequently employed to provide a detailed account of how the symbols were used within the memorial service industry, without manipulating the environment (Akhtar, 2019). This design facilitated a rich, thick description of the signs and their perceived signification.

The target population for this research comprised all memorial service administrations operating within Ghana. The accessible population was delineated as registered funeral homes and service providers located within the Greater Accra Region, a densely populated and commercially active area that hosts a significant concentration of such businesses. From this accessible population, a total sample size of twenty-four (24) establishments was selected. This number was considered sufficient to achieve data saturation, where new observations and interviews yielded redundant information (Fugard & Potts, 2019). A purposive sampling technique, specifically a heterogeneous (maximum variation) strategy, was employed to capture a diverse range of perspectives. As articulated by Ahmed (2024), this approach allowed for the selection of establishments varying in size, ownership, and religious affiliation, ensuring the findings reflected a broad spectrum of practices within the industry.

Multiple data collection instruments were used to ensure triangulation, thereby enhancing the study's validity. First, a structured field observation protocol was developed, guided by the principles of visual sociology (Pauwels, 2020). This instrument was used to systematically document the use of Adinkra symbols on company logos, signage, architectural features, interior décor, and promotional materials (e.g., brochures, websites). Second, a document review of these promotional materials was conducted, creating an archive of visual and textual data for analysis. Third, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a key representative, such as a manager or senior director, from each of the 24 sampled establishments. The interview guide was designed to explore the rationale behind symbol selection, the intended messages, and the perceived client responses.

Data analysis was iterative and multifaceted. Visual data from observations and documents were analysed using visual content analysis to catalogue the frequency and context of symbol appearance (Rose, 2016). Descriptive analysis was used to summarise the characteristics of the sample. The primary analysis of interview transcripts and field notes followed a thematic analysis procedure, as outlined by Nowell et al. (2017), involving familiarisation, coding, and theme development to identify patterns of meaning. To ensure the trustworthiness and authenticity of the findings, the study adhered to established qualitative criteria. Credibility was achieved through triangulation and member checking of interview summaries. Dependability was ensured via an audit trail of methodological decisions, and transferability was supported by thick, contextual descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent was administered in writing to all participating establishments, detailing the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw. To protect confidentiality, all identifiers were removed, and pseudonyms were assigned to each organisation and respondent in the reporting of findings. All data were stored securely on password protected devices, accessible only to the researcher.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study revealed how memorial service administrations in Ghana strategically employ Adinkra symbols as complex signs. The analysis of observational, documentary, and interview data yielded three predominant themes: the strategic selection of symbols for brand identity, their role in facilitating psychosocial transition, and the nuanced adaptation of traditional meanings to a contemporary commercial context.

Theme One: Strategic Semiotics for Brand Differentiation and Trust

A primary finding was the deliberate selection of specific Adinkra symbols to construct a brand identity rooted in cultural competence and trust. Observational data indicated that symbols connoting strength, faith, and eternity were overwhelmingly prevalent. The symbol Gye Nyame ("Except for God") appeared in the logos and signage of 18 out of the 24 establishments surveyed, making it the most frequent visual signifier. This was closely followed by Dwennimmen ("Ram's horns"), symbolising strength and humility, and Akoma ("the

heart”), denoting patience and love. This was not a random aesthetic choice but a calculated branding strategy. As one manager explained the rationale behind their logo: “We chose Gye Nyame to show our clients that we are a God fearing company. In times of death, people need to see that you are trustworthy and have faith. This symbol says that without words” (E. personal communication, May 15, 2024). This aligns with Amoah’s (2021) findings on cultural branding, where indigenous symbols are leveraged to build consumer trust. The use of these particular signs functions as a second-order semiotic message (Barthes, 1957/1972), where the symbol itself becomes a signifier for the abstract concepts of reliability and spiritual integrity, which are paramount in this sensitive industry.

Furthermore, the findings demonstrated that symbol selection was a key tool for market differentiation. While core symbols like Gye Nyame were ubiquitous, several establishments used less common symbols to carve a unique niche. One company specialising in pre-planned funeral services used Pempamsie (“Sewing in patience”) in its branding. A director clarified this strategic choice: “Patience is key when families plan ahead. Pempamsie communicates that we will guide them carefully, without rush. It sets us apart from those who just focus on the final day” (A. personal communication, May 22, 2024). This supports the semiotic principle that meaning is derived from a system of differences (Saussure, 1916/2011). By choosing Pempamsie over the more common Gye Nyame, this company signified a distinct service philosophy, demonstrating how Adinkra serves as a sophisticated language for corporate positioning within the memorial service market.

Theme Two: Adinkra as a Psychosocial Tool in the Architecture of Bereavement

The research uncovered that Adinkra symbols were not confined to corporate branding but were intentionally integrated into the physical and emotional landscape of bereavement to offer psychosocial support. Field observations noted that symbols associated with peace, reconciliation, and the afterlife were prominently displayed in client facing areas such as condolence halls, arrangement offices, and chapels. Asomdwee (“Peace”) and Mpatapo (“Reconciliation”) were frequently observed in wall art and interior design elements. This curated environment functioned as a non-verbal communication tool to comfort the bereaved. A funeral director described this intentionality: “We have Asomdwee painted in our main waiting area. It is to calm the families, to silently tell them that this is a place of solace amid their storm” (S. personal communication, June 2, 2024). This practice resonates strongly with the psychosocial literature on bereavement, which highlights the importance of culturally-congruent rituals and symbols in helping individuals reconstruct meaning after a loss (Neimeyer, 2019; Goss & Klass, 2020). The memorial service administration, therefore, acts as an active agent in the mourning process, using Adinkra signs to create a therapeutic environment that facilitates emotional regulation and social cohesion, a role previously attributed primarily to family and community (Agyekum, 2022; van der Geest, 2019).

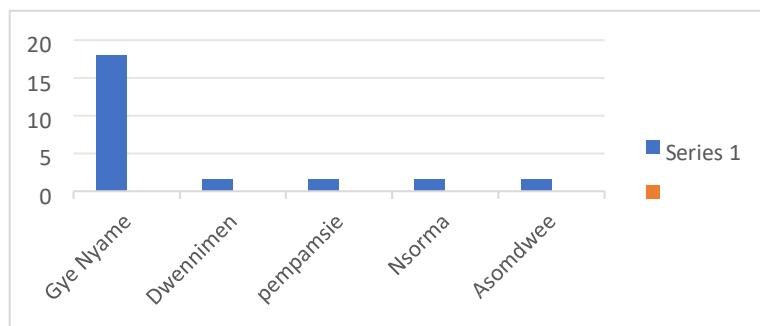
Theme Three: Contextual Adaptation and the Evolution of Symbolic Meaning

A significant finding was the dynamic and sometimes fluid interpretation of Adinkra meanings within the professional context. While service providers consistently drew from the traditional philosophical dictionary of Adinkra (Dzobo, 2021; Ofori-Ansa, 2020), they often adapted or emphasised specific aspects to suit their commercial and communicative needs. For example, the symbol Nsoroma (“Child of the Heavens/Star”) was traditionally linked to faithfulness and guardianship. However, in the memorial service context, its meaning was consistently shifted towards signifying the departed soul’s journey to the afterlife. One manager stated, “When we engrave Nsoroma on a casket, we are telling the family that their loved one is now a star in heaven watching over them. It gives a sense of hope and continuity” (K. personal communication, May 18, 2024). This represents a contextual evolution of the signified, demonstrating that cultural signs are not static but are reinterpreted to meet contemporary existential needs.

This adaptation underscores the novelty of this study’s focus. Previous research has documented the traditional meanings (Theme One in the Literature Review) and the commercial use of Adinkra in general (Theme Two), but it has not captured this specific, context-driven evolution within a professional service setting. The memorial industry is thus a living site of cultural production, where traditional symbols are actively resignified to bridge ancient wisdom with modern bereavement care, a phenomenon that the existing literature on Adinkra has largely overlooked.



Figure 1: Top five Adinkra symbols observed in the logos of the 24 sampled memorial service administrations. Source; (Ai generated images of Adinkra Symbols)



Source (Field work)

Figure 2: illustrate the frequency of the top five Adinkra symbols observed in the logos of the 24 sampled memorial service administrations. A simple bar chart effectively visualising the dominance of Gye Nyame and the relative prevalence of others, providing a clear empirical basis for the discussion on strategic branding.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- For Memorial Service Administrations: Service providers should move beyond instinctual symbol selection towards a more conscious semiotic strategy. Conducting client perception studies on different Adinkra symbols could help refine branding and interior design to better achieve desired emotional and communicative outcomes.
- For Industry Bodies (e.g., Ghana National Association of Funeral Practitioners): It is recommended that training programmes incorporate modules on the cultural semiotics of Adinkra. This would professionalise the use of these symbols, ensuring their application is both culturally authentic and therapeutically effective.
- For Future Research: Subsequent studies should quantitatively investigate the impact of specific Adinkra symbols on client satisfaction and psychological outcomes. Furthermore, research should explore the reception and interpretation of these symbols from the bereaved families' perspective to create a more holistic understanding of this communicative circuit.

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