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Original Article

CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN ADINKRA CLOTH PRODUCTION: DESIGN, PRINTING TECHNIQUE, BASE FABRIC AND PRINTING PASTE (DYE)

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Abstract
Developing and exploring new ideas or modus operandi for the production of Ghanaian textiles is paramount in this age and time. There is a growing trend towards industrialising Adinkra cloth production to meet market demand. This study discusses contemporary trends of design, printing technique, base fabric and printing paste in Adinkra Cloth Production. It employs a developmental study of descriptive research to consider the existing status and interrelationships of phenomena and changes that has taken place since the creation of the tradition and art of Adinkra cloth production. The study establishes the dichotomy between indigenous and technology-driven production of Adinkra cloth in the 21st century. It brings to the fore the attraction of tourism potentials to the various Adinkra production communities in Ghana. Also, the study provides the understanding of contemporary production of Adinkra and recommends newer approaches for its production.

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1. Introduction
Adinkra are visual symbols, which represent popular proverbs ormaxims, record historical events, express particular attitudes or behaviour related to depicted figures or concepts uniquely related to abstract shapes. Adinkra cloth is one of the very few examples of printed or stamped traditional cloth in Africa (Boakye 2007). Clarke (2002) reiterates that Adinkra cloth is the only African cloth printing tradition of pre-colonial origin. Asante people of Ghana in West Africa are known for the production of Adinkra cloth which involves hand printing of the symbols into patterns (Adinkra symbols) that convey the thoughts and feelings of the person wearing them (Dressler2007). The history of Adinkra cloth is quite ambiguous. There are several explanations of its origin and past. It is believed that King Adinkra wore clothes with these designs when Nana Osei Bonsu killed him for copying the Asante’s Golden Stool. The motifs were taken and later used by the Asante. In contrast, Rattray (1988) speculates that Adinkra symbols were borrowed and the Asante invented new meanings that suited them. He also added that the symbols were possibly amulet signs introduced by the Mohammedans from the north of Ghana. But according to a popular account of the origin of Adinkra cloth, King Adinkra, the chief of Gyamaniv Ivory Coast wore special clothes with patterns on them made up of symbols with special meanings. It is noted that King Adinkra insulted the King of the Asante by copying the design of his sacred golden stool. In the early 1800s, King Adinkra was slain for this intransigence against the Asante King. Boakye (2007) asserts that the introduction of the cloth happened around the time of this event and came to be called Adinkra after King Adinkra was defeated. Clarke (2002) corroborates this account by putting the date of the introduction of the cloth circa 1818, following the capture of a rival monarch by the name of Adinkra.

African oral tradition (Adinkra Symbols 2011) dates the arrival of Adinkra among the Akan to the end of the Asante-Gyaman War in 1818. However, the Englishman Thomas Edward Bowdich collected a piece of Adinkra cloth in 1817 (Figure 1), which demonstrates that Adinkra art existed before the traditional starting date. Bowdich obtained this Adinkra cloth in Kumasi. The cloth features fifteen stamped symbols, including “nsroma” (stars),...
The next oldest piece of Adinkra cloth (Figure 2) was sent in 1825 from the Elmina Castle to the Royal Cabinet of Curiosities in The Hague, in response to an assignment from Major F. Last, who was appointed temporary Commander of Dutch possessions along the Guinea Coast. He probably had the cloth commissioned for King William I, which would explain why the Dutch coat of arms is in the centre. It is now on display in the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden (Adinkra Symbols 2011). This introduced the design, concept and the characteristics of the cloth in its original state.

The centre of production is the village of Ntonso, where the cloth has been made for a long time. Ntonso is 18 kilometres (12 miles) north of Kumasi on the Asante Mampong Road. From the village of Ntonso, the practice of making Adinkra cloth spread to Kona and other Asante villages but has never been in these places as much as in Ntonso. The symbolism and uses of Adinkra cloths have changed over time but much of the tradition remains the same. Over the years, the ingredients and recipe in making the dye for dyeing the Adinkra cloth have remained untouched. Boakye (2007) emphasises that, historically over 90% of Ntonso’s population was in some way involved in the production of Adinkra cloth. In recent years, the number of cohorts involved in the production of Adinkra cloth has decreased. This is attributed to the growing use of contemporary methods or technology in the production of Adinkra cloths which include screen printing, use of synthetic dyes, among others. In effect, it has optimised the production processes, cutting down on both the human and material resource, especially in the face of concerns about the depletion of our forest vegetation up north where the raw material for making dye, comes from. Earlier production processes culminated in some kind of synergy between the activities of men and women of Ntonso. Women are very much involved in the collection, preparation and transport of the bark of the tree used to prepare the "badie" dye and subsequently, the Adinkra "aduro" (paste). Again, the women are responsible for the preparatory processes preceding the extraction of the dye. These include breaking the bark into pieces, wetting it over a number of days to soften it for pounding, the actual pounding process to aid the dye extraction, steeping it in metal drums, and final boiling and sieving to arrive at a dye solution that will be boiled over a number of days until it thickens to a smooth, black paste for stamping. The carving of the symbols from gourds and the actual printing activity and subsequent selling is the main preserve of men of the community. They also prepare and sell the dye for stamping to the printers.

The word ‘adinkra’ means goodbye, and originally the cloth was worn only by royalty and spiritual leaders for mourning during funeral services and important sacred ceremonies. Now, anyone can wear it for any occasion. These ancient symbols are handmade and convey messages of gallantry, unity, hope, and the greatness of the Supreme Being. In its totality, Adinkra symbolism is a visual representation of social thought relating to the history, philosophy and religious beliefs of the Akan peoples of Ghana.

2. Methodology

In this study, descriptive research was used to obtain information concerning the current status of the phenomena, describing "what exists" with respect to variables or conditions in a situation (Key 1997). Under the descriptive research, a developmental study was employed to determine changes in the development and production of Adinkra cloths over time. This considered the comparison of design, printing technique, base fabric and printing paste between the old and contemporary methods in the production of Adinkra cloths. For instance, the design and technique of printing Adinkra in time past was analytically juxtaposed to trending methods of producing Adinkra cloths. Developmental study was also used to describe the status quo which investigates the relationship between ancient and current approaches of producing Adinkra to predict future development.

The Ntonsu production communities were visited to ascertain and describe existing status of Adinkra cloth production. Interview and observation instruments were used to obtain data from the field. The ancient methods of production were in part sourced from literature and through interview with some chief Adinkra cloth producers. Interview was also used to establish and understand the current methodology of Adinkra cloth production, especially in the involvement of modern technology. Observation tool was practiced to observe the phenomenon...
that characterised the production of Adinkra cloths, from weaving of the cloth through to the stamping or printing of the Adinkra symbols. This was achieved through contact with some chief Adinkra producers at Ntonsu, sampled for the study. The results are discussed in a comparative manner that is, comparing changes in the production of Adinkra cloths in past to the present.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Design

Inspiration for Adinkra cloth design is invariably circumscribed to Adinkra symbols, with the interplay of the elements of design such as lines. In Adinkra cloths, symbols are usually composed or distributed with rectilinear grids dividing the symbols into segments (Figure 1 & 2). Adinkra symbols as motifs for Adinkra cloths, express various themes that relate to the history, beliefs and philosophy of the people of Asante. These mostly have rich proverbial meanings since proverbs play an important role in the Asante culture. Adinkra symbols continue to change as new influences impact on Ghanaian culture as some of the symbols now record specific technological developments such as using embroidery techniques (Figure 3) to register the symbols in fabric in unique manner. With this, there is a slight deviation of the registered symbols from the indigenous symbols, thereby adding aesthetic effects the cloth. Basically, Adinkra cloth design is inextricable from its symbols because the symbols are used to describe or identify the cloth.

The antique Adinkra cloths (Figure 1 and 2) describe the use of the principles and elements of design in an art piece. In recent years, the use of block stamp and screen print has introduced a newer approach to Adinkra cloth design, especially in the area of motif arrangement. This has limited the use of the aforementioned rectilinear grid design in most recent Adinkra cloths. With the newer approach, blocks of Adinkra symbols and other shapes are arranged in a counter-change manner (Figure 4) and also, very narrow kente strips or embroidery design known as ‘Niti mu’ or ‘Nwomu’ (Figure 5), are used in between the blocks of the Adinkra symbols, to enhance its aesthetic value. Nwomu is a needling technique with brightly coloured rayon yarn which are arranged longitudinally, one lying next to the other to form bands of colour over a narrow width extending along the length of the cloth. Lately, the traditional Adinkra cloth has been simulated with roller-printed machine to produce Adinkra cloth designs with variance and in assorted colours.
involves the use of contemporary technology in factory production settings. Today, they have taken on a more general significance as an important and unique form of African textile artistry. Adinkra cloth design has seen a major development in the use of brightly rayon threads in creating huge Adinkra symbols often in combination with other unique motifs in embroidery technique often on imported satin background or on narrow strip woven fabrics.

3.2 The Printing Stamps and Technique
The native Adinkra cloth involves the printing of Adinkra symbols and other designs with a black dye (Adinkra duro) using stamps carved from calabash pieces (Figure 6). Currently, the printing of Adinkra cloth has seen the use of screen printing technique together with acrylic based synthetic printing pastes instead of calabash stamps with Adinkra duro. This technique, obviously a foreign influence employs the use of work benches raised well above the ground to enable a person of average height work comfortably while standing (Figure 7). The screens are developed outside of the town by individuals engaged in screen printing of t-shirts. A flat piece of wood is used as squeegee to draw the acrylic paste across the design area thus transferring the design onto the cloth. This development has greatly impacted on the production of Adinkra cloths, reducing the production time and augmenting the accuracy of design registration. Although comb printing is widely used in the printing of Adinkra cloths, the introduction of screen and block stamp has invariably minimised use of the comb to print rectilinear grids which first divide the base fabric into segments for easy and precise stamping of the Adinkra symbols. Designs can be easily registered without the help of comb-brushed rectilinear grids.

Adinkra cloths are also printed with mechanized industrial printing machine which simulates the indigenous design on a mill-woven fabric. With this, large yards of Adinkra cloth are produced within a very short time, contrary to the calabash or block stamp ones which take a longer time to produce. The cloths made with calabash stamps always show the uniqueness and originality as compared to the roller-printed ones. They also possess a high sense of cultural identity delineating the traditional and economic activities of the people. The painstaking printing nature of the cloth such as joining together of narrow woven-strips, combs to draw rectilinear grids (Figure 8) and the use of five to eight centimetres calabash stamps to print, gives it the rich heritage it possesses. Today, other types of printing are used with the same Adinkra motifs. Batik (resist method) is used with other methods to produce interesting Adinkra cloths. This is a new development in the area of Adinkra cloth printing.

Figure 6: Calabash stamps engraved with Adinkra symbols

Figure 7: Screen printing method

Figure 8: A printing process using the comb with the Badie paste (Adinkra aduro)
Courtesy - Adinkra Cloth (2011)

3.3 The Base Fabric
The use of pieced-together narrow strips of a fixed width undoubtedly influenced the compositional divisions of the cloth. Originally (O. Boukye, personal communication, April 9, 2012), the fabric for printing was hand-woven with hand-spun cotton thread, woven on a kente-style or a
horizontal treadle loom (Figure 9). The threads for weaving were made from locally grown cotton. This changed when the Europeans invaded the Gold Coast and introduced other fibre types through their garments and trade. The native weavers unravelled fibres such as wool, rayon, silk, among others to weave such fabrics. As a result, more fibres were introduced. This continued and paved the way for mill-woven fabrics to be used, and according to Adinkra Cloth (2011) by the end of the nineteenth century, imported industrially produced mill-woven cloth had largely replaced the hand-woven strip weaves. These fabrics come in different shades and sizes and are readily available on the local market for purchase. Nowadays, khaki and lace (Figure 10) fabrics are used as the base fabric to print Adinkra cloth.

Mill-woven fabrics for Adinkra printing are either dyed using synthetic dyes or with locally prepared dyes. Both the hand and mill-woven fabrics are decorated before printing; the embellishment is achieved mainly by connecting a narrow width of cloth with either the “Nwomu” technique explained earlier or by a narrow strip of coloured plain-woven cloth. The Adinkra motif is broken up into sections with bright strips of kente or embroidery.

3.4 Printing Paste and Dye
The native method and production of stamping and dyeing solutions for Adinkra cloth remains a challenge as the preparation and application of dye takes a long time. The trees for the production of the dye are fetched from the Northern Savannah of Ghana, where Badie and Kuntunkuni trees grow. From the bark and roots of these trees, solutions for stamping and dyeing are made. The botanical name of Kuntunkuni is Bobax Brevicuspe and Badie is Adansonia Digitata. The dye (Adinkra aduro) for printing is derived from the bark of the Badietree (Figure 11) and the roots of the Kuntunkuni tree (Figure 12) are used to dye the base fabric. The bark and roots are individually soaked in water for days to soften. They are then pounded to increase the softening process. The Badie bark is boiled until a pulpy substance of deep brown colour emerges. The Kuntunkuni roots are also boiled into a dark solution to dye the cloth black. The first time a cloth is put through the dyeing process, it turns light brown. This process is repeated a couple of times until a desired colour is achieved, or sometimes dyed ten times before the fabric turns black. The cloth is normally dyed in either red or black.
The Badie bark goes through a longer boiling process than the Kuntuntuni root before the printing paste is obtained. With the advent of synthetic dyes and print paste, Adinkra cloths are produced with ease and they are very fast to washing unlike the original Adinkra cloth which fades easily as a result of the natural ink used without any fixation. Also, synthetic pigments offer a gamut of colours when used to dye and print the cloth. The use of these pigments in the Adinkra cloth production is fast permeating the market and this was asserted by O. Boakye (personal communication, April 9, 2012), an Adinkra cloth designer at Ntonso, that because the natural print paste is not well refined, it easily blocks the mesh when being used for screen printing. Contemporarily, the designers have explored and introduced ostentatious cloths which do not demand dyeing or printing of the fabric. This new method does not need a larger working space as compared to the previous ones. The designers usually design on stripes of kente fabrics after which they sew the strips together to form a bigger cloth.

4. Conclusion
The study discussed contemporary trends of Adinkra cloth production and inter-relationships of phenomena and changes that had taken place since its inception. Adinkra, or relief-stamped fabric, is one of the textile arts of Ghana. In the past, Adinkra use was the exclusive right of royalty and spiritual leaders, and only used for important ceremonies such as funerals. Today, the Adinkra cloth is used by all, prompting newer methods of production. It has therefore become necessary that modern technology should be applied, which abounds. Although the traditional methods of production are very much in use, Adinkra cloth is more widely available today because of the introduction of mill-woven fabric, roll-printed designs and the use of synthetic dye. Roller printed mill-woven Adinkra is nearly as commercially successful as machine-made kente and appears in many of the same clothing forms, including hats, bags, scarves, and shawls. Their patronage being primarily colour fastness and availability in other colour ranges apart from black.

As noted by Boakye (2007) that over 90% of Ntonso’s population was in some way involved in the production of Adinkra cloth but now, the number of people involved in the production of Adinkra cloth has decreased. To help salvage this, consideration should be made to technologically explore the traditional methodology of dye production and to improve upon them rather than importing acrylic dyes.

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References

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