

ADINKRA - Cultural Symbols of the Asante people

Origin

The Adinkra symbols are believed to have their origin from Gyaman, a former kingdom in today's Côte D'Ivoire.

According to an Asante (Ghana) legend Adinkra was the name of a king of the Gyaman (Nana kofi Adinkra). Adinkra was defeated and captured in a battle by the Asantes for having copied the "Golden Stool", which represents for them absolute power and tribal cohesion. He was finally killed and his territory annexed to the kingdom of Asante.

The tradition had it that Nana Adinkra wore patterned cloth, which was interpreted as a way of expressing his sorrow on being taken to Kumasi the capital of Asante.

The Asante people around the 19th century then took to painting of traditional symbols of the Gyamans onto cloth, a tradition that was well practiced by the latter.

Adinkra also means 'goodbye' or 'farewell' in *Twi* the language of the Akan ethnic group of which Asante is a part. It has therefore been the tradition of the Akan especially the Asante to wear cloths decorated with Adinkra symbols on important occasions especially at funerals of family relations and friends. This is to signify their sorrow and to bid farewell to the deceased.

Today, the Adinkra cloth is not exclusively worn by the Asante people. It is worn by other ethnic groups in Ghana on a variety of social gatherings and festive occasions

Symbolism/Significance

The Adinkra symbols express various themes that relate to the history, beliefs and philosophy of the Asante. They mostly have rich proverbial meaning since proverbs play an important role in the Asante culture. The use of Proverbs is considered as a mark of wisdom.

Other Adinkra symbols depict historical events, human behaviour and attitudes, animal behaviour, plant life forms and shapes of objects.

In fact, the Adinkra symbols continue to change as new influences impact on Ghanaian culture as some of the symbols now record specific technological developments.

The Adinkra cloth



The Adinkra cloth is stamped or printed with Adinkra symbols. It is one of the few examples of traditional cloths in Africa.

The Adinkra cloth was hitherto the preserve of the royalty and spiritual leaders of the Asantes. They wore it during very important sacred ceremonies.

Today the Adinkra cloth is used for a wide range of social activities such as festivals, marriage, and naming ceremonies among others.

TYPES:

The 3 most important funerary Adinkra are the dark – brown (*kuntunkuni*) the brick – red (*kobene*) and the black (*brisi*).

There are however, other forms of which cannot be properly called mourning cloth. Their bright and light backgrounds classify them as

Kwasiada Adinkra or Sunday Adinkra meaning fancy cloths which cannot be suitable for funerary contents but appropriate for most festive occasions or even daily wear.

Other uses of the Adinkra symbols

Adinkra symbols can be described as small, symbolic pictures or motives used to decorate colourful patterned cloth by fashion designers in Ghana.

Designers in modern times use Adinkra symbols in creating and decorating other accessories than cloth.

Other artisans/crafts men such as sculptors, carpenters, and architects also use the symbols to design their products.

Some corporate institutions in Ghana now use the Adinkra symbols as their institutional Symbol or Logo.

Adinkra Printing

The Asante people have developed their unique art of adinkra printing. They use two traditional printing methods; the block-stamp technique, which involves the use of wooden or metal stamps and the screen-printing.



The Adinkra cloth was originally printed from hand carved stamps from calabash or gourd (*apakyiwa*). The dye or ink (*adinkra aduru*) for printing is derived from the bark of the *Badie* and the roots of the *kuntunkuni* trees. The bark and roots are soaked in water for days to soften. They are then pounded to increase the softening process. The

Badie bark is boiled with iron scraps. When the colour (deep brown)



emerges from the pulp it is sieved and engraved onto a piece of calabash or pot.

The kuntunkuni roots are also boiled into a dark solution to dye the cloth black. The Cloth is dipped and soaked in the solution. It has to be dried several times before it turns completely black.

The cloth is normally dyed in either red or black.



For the red Adinkra cloth, a chemical called *Sudi* is used instead of the kuntunkuni root.

The Stamps

The various stamps carved from the calabash are tinted with dye and pressed in sequence onto plain cotton cloth, pegged on the ground.

Today raised platforms with sack covering act as the printing table.

In recent times imported cloth is used as the background of the cloth.

Sometimes the various symbols are used on one fabric and this also has its significance.

The designing is done according to the message the wearer or owner of the cloth intends to convey to the participants of the event.

The quality of the cloth also shows the status of the one wearing it.

The original Adinkra cloth is not meant to be washed since it faded easily as a result of the natural ink used without any chemical additives.

Today, other types of cloth are used with the same adinkra motives but stamped in indelible colours using the batik method.

Ntonso, a town in the Ashanti Region is noted for Adinkra cloth production. It is popularly acknowledged as the "Home of Adinkra"


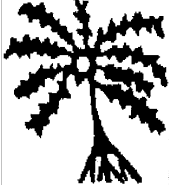

AESTHETIC VALUE







The several bright colours of red, yellow, white, blue etc. of the Kwasiada Adinkra project the festive nature of the day. Sundays are normally characterized by drumming and dancing, playing of "owari" and "dame" (traditional games and other exciting social and religious activities).




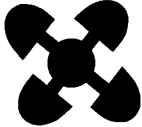
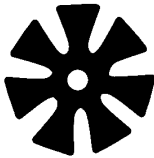
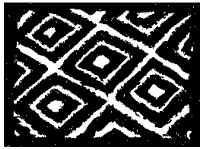
In contrast to the above is the dark and dull colours of black, dark – brown and brick red which are the make-up of the "Birisi", "Kuntunkuni" and "Kobene" cloths. Black for instance among the Asantes evokes an aesthetic response of sadness and hopelessness, The red colour is normally associated with blood and death. That is why during funerals Kobene in particular is worn by the closest relatives to show how aggrieved they were and the others appear in different cloths Kobene is also worn during the Asantehene's funeral or when there is a national calamity.


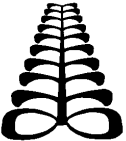
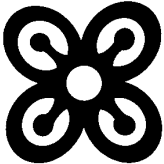


The Omanhene of Abeamase of Domease said the cloth means "our eyes are red".


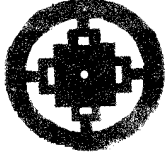



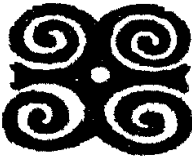
Below is a table displaying in alphabetical order some of the old and new Adinkra and other cultural symbols of the Akan. They have been arranged by names in *Twi*, literal translation in English, significance and proverbial meaning where available.

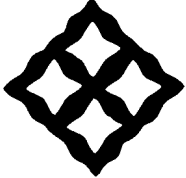

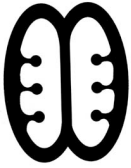



Symbol/name in Akan	Literal meaning	Symbolic meaning (s)	Proverbial expression
 Aban	Fence	Strength and authority.	
 Abe dua	Palm tree	Wealth Self-sufficiency Toughness vitality	<p><i>Nipa nye abe dua na ne ho ahyia ne ho.</i></p> <p>The human being is not like the palm that is self-sufficient.</p> <p><i>Nnua nyinaa bewu agya abe.</i></p> <p>All trees will wither safe the palm tree.</p>
 Adinkrahene	Adinkra King. Chief of all the Adinkra designs; forms the basis of adinkra printing.	Greatness Royalty	

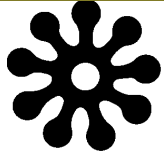





 <p>Adikrahene Dua</p>	<p>Adinkra king stamp.</p> <p>This is used only for printing on the Adinkra cloth.</p>	<p>Greatness</p> <p>Royalty</p>	
 <p>Adwera</p>	<p>Watery shrub</p>	<p>Purity and Sanctity</p> <p>Chastity</p> <p>good fortune</p> <p>Consecration</p> <p>Cleanliness</p>	<p><i>Adwera nsuo, wo ne nkwansuo, nsu korogyenn a wohuru nso wonhye.</i></p> <p>Water of life, you are the pure crystal clean water that boils but, does not burn.</p>
 <p>Adwo</p>	<p>Peace.</p>	<p>Peace/Calmness</p>	<p><i>Ohene nya ahontenafo pa a, ne bere so dwo</i></p> <p>When the king has good counselors, then he will have a peaceful reign.</p>
 <p>Agyinduwura</p>		<p>Faithfulness</p> <p>Alertness</p> <p>Dutifulness</p>	
 <p>Akofena</p>	<p>Royal/ ceremonial sword.</p>	<p>✦ Gallantry</p> <p>✦ Valour</p> <p>✦ Bravery</p>	<p><i>Akofena kunini ko a, wobo a fena kye no safohene</i></p> <p>The great warrior always has a royal sword of rest even when he retires</p>
 <p>Akoben</p>	<p>War Horn</p> <p>The sound of Ako-ben is a battle cry.</p>	<p>Call to arms</p> <p>Readiness and preparedness for action or battle.</p>	



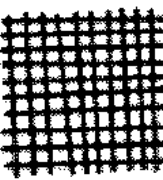

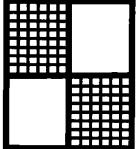

 <p>Ako-ben</p>	<p>War Horn (another version)</p> <p>The sound of Ako-ben is a battle cry.</p>	<p>Call to arms Readiness and preparedness for action or battle.</p> <p>Vigilance</p>	
 <p>Akoko nan</p>	<p>The hen's feet</p>	<p>Parenthood. Care. Tenderness. Protection. Parental admonition is not intended to harm the child. (Parental discipline.)</p>	<p><i>Akoko nan tia ba, na ennkum no.</i></p> <p>The hen treads upon its chicks but it does not intend to kill them.</p>
 <p>Akoma</p>	<p>The heart.</p>	<p>Patience</p> <p>Endurance</p> <p>Love and faithfulness</p>	<p><i>Nya Akoma</i></p> <p>Take heart.</p>
 <p>Akoma ntoaso</p>	<p>Extension of the heart.</p>	<p>Understanding</p> <p>Agreement or charter</p> <p>Unity.</p>	
 <p>Ananse ntontan</p>	<p>Spider web</p>	<p>Wisdom creativity</p>	
 <p>Ani bere</p>	<p>Seriousness</p>	<p>Diligence</p> <p>Perseverance</p>	<p><i>Ani bere a, nso gya, anka mani abere koo.</i></p> <p>Seriousness does not show fiery eyes; else you would see my face all red.</p>



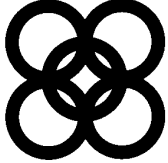


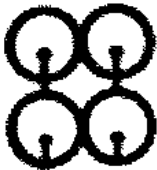
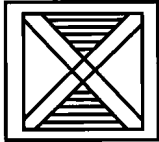
 <p>Asase ye duru</p>	<p>The earth has weight.</p>	<p>Divinity of the earth</p> <p>Providence Power/Authority Wealth Might</p>	<p><i>Tumi nyina ne asase</i></p> <p>All power emanates from the earth</p> <p><i>Asase ye duru sen epo</i></p> <p>The earth is heavier than the sea</p>
 <p>Aya</p>	<p>The fern</p>	<p>Defiance Endurance Resourcefulness</p>	
 <p>Bese saka</p>	<p>Sack of colanuts</p>	<p>Power</p> <p>Abundance affluence</p> <p>Togetherness and unity (agriculture and trade bring people together).</p>	
 <p>Bi-nnka-bi (obinnka obi)</p>	<p>Bite not one another</p>	<p>Peace</p> <p>Harmony</p> <p>Caution against strife and provocation</p>	
 <p>Biribi wo soro</p>	<p>There is something in the heavens.</p>	<p>Hope.</p> <p>Reliance on God for inspiration.</p>	<p><i>Nyame, biribi wo soro, na ma embeka me nsa.</i></p> <p>God, there is something in heaven, let it get to me.</p>





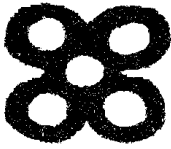

 <p>Boa me na me boa wo</p>	<p>Help me to help you.</p>	<p>Interdependence Cooperation Helping one another</p>	
 <p>Dame-dame</p>	<p>A board game</p>	<p>Intelligence Ingenuity</p>	
 <p>Dono</p>	<p>Drum</p>	<p>Praise</p>	
 <p>Dono ntoaso (Nnonnowa)</p>	<p>Double drum</p>	<p>Unity Concord Strength</p>	
 <p>Duafe</p>	<p>Wooden comb</p>	<p>Feminine virtue. Everlasting love.</p>	
 <p>Dwannimmen</p>	<p>Ram's horn</p>	<p>Concealment Humility & Strength Wisdom & learning</p>	<p><i>Dwannini ye asisie a, ode n'akorana na...</i> It is the hart and not the horns that leads a ram to bully.</p>

 <p>Eban</p>	<p>Fence/fort or castle Representing fenced homes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Protection + security + safety + fortress 	
 <p>Epa</p>	<p>Handcuffs</p>	<p>Slavery</p> <p>Equality</p> <p>Law & Justice</p>	<p><i>Onii a ne pa da wonsa no, na n'akoa ne wo</i></p> <p>You are a slave to the one whose handcuffs you are wearing.</p>
 <p>Ese ne tekrema</p>	<p>The teeth and the tongue.</p>	<p>Friendship interdependence</p> <p>Advancement progress</p> <p>Strength in unity.</p>	
 <p>Fafanto/Esononamtam</p>		<p>Tenderness gentleness</p>	
 <p>Fihankra</p>	<p>House</p>	<p>Safety /security in a home.</p>	
 <p>Fawohudie</p>	<p>Freedom</p>	<p>Freedom Liberty</p>	





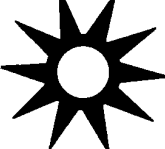
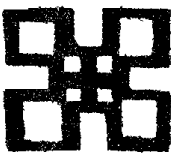

 <p>Fofoo</p>	<p><i>Fofoo</i> plant (a yellow-flowered plant)</p>	<p>Jealousy</p> <p>Envy</p>	<p><i>Se die fofoo pe ne se gyanantwi abo bidie.</i></p> <p>The <i>Fofoo</i> plant's wish is that the <i>gyinantwi</i> seeds should turn black.</p>
 <p>Funtunmfunafu dua</p>	<p>The tree/altar of the funtunfunafu . (version of the Siamese crocodile)</p>	<p>Need for unity when there is the same destiny</p>	
 <p>Funtumfunafu denkyem funafu/ Funntunmireku</p>	<p>Siamese twin crocodiles joined at the stomach.</p>	<p>Democracy and oneness irrespective of cultural differences.</p>	<p><i>Funtumfunafu denkyemfunafu, won afuru bom, nso woredidi a na woreko.</i></p> <p>They share one stomach and yet they fight for getting food.</p>
 <p>Gyawu atiko</p>	<p>Symbol drawn by Gyawu, who was a chief of Bantama</p>	<p>Bravery</p> <p>Valour</p> <p>Fearlessness</p> <p>Leadership</p>	
 <p>Gye Nyame</p>	<p>Except God.</p>	<p>Omnipotence and immortality of God</p>	
 <p>Hye wonnye</p>	<p>That which cannot be burnt</p>	<p>Imperishability</p> <p>Endless</p> <p>Forgiveness</p> <p>Toughness</p>	<p><i>Hye wonnhye</i></p> <p>He who burns be not burned</p>




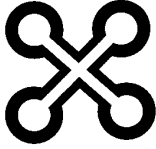


 <p>Hwemudua</p>		<p>Excellence Superior quality</p>	
 <p>Kae me</p>	<p>Remember me.</p>	<p>Loyalty Faithfulness</p>	
 <p>Kete pa</p>	<p>Good bed</p>	<p>Good marriage. Love and faithfulness</p>	
 <p>Kojo baiden</p>	<p>Rays</p>	<p>Cosmos omnipresence</p>	
 <p>Kontire ne Akwamu</p>	<p>State elders</p>	<p>Reliance. Democracy.</p>	<p>One head does not make up council</p>
 <p>Krado – mmra krado</p>	<p>Seal of law and order</p>	<p>Authority of the court. Law and order</p>	

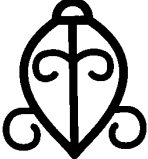

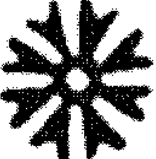
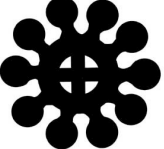


 <p>Krapa (Musuyidie)</p>	<p>Sanctity, Pure in heart.</p>	<p>Sanctity Purity.</p>	<p><i>Krapa te se okra okyiri fi</i> Sanctity, like cats, abhors filth.</p>
 <p>Kramo bone</p>	<p>The Bad</p>	<p>Warning against hypocrisy</p>	<p><i>Kramo bone amma yennhu kramo pa</i> We cannot tell the good from the bad because of pretence and hypocrisy</p>
 <p>Kuntinkantan</p>	<p>Do not boast. Do not be filled with pride.</p>	<p>Need for humility and service Modesty</p>	
 <p>Kwatakye- atiko</p>	<p>Hair of the hero Kwatakye</p>	<p>Valour Bravery leadership</p>	
 <p>Mako</p>			
 <p>Me ware wo</p>	<p>I shall marry you.</p>	<p>Commitment</p>	
	<p>Wind house. House built to stand windy and treacherous</p>	<p>Fortitude</p>	







Mframadan	conditions.		
 Mmomudwan	Unity	Unity Togetherness	
 Mmra krado	Seal of law and order.	The Court's authority./law and order	
 Mmusuyidee	That which removes ill luck or evil.	Good fortune Sanctity Spiritual strength	
 Mpatapo	Reconciliation knot	Reconciliation Peacemaking	
 Mpuannum nkotimsofo puua	Five tufts of hair (a traditional hair style)	Skillfulness Priestly office Loyalty Adroitness	
 Nea onnim no sua a ohu	He who does not know can know from Learning. Knowledge comes by learning.	knowledge	






 <p>Nea ope se nkrofoo ye ma wo no, ye saa ara ma won.</p>	<p>Do to others the things you want them to do to for you.</p>	<p>Justice</p>	<p><i>Nea ope se nkrofoo ye ma wo no, ye saa ara ma won</i></p> <p>Do unto others what you want others to do unto you.</p>
 <p>Nea ope se obedi hene</p>	<p>He who wants to be king.</p>	<p>Leadership</p>	
 <p>Nhwimu /Nkyimu</p>	<p>Crossing. The divisions done onto the plain cloth before the stamping is done.</p>	<p>Skill Precision</p>	
 <p>Nkuma kese</p>	<p>The great okra</p>	<p>Supremacy Superiority</p>	
 <p>Nkyinkyim</p>	<p>Zigzag/ twisting</p>	<p>Playing many roles. (Dynamism)</p> <p>Initiative</p> <p>Toughness</p> <p>Adaptability</p> <p>Resoluteness</p>	<p><i>Obra kwan ye nkyinkyimiie</i></p> <p>Life's path is full of ups and downs; twists and turns.</p>





 <p>Nkonsonkonson</p>	Chain links	Human relations Unity	
 <p>Nkontim</p>	Hair of the Queen's servant	Loyalty Service	
 <p>Nnonnowa (Donno ntoaso)</p>	Double drum	Valour Strength	
 <p>Nserewa</p>		Wealth Abundance Affluence	
 <p>Nsoromma</p>	The Star Child of God/child of the heavens	Reflection of God faith in God Guardianship.	
 <p>Nssa</p>	Type of hand woven-cloth/ Blanket	Excellence Authenticity Genuineness	<i>Nea onim nssa na oto n'ago</i> The one who knows the nssa blanket is willing to buy it even when it is old.
 <p>Ntesie - Mate masie</p>	I have heard and kept it.	Knowledge Wisdom	<i>Nyansa bun mu ne mate masie</i> Deep wisdom comes out of listening and keeping what is heard.

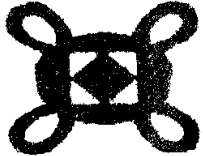




 <p>Nya abotere</p>	<p>Be patient</p>	<p>Patience calmness</p>	
 <p>Nyame dua</p>	<p>Altar of God/tree of God God's altar in the sky; a place of worship.</p>	<p>God's presence/ protection.</p>	
 <p>Nyame nti</p>	<p>Since god exist For God's sake By God's grace</p>	<p>God's grace. Faith in God.</p>	<p>Nyame nti mi nnwe wura By god's grace, I will not eat leaves to survive.</p>
 <p>Nyame nnwu na me wu</p>	<p>God never dies; therefore I shall not die.</p>	<p>Life after death</p>	
 <p>Nyansapo</p>	<p>Wisdom knot</p>	<p>Wisdom Ingenuity Patience</p>	
 <p>Odenkyem.</p>	<p>The crocodile.</p>	<p>Prudence</p>	<p>Odenkyem da nsuo mu, nso onnhome nsuo, ohome mframa The crocodile lives in water but does breathe air and not water.</p>





 <p>Odo nyera fie kwan</p>	<p>Love does not lose its way home.</p> <p>Blessing in loving.</p>	<p>Power of Love</p> <p>Faithfulness</p>	
 <p>Ohene adwa</p>	<p>The king's stool</p>	<p>State Chieftaincy</p>	
 <p>Ohene</p>	<p>King</p>	<p>Wisdom</p>	
 <p>Ohene aniwa</p>	<p>king's eye</p>	<p>Beauty Vigilance</p>	
 <p>Ohene tuo</p>	<p>The king's gun. Defender and protector of the king.</p>	<p>Greatness</p>	
 <p>Okodee mmowere</p>	<p>Eagle's talons. A style of Shavings on the heads of some traditional court attendants.</p>	<p>Strength and unity.</p>	

 <p>Okuafo Pa</p>	Good farmer	Hardwork Entrepreneurship Industry productivity	<p><i>Okuafoo pa ne obi a oye nsiyefoo, ono na ose : w'afuo so a, woye ne nyinaa.</i></p> <p>The good and industrious farmer says: No matter how big your farm is you tend it all.</p>
 <p>Onyakopon aniwa</p>	God's eye	Omnipresence of God	<p><i>Onyakopon aniwa hu asumu asem biara</i></p> <p>God's eye sees all secrets</p>
 <p>Onyakopon ne yen ntena</p>	May God be with us	God's presence and protection	
 <p>Osidan</p>	The builder	Creativity	
 <p>Osram /Osrane</p>	The moon.	Patience and understanding	<p><i>Osram mmfiti preko nntwareman.</i></p> <p>It takes the moon some time to go round the earth.</p>
 <p>Osram ne Nsoroma</p>	The moon and the star.	Love Faithfulness Fondness.	
<p>Owia kokroko</p>	The greatness of the sun.		God has a reason for keeping the sun at a distance.

 <p>Owo foro adobe</p>	<p>Snake climbing the palm tree.</p>	<p>Performing the impossible. Excellence/valor</p>	
 <p>Owu atwedee</p>	<p>Ladder of death.</p>	<p>Death, the ultimate fate of man. Mortal nature of man. Fate</p>	<p><i>Owu atwedee obaako nforo.</i> All men shall climb the ladder of death</p>
 <p>Pa gya</p>	<p>Striking of fire.</p>	<p>War</p>	
 <p>Pempamsie</p>	<p>Readiness</p>	<p>Readiness/Preparedness Strength and unity.</p>	<p><i>Pempamsie se, bebre ahooden ne koroye.</i> That which will not overcome</p>
 <p>Sankofa</p>	<p>Return and get it. Learning from the past.</p>	<p>You can always correct your mistakes. Wisdom Using past experiences to build the future. Better late than never</p>	<p><i>Se wo were fin a wo sankofa a yennkyi.</i> It is not a taboo to return to fetch something you forgot earlier on.</p>

 <p>Sankofa (alternate version)</p>	<p>Return and get it.</p> <p>Learning from the past.</p>	<p>You can always correct your mistakes.</p> <p>Wisdom</p> <p>Using past experiences to build the future.</p> <p>Better late than never</p>	<p><i>Se wo were fin a wo sankofa a yennkyi.</i></p> <p>It is not a taboo to return to fetch something you forgot earlier on.</p>
 <p>Sankofa dua</p>			
 <p>Sepow</p>	<p>Knife used in executions.</p> <p>This is plunged through the throat of the victim's cheeks to prevent him from invoking a curse on the King.</p>	<p>Justice</p>	
 <p>Sesa woruban</p>	<p>Change your life</p>	<p>Transformation</p> <p>A new beginning</p>	

 <p>Sunsum</p>	<p>The Soul</p> <p>The Akans believe that the soul of the chief reside in a younger courtier</p>	<p>Spirituality</p> <p>Purity</p> <p>Everlasting</p>	
 <p>Tabon</p>	<p>Paddle</p>	<p>Courage</p> <p>hard work</p>	
 <p>Tamfo bebre</p>	<p>The enemy shall suffer.</p>	<p>Jealousy</p>	
 <p>Tumi te se kosua</p>	<p>Power is like an egg</p>	<p>Delicacy of political power,</p> <p>Fragility of democracy,</p> <p>Restraint</p>	<p><i>Tumi te se kosua, woso mu den a, epae; na se woanso mu yie nso a, efiri wo nsa bo famu ma epae</i></p> <p>Power is as fragile as an egg, when held too tightly it might break; if it is held too loosely, it might fall and break.</p>
 <p>Tuo ne Akofena</p>	<p>Gun and State sword</p>	<p>Power Responsibility Authority Legitimacy, National security protection, Military prowess</p>	<p>&</p>

 <p>Wawa aba</p>	<p>Seed of the <i>wawa</i> tree.</p> <p><i>Wawa</i> is a hardwood used in carving.</p>	<p>Skillfulness</p>	
 <p>Wuforo dua pa a</p>	<p>When you climb a good tree.</p>	<p>Support Cooperation Encouragement</p>	<p><i>Wuforo dua pa a na ye pia wo</i></p> <p>He who climbs a good tree is encouraged/supported.</p>
 <p>Wo nsa da mu a</p>	<p>If you have your hands in the dish</p>	<p>Democracy Pluralism</p>	
			

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