

# The Influence of European Elements on Asante Adinkra

Dickson Adom

Department of General Art Studies, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana

**Abstract:** *The Adinkra tradition in Ashanti has seen some form of transformation due to the influx of some European elements. These impacts are greatly seen in the tools and materials, production techniques, concept of design of the Adinkra cloth. Some of these influences are positive while others are negatively affecting the production of this indigenous cloth. There is the need to research into these European influences to ascertain the extent to which the Adinkra cloth has benefited or have been adversely affected by them. The research was thus carried out to critically examine these European influences to be able to offer advice on what aspects of the European elements need to be discontinued and the aspects to be promoted. The researcher gathered the primary data for the research paper through personal interviews, administration of questionnaires, as well as observations. The secondary data was accrued through a thorough review of peer reviewed articles on the subject, published and unpublished research works, textbooks etc. The results of the study have been presented under the following headings: Analysis of the research instruments, main findings (primary and secondary data), Interpreting the data, answering of research questions, conclusions and recommendations. This included investigating and examining the extent to which the Asante Adinkra have been impacted by these European elements, the positive impacts and how they have ensured the improvement of the Asante adinkra production industry and the negative impacts and how they have adversely affected the Asante textile industry have been succinctly discussed. The study revealed the beneficiary aspects of the impacts and discusses how they can be harnessed for the development of the adinkra industry in Ashanti. However, the study also highlighted and cautioned strongly, the negative aspects of the European influences that if not curtailed would downplay the quality and erode the adinkra cloth of its cultural significance.*

**Keywords:** European elements, Adinkra, European Influences, Culture, Badie dye, Asantes

## 1. Introduction

The *Adinkra* cloth of the Asante ethnic society is one of the indigenous and traditional artifacts that has been impacted by European elements such as tools and materials, concept of design and their production techniques and products. It is known as the only African cloth printing tradition in pre-colonial Africa (Frimpong, Asinyo & Amankwaah, 2013). It is a type of planographic printing that employs the relief block as a stamping tool for registering designs on a laid cloth (Awutah, 2012). The impacts of Europe on this famous traditional cloth have to be critically examined to find out the extent to which they are positively or negatively affecting it. The adinkra cloth conveys the thoughts, beliefs and values of the Asante people and thus any negative European influence on the cloth if not critically examined with the view of suggesting pragmatic ways of addressing or curtailing them would taint the general history and culture of the Asante people. This knowledge regarding the influences of the European elements on Asante adinkra cloth have to be examined and the information made available to the general populace especially stakeholders of the textile production technique.

This research paper is an astute informant and a critical eye opener to help in ascertaining the forms of impact of the European elements on the *Adinkra* cloth. This would alert the adinkra cloth producers of the dangers in wholly embracing all the influences of European elements and offer advice on the European influence to accept and those that could be detrimental to the Adinkra production which must be discontinued. This would help cease any negative impact on the cloth while carefully blending the positive influences to the traditional method to help in the development,

transmission and preservation of the Adinkra cloth-the historical and cultural heritage of the Asante kingdom.

## 2. Methodology

Qualitative research design with its planned research and investigative nature was adopted and implemented by the researcher in examining the main impacts of the European elements on the Asante adinkra. Also, this research approach enabled the researcher in collecting an extensive amount of verbal data from a small number of participants through personal interview, Close-ended questionnaire and participant observation. The collected data was organized into small forms that give coherence. Verbal descriptions in the form of transcribed notes from recordings were used to study the phenomena under investigation. Interpretative narratives and discussions were drawn from the data accrue from the phenomena under study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The case study and descriptive research methods were used by the researcher to assist him vividly describe the chain of events about the influence of European elements on Asante Adinkra witnessed at Ntonso and Kumasi Cultural Centre to enable him deeply understand the influence of the European elements on the Asante adinkra.

The population for the study was adinkra cloth producers at the study centre thus Ntonso and Kumasi Cultural Centre. Purposive sampling was implemented for the selection of the sample for the study. Twenty skilled masters and Forty apprentices were deliberately selected and interviewed because they were seen to help immensely in realizing the objectives laid out for the study (Kumekpor, 2002).

Participant observation, personal and structured interviews as well as close-ended questionnaire was the main

Volume 5 Issue 7, July 2016

[www.ijsr.net](http://www.ijsr.net)

Licensed Under Creative Commons Attribution CC BY

instrumentations used for the soliciting of the required data for the study. The researcher also took part in the activities witnessed at Ntonso and the Kumasi Cultural Centre such as cutting of the relief blocks for making adinkra prints, preparation of badie dye, and the printing of the adinkra cloth. This aided him in gleaning detailed information about the influence of European elements on the Asante adinkra. Also, the researcher used the structured form of interview in addition to the participant observation to assist him get the exact data to help him in answering the research questions for the study. The researcher implemented the data analysis spiral that employs the interpretivist theory to analyze the data for the study (Creswell, 1998). The data was first organized by arranging the specific facts in a logical or chronological order. Large amounts of text was broken down into smaller units such as sentences, stories etc. Then, the entire data was perused severally to get the sense of what it contains as a whole. Preliminary interpretations of the organized data were made. The data was classified or grouped into common categories or themes. Meanings and interpretations were then sought from each of the categories by identifying patterns. The data was then finally summarized.

### 3. Asante Adinkra

#### 3.1. Origin of Adinkra Cloth Printing

According to Asihene (1978), the word *Adinkra* means saying farewell (to the dead implied). It is the name given to the traditional mourning cloth of Ghana. Rattray (1927) said that according to legends, *Adinkra* was originally the name of a king of *Gyaman* (in the Ivory Coast) who was beheaded at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Nana Bonsu Panyin of Asante for making a copy of the Ashanti Golden Stool. After his death, his craftsmen, who were taken into captivity, introduced the art of making *Adinkra* cloth, using the pattern found on king *Adinkra*'s clothes and on the columns of his stool in Asante.

According to a second view by Asihene (1978), *Adinkra* designs were first made for the kings of Denkyira, Takyiman and Ashanti in ancient times, long before the reign of king *Adinkra*. It was then called *Adwinikena*, believed to have been later corrupted to *Adinkra*. It is also believed by another school of thought that the Muslims inspired the more abstracted symbols. The most obvious one is the crescent moon and star symbol, which symbolizes faithfulness. Another account has it that the word '*Adinkra*' means 'farewell' or 'goodbye', in the Akan language. It is therefore suggested that the cloth with its symbols has its name because it is used on funeral occasions in saying farewell or goodbye to the departed souls.

*Adinkra* cloth is made by hand stamping *Adinkra* patterns onto a plain white or dyed russet-brown, cotton fabric. The dye is made from the bark of the *kuntunkuni* tree. (It's botanical name is *bobax brevicuspe* (Appiah, 1988). A cloth dyed in this russet-brown colour is known as *kuntunkuni*, named after the tree. It is worn during funeral ceremonies. Other colored materials like the *Kobene* (Vermilion red) and *Brisi* (indigo or black) are not stamped, although they are mourning cloths. *Adinkra* patterns can be stamped on yellow

ochre or white background cotton fabric for occasions other than funerals. The traditional patterns printed on the *Adinkra* cloths are symbolical. They have names that have proverbial, historical, allegorical, or magical significance. Asihene (1978) mentioned some of these symbols and their meanings. For instance, the oval-shape designs symbolize sacredness, femininity, and beauty, while a half circle or crescent signifies fertility. The cross is associated with pity, while the arrow represents new life. Representational objects in nature as well as abstract motifs are used for making cloth designs. In the olden days, a king wore *Adinkra* cloth with a single design to express his thought or philosophy. For example, the *aya* or fern-design cloth meant that he was not afraid of any one.

#### 3.2. Making of Blocks and Dyes

The stamps for printing the *Adinkra* patterns are cut from gourd or pieces of calabash about three inches in diameter. Three or four sticks of stiff palm-leaf ribs are attached to the calabash and tied together at one end to serve as a handle, held between the forefinger and thumb.



**Figure 1:** Adinkra stamp held being use in stamping a piece of cloth

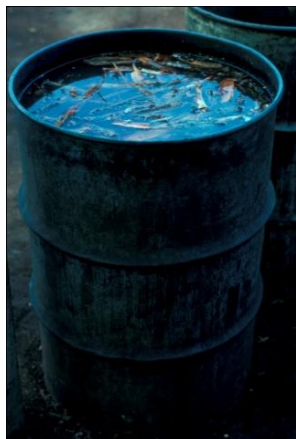
The *adinkra* dye which is a vegetable dye is extracted from the bark of the *badie* tree *Adansonia digitata*. It is grown mostly in the Brong Ahafo region. The barks removed are boiled for about three hours. The liquid formed is collected and poured into the container. Enough water is again poured onto the stuff and boiled for some time. The liquid is collected and poured into the container. This process is repeated as long as the stuff continues to yield the dye. The collected dye is then boiled for about four hours till the colour turns black and sticky.

Originally, iron fillings known as '*etia*' (Asihene 1978) were added to the solution during boiling but now it could be boiled without them. To make the dyes look shiny after printing, honey, albumen or sugar is added and stirred when it cools down.





**Figure 2:** Barks of the Badie Tree



**Figure 3:** Soaking of the barks



**Figure 4:** Pounding of the barks  
(Source: Photographed by the researcher)

### 3.3. Printing of the Adinkra Cloth

According to Asihene (1978) the large piece of fabric is stretched taut on a clean ground by pegging the ends. Sometimes, the fabric is spread on a floor and covered with hard paper boards and nailed at the corners and the selvages. The stamp block is dipped into the dye bowl and is shaken a bit if it picks too much of the dye. The stamp is applied directly, freehand onto the stretched cloth. The block is stamped on the cloth according to the design planned by the textile designer.



**Fig.5.** Printing of adinkra cloth  
(Source: Photographed by the researcher)

On some occasions, to heighten the design, Asihene noted that the cloth to be printed is sometimes decorated with horizontal bands of silk yarns arranged in a repeat pattern of yellow, red, black, green and blue. After printing, the cloth is dried and there is neither after-treatment nor any other finishing process. The indigenous and well-known *adinkra* cloth producing villages are Asokwa, Ntonso, and Adanwumase in the Asante region. There are four types of *Adinkra* cloth, namely, the *Mpakyiwa* (plain background type); The *Nhiwimu* (linear marking type); The *Kente* strip type and the *Nwomu* type.

## 4. Results and Discussions

### 4.1. Objective 1: To examine the influence of European Elements on Asante Adinkra

The researcher noticed that the tools and material for adinkra cloth production have been impacted by European tools and materials:

- 1) The adinkra stamps carved on calabash discs have been influenced by silk screens for printing.
- 2) The locally manufactured dyes extracted from the *badie* and *kuntunkuni* trees have been replaced with imported dyes like vat dyes and azoic dyes from Europe. The *badie* paste for printing has been replaced by imported paste from Europe.

The researcher found out that the choice of designs for adinkra cloth production has been impacted by European-inclined designs:

- 1) The adinkra symbols which were used as motifs for adinkra fabric have been influenced by computer generated designs, natural and geometric shapes like flowers, leaves, circles, ovals shapes etc.

The researcher noticed that the production processes for adinkra cloth production have been impacted by European textile processes:

- 1) The block printing technique has been influenced by screen printing.
- 2) Printing carried out on the ground has been influenced by printing on padded printing tables.
- 3) The iron slags and egg albumen which were added to the locally made dyes to give it a shiny affect has been influenced by the use of varnish.

- 4) Ironing of the adinkra clothes after printing has influenced the non- finishing treatment given to the printed fabrics.



**Figure 6:** Silk screens and Calabash stamps use for Adinkra cloth production  
 (Source: Photographed by the researcher)

#### 4.2. Objective 2: To examine the merits and demerits of the European elements on Asante Adinkra

From the analysis outlined, these were found out by the researcher: The researcher noticed that there are positive impacts of the European elements on the Adinkra produced in Ashanti. Some of these merits are:

- 1) The screen printing process that has influenced the block printing by the use of calabash discs is faster and less time consuming. Moreover, it has ensured accuracy and precision of printed designs.
- 2) Imported dyes and printing paste for adinkra cloth production are fast when used for printing unlike the local dyes and pastes that fade out easily. It has also reduced the work load on adinkra cloth producers who always had to work tediously extracting dyes and pastes from local trees.
- 3) The padded printing tables used have ensured smooth and good registration of printing designs in adinkra cloth.
- 4) The finishing treatments that are now given to the adinkra cloths have improved their appearance, handling and attractiveness maximizing sales of the adinkra clothes.
- 5) The European-generated designs have brought about diversity in the designs for adinkra cloths.



**Figure 7:** Printing paste imported from Europe

The researcher however noticed that there are some negative impacts of the European elements on the adinkra produced in Ashanti. Some of these demerits are:

- 1) The European-inclined designs are gradually making the traditional designs that embody the cultural heritage of the Asante to fade out in all the textile products produced in Asante especially in adinkra cloths.
- 2) European fashion styles are not helping in the sales of the Asante Adinkra and are not reflecting favourably on the morals and attitudes of Asantes and Ghanaians as a whole.

#### 4.3. Objective 3: To find out the aspects of the European elements and aspects of the Asante Adinkra that needs to be promoted or discontinued in Ashanti

Aspects of European elements that need to be promoted are:

- 1) Tools and materials for adinkra cloth production such as silk screens, padded tables, printing pastes and dyes imported from Europe.
- 2) Finishing techniques given to adinkra cloth should be promoted.

Aspects of European elements that need to be discontinued are:

- 1) European fashion styles that are negatively affecting the morals and attitudes of Asantes and Ghanaians as a whole should be stopped.
- 2) European inclined designs extensively used that are making the traditional designs to fade out should be discontinued.

Aspects of Asante Adinkra that need to be promoted are:

- 1) Traditional designs like adinkra symbols and other ideographs, signs and symbols that portray and educate us on our culture heritage should be promoted to ensure the revival and propagation of our culture to the younger generation.
- 2) Asante fashion styles, norms and concepts that instilled good morals and attitudes in Asantes and Ghanaians as a whole should be revived and promoted.

Aspects of Asante Adinkra that need to be discontinued are:

- All the indigenous tools and materials that are not helping Asante adinkra to meet the taste and demands of the modern day Asante and Ghanaians as a whole should be discontinued.
- 1) All indigenous textile production processes that down play quality and value should be discontinued.

#### 5. Secondary Data

Osei (2002), Salm and Falola (1966), Asihene (1978), Asmah (2004) and Adom (2005) all asserted that there has been an influence on the tools and materials for Asante adinkra by European tools and materials. The finding of the primary data also revealed that local dyes and pastes have been influenced by dyes and pastes imported from Europe. Adom (2005) and Asmah (2004) quoted in the literature review affirmed this. They added that the prepared wooden and calabash blocks have been influenced by silk screens. This was also found out by the researcher that the screen



printing technique has influenced the block printing technique by the use of calabash or wooden blocks.

Asihene (1978) commented on the European influence on how the surface the cloth to be printed was laid. He said formerly the designs were stamped on cloths laid on the floor. But due to European influence, the clothes are laid on padded printing tables. The findings in the primary data buttressed what he said that indeed there has been European influence in this area. Asmah (2004) buttressed that there is a positive European influence on the local dyes used for dyeing. He said the modernized synthetic dyes imported from Europe do not leave any residue after being used unlike the local dyes.

Nubour (2006), agreed and added that the imported dyes from Europe are fast unlike the local dyes. Asmah (2004) added that the imported dyes have helped in reducing the duration of dyeing which was formerly a day or two for one cloth to about 10-60 minutes and this can be said to be a positive influence from Europe. The findings from the primary data also affirm that the general influence of European elements on the tools and materials for Asante adinkra production are positive and should be promoted.

With regards to the influence of European elements on the choice of design for Asante adinkra production, Asihene (1978) pointed out that some of the indigenous designs are also forgotten because of some influence of European elements. This, he advised has to cease. He emphasized that the traditional elements have a great potential of rescuing Ghana's heritage as a whole for prosperity and utilized for national development. Gyekye (1998) hinted that every society in the modern world has many traditional elements inherited from the past and the society takes pride in several of these elements and build on them. However, the findings in the primary data revealed that the traditional designs for Asante adinkra cloth production are gradually fading away. This according to the writers quoted and the findings from the primary data has to cease, since it's negatively affecting the textiles done in Asante today.

## 6. Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

This research paper attempted to identify the impacts of European elements on Asante adinkra in the areas of tools and materials, concept of design and production processes etc. These influences were seen by the study as both negative and positive. The study revealed that the influences of the European elements are largely seen in the areas of tools and materials, concept of designs, and production processes. A careful investigation unveiled that the merits of the influence of these European elements were seen in the tools and materials and some of the production processes of Asante Adinkra. However, the demerits of the influence of these European elements on the Asante adinkra were also realized in some European concept of design which is eroding Asante's of the good gems inherent in their own cultural heritage.

The necessary authorities and stakeholders concerned with the improvement of the indigenous textile industry such as the government, ministry of Trade and Industry, corporate

bodies and NGO's as well as institutions for art and culture in Ghana like the various Centres for National Culture etc., the Asante adinkra producers and Asante adinkra patronisers need to harness the positive aspects of the influence from Europe with the good aspects of the indigenous Asante adinkra to uplift it to the current demands of the textile world while ensuring the preservation and propagation of the rich cultural heritage of Asante to the younger generation.

## References

- [1] Adom, D. (2010). *The Influence of European Elements on Asante Textiles*. Master's thesis, Kumasi: Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology
- [2] Adom, D. (2011). *General Knowledge in Art for Senior High Schools*. Kumasi: Adom Series Publications.
- [3] Akwaboa, S.A. (1989). *Art for Schools and Colleges*. Kumasi: Samarg Publications
- [4] Asare, O.K. (1978). *West African Traditional Religion*. Singapore: F.E.P. International Private Limited
- [5] Asihene, E.V. (1978). *Understanding the Traditional Arts of Ghana*. London: Associated University Presses, Inc.
- [6] Asmah, E.A. (2004). *A Manual on Batik and Tie-dye for Teachers*. Unpublished Master's Thesis. Kumasi: Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology.
- [7] Frimpong, Asinyo & Amankwaah (2013). *Contemporary Trends in Adinkra Cloth Production: Design, Printing Technique, Base Fabric and Printing Paste*. United States: Universal Research Publications. Retrieved from <http://www.urpjournals.com> ISSN 2277-7156
- [8] Gyekye K. (1998). *African Cultural Values, An introduction for Senior Secondary Schools*. Ghana: Sankofa Publishing Company
- [9] Kumekpor, K. B. (2002). *Research Methods & Techniques of Social Research*. Accra: SonLife Printing Press and Services
- [10] Leedy, P. D. & Ormrod, J. E. (2005). *Practical Research: Planning and Design* (8th ed.). New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.
- [11] Nubour, C. (2006). *Evaluation of the textile Industry at Adanwomase, Bonwire and Ntonso in the Ashanti Region of Ghana*. Unpublished Master's Thesis. Kumasi: Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology
- [12] Rattray, R.S. (1927). *Religion and Art in Ashanti*. London: Clarendon Press.
- [13] Salm, J. S. & Folola, T. (1966). *Culture and Customs of Ghana*. London: Greenwood Press
- [14] Storey, J. (1992). *Manual of Dyes and Fabrics*. New York: Thames and Hudson Inc.

## Author Profile



**Dickson Adom** had his First Class B.A. Arts degree in Integrated Rural Arts and Industry and a grade 'A' M.A. Arts degree in African Art and Culture from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana in 2006 and 2010 respectively. He earned his Distinction in Education at the University of Education, Winneba in Ghana. He is a prolific writer

of various textbooks used in various educational levels in Ghana as well as articles in the field of art and recently in anthropological and cultural studies as well as biodiversity conservation using traditional ecological knowledge. He is a currently a Doctor of Philosophy candidate in the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana.

