

# [Article] Engaging Theology and Theological Education in the Majority World: Recognizing Visual and Symbolic Theology from the Akan People's Illustrations



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## Introduction

That there are multiple epistemologies is not disputed in contemporary scholarship—at least, not objectively. Presumably, the issue of the multiplicity of cognitive orientations includes contextual constructions of realities. This development should mean that a people's epistemological orientation is critical for teaching and doing theology among them. Thus, it is not surprising that we have different theologies: liberation, black African, feminist, and African, to name but a few. Stephen Bevans is right to suggest that there should be different approaches to and models of doing theology (2013, 3). My question is: Has missional scholarship given proper emphasis to the issue of epistemological realities for missional and theological training?

All communities use some form of symbols for communication. But for people of the “majority world”—that is, Asia, Latin America, and Africa, regions in which Christianity is thriving—symbols occupy a large, commanding space as an epistemological facility, even in the religious space. David Morgan, for instance, discusses the widespread use of symbols in Hindu religious mediation in Asia (2005a, 48–49).



For people in the majority world, symbols are serious epistemological realities. To remove symbolic communication is to deny people a medium for constructing their reality—including concepts of truth and values, social and religious direction, and other significant survival needs. As Jean-Marc Éla argues for Africa, any type of Christianity that eliminates symbolism from African peoples deprives them of “their self-awareness and tears them away from the reality that has integrated them into the very system by which, through these symbols, they are striving to overcome the contradictions between life and death” (2009, 35).

I will limit the discussion in this paper to the symbols of the Akans of Ghana as representative of the African case. I am using the Akan case study to unveil what I refer to as “symbolic theology.”

### **Metaphor, as used in this paper**

Understanding what I mean by using “symbol” requires that we begin by defining “metaphor.” A metaphor in this context is something that tells a story which is not about itself but about some other reality, which it describes for good living (Combs and Freedman 1990, xiv). People who use metaphors in this way use the stories behind the metaphors to maintain the values the metaphors teach, along with their religious and social direction, in unbroken, intergenerational transmission. Such metaphors are therefore also memory anchors for the transmission of contextual faith, values and socially appropriate attitudes, and behaviors. In short, metaphors are means for transmitting knowledge and values among communities in the majority world.

The story a metaphor tells is sometimes descriptive of a religious encounter experienced by a peoples’ forebears, which they passed down in this genre. That’s why Peter Berger’s assertion of the social contexts of epistemological realities is extremely important. Berger and Thomas Luckmann state:

It is our contention, then, that the sociology of knowledge must concern itself with whatever passes for “knowledge” in a society, regardless of the ultimate validity or invalidity (by whatever criteria) of such “knowledge.” And insofar as all human “knowledge” is developed, transmitted and maintained in social situations, the sociology of knowledge must seek to understand the processes by which this is done in such a way that a taken-for-granted “reality” congeals for the man in the street. In other words, we contend that *the sociology of knowledge is concerned with the analysis of the social construction of reality.* (1967, 3; italics in original)

This contextual process of understanding points out that knowledge of reality has a home. Berger and Luckmann's explanation implies that metaphors and symbols take a direct route toward understanding reality as people construct it.

A metaphor sometimes transmits its educational stories through proverbs, songs, stories, symbols, dirges, dance forms, and even silence. But we must investigate the intents of these metaphorical forms, identifying the social values they were intended to convey. Like Geertz's "webs of significance," we have to unravel such metaphors in pursuit of meaning (Geertz 1973, 5). We can therefore propose that a metaphor has the following qualities:

1. A metaphor is *rhetoric*. As such, it tells a story or myth. By myth, I do not mean a story that is not true. Rather, I mean historical truths that can be discerned more than verified and which are communicated in stories. As Daniel Shaw explains:

For majority of the world's people, just as for the people of biblical times, mythology acts as a root metaphor for reality. While not always based on fact as seen from a rationalist viewpoint, myth is truth from the perspective of people for whom it establishes identity—it is their scripture. (2000, 668)

Consequently, the story a metaphor tells is not about itself. The metaphor points to a culturally endorsed value or reality for a given community.

2. A metaphor is a *memory anchor*. This means that a metaphor's story or myth is intended to keep realities of a people's experiences in the memory. H. W. Turner (1979) articulates this character of metaphors in his "anthropological ontology" and "epistemological structure." In Turner's view, human beings model their experience and knowledge of God metaphorically or symbolically. According to Turner, because of the limited nature of language and the need to preserve and express experiences of the divine, human beings sometimes create symbols to serve as memory anchors. Therefore, understanding human culture, including socially constructed realities, requires unraveling the meanings people have assigned to symbols for active or passive communication (Geertz 1973, 5).
3. Part of the purpose of a metaphor is to indicate what a particular group of people considers to be "a good life." This suggests that values and morals are contextual.

## Symbol, as used in this paper

A symbol is an artwork, proverb, or ceremony that conveys a myth or story as a metaphor (Combs and Freedman 1990). When Karen Barber explains that a *thing* can be a *text*, she affirms the understanding that symbols can be entextualized (that is, given contextual meanings) to carry messages and to serve as metaphors and memory anchors for people within a culture time and space (2007b, 200).

## The Adinkra symbols of the Akans of Ghana

The Adinkra symbols are artworks that function as metaphorical memory anchors for Akans. As memory anchors, the symbols tell stories of the Akan people's historical experiences, including religious ones. Akans intend the stories to be tools for building social and cultural values for the Akan people. With the same metaphorical understanding of the Adinkra symbols, Archbishop Emeritus Peter Sarpong of St. Peter's Basilica in Kumasi, Ghana, says:

The Adinkra Symbols are the age-old pictorial presentation of the values that have stood Akans in good stead for so long. These symbols are many. The Adinkra Symbols are extensively used to express feelings and sentiments that one may be undergoing at a particular moment. (2008, v)

Odeneho Dr. Afram Brempong III, Sumamanhene,<sup>1</sup> expresses this same view of the Adinkra symbols as instruments of expressions in an article in Ghana's *Daily Graphic* newspaper (Adu-Gyamerah, *Daily Graphic*, March 16, 2016). In that publication, the Sumamanhene described the Adinkra symbols as artistic realities, which "espouse and highlight the philosophical underpinnings of African traditional cultural beliefs and practices including the existence and supremacy of God, unity in diversity as well as the concept of power and authority."

This king of the Gyaman Kingdom, whose name the Adinkra symbols bear, is credited with the creation of the first Adinkra symbols in the 17th century (Nana Buachie Suma 2016; Willis 1998, 29; Nkansah-Obrempong 2010, 200–201). As such, the Sumamanhene is one the traditional custodians of the historical myths about the Adinkra symbols. The Gyaman Kingdom was an Akan kingdom which covered the mideastern and the midwestern parts of the Ivory Coast and Ghana, respectively. Nana Adinkra's reason for creating the first

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<sup>1</sup> Sumamanhene is the Akan title for the Paramount Chief of the Suma Traditional Area. Odeneho Dr. Afram Brempong III is a living descendant of the Nana Kwadwo Adinkra Agyeman, ancient king of the Gyaman Kingdom.

Adinkra symbol, which I will discuss later, is therefore important for unravelling the myth around the Adinkra symbols so that we can understand them.

The Akan people believe that the metaphors conveyed by the Adinkra symbols are part of the realities that give them their cultural identity. Figure 1 shows Adinkra symbols which function as religious metaphors for the Akans.



Figure 1. Gye Nyame (“except God”); Owuo kuum Nyame (“death killed God”).

These Adinkra symbols are primarily religious symbols, created by the ancestors of the Akans of Ghana (and the Ivory Coast) to represent and express their religious experiences and transmit their faith to future generations.

According to the Sumamanhene, whom I interviewed about the origins of the Adinkra symbols, the first symbol Nana Adinkra created was the *Obi nka ‘bi* (“no one bites the other”), shown in Figure 2 (Achampong 2008, 18).



Figure 2. Different forms of the *Obi nka ‘bi* Adinkra symbol.

The *Obi nka ‘bi* was originally an art piece showing two fish with their tails in each other’s mouths. In the artwork, each fish is waiting for the other to bite first.

The Sumamanhene explained that Nana Adinkra created the *Obi nka ‘bi* from a dream he had when his kingdom was faced with an imminent civil war. In the story, Nana Adinkra needed a way to avert that war. According to the Sumamanhene, whenever Nana Adinkra received inspiration for a symbol—often through dreams—he drew the symbol the next morning on a growing *duatoa* (“tree-bottle,” a gourd).

The story about the Obi nka 'bi tells that the following morning, Nana Adinkra called all the chiefs of the kingdom and explained the symbol to them. This quelled the civil war. Since then, the Obi nka 'bi symbol has meant for the Akans that a people of one nation should not fight amongst themselves, because a civil war will surely destroy them all. The Akans have carried this primary understanding of the Obi nka 'bi into the 21st century, where it has become a national symbol for Ghanaians. Since Ghana's adoption of a democratic form of governance, political tensions have threatened the nation's peace before national elections. In pre-election periods, Ghanaians have always feared civil war. Whenever those political tensions arise, the Obi nka 'bi Adinkra symbol has been part of the symbolic communication channels used to quell the tensions, ushering Ghana into peace throughout the election periods. Before the 2016 presidential and parliamentary elections in Ghana, for instance, the Obi nka 'bi and other Adinkra symbols had a strong presence in the mediated peace messages printed and broadcasted in that country.

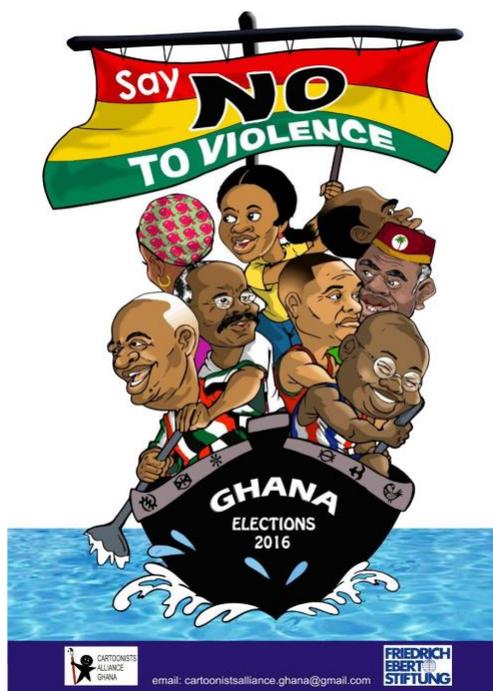


Figure 3. A cartoon of the canoe of peace<sup>2</sup> before the 2016 elections in Ghana.

The artistic impression in Figure 3 pictures the leaders of all of the political parties that were vying for the 2016 presidential election. The leaders were in one canoe, with Adinkra symbols drawn along its outboard. This peace picture, featuring Adinkra symbols, communicated meaning to Ghanaians and became a part of the tools Ghanaians used to ease the political tensions. We now look at two more Adinkra symbols.

<sup>2</sup> Cartoons Alliance of Ghana, "Ghana Elections 2016." [Cartoonistalliance.ghana@gmail.com](mailto:Cartoonistalliance.ghana@gmail.com) (2016).

### What is the *Gye Nyame* symbol?

The *Gye Nyame* symbol (Figure 4) has been translated “except God/the Lord” (Willis 1998, 114–15). It affirms that final decisions in all issues about life and existence are with God, not human beings. From that understanding, the *Gye Nyame* symbol represents the sovereignty and supremacy of God for the Akan people (Willis 1998, 114).



Figure 4. The *Gye Nyame* symbol (“the final decision is with God [and not humans]”) (Achampong 2008).

The Sumamanhene said that the founders of the Gyaman Kingdom were once neighbors of the Asantes, in what is now the city of Kumasi, Ghana. But they fought with the Asantes and killed their king, Nana Obiri Yeboah, in the 17th century. According to the Sumamanhene, when King Osei Tutu I succeeded his uncle Nana Obiri Yeboah as the leader of the Asantes, he always sought revenge, to destroy the Gyamans and the kingdom of Nana Adinkra. To avoid a war of Asante revenge, the Gyaman people migrated away from the Asantes, eventually settling in their present locations in Ghana and the Ivory Coast. The Sumamanhene recounted that from the founding of the Asante Kingdom, the Asantes have fought six wars with the Gyamans in continued attempts to annihilate the Gyaman Kingdom. The Sumamanhene contends, however, that the Asantes never defeated the Gyamans, and that the Gyamans never became vassals to the Asantes.

The Gyamans believed that the Supreme Being, or God, protected them from the larger Asante army and its superior war tactics. The Gyamans attributed their survival as a nation to the preservation of Nyame, the shortened form of Nyankopɔn (the Akan name for God). For that reason, the *Gye Nyame* became a symbolic affirmation and memory carrier of the belief that unless God allows it, a people who have Nyame’s (God’s) protection cannot be destroyed. This is part of the myth behind the *Gye Nyame* symbol. Their belief that God protected them as a people has not faltered, for the Akan people seem to have had a long historical relationship with God (Rattray 1979, chapter 13).

The *Gye Nyame* symbol was created to tell the survival story of the Gyamans in fatal contexts and situations. It is a symbolic, artistic creed that affirms and communicates that the Gyamans survived only through the gracious and merciful safekeeping of Nyame (God). The *Gye Nyame* invites new Akan generations to trust in

Nyankopɔn, the all-powerful God of heaven. That belief in Nyame’s sovereignty seems to be the reason why W. Bruce Willis wrote in his *Adinkra Dictionary* that the Gye Nyame symbol communicates "the omnipotence, omnipresence, and immortality of God" (1998, 114). In the Gye Nyame the Akan people confess a faith that says, "Except God, I fear none." This message is so connected to Ghana’s cultural and historical values that today the symbol appears on some of the country’s currency.

The story of the symbol’s creation further illustrates the historical, experience-based origins of the Adinkra symbols. The Gye Nyame symbol was created to look like two traditional clubs, with something between them that keeps them from crashing into each other. The symbol suggests that though there may be danger all around, with an issue between them still keeping them apart, there will be no destruction.

Even in present-day Ghana, the Gye Nyame Adinkra symbol communicates a sense of God’s protection of those who trust in him. The oral culture of the Akan people does not need a lengthy theological treatise to grasp the central concept. For the Akan, a symbol is sufficient to convey that faith-building story. A symbol tells stories in ways that go beyond words.

### The *Owuo kumm Nyame* symbol



Figure 5. *Owuo kumm Nyame*.

The *Owuo kumm Nyame* symbol (Figure 5) means, literally, "death killed God." Like the Gye Nyame, this symbol is created with images of two Akan traditional clubs. The clubs face each other, with the *Sepɔ* Adinkra symbol between them. The *Sepɔ* is a combination of the symbol "O" (the symbolic representation of God, from which the Akans get the name "Onyankopɔn" for God), and the symbol for rulership, a triangular design that kings and paramount chiefs continue to wear on their chests. The *Sepɔ* symbol, therefore, is a symbol of law or justice. It also often refers to Onyankopɔn (God himself or herself).<sup>3</sup> The complexity in the fact that the *Owuo kumm Nyame* symbol suggests the death of God is beyond the scope of this brief article to discuss fully. But the *Owuo kumm Nyame* can be a starting point for an Akan theology of the death of God in Christianity.

<sup>3</sup> Among the Akans, God can be either male or female. God is sometimes referred to as "Onyame Obaatanpa" ("God the good Mother").

## Adinkra symbolic theology: Is it viable?

Some scholars have argued that in many settings in Ghana today, people use the Adinkra symbols without knowing their deep meanings. Willis, for example, says:

Many people who wear Adinkra like its attractiveness and may not understand the deep spiritual and cultural meanings behind the symbols. Some retail dealers of the [Adinkra] cloth also cannot “read” the symbols and do not know the deep spiritual meaning of the cloth’s symbols. (1998)

I agree that in many contexts people who use Adinkra cloth and symbols do not really understand the deeper spiritual and philosophical issues being communicated. But the symbols are still a potentially effective medium for theological education in Ghana—partly because of their popularity, but also, more importantly, because of how they fit into the way people transmit their socially and culturally constructed realities from one generation to another. To this we now turn.

## Sociocultural transmission of the metaphors of symbols

In my Ph.D dissertation (2018), I wrote about the meanings of some of the Adinkra symbols. A reader asked if I assumed that traditions from the ancestors have remained static in meaning, in spite of the changing trends of globalization. Though I had not viewed the meanings of the Adinkra symbols as static, I see the question of the sociocultural transmission of symbol is an important one. Figure 6 presents a diagram of my perception of the transmission of symbols across the generations in a cultural time and space, clarifying the different phases that Adinkra symbols have moved through in the history of the Akan people.

GL is the “Generation Line,” which follows the history of a group of people. On this line, I am sample three contexts (A, B, C), representing recognizable periods in the people’s cultural history. These periods stand out because within them people respond consciously and unconsciously to social, political, economic, and other contextual influences in their pursuit of survival. Normally, when people struggle for survival during their history, they do not want to lose what they have learned from the experience. Therefore, they preserve and communicate these experiences and their significance through symbols, creating Symbolic Memory Anchors (SMAs) from the resources available to them. These SMAs stabilize and are used to carry the metaphors to future generations.

The members of the cultural group who initially had the religious experiences (REs) will intentionally share the symbols and their metaphors, or rhetoric, until the symbolic becomes what A. H. Mathias Zahniser calls “dominant symbols” (Zahniser 1997, 78). Dominant symbols are those symbols known and understood by a significant majority of the people within a social context. For some generations after the creation of these symbols, they will hold their significant metaphors or rhetoric for the people of that culture in the space of time; this is what I call the succeeding generation gap (SG). In these SG epochs, the original metaphor of the symbols will serve the purposes of their original creators until a future generation encounters challenging realities of different social, political, economic, and other contextual influences. These life issues will in turn cause them to seek out contextually compelling, relevant answers.

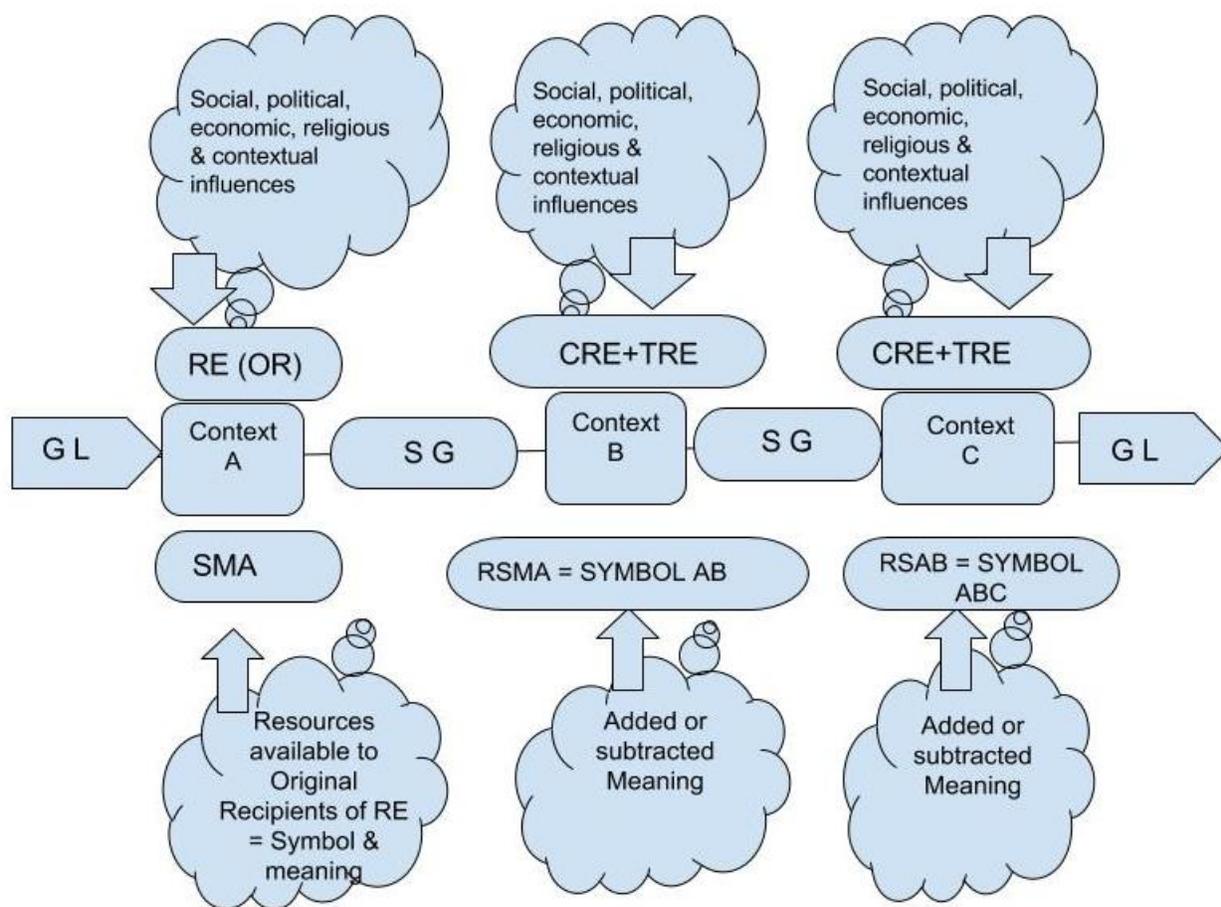


Figure 6. The transmission of symbols in cultural time and space.

I believe, however, that people do not discard their inherited traditions for entirely new solutions when challenged by new realities. Instead, they process the contemporary contextual religious experiences (CREs), together with their inherited traditions, or transferred religious experiences (TREs), into new religious

symbolic memory anchors (RSMAs), thus creating new symbols from the old. In this way, symbol A becomes symbol AB.

The same process of symbolic alteration will continue to develop until the people of that culture, in another context, have achieved a new symbolic form, symbol ABC. This will be a newer form of symbolic memory anchors (RSMAs) that fulfills the needs of the contemporary generation. When the next generation face another challenge, they process their received symbolism put together as received symbolic anchor birthed (RSAB) with their contextual symbols for new realities. This processing of symbolism continues as they deal with the need for new realities from epoch to epoch.

Again, one issue in all of this is that people normally do not entirely discard their inherited SMAs. Rather, they add to the inherited symbols to make them more appropriate and relevant for their contexts. As Kwame Gyekye affirms, “The truth of the assertion that every society in the modern world inherits ancestral cultural values implies that modernity is not always a rejection of the past” (1997b, 217).

Understanding that modernity is a processing of the past and the contemporary, I suggest the following:

1. First, effective education for cross-cultural missions must not only appreciate the cultural distinctiveness of different peoples but also identify what constitutes reality for peoples whose cultural orientations are different from that of the missionary. The humility required to recognize the reality of different epistemological orientations around the world is therefore not only godly, but absolutely essential.
2. Second, missions students must be trained to understand that differences in epistemologies require a critical hermeneutical analysis of the historically and socially constructed realities of the cultural areas in which the missionaries live and work. Anything short of these realizations and affirmation is likely to bring about rejection of the faith by Christians of those communities, who may not even know that they continue to deal with split-level Christianity and folk religion, as Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiénou argue (2000). They will foster only Christians for whom the Christian faith is peripheral, who, in the words of Peter K. Sarpong, jump in and out of the water of Christianity as it suits them (2002, 18).

## What are the benefits of symbolic theology?

I believe that symbolic theologies and theological education are appropriate for majority world contexts, because in these worlds, symbols occupy a large space in epistemology. As Jean-Marc Éla explains, the symbolic occupies an important space in Africans' lives. As I showed at the beginning of this paper, many Asians share this kind of reality. Éla points out that many Africans appreciate reality through symbols. He argues that the Africans' universe, for instance, is one in which "all things speak [that is, are metaphorical]" (2009, 34). Éla explains that the African world is a world in which signs play an important role in every socio-religious practice. He suggests that African civilization is one of symbols, in which relationships pass through the invisible places of the symbolic, in a distinctive way of maintaining relationship to the universe (Éla 2009, 35).

Emmanuel Martey and Nicholas Ibeawuchi Mbogu refer to this kind of cultural deprivation as "anthropological pauperization." For Mbogu, "The social underdevelopment of Africa represents a fundamental aspect of the anthropological pauperization of the African person":

If we define pauperization as the fact of becoming poor, namely being deprived of all that we have acquired, all that we are and all that we can be, we shall recognize that Africa is subjected to structures, which result in complete pauperization: political and social. When it is not a matter of being deprived of all we own, but rather of all we are—our human identity, our social roots, our history, our culture, our dignity, our rights, our hopes, our plans—then pauperization becomes anthropological. (2006, 343)

For this reason alone, we must not only champion missional education that digresses from Western epistemological structures and employs symbolic and visual epistemological structures for the majority world contexts, but we also have to orient ourselves toward missionary interventions that employ symbols to a great extent. That's why Sarpong has called on African theologians to begin to use symbols for their theological constructions. He pleads:

It is important for the minister to remember that African traditional religion and culture put much store by rituals and ceremonies. These are of sacramental value. They cause what they signify. *One cannot think of African religion or life without externals such as gestures, symbols, signs depicting some innermost realities.* (Sarpong 1990, 12; italics mine)

Sarpong reminds us that theologians who work in African contexts must begin to dialogue with African cultures in deeper ways. I believe that dialogue with African socially constructed realities will facilitate the doing away with split-level Christianity (Hiebert, Shaw, and Tiénou 2000, 15–17). In the final moments in this paper, I will outline some of the benefits of symbolic theology for the majority world.

### **Benefits of symbolic theology and education**

Visual symbols encapsulate deeply held concepts, including a people's theological experiences, as explained above, and truths about the world with a depth often not realized through other teaching methods. As a means for retaining and expressing faith, symbols are effective structures for missional education and theological constructions. As Morgan says, symbols or "Images can serve as a kind of external scaffolding for interior experience, such as mediation" (2005a, 50).

Second, symbols may better engage majority-world people in worship than other methods. Morgan is convinced of this, concluding that "the acts of looking at images [symbols] and evoking imagery within the imagination are ritual practices that would not work as they do without imagery" (2005a, 51).

Third, symbols foster faith communities for people who live in the symbolic worlds of oral literature more easily than in philosophical faith confessions. Many people of the majority world fit this description. People who share faith symbols are more likely to see themselves as having one source of identity, power, and protection.

The Bible itself is full of types, bordering on symbolic theological constructions. I will present one such example. The understanding that some the Adinkra symbols of the Akans were created from religious experiences for the purposes of transmitting religious constructed realities is similar to the story of the institution of the Passover meal for the people of Israel (Exodus 12:24–27). The purpose of the meal was intended as a metaphor to carry the message of God's salvation of his people. As humans in primarily oral cultures, communication happens better through metaphors of symbols and ceremonies. These symbols touch people more deeply than purely verbal philosophical presentations.

### **Conclusion**

We have seen that people construct, appreciate, and transmit reality in different ways. I have argued that for majority-world people the construction of theology and theological education must recognize and

intentionally employ visual symbols. Any theology and theological education that ignores this important issue will end up further pauperizing the people of the majority world. We have seen some of the benefits for missions as they take symbolic theology seriously.

The proposed symbolic theology will also have some limitations. Some people may fear that its sometimes close connections to traditional culture could weaken the significance of Christianity as a new, better, truer religion. This perception in turn, may more easily foster unwanted religious syncretism. However, symbolic and visual theologies are better for people of the majority world, because they exist within already familiar concepts. This need for familiarization with the symbolisms of mission destinations was true for the Apostle Paul when he spoke in Athens (Acts 17:16–31), and it remains true in all parts of the world today.

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