

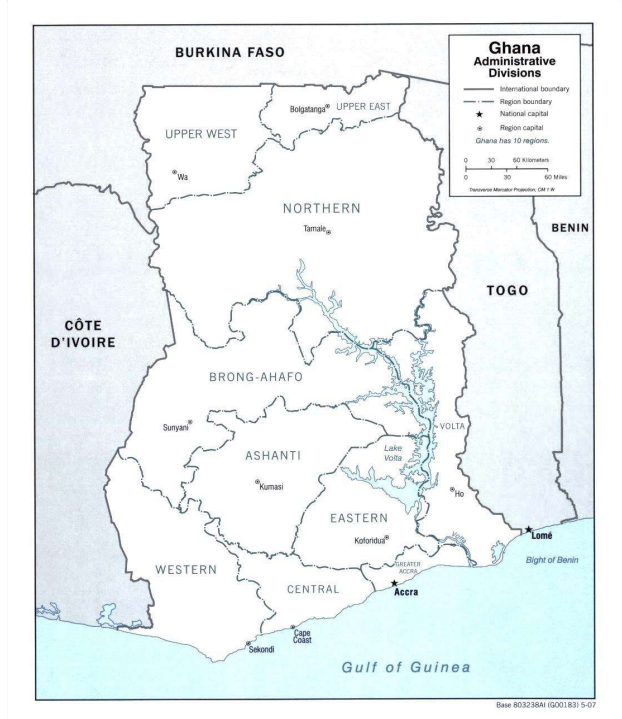
College Guild
PO Box 696, Brunswick, Maine 04011
World Mythology
Unit 2 of 5
Ghanaian Mythology

Africa is made up of 54 countries with over 3,000 ethnic groups and around 2,000 languages. And as one can imagine, Africa hosts an abundance of cultures, each with its own set of varying belief systems. African myths are embedded and transmitted through ritual practice. African mythology commonly depicts the **cosmos anthropomorphically**. However, despite similarities in stories, legends, and **deities** across various regions, these beliefs remain distinct to the people of each location, making African Mythology a broad and diverse term. This unit focuses on information derived from one specific area of the continent, highlighting the myths and **deities** unique to that region: Ghana, a West African country, and more specifically, the Akan people.

Africa Map



Ghana Map



Adinkra Symbols



Glossary of Terms:

1. **Abosom** - Lower **deities** or spirits, which assist humans on earth.
2. **Adinkra** - A writing system using **symbols** to represent various concepts used by the Akan peoples of Ghana to mark fabrics.
3. **Androgynous Entity** - One of indeterminate sex or possessing attributes considered both male and female.
4. **Anthropomorphic** - Having human characteristics.
5. **Artifacts** - An object made by a human being, typically an item of cultural or historical interest.
6. **Ceremonies** - A formal religious or public occasion, typically one celebrating a particular event or anniversary.
7. **Cosmos** - The universe regarded as an orderly, harmonious whole.
8. **Counsel** - A person or group of people that give advice.
9. **Deity** - Divine status, quality, or nature of a god or goddess.
10. **Gravitas** - Seriousness and importance of manner, taking responsibility, causing feelings of respect and trust in others.
11. **Libations** - A drink poured out as an offering to a **deity**.
12. **Mortar** - A cup-shaped receptacle made of hard material, in which ingredients are crushed or ground, used especially in cooking or pharmacy.
13. **Symbols** - A mark or character used as a conventional representation of an object, function, or process, e.g. the letter or letters standing for a chemical element or a character in musical notation.
14. **Pantheon** - All the gods of a people or religion collectively.
15. **Pestles** - A heavy tool with a rounded end, used for crushing and grinding substances such as spices or drugs, typically in a **mortar**.
16. **Placated** - To make (someone) less angry or hostile.
17. **Reverence** - Deep respect for someone or something.
18. **Triad** - A group or set of three connected people or things.
19. **Triune** - Consisting of three in one (used especially with reference to the Trinity).

Ashanti Mythology of the Ashanti people of Ghana

Ghana is a country that has one of the most prosperous cultural heritages in Africa. Being home to roughly 100 linguistic and cultural groups, it is not surprising that it has various beliefs and myths. These myths have been passed on from generation to generation and have become an integral part of Ghanaian society.

Myths in Ghana mainly explain the origin of some of the most important **artifacts** and **symbols** called **adinkra**. They serve as a shorthand for communicating profound truths in visual form. Most universities in Ghana use at least one **adinkra** symbol in their logo, demonstrating the **gravitas** their use has come to symbolize. They are also used to teach positive moral values such as hard work, perseverance, and obedience to the youth in society. Many **artifacts**, including pots, stools, musical instruments, textiles, clothing, leather works, weapons, tools, carvings, masks, jewelry, and ritual dolls, have **Adinkra** symbols. We will now go into detail regarding three of the adinkra symbols presented below: osram ne nsoromma (love), denkyem (adaptability), and dwennimmen (humility).

Some Adinkra Symbols



JEALOUSY



HOPE



LOVE



ADAPTABILITY



HUMILITY



NURTURING

Osram ne Nsoromma: Love

Osram ne Nsoromma means “moon and star.” This symbol pictures a half moon with a star slightly hanging within the moon’s circumference. These two powerful objects of creation, moon and star, co-exist in the sky to produce magnificent light or brightness at night. This **adinkra** symbol represents faithfulness, fondness, harmony, benevolence, love, loyalty, and femininity. This symbol is from the proverb “Kyekye pe awaree,” meaning “The North Star loves marriage.” She, the North Star, is always in the sky waiting for the return of the moon, her husband.

Denkyem: Adaptability

Denkyem means “crocodile.” This **adinkra** symbol represents adaptability and cleverness, based on the **Akan** proverb, “The crocodile lives in water, yet it breathes air.” The crocodile is seen as intelligent and adaptable because it lives in water but breathes air. This reptile is known for its ability to navigate different environments, showing cleverness, strength, and a bit of mystery. The idea is that living in water and breathing air is tricky for humans, so the crocodile, when turned into a symbol, becomes a way to express unique qualities or abilities that someone wants to share about themselves.

Dwennimmen: Humility

Dwennimmen means “the horns of a ram.” Imagine the horns of a ram – they’re strong, fierce, and can be pretty intimidating. They are like the ram’s defense. Dwennimmen is like a picture of those horns and stands for strength in your mind, body, and soul. But here’s the exciting part – it also stands for humility, wisdom, and learning.

Why horns? Well, think about sheep – they’re humble and easy to guide. Unlike goats, they follow the shepherd wherever they are led, even regarding food. So, the symbol is saying, “Be strong, but also be humble and willing to learn, just like the horns of a ram.”

Sometimes, people find it hard to be modest, especially when they are successful. They might think their success is all because of their efforts, and that can make them act too proud. But here’s where the horns come in again – they’re a picture of two horns facing each other like rams fighting. It’s a bit like how people sometimes argue and try to prove they’re better than others. But the symbol wants us to think differently. Instead of fighting and proving we’re the best, maybe it is even more incredible to control ourselves and not get into unnecessary arguments. That could be an even higher ideal – showing strength through self-restraint. Therefore, the symbol dwennimmen not only pictures strong horns but also symbolizes the importance of humility, wisdom, and learning to control ourselves.

1. **Draw a symbol with a hidden message representing you or your family. Explain what your hidden message is.**
2. **Which of these three Adinkra symbols – osram ne nsoromma, denkyem, and dwennimmen – would you choose to represent yourself? Why?**

The Powerful Deities

The Asante, or Ashanti, people live in South-Central Ghana and nearby parts of Togo and Côte d'Ivoire. Their **deities** used to live close to humans, teaching them how to live. However, because of the bad things people did, many gods decided to go back home. In stories, they say the gods' home is in the Sky, a place beyond the clouds that no one on Earth has ever seen. Since humans can't go there or see it, they talk about the gods and their adventures on Earth instead.

3. Why would Ghanaian deities choose to reside someplace where they could not be seen versus the Greek Gods who lived on Mount Olympus, which could be seen?

The Creator

Nyame, the all-knowing, all-powerful Supreme God, Creator of the **cosmos**, and leader of the Ashanti **abosom** of gods and goddesses, is the most significant **deity** in Ashanti mythology. Nyame, like many African gods, was distant from humanity and disinterested in their everyday activities. Nyame was an **androgynous entity**, embodying both male and female aspects, and symbolized the natural world. They gave humans a soul and were the controllers of destiny. Nyame also played a parental role in the pantheon, giving birth to minor gods who represented various aspects of nature and were worshiped by 'lesser' people. At the same time, Nyame enjoyed **reverence** from kings and priests.

4. As an androgynous leader, Nyame represented all equally. Do you believe it is better that way? Why or why not?



Nyame, the Creator God, was one part of a **triune deity**, or **triad**, which consisted of Nyame, Nyankopon, and Odomankoma. Nyame represented the natural universe; Nyankopon represented its **kra** or life-giving power, and Odomankoma represented the creative force that made the world visible. Only some people made these distinctions among the three names of the **deity**. Those who distinguish between Nyame and Nyankopon identify Nyame as the female element, symbolized by the Moon, and Nyankopon as the male element, represented by the Sun.

← *Nyame - The Creator in Ghana Mythology*

In some traditions, after Nyame created the Earth and populated it with humans, they lived on Earth among people. In one tale, this situation ended when a woman bumped Nyame, who appeared masculine in this story, with her pestle as she pounded grain in her

mortar. Angry, Nyame went away to the sky. In a different version of the myth, Nyame watched a group of women pounding grain. The women asked Nyame to leave, but when he did not comply, they hurriedly approached him and struck him with their **pestles** until the god departed Earth for the sky.

5. Using both tales, come up with your own story of why Nyame returned to the sky.

In the Beginning

The First Women

Aberewa Ashanti was the name given to the primordial, or first woman. This powerful earth goddess was also called Asase Yaa. Aberewa is part of the myth that explains why the sky god, Nyame, withdrew from Earth and returned to the heavens (from the story above).

Ironically, Aberewa is the wife of Nyame, the Creator God. Nyame created the Earth and populated it with humans. Asase Yaa is the goddess of Earth and fertility to the Ashanti people of Ghana. She is the spirit of Earth, the Great Mother of Ghana, and

a tremendously important spirit in her own right. Although mighty, she has no shrines or temples dedicated to her. In the fields, people worship Asase Yaa. Anyone who works in a field can claim to be a child of Asase Yaa. She is also the Mother of the Dead, their guardian. Asase Yaa accompanied enslaved people to the Western Hemisphere. She is revered in Guyana, a country on the northern mainland of South America, and by the Maroons of Jamaica.

Aberewa Ashanti, the first woman



6. Aberewa Ashanti is a very powerful woman. List up to 3 women in your life who are powerful and explain why.

As the goddess of the Earth and the Mother of the Dead, Asase Yaa must be **placated**, typically with libations, before Earth is disturbed for any reason, whether planting, digging a grave, or otherwise. It is traditional to lift a coffin up and down three times before laying it to rest on Earth to give Asase Yaa due notice and time to prepare.

Humans depend on the Earth for all the food we eat, and when we die, we return to the Earth through burial. Aberewa Ashanti represents this cycle as the Goddess of the Earth and the Mother of the Dead. (The Aztecs, Greeks, and other cultures have similar myths.)

7. Write a short poem or a paragraph, or draw a picture about this cycle of life and death.

The First Man

The Ashanti tells several myths concerning the origin of man. According to Akan mythology, all humans lived deep in the earth. One states that on the first night (Monday in the Akan calendar, a 42-day cycle used in Ghana during this era), the first man, Adu Ogyinae (Ashanti of Ghana), came to the earth's surface through holes bored in the ground by a giant earthworm. Six men, a few women, a leopard, and a dog followed him. Of the entire group, only Adu was not frightened by the new things he saw on the earth's surface. By Tuesday, he managed to calm the others and gave them strength by laying his hands on them.

8. If you were the first human, list two ways you would communicate with animals to help you.

Adu took charge and grouped the people into work teams. He commanded the dog to search for fire while he hunted for meat with the leopard's help. The meat was cooked with the flame the dog brought back and was fed to the dog to test whether it was safe. When the dog showed no signs of illness, the others began to eat. Nyame then came upon one of the group members and made him his assistant. He also coordinated the construction of their first shelters until a tree he was cutting down fell on him and killed him. Each year, the Ashanti hold **ceremonies** in wooded areas to commemorate the first human beings.

9. Adu took charge and led people, which allowed them all to thrive in the new environment they were in. Why are leaders needed? What qualities does a good leader have?

Father and Son

Anansi (the name literally translates to spider) was one of Nyame's sons. He was considered the creator of the sun, moon, and stars and thus controlled day and night. Anansi was known as a trickster god and the god of stories, wisdom, knowledge, and the mediator between humans and spirits. Though Nyame made Adu come to life, Anansi was the one who created Adu. He also brought rain to Earth and taught humans agriculture and how to sow grain.

Initially, Anansi was renowned for his wisdom because he owned all the wisdom in the world. No one did anything without first seeking Anansi's advice. However, not everyone seemed grateful for Anansi's wise counsel. To punish people for their lack of gratitude for his wise **counsel**, Anansi decided to stop giving advice and to repossess all the wisdom he had given out. He went from house to house, collecting all the bits of wisdom. He stored the wisdom in a large pot, which he planned to hide at the top of a tall tree.

Anansi, Spider God of Knowledge, Stories, Trickery, and Wisdom



10. What is wise counsel and why is it important? Do you have someone who gives you wise counsel? If yes, how has it helped you? If not, who would you choose to serve as your wise counsel?

After Anansi had made several unsuccessful attempts to climb the tree, his son, Ntikuma, shouted that he might have an easier time if he hung the pot on his back. Anansi angrily responded that he must have failed to gather all of the world's wisdom since Ntikuma still seemed to possess some.

With the pot on his back, Anansi quickly reached the top of the tree, but his anger made him clumsy. As he tried to tie the pot to the tree, it slipped from his hands. The pot fell to the ground and smashed on a rock, freeing all the bits of wisdom. People came from all over to snatch up as much wisdom as possible. The first to arrive were able to collect a great deal of wisdom, but the latecomers found very little left to collect.

- 11. Imagine you were the first person to arrive. What kind of wisdom would you collect first? How would it impact your life choices and those around you?**
- 12. Illustrate the latecomers' expressions as they come to the realization that there is no more wisdom for them to acquire. Alternatively, write a brief poem from the latecomers' perspective, expressing their emotions about being left without wisdom.**



Death & the Underworld

← The Underworld

In one tale about the origin of death, Nyame sent his servant, a goat, to give humans the message that although death would come to them, they would not remain dead. They would come to live with Nyame in the heavens. On the way, the goat stopped to eat some grass. Annoyed by this delay, Nyame sent a sheep with the same message. Unfortunately, the sheep got the message wrong; it told people that death would be the end. When the goat finally arrived, the people said they had accepted the sheep's message. In this way, death came into the world.

13. What does this story suggest about communication?

14. Explain a time when there was a misunderstanding of a message you were trying to deliver. What happened and how did you resolve the misunderstanding?

In a different myth, people had grown tired of dying, so they sent a sheep to take a message to Nyame, asking him to let them continue to live. To ensure the message got to Nyame, they also sent a dog. Being faster than the sheep — which had stopped to eat grass — the dog reached Nyame first. However, he also gave the wrong message. He told Nyame that people wished to remain dead rather than join Nyame in the heavens. Nyame agreed to this, and when the sheep arrived with the correct message, Nyame could not reverse his decision.

15. What do both tales about the origin of death suggest about messengers versus the message? What are the lessons to be learned from the sheep, the goat, and the dog?

Amokye Ashanti is the woman who welcomes the souls of dead women to Asamando, the Land of the Dead. Amokye also guards the entrance to the underworld. Traditionally, Ashanti women wear beads, which they give Amokye as payment for admitting them to Asamando through a river crossing.

16. Why do you think the Greek gods asked for a coin of money while the Ghanaian deities asked for beads that were commonly worn?

Self-Reflection Exercise - Write, Draw, Write a Poem, Tell A Story to Answer these questions.

1) Choose a god of Ghanaian Mythology that you relate to and then explain why.

- 2) What was the most interesting thing you learned about Ghanaian Mythology?
- 3) How do the lessons of Ghanaian Mythology apply to your own life?

Remember: First names only & please let us know if your address changes

Appendix Ghanaian Mythology: Unit 2 of 5

Sources

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