

# Symbolic Wisdom Conveyed in the Traditional Ghanaian and Chinese Furniture Culture

Obed Persie Appiah-Kubi<sup>1,2,\*</sup>, Paul Benedict Inkum<sup>1,2</sup>, Obed Atta-Asamoah<sup>3</sup>, Lv Jiufang<sup>1</sup>, Zhihui Wu<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>College of Furnishings and Industrial Design, Nanjing Forestry University, Nanjing, China

<sup>2</sup>Department of Interior Design and Materials Technology, Faculty of Built and Natural Environment, Kumasi Technical University, Kumasi, Ghana

<sup>3</sup>Department of Languages, Mim Senior High School, Mim, Ghana

## Email address:

[persie.wan@gmail.com](mailto:persie.wan@gmail.com) (O. P. Appiah-Kubi)

\*Corresponding author

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**Abstract:** Symbolic wisdoms; distinguished but communicative wisdoms in the form of imagery (designs or symbols) by which a country, tribe, or ethnic group use to convey its rich culture and philosophies, have since been used in many mediums to communicate to people. Among the Ghanaians, the most popular symbolic wisdom “Gye Nyame” which translates as “except God”, symbolizing God’s supremacy and omnipotent is not only conveyed in textile design and architectural buildings but also in traditional Ghanaian furniture items. Among the Chinese, Dragon (*Lóng*), which symbolizes imperial power and authority, protection, good luck, male vigor, and fertility, is the most popular Chinese distinguished symbolic wisdom not only conveyed in textile design and architectural buildings but also in the traditional furniture items they use. There are more symbolic wisdoms used by the two countries in their Traditional furniture industry. They are to serve as a vessel for expression, posing a question or suggesting a possible answer. It is, however, a worry that though most Ghanaians and Chinese users of Traditional Furniture items with wisdoms conveyed in them know and can mention some associated with them respectively, they do not know the meaning or message the symbolic wisdoms carry. Given this, the study primarily aimed at researching the various symbolic wisdoms conveyed in the traditional Ghanaian and Chinese furniture items, to educate users to have in-depth knowledge and understanding of their preferred symbols when conveyed in furniture items. The survey research design using the qualitative approach was adopted. The convenience and purposive sampling techniques were considered to select a sample size of 25 respondents each from the two countries for the study (50 respondents). A significant percentage; 55% and 43% users respectively of Traditional Ghanaian and Chinese furniture items with symbolic wisdoms conveyed in them do not know the meaning or message the symbolic wisdoms carry. The study is expected to help educate the users to get in-depth knowledge and understanding of the message the symbols carry rather than just picking and using crafty symbolic wisdom(s). Both Ghanaian and Chinese users are encouraged to find out the meaning and the message a preferred symbolic wisdom carries before it is used. Again, further studies need to be done on the influence symbolic wisdom(s) has/have on users, and how it/they correlates with their behaviour. Furthermore, studies on other peculiar symbolic wisdom conveyed in furniture items found in temples, churches, mosques, etc. needs to be researched.

**Keywords:** Distinguished, Furniture Items, Symbolic Wisdom, Symbols, Traditional

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## 1. Introduction

Furniture items, a utilitarian object found in every

household, are classified as either traditional or contemporary and play an important role in a person’s life milestones [2-3].

The traditional ones made in Ghana and China have

exquisite designs but are symbolic regardless of their type, purpose, and who to use them. Traditional Ghanaian and Chinese furniture has a long history and the artisans have since time immemorial, constantly been innovative and creative in using durable materials for production, and carving or painting symbolic wisdoms in the form of designs on furniture items while focusing on the various wood products used in daily lives for both interior and exterior functions.

Aside from the famous and symbolic seats, other furniture items produced by the traditional Ghanaian and Chinese artisans include decorative but figurative center tables, storage items, wall hangings, valet stands, light and lampstands, door panels, miniature human figures, decorative carvings, entertainment objects, etc. in either realism or abstract form.

The traditional furniture artisans from the two countries convey symbolic wisdoms in the form of designs in the engineering of the furniture items while ensuring beauty. These symbolic wisdoms are either carved or painted on traditional furniture items to communicate a message to or about the user [7, 10, 11, 6]. Each furniture item is made from a single block of wood; the most commonly used among the Ghanaians include; “Sese”, Cedrela, Mahogany, “Nyame dua”, teak, etc. Among the Chinese, the commonly used wood include; rosewood “Huang Hua Li”, zitan wood, Chinese beech, Ebony “Wu mu”, Walnut “Heta mu”, paulownia, birch, maple, alder, mahogany “Hong mu”, to mention but a few, and carved to form furniture items [12, 15, 8, 13].

The many symbolic wisdoms in the form of designs conveyed in the traditional Ghanaian and Chinese furniture items mean that every item is unique; each has a different meaning for the person who uses it.

Among the Ghanaians, the popular symbolic wisdom conveyed in the traditional furniture items is the “Adinkra symbols”. “Adinkra symbols” are symbols believed to have originated in Gyaman, the former state of present-day Ivory Coast or Côte D'Ivoire [1]. Adinkra symbols are a fully defined set of symbols in the form of pictures or images by which the Ghanaians have also adapted to convey their rich culture and philosophies. Adinkra's symbols are based on a variety of observations and interactions between people and objects, animal and animal scenes, the human body and its organs, and natural objects, geometric and abstract ideas [4]. The common symbols used include; “*Gye Nyame*” which translates as Except God, symbolizes the supremacy of God, “*Akoma*” which translates as Heart, symbolizes patience and tolerance, “*Bi nka bi*” which translates as no one should bite the other, symbolizing peace and harmony, “*Akofena*” which translates as a war sword, symbolizes authority and gallantry, “*Sankofa*” which translates as go back and get it, symbolizes learning from the past to make self-improvement, “*Odo nnyew fie kwan*” means love does not lose its way home, “*Hye Wonhye*”, literally translates to “that which does not burn”. The symbol means imperishability and endurance. “*Nyansapo*” is another symbolic wisdom Traditional Ghanaian Furniture artisans use. The symbol means wisdom knot. It is a symbol of wisdom, ingenuity, intelligence, and

patience. There are more symbols the Traditional Ghanaian furniture artisans use. Some of the used designs contain animal shapes or images that recall the person who used them. These symbols are mostly embossed or carved on stools found in palaces and homes, and tables for both indoor and outdoor use.

The Traditional Chinese furniture and the imagery that goes with it are full of symbolic wisdoms, all of them well-meaning and auspicious [14, 9]. Aside from the characters or the pinyin, the common symbolic wisdom conveyed in the Traditional Chinese furniture is the dragon (*Lóng*). In Chinese culture, the dragon is considered the supreme being of all other animals and creatures, because of its heavy symbolism of good luck, protection, power, authority, male vigor and fertility, prosperity, and success. The Chinese see an emperor as a son of the dragon. Hence, aside seeing this supreme creature on Traditional furniture, the dragon image is often depicted in palaces, temples, houses, and on utensils and cutlery such as bowls, plates, spoons, etc. to communicate a message.

Another popular symbolic wisdom conveyed in the traditional Chinese Furniture industry is the bat (*Biānfú*). According to Chinese belief, bat represents good luck, as the word for bat sounds very similar to “Fu”, the word for good fortune or blessing. The bat symbol is supposed to represent good luck and Love, Long Life, blessing, Good Health, Wealth, and a Peaceful Death. To the Chinese, the bat is also a symbol of longevity due to its long-life span, and in particular, red bats are supposed to ward off evil spirits. Two bats seen together doubles the good luck, while the representation of five bats together symbolizes the Five Blessings of life: wealth, health, virtue, long life, and natural death. Four bats painted or carved together on the splat of any antique Chinese armchair are believed to bring quadruple luck to the owner. With this ideology, the symbolic wisdom or design when carved or painted to form part of the furniture, communicate a message about the user of the seat.

Another meaningful symbolic wisdom the Chinese convey in their traditional furniture is the cock or rooster (*Gōngjī*). The cock or rooster is a symbol of good luck to the Chinese, as it symbolizes confidence, strength, and advancement. This symbol is also widely used in business environments, and the Chinese always give a rooster with an impressive comb to someone with a new job, as a good luck charm. This symbol when painted or carved to form part of the traditional furniture item is communicative enough to say some good things to the user.

Many pieces of Chinese Antique Furniture or Chinese Antique Architectural Elements use multiple symbolic wisdom, whose meanings combine to create a richly layered and complex interpretation for the owner. For instance, to the Chinese, the Butterfly is considered as one of the meaningful symbols used in the designing of their Traditional furniture to communicate a message. The butterfly (*Húdié*) symbolizes joy and happy marriage. That is the more reason why butterflies are so often seen on the dowry furniture that a bride takes to her marriage or gives as a wedding gift to the new bride and

groom. The Lotus flower also adds another layer of symbolic wisdom, in that it often represents the Buddha himself. The lotus plant grows in the mud, yet the pretty bloom arises from the muck untainted; it is a symbol of purity and perfection, and one that represents the way of Buddhism.

There are more symbolic wisdoms, at times a combination of symbols the Traditional Chinese furniture artisans use. Some of the used symbolic wisdom or designs contain animal shapes or images that recall the person who used them.

The many symbolic wisdoms of Ghana and China conveyed in Traditional Furniture items are to serve as a vessel for expression, posing a question or suggesting a possible answer. Symbolic wisdoms are not only for aesthetic sake, but design expression's sake. It is a worry though most Ghanaians and Chinese Traditional Furniture users know and can mention some symbolic wisdoms associated with them respectively, they do not know the meaning or message the symbolic wisdoms carry. [5] asserts that the search for design expression in traditional furniture is the driving force of human civilization. This assertion, however, has been the motivation to research the various symbolic wisdom conveyed in the traditional Ghanaian and Chinese furniture items, to educate users to have in-depth knowledge and understanding of their preferred symbols when conveyed in their furniture items.

The study will serve as reference material for the general public particularly Ghanaian and Chinese users of Traditional Furniture items with symbolic wisdom(s) conveyed in them. Traditional furniture artisans from Ghana and China, as well as those from other parts of the continents and researchers across the globe will also benefit from the awareness the study will create, as one's culture can be learned and adapted.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The researchers adopted the survey research design using the qualitative research approach with interview as the main primary source of data collection and other literary sources serving as the secondary source of collecting data. The convenience and purposive sampling techniques were considered to select a sample size of 25 respondents each from the two countries for the study (50 respondents). Data were obtained from respondents through the use of an open and close-ended questionnaire.

## 3. Result and Discussion

The following results were from interviewing Ghanaian and Chinese users of Traditional Furniture items with

symbolic wisdom conveyed in them.

### 3.1. Ghanaian Respondents' Knowledge of Symbolic Wisdom

The 25 respondents from Ghana were asked the following questions:

#### 3.1.1. Do You Know What Ghanaian Symbolic Wisdoms or Designs Are

22 out of the 25, representing 88% of the respondents indicated they know what symbolic wisdom or design is, while the remaining 3, representing 12% of the respondents stated they do not know what it is. The 22 concluded that, symbolic wisdoms or designs are symbols in the form of imagery by which Ghanaians use to convey their rich culture and philosophies.

Below shows the graphical representation of their responses.

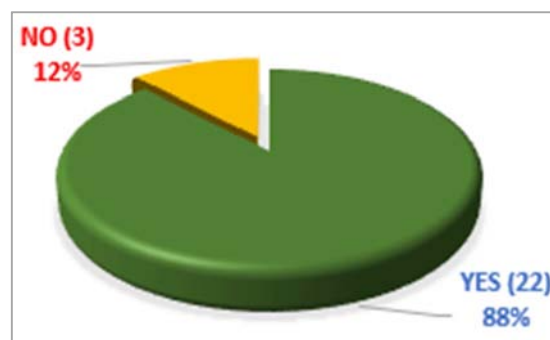


Figure 1. Ghanaian respondents' knowledge of symbolic wisdom.

#### 3.1.2. Can You Mention Some Distinguished Ghanaian Symbolic Wisdoms or Designs Conveyed in Traditional Furniture Items

Symbols like "Gye Nyame", "Sankofa", "Adinkrahene", "Akoma", "Bi nka bi", "Akofena", "Hye Wonhye", "Nyansapo", "Nkyinkyim", "Aban", "Mako", and "Mmere Dane" were some of the symbolic wisdoms mentioned by the 22 respondents. It was known through the study that "Gye Nyame", which translates as "except God" is the most popular or common Ghanaian symbolic wisdom or design most Ghanaians know and prefer when conveyed in the traditional furniture items they use. This is because Ghanaians in general believe in the Supreme God as the omnipotent, and know He is capable of meeting the needs of those who faithfully worship and trust in him.

Below shows the images of some distinguished Ghanaian symbolic wisdoms or designs the respondents mentioned.



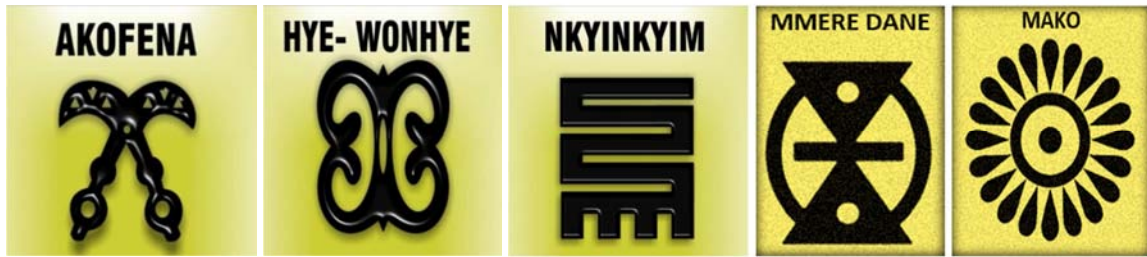


Figure 2. Images of some distinguished Ghanaian symbolic wisdom.

Below shows, some Ghanaian symbolic wisdom conveyed in traditional furniture items.



Figure 3. Some Ghanaian symbolic wisdom conveyed in Traditional Furniture items.

### 3.1.3. Do You Know the Message the Mentioned Ghanaian Symbolic Wisdom Conveyed in Traditional Ghanaian Furniture Items Communicate to Users

The 22 respondents that indicated they know the Ghanaian symbolic wisdom and even mentioned some, were further asked if they know the message the mentioned designs or symbols communicate. Surprisingly, only 10 out of the 22 respondents representing 45% know the message the mentioned symbolic wisdom communicates about a user.

According to the 10 respondents, they do not only look out for how crafty traditional furniture items appear but the message a symbolic wisdom carries encourage or persuade them to buy the item(s).

The majority of the respondents (12) representing 55% do not know that the symbolic wisdom conveyed in traditional Ghanaian furniture items communicates a message about a user, and this excludes the 3 respondents who initially stated they do not know Ghanaian symbolic wisdom.

It appears that the 12 respondents see Ghanaian symbolic wisdom as nice designs conveyed in traditional furniture items to just beautify the items to attract users or buyers.

Below is the graphical representation.

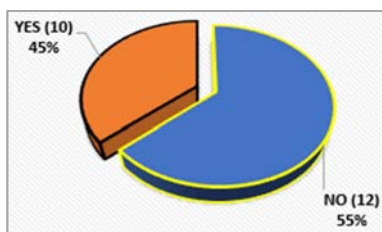


Figure 4. Response on the knowledge of the meanings into the symbolic wisdom.

### 3.2. Chinese Respondents' Knowledge of Symbolic Wisdom

The 25 respondents from China were asked the following questions.

#### 3.2.1. Do You Know What Chinese Symbolic Wisdoms or Designs Are

23 out of the 25, representing 92% of the respondents indicated they know what symbolic wisdom or design is, while the remaining 2, representing 8% of the respondents stated they do not know what it is. The 23 concluded that the Chinese symbolic wisdoms or designs are symbols in the form of logograms or writings (Chinese characters or hanzi) or imagery or a combination of both by which the Chinese use to convey its rich culture and philosophies.

Below shows the graphical representation.

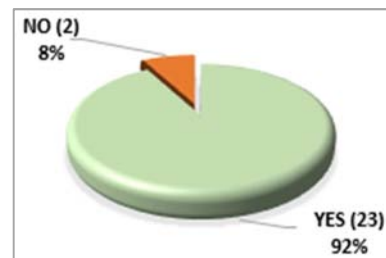


Figure 5. Chinese respondents' knowledge on symbolic wisdom.

#### 3.2.2. Can You Mention Some Distinguished Chinese Symbolic Wisdoms or Designs Conveyed in Traditional Furniture Items

Distinguished symbolic wisdoms like the Chinese characters or hanzi, Dragon (Lóng), Bat (Biānfú), Cock or Rooster (Gōngjī), Butterfly (Húdié), Lotus Flower, Koi Fish,



Elephant, Snake, and Sword were some of the symbolic wisdoms mentioned by the 23 respondents. Like the Ghanaians have the “Gye Nyame” symbolic wisdom as the popular symbolic wisdom, the Chinese also have theirs. It was known through the study that the Dragon (*Lóng*), which symbolizes imperial power and authority, protection, good luck, male vigor, and fertility, is the most popular or common Chinese distinguished symbolic wisdom most Chinese know and prefer when conveyed in the traditional furniture items they use. This is because the Chinese in general believe they find protection and power when this symbolic wisdom is conveyed in any item.

Below shows the images of some distinguished Chinese symbolic wisdoms the respondents mentioned.



**Figure 6.** Images of some distinguished Chinese symbolic wisdom.

Below shows, some Chinese symbolic wisdom conveyed in traditional furniture items.



**Figure 7.** Some Chinese symbolic wisdom conveyed in Traditional Furniture items.

### 3.2.3. Do You Know the Message the Mentioned Chinese Symbolic Wisdoms Conveyed in Traditional Chinese Furniture Items Communicate to or About Users

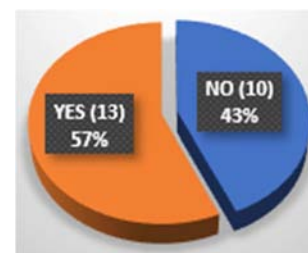
The 23 respondents that indicated they know the Chinese symbolic wisdoms and even mentioned some, were further asked if they know the message the mentioned symbols communicate. Amazingly, 13 out of the 23 respondents representing 57% know the message the mentioned symbolic wisdom communicates about a user.

According to the 13 respondents, because the symbols communicate, they feel fulfilled to use or purchase furniture items with symbolic wisdom carved, embossed, or painted on them before considering the crafty nature of the item. They believe the symbols help remind them of who they are and the expectations from the society.

The remaining 10 representing 43% do not know the exact message the Chinese symbolic wisdoms conveyed in traditional furniture items communicate to or about a user. This excludes the 2 respondents who initially stated they do not know Chinese symbolic wisdoms.

The 10 respondents see Chinese symbolic wisdoms as nice designs conveyed in traditional furniture items to add beauty to the traditional furniture items to easily attract users or buyers.

Below is the graphical representation.



**Figure 8.** Response on the knowledge of the meanings into the symbolic wisdom.

Both the Ghanaians and the Chinese have several symbolic wisdoms they use to communicate a message. Comparatively, as “Gye Nyame” is a popular symbolic wisdom used in the Traditional Ghanaian furniture industry, the Dragon “Lóng” is also seen as the popular symbolic wisdom conveyed in Traditional Chinese furniture items.

Due to different cultures and philosophy of Ghana and China, the “Gye Nyame” symbol which is commonly conveyed in traditional furniture items, is a belief from the Ghanaians that, God, the supreme being has the power to bless, change fortunes, protect, and make them what they want to be. That is the reason why this particular symbol is seen in almost every traditional furniture items. On the other hand, the Chinese also use the Dragon “Lóng” symbol to portray imperial power and authority, protection, good luck, male vigor, and fertility. This clearly means the two countries believe in different supreme being.

From the study, it is realized that 55%, that is, most users of traditional Ghanaian furniture items with symbolic wisdoms conveyed in them do not know the message the wisdoms carry. This, however, is a worry because it appears the education on Ghana’s culture and histories are low, and sooner than later, Ghana’s rich culture that contains great philosophies will fade off since a great aspect of the culture is being used for using sake without understanding the message it contains. This is different among the Chinese. About 43% of users of traditional furniture items with symbolic wisdoms conveyed in them also do not know the message the wisdoms carry. Though 43% is a significant percent, majority know the message the wisdoms carry, and it is a good sign of understanding China’s culture and philosophies.

## 4. Conclusion

From the study, it can be concluded that both the Ghanaians and the Chinese have symbolic wisdom that is conveyed in their traditional furniture items. All of them are different, unique, and communicative.

It is concluded that, “Gye Nyame” which translate as *except God* is the popular symbolic wisdom conveyed in the traditional Ghanaian furniture items while Dragon “Lóng”, which symbolizes imperial power and authority, protection, good luck, male vigor, and fertility is the popular symbolic wisdom conveyed in the traditional Chinese furniture items.

It is again concluded that majority of users of respective Traditional Ghanaian and Chinese Furniture items with symbolic wisdoms conveyed in them know the symbolic wisdom. However, a significant percentage of 55% and 43% users respectively of Ghanaian and Chinese traditional furniture items with symbolic wisdoms conveyed in them do not know the exact message or meaning the symbolic wisdoms communicate to a user. It is how nice or attractive their respective symbolic wisdoms appear on traditional furniture items that influence them as their preferred symbol when conveyed in their traditional furniture items.

## 5. Recommendations

Users of both traditional Ghanaian and Chinese furniture items are encouraged to find out the meaning and the message a preferred symbolic wisdom carries before it is used. Again, further studies need to be done on the influence these symbolic wisdoms have on users, and how they correlates with their behaviour.

Every tribe, country and religion have special symbolic wisdoms that help them communicate a message, it is therefore recommended that, further studies be conducted to bring to bear other peculiar symbolic wisdoms conveyed in furniture items found in temples, churches, mosques, etc.

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