

Adinkra Project: Grounded in Liberty City

A socially engaged art project by Xavier Cortada



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The facade of the African Heritage Cultural Arts Center depicts Adinkra symbols.

Working in conjunction with Liberty City’s youth and its [African Heritage Cultural Arts Center](#) (AHCAC), artist Xavier Cortada is creating *Adinkra Project: Grounded in Liberty City* to address issues around community cohesion, communal identity, and gentrification. Adinkra, symbols from Ghana that represent deeply symbolic concepts, are a means for “supporting the transmission of a complex and nuanced body of practice and belief.” These symbols cover the façade of the AHCAC, presenting an array of African proverbs in the form of elaborate iconography and providing Cortada with a point of departure for community involvement. Local families will depict Adinkra symbols of their choice on flags and plant them at home alongside native trees. This practice harkens back to the artist’s [Native Flags](#) project, launched at the North Pole through the New York Foundation for the Arts, which saw Miami



Since 2009, Cortada has implemented *Native Flags* with school children in every Miami-Dade County public school.

citizens as “reverse conquistadors,” reclaiming urban spaces for nature. Within the context of Cortada’s efforts in Liberty City, the Adinkra symbols offer neighbors a means to display a unified statement of reclamation. By having residents of the community make a collective claim to an area in this way, the Adinkra symbols act as cultural aphorisms, the relevance of which resides in their ability to present the relational identity of a localized population as a ubiquitous part of everyday life.

Cortada’s project focuses on 11 specific Adinkra symbols; the respective symbols representative of core societal values. Take, for example, the *Nkonsonkonson* symbol, a literal chain link illustrative of community unity and reminder of each individual’s contribution to common wellbeing. The significance of such powerful collective imagery carries exponential resonance through its continued usage across space and time. By having local Liberty City residents plant these symbols within and around their neighborhood, a shared mentality of an “owned” and respected community space is fostered. This theme of communal pride is an intrinsic aspect of the artist’s work, the very process of this project being one of self-empowerment. Importantly, the saplings children plant today will provide the tree canopy for a community they aim to grow, giving shade to their own children a generation from now.

Bronzes

Through Cortada's residency at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center (part of a Home + Away program with Oolite Arts), the artist furthered his investigation of the Adinkra symbols within the perspective of a traditional fine art material; bronze. The dichotomy that exists between ephemerality and permanence has long been a part of Cortada's work, the presumption of art as a living, engaged culture. Bronze's cultural importance resides in it being a historically significant metal to the development of human civilization. When used in the depiction of the adinkra symbols, the ensuing sculptures appear timeless, seemingly as old as the iconography upon which they are based.



Molten bronze is poured to create Xavier Cortada's Adinkra sculptures at his Anderson Ranch Arts Center sculpture studio in Aspen, Colorado during his 2022 Oolite Arts Home + Away Residency.



Xavier Cortada, "AYA (Adinkra series)," bronze, 2022.



Xavier Cortada, "NKYINKYIM (Adinkra series)," bronze, 2022.



Xavier Cortada, "OHENE TUO (Adinkra series)," bronze, 2022.



Xavier Cortada, "PEMPAMSIE (Adinkra series)," bronze, 2022.



Xavier Cortada, "AKOBEN," bronze, 2022.



AKOBEN

Meaning: The Word ‘Akoben’ literally describes a horn that was blown by Ashantis to summon warriors, alert people and prepare for battle.

Symbolises: vigilance, wariness

Origin: The word is derived from the term *aben* and it means animal horn.

Spiritual meaning: Akoben symbolizes devotion, loyalty and service. Each person has a unique role in the social construction of justice¹.

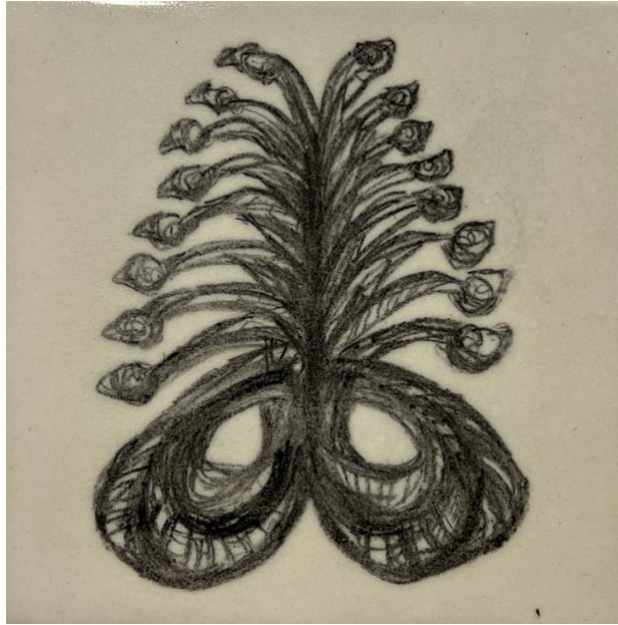
Meaning in today’s society: It calls for citizens to be vigilant about their community. To take action and get involved, participate and create a good place for their families and friends.

Environmental meaning: The Akoben adinkra symbol has been adopted by the Environmental Protection Agency in Ghana for an environmental performance rating and disclosure initiative for mining and manufacturing operations². This symbol calls the citizens to be alert and prepare for action and defend their communities. In this instance the symbol is utilized to call for environmental action, to be vigilant and be ready to defend their territory and follow thru with environmental initiatives the country has put in place.

Image above: Xavier Cortada, “Akoben,” Underglaze on glazed ceramic tile, 6” x 6”, 2020

¹ Black, Helen. 2011. *From zero to eighty: Two African american men’s narrative of racism, suffering, survival and transformation*. iUniverse Press.

² Adom, Dickson, Opuku, Moses, Newton, P. Jerry, and Yeboah, Akwasi. 2018. “Adinkra Cultural Symbols for Environmental Sustainability Education in Ghana”. *World Environment*, 8(2): 36-46



AYA

Meaning: Fern. Fern are plants that are very resilient and can live in a variety of habitats and soil types. They can reproduce fast as well.

Symbolises: symbol of endurance and resourcefulness.

Origin: The word Aya has its origin in the Arab language in which it means miracle.

Spiritual meaning: Ferns have been attributed many mystical powers and are subject of many folklore tales in different cultures. Spiritually, Aya represents the faith in ourselves that drives us to continue forth despite our struggles. It is the will inside each person not to allow adversity to destroy them. As one continues in the path without giving up, the difficulties will become smaller. It is the courage not only to survive but to strive.

Meaning in today's society: They represent individuals or societies that despite the many adversities in life have been resilient and have continued on to overcome difficulties. It represents an individual or society that will prevail.

Environmental meaning: Countries must maintain the buoyancy and resilience of their environment and its resources to withstand future supply challenges³.

Image above: Xavier Cortada, "Aya," Underglaze on glazed ceramic tile, 6" x 6", 2020

³ Adom, Dickson, Opuku, Moses, Newton, P. Jerry, and Yeboah, Akwasi. 2018. "Adinkra Cultural Symbols for Environmental Sustainability Education in Ghana". *World Environment*, 8(2): 36-46



BESE SAKA

Meaning: It means a sack of kola nuts.

Symbolises: Economic well being, wealth, affluence, richness, abundance. It also means unity and togetherness.

Origin: The kola nut was utilized by the Ghana society as a form of currency. This crop is a cash crop that plays a significant role in the economy of the country. The Cola nut trade brought about economic well-being and high standard of living, especially for the Ashanti Kingdom and also among people who traded in it. Cola nut is chewed by people for its medicinal value, stimulating effect, and its ability to keep people awake⁴.

Spiritual Meaning: Togetherness and unity mean that everyone is bound in a group. The unity of the community is the strength citizens need to overcome obstacles. If everyone works for the same goal the community will form a force that will be difficult to break.

Meaning in today's society: Because the kola nuts are inside a pod, they are seen as a symbol of unity and togetherness. In today's society it translates to working in unity to achieve abundance and success in our community.

Environmental meaning: This Symbol educates the society in order to combat environmental crisis there is a need for all the individuals in a society to work together in unity. This envisions that economic progress can be achieved through sustainable practices if everyone worked together⁵. This symbol has also been associated with sustainable agricultural practices since it suggests that people should work together on the land.

Image above: Xavier Cortada, "Bese Saka," Underglaze on glazed ceramic tile, 6" x 6", 2020

⁴ Kuwornu-Adjaotoor, J.E.T., Appiah, George, and Nartey, Melvin. 2015. The philosophy

⁵ Adom, Dickson, Opuku, Moses, Newton, P. Jerry, and Yeboah, Akwasi. 2018. "Adinkra Cultural Symbols for Environmental Sustainability Education in Ghana". *World Environment*, 8(2): 36-46



DUAFE

Meaning: Duafe literally means a wooden comb. Known also as “african pic”.

Symbolises: Cleanliness and beauty and desirable feminine qualities.

Origin: This word is in Twi, which is one of the dialects spoken in Ghana. The wooden comb was a prized possession of the African women to comb and adorn their hair. It was a very important part of self grooming. They were usually gifted to the women by a male member of the family to commemorate an important event in their lives⁶.

Spiritual Meaning: The spiritual meaning of Duafe is purity and holiness. We need to be pure in order to have absence of stains, and therefore, society stays free from corruption.

Meaning in today’s society: Freedom from immorality in our society constitutes freedom from inappropriate elements in our community. Our leaders must show transparency in their acts in order to benefit everyone. Cleaning of the bad elements in our community.

Environmental meaning: The symbol reminds societal members to maintain the clean state of the environment by engaging in environmental friendly activities⁷. It reminds us to work to be free from anything that contaminates or pollutes our environment.

Image above: Xavier Cortada, “Duafe,” Underglaze on glazed ceramic tile, 6” x 6”, 2020

⁶ Cosgrove, Adenike. 2019. Duafe (Comb). ÌMÒDÁRA.com.

⁷ Adom, Dickson, Opuku, Moses, Newton, P. Jerry, and Yeboah, Akwasi. 2018. “Adinkra Cultural Symbols for Environmental Sustainability Education in Ghana”. *World Environment*, 8(2): 36-46.



GYE NYAME

Meaning: Except for God.

Symbolises: The immortality of God. This symbol is the most used in Ghana and signifies the deep religious character and faith of its people. If you look closely at the symbol you can see it shows a person inside of a hand. It is a picture of how we are held in the hand of God⁸.

Origin: Twi language, one of the three dialects spoken in Ghana. This symbol shows a belief in *Onyame* which translated means God.

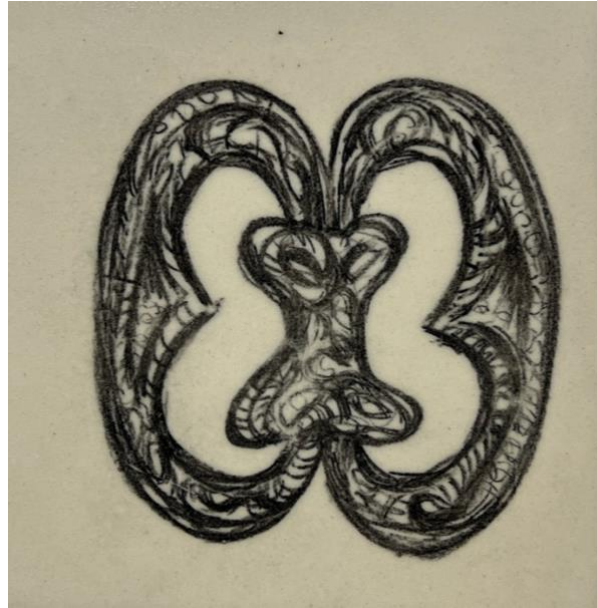
Spiritual Meaning: There are many sayings used with this symbol such as: *Nyame nwu na mawu*, which translates into “God will not die for me to die”. This signifies the immortality of God and his power. Another saying is *Worepe asem aka akyere Onyame a, ka kyere mframa*, which means “if you want to say something to God say it to the wind”⁹ and signifies that God is everywhere.

Meaning in today’s society: We are all created equal, and as equals we must learn to work together to benefit our society. The importance of communion, which means participation, and communication, from every person in a society is crucial in order to bring everyone together and achieve.

Environmental meaning: It reminds us to take care of the earth and all of its creatures because it is part of a wonderful creation. It reminds us to respect it and preserve it as best as possible for future generations to enjoy as well.

⁸<http://blog.africaimports.com/wordpress/2009/02/the-gye-nyame-symbol-a-piece-of-african-history/>

⁹ <http://www.adinkrasymbols.org/symbols/gye-nyame>



NKONSONKONSON

Meaning: Chain link

Symbolises: Community unity

Origin: The origin of the word is from the Twi dialect in Ghana.

Spiritual Meaning: The spiritual meaning of community signifies how everyone is and how everyone acts with each other. It is about the connection between human beings that are part of the same universe. Every individual is different, yet everyone contributes their special talents to the benefit of the whole, making the relationship between humans interdependent of each other.

Meaning in today's society: A reminder that everyone has to contribute to society, everyone's input is important because there is strength in numbers. Unity gives people strength and courage to assure people's survival and resilience. Unity is the key to building a strong society in which each member thrives.

Environmental meaning: The 'Nkonsonkonson' adinkra symbol educates members of the society to always join their communities and/or taking the lead roles in environmentally friendly activities to enhance the condition of the environment and its resources¹⁰.

Image above: Xavier Cortada, "Nkonsonkonson," Underglaze on glazed ceramic tile, 6" x 6", 2020

¹⁰ Adom, Dickson, Opuku, Moses, Newton, P. Jerry, and Yeboah, Akwasi. 2018. "Adinkra Cultural Symbols for Environmental Sustainability Education in Ghana". *World Environment*, 8(2): 36-46.



NKYINKYIM

Meaning: Literal meaning is twists and turns.

Symbolises: Initiative, dynamism, versatility, prudence, balance, and vigilance. The twists and turns in life.

Origin: The word is from the Twi dialect in Ghana.

Spiritual Meaning: The Akan proverb associated with this symbol is *Obra ne wo ara wo bo*, which means “Life is what you make of it”. Despite all the twists and turns in life, one should make the best out of every situation and continue to dynamically survive. Another proverb associated with this symbol is . Encourages to have faith and optimism.

Meaning in today’s society: There is a need for us to experiment and learn various skills to help us succeed in various economic heats, a situation that marks the world we live in today¹¹.

Environmental meaning: It educates societal members to change their unwarranted attitudes that have destroyed the environment and its resources. It is an assurance to societies with bad environmental state that they can improve the condition for the better by engaging in environmentally friendly activities. They must also sensitize the public through environmental sustainability education.¹²

Image above: Xavier Cortada, “Nkyinkyim,” Underglaze on glazed ceramic tile, 6” x 6”, 2020

¹¹ Adom, Dickson, Asante Appau, and Kquofi, Steve. 2016. “Adinkra: An Epitome of Asante Philosophy and History”. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol. 6, N0.14.

¹² Adom, Dickson, Opuku, Moses, Newton, P. Jerry, and Yeboah, Akwasi. 2018. “Adinkra Cultural Symbols for Environmental Sustainability Education in Ghana”. *World Environment*, 8(2): 36-46.



OBI NKA BI

Meaning: Bite not one another

Symbolises: Do not offend one another.

Origin: A Twi word of the Akan people from Ghana and Cote d'Ivoire. The literal translation is "bite not one another"

Spiritual Meaning: Unity and oneness toward environmental sustainability. The symbol signifies peace and harmony that should exist between humans. It also portrays the peaceful co-existence that is expected to exist between human beings, the environment and its resources. Ensuring peaceful co-existence between humans and nature while living in harmony with nature is the main significance of this symbol.

Meaning in today's society: It cautions people not to be prejudice against others. Not to look down on people.

Environmental meaning: The environment and its resources are the inheritance of all members of society. If cared for, we all benefit immeasurably. Conversely, if we wantonly destroy it, natural reprisals from our negative actions will befall us all. That is the philosophy in the Obi-nka-bi. We need to all come together collectively against negative activities such as illegal mining, deforestation and so on. ¹³

Image above: Xavier Cortada, "Obi Nka Bi," Underglaze on glazed ceramic tile, 6" x 6", 2020

¹³ Adinkra Cultural Symbols for Environmental Sustainability ... (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325450947_Adinkra_Cultural_Symbols_for_Environmental_Sustainability_Education_in_Ghana



OHENE TUO

Meaning: The king's gun

Symbolises: Martial capabilities and defense.

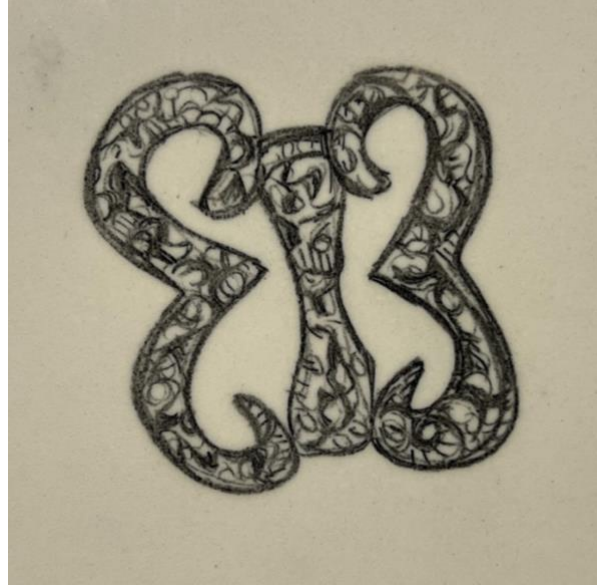
Origin: Literally translated is "ohene," a king or a chief, and "guo" means gun.

Spiritual Meaning: The Ohene Tuo Adinkra cultural symbol signifies warding off and fighting against enemy attacks.

Meaning in today's society: This symbol reminds traditional authorities and the ministries in charge of the environment on the need to perform their assigned duties in the society regarding the environment, including sanctioning and punishing defaulters of environmental defiance.

Environmental meaning: The symbol is a cautionary message to all enemies of the environment that they would face punishments imposed by the traditional authorities and/or the government. The symbol is a reminder to all perpetrators of negative environmental activities that they would never go unpunished. Resilient punishment for offenders of environmental degradation is warranted under this symbol.¹⁴

¹⁴ Adinkra Cultural Symbols for Environmental Sustainability ... (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325450947_Adinkra_Cultural_Symbols_for_Environmental_Sustainability_Education_in_Ghana



PEMPAMSIE

Meaning: Preparedness and foresight

Symbolises: This symbol calls for the need to exhibit foresight and precautionary abilities in preparedness for any unforeseen eventualities.

Origin: Literal translation is "sew in readiness"

Spiritual Meaning: This calls for the need to exhibit foresight and precautionary abilities in preparedness for any mishaps.

Meaning in today's society: This symbol reminds governments and society members to always sustain the environment and its resources. It educates us on the importance of societal preparedness for the future through the engagement in environmental activities.

Environmental meaning: Preparedness for healthy environmental practices and vigilance against negative environmental practices. This would protect societies from any unforeseen natural retribution such as earthquakes, storms, hurricanes, tsunamis and so forth. Therefore the greening and environmentally friendly activities would prepare societies, offering them a stronger buffer against all forms of future natural upheavals. It would also keep in abundance all environmental resources for the sustainable use by the present and future generations. ¹⁵

Image above: Xavier Cortada, "Pempamsie," Underglaze on glazed ceramic tile, 6" x 6", 2020

¹⁵ Adinkra Cultural Symbols for Environmental Sustainability ... (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325450947_Adinkra_Cultural_Symbols_for_Environmental_Sustainability_Education_in_Ghana



SANKOFA

Meaning: Go back for it

Symbolises: There is wisdom in learning from the past, ancestors.

Origin: Twi dialect from Ghana. It is a mythical bird moving forward while its head is turned backward toward an egg. The egg represents knowledge from the past.¹⁶

Spiritual Meaning: The symbol teaches the wisdom in learning from the past to help improve the future. It teaches people to cherish and value their culture. This is the symbol of positive reversion and revival.

Meaning in today's society: It represents a wake up call to fetch what is forgotten¹⁷

Environmental meaning: Educates us of our roles as stewards of the environment and its associated accountability. This cultural symbol also reminds us not to forget the rich cultural precepts of our forebears who lived sustainably because they wanted to be good stewards of the environment, always thinking of the future progeny It teaches us the need to return to the ideals of stewardship of the environment.¹⁸

Image above: Xavier Cortada, "Sankofa," Underglaze on glazed ceramic tile, 6" x 6", 2020

¹⁶ Shujaa, Mwalimu J., and Shujaa, Kenya J. 2015. *The Sage Encyclopedia of African Cultural Heritage in North America*. Sage Publications

¹⁷ Adom, Dickson, Asante Appau, and Kquofi, Steve. 2016. "Adinkra: An Epitome of Asante Philosophy and History". *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol. 6, N0.14.

¹⁸ Adinkra Cultural Symbols for Environmental Sustainability ... (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325450947_Adinkra_Cultural_Symbols_for_Environmental_Sustainability_Education_in_Ghana



Xavier Cortada is an artist, Professor of Practice at the University of Miami Department of Art and Art History and Artist-in-Residence at Pinecrest Gardens, where his studio, gallery and socially engaged art practice are based. Cortada's work is intended to generate awareness and action towards issues of global climate change. Using art's elasticity to engage others, Cortada educates and inspires community members to work and learn together to solve our community's problems.

The artist has created art installations at the North and South Poles to address environmental concerns at every point in between. He has developed numerous collaborative art projects globally, including peace murals in Cyprus and Northern Ireland, child welfare murals in Bolivia and Panama, AIDS murals in Geneva and South Africa, and eco-art projects in Hawaii, New Hampshire, Taiwan, Holland and Latvia.

Cortada has also been commissioned to create art for the White House, the World Bank, Pinecrest Village Hall, Miami City Hall, Miami-Dade County Hall, Florida Botanical Gardens, Port Everglades, the Florida Turnpike, the University of Miami, the Miami Art Museum, the Museum of Florida History and the Frost Art Museum.

His work is in the permanent collections of the Perez Art Museum Miami (PAMM), the NSU Museum of Art in Ft. Lauderdale, the Whatcom Museum, the Phillip and Patricia Frost Art Museum, the MDC Museum of Art + Design and the World Bank.

Cortada, born in Albany, NY and raised in Miami, holds undergraduate, graduate and law degrees from the University of Miami.

To learn more, visit www.cortada.com.



CORTADA

Pinecrest Gardens
11000 Red Road
Pinecrest, FL 33156

www.cortada.com
[@xcortada](https://www.instagram.com/xcortada)

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