

An abstract painting with a complex composition of brushstrokes. The color palette is dominated by various shades of blue, from light sky blue to deep navy and black. Large areas of bright yellow and white are interspersed, creating a sense of light and movement. The brushwork is expressive and layered, with some areas appearing more saturated than others. The overall effect is one of dynamic energy and emotional depth.

# Culture and Tradition at School and at Home

MIKA METSÄRINNE, RIITTA KORHONEN,  
TAPIO HEINO & MAIJA ESKO (Eds.)



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RAUMA TEACHER TRAINING SCHOOL  
UNIVERSITY OF TURKU

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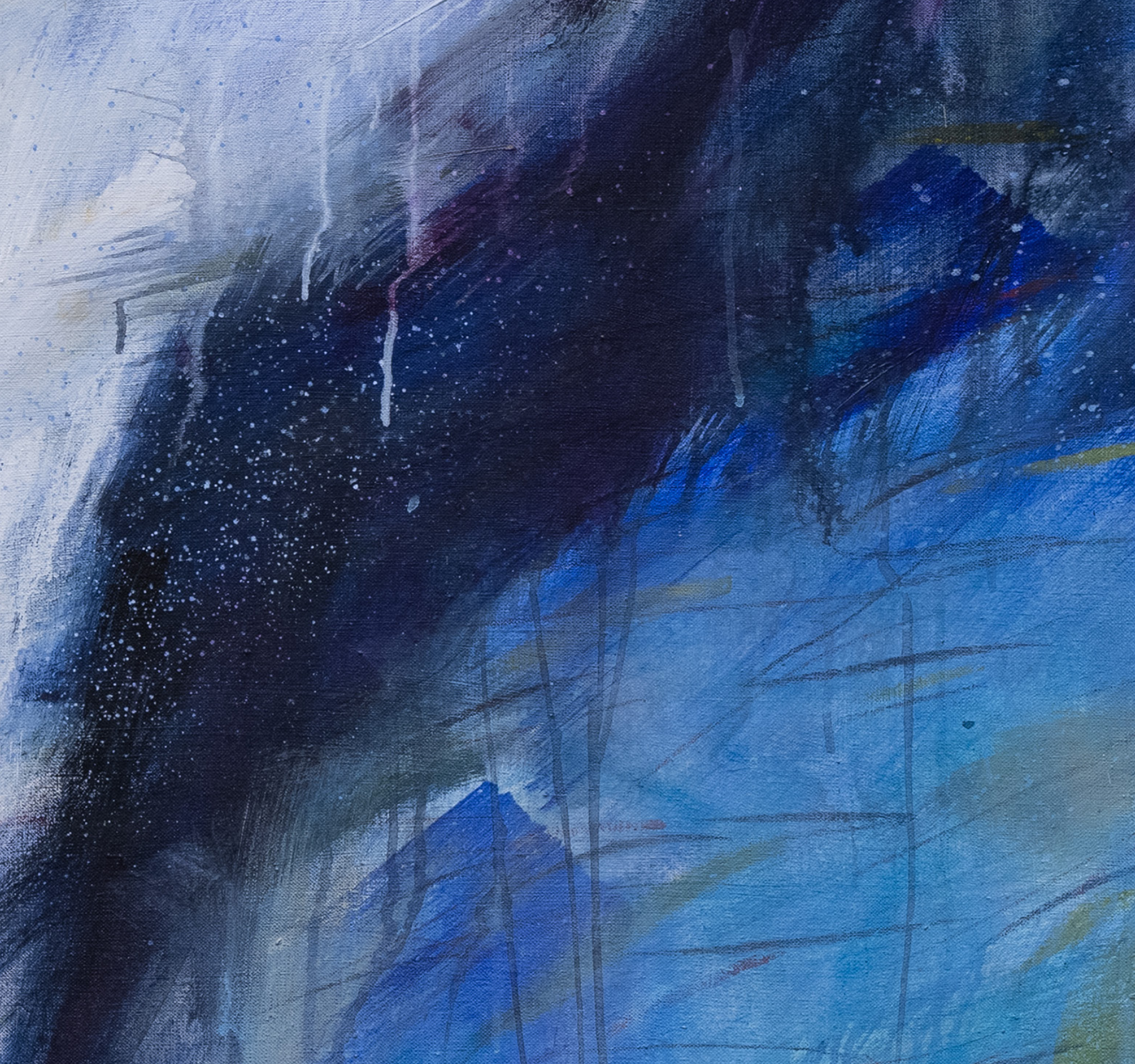
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# The Adinkra game: an intercultural communicative and philosophical praxis

LOUISE MÜLLER, KOFI DORVLO & HEIDI MUIJEN

## Abstract

In 2020, an international team of intercultural philosophers and African linguists created a multilinguistic game named Adinkra. This name refers to a medieval rooted symbolic language in Ghana that is actively used by the Akan and especially the Asante among them to communicate indirectly. The Akan is both the meta-ethnic name of the largest Ghanaian cultural-linguistic group of which the Asante is an Akan cultural subgroup and of a Central Tano language of which Asante-Twi is a dialect. The Adinkra symbols, which have permeated Akan life and the arts, can be found e.g. on Asante royal staffs and gold weights. They are also loosely connected to Akan proverbs. The game Adinkra aims to enhance its players' intercultural communicative, and moral philosophical understanding by matching Adinkra symbols with Akan proverbs. It was created for educational and therapeutically purposes. This article focusses on the rules, the making of Adinkra, its aims and objectives.

The objective of this article is twofold. First, it focusses on the game itself. It elaborates on what its rules are and the content of the game. It also focusses on how playing the multilinguistic game, Adinkra can enhance intercultural understanding and communication. It, furthermore, concentrates on the results of a pilot reception study of this game in the Netherlands among intercultural groups of players. This study has proven that the Adinkra game stimulates creative thinking, engagement in dialogue and reflective ethical thinking. For this reason, the authors believe that it has a lot to contribute to intercultural educational programs with a focus on intercultural communication, philosophy and arts in both Africa and the global North. Finally, a section is devoted to the question of how the Adinkra game was developed and methodologically grounded in Gadamer's playful hermeneutics, and the theories of the Wheel of the Intercultural Art of living and (African) Indigenous Religions.

Secondly, the article focusses on the game's oral-literary storytelling context and Akan moral ideas. It then throws the searchlight on the creative, therapeutic value and its



potential to serve as a ‘cultural detox’. The authors and game makers think that being introduced to an African communitarian *ethos* hidden in the Adinkra symbols and Akan proverbs can help its players to develop a critical eye for the highly individualistic *ethos* of Western culture that, among others, is promoted by neoliberal thinking and praxis. The word *praxis* is used by the authors in the meaning found in educational contexts. Adinkra’s players are stimulated to reflect upon a different moral idea, which can change their mindset and put them into action to contribute to social awareness and societal change.

**Keywords:** 1. Intercultural Philosophy and Communication; 2. African Philosophy; 3. African Indigenous Religions; 4. Akan; 5. Ghana; 6. Adinkra Symbols and Akan Proverbs; 7. Oral literature and storytelling; 8. Creative Thinking; 9. Education; 10. Game; 11. Art Therapy.

### Introduction

In 2019, an international team of philosophers and African linguists created a multilinguistic game named Adinkra, which texts on the play guide and cards are written in Asante Twi, a Niger-Congo language spoken by the Akan people, English and Dutch. The Adinkra symbols belong to the Akan people, which is a West African meta-ethnic-linguistic group of which the majority lives in Ghana, the Ivory Coast and parts of Togo. Akan is also a Central Tano language with the dialects Asante, Fante, and Akwapem among others. The Asante is an Akan cultural or eth-

nic subgroup, which consists of over 20 million people. It is also a dialect of the Akan language (CIA, Retrieved 13 November 2019; Stewart, 1989).<sup>1</sup> This article focusses on potential therapeutic, intercultural communicative and philosophical value of playing the Adinkra game.

The first part will concentrate on the game itself. It will elaborate on the rules of the Adinkra game, the game content, its theoretical contribution to the enhancement of intercultural communication and philosophical understanding. It also presents the results of the authors’ recent Adinkra game pilot reception study conducted among student-teachers of culturally diverse groups of Universities of Applied sciences in the Netherlands. This part will concentrate on the game makers’ hermeneutical and dialogical methodological angle of approach and its connection to the so-called philosophy of the Wheel of the Intercultural Art of Living and the theory of (African) Indigenous Religions.

The second part of this article will focus on the game’s oral-literary context, which increases insight into the connectivity between the game’s Adinkra symbols and Akan proverbs with the wider context of Akan culture. It will also focus on the communitarian *ethos* embedded in these proverbs, symbols and the concomitant oral stories in comparative perspective with Western individualistic norms and values. This part will highlight the usefulness of Adinkra as a playful way to develop a critical eye for the negative side of Western individualism as an *ethos* promoted by the neoliberal market economy. It also high-

<sup>1</sup> The Akans in Ivory Coast make up 28,9% (2014 est.) of a population, which currently counts 26.0 million people (2018 est.). In Ghana, the Akans make up 47.5% (2010 est.) of the population that today consists of 28,1 million people (2018 est.).



lights the game's therapeutic value and its ability to serve as a 'cultural detox' and an intercultural philopraxis.

## Part I: The Adinkra game

### 1.1 Adinkra: the rules of the game

The Adinkra game, which is created for groups of a minimum of two and a maximum of around twenty persons between the age of 18 and 118, consists of two rounds. In the first round, the players have to participate in small groups that receive some cards. In these groups, they have to focus on the Adinkra symbols and its corresponding Akan proverb on the card in front of them and contemplate on the deeper meaning of the natural elements to which they are categorized. There are five categories of natural elements in the play all corresponding to a colour. These are fire (red), earth (green), water (blue), air (yellow), and ether (purple). According to the theory of the Wheel of the Intercultural Art of Living and the Akan Indigenous Religion (see section 1.5) these are also the natural elements to which the Adinkra symbols belong. The participation of the players in this round can be related to practices supporting active engagement and creating an intercultural understanding of the significance of the five elements and an African traditional culture and religion. The players understanding will become intercultural philosophical once the game master elaborates on the categorical similarities between traditional African, ancient Greek, and Mayan culture and religion among others.

In the second round, the players have to use the knowledge they have gained in the first round to discuss in which elemental category they think the Akan proverb on the card in front of them belongs. They also need to connect the Akan proverb on their card to one of the cards with an Adinkra symbol in front of them and have to discuss their findings of the matching pairs with one another.

This part of the exercise stimulates creative associative thinking and it broadens the players' horizon whereas they have to try to see the world through the eyes of the other, which are the Akan people of Ghana. The question they have to answer is whether they think like the Akan or differently, and if so, why and how. The players reflect on their ethos, whereas the game master can provide the ultimate answer to this intercultural philosophical question by revealing the matching pairs according to the Akan *ethos*.



Figure 1. Stamped Adinkra cloth (Poirier 2014).





Figure 2: The Golden Stool (Sika Dwa Kofi) of the Asante

### 1.2 The game's content: the Adinkra symbols and Asante proverbs

The most eye-catching symbols of the Asante are the so-called Adinkra symbols. Adinkra means 'goodbye' and the Asante initially used Adinkra symbols on their funeral cloth to say farewell and express their feelings of sadness and their grief to the person who passed away. Adinkra symbols have been expanded in their use and have become part and parcel of the daily life of the Asante. They can be found on buildings, boats, lorries, gold weights, royal artefacts and even jewellery and as kinky haircut (2010, observations in Kumasi, Ghana by author L.F. Müller). Today, it is inconceivable to have an Asante oral culture without Adinkra symbols, which have been painted on cloth by the Asante since the nineteenth-century. According to an early nineteenth-century oral tradition, Adinkra symbols are named after the king of Gyaman, Nana Kofi Adinkra. This king, whose territory was located in today's Ivory Coast, was summoned to the court of the Asantehene because he insulted the Asante King (*Asantehene*)

by copying the Golden Stool (*Sika Dwa Kofi*), which was a sacrilege because the Stool was the symbol of power of the Asante people. This was the symbol and the seat of the Asantehene's spiritual and political power, which was believed to contain the soul (*sunsum*) of the Asante nation. Consequently, the Asante King gave instructions to kill king Adinkra and to annex his territory. Tradition demanded that king Adinkra wore a traditional patterned cloth when he was forced to walk to Kumasi, the capital of Asante, where he was put to death. Since then, the Asante referred to the cloth of the Gyaman people as Adinkra cloth and to Adinkra symbols when they mention its meaningful codified ornaments (see figure 1) (Poirier et al., 2014).

Since the second half of the nineteenth century, Adinkra symbols have been orally associated with and connected to Asante proverbs. These proverbs convey the moral values that the Asante traditional leaders have used to legitimize their power since the foundation of the Asante Kingdom in 1701. This does not imply that the Asante oral culture was static and unchanging. It merely means that the symbols and proverbs have been used by the successive Asante traditional rulers to control the Asante society by their determination of the moral order. The matter is comparable to how religious institutions, such as the Christian church, use symbols and sayings - in their case quoted from a literary source - to legitimize their existence as a religious authority. In the case of the Asante, the pearls of wisdom of the past generations were not written down but conveyed verbally by the Asante elders, their sages and their traditional priest and rulers. According to oral tradition, the traditional priest Okomfo Anokye received seventy-seven laws from the Supreme Being (*Onyame*) while he accompanied the first Asante ruler (*Asantehene Osei*



Tutu) to Kumasi. This occurred after the Golden Stool, which was the source of Osei Tutu's religiopolitical power, had come down from the sky (see figure 2) (Müller, 2010b). According to the Gold Coast government anthropologist, Capt. R.S. Rattray, the myth quoted below:

[...] Osei Tutu I was informed [LM: by Okomfo Anokye or 'Anotchi'] and held a great gathering in Kumasi in the presence of the king and the Queen mother One Manu, and the chief of Kokofu, called Gyami, the Kokofu Queen Mother, Ajua Pinaman, and many others. Anotchi, in the presence of a huge multitude, with the help of his supernatural power, stated to have brought down from the sky, in a black cloud, and amid rumblings, and in air thick with white dust, a wooden stool with three supports and partly covered with gold. This stool did not fall to earth but alighted slowly upon Osei Tutu's knees. There were, according to some authorities, two brass bells on the stool when it first came from above. According to others, Anotchi caused Osei Tutu to have four bells made, two of gold and two of brass, and to hang one on each side of the stool. Anotchi told Osei Tutu I and all the people that this stool contained the *sunsum* (a collective spirit) of the Asante nation, and that their power, their health, their bravery, their welfare were in this stool. To emphasise this fact, he caused the king and every Asante chief and all the queen mothers to take a few hairs from the head and pubis, and a piece of the nail from the forefinger. These were made into a powder and mixed with 'medicine'. Some were drunk and some poured or smeared on the stool. Anotchi told the Asante that if this stool was taken or destroyed, then, just as a man sickens and dies whose *sunsum* during life has wandered away or has been injured by some other *sunsum*, so would the Asante nation sicken and lose its vitality and power (Rattray, 1923: 289-290).

Many of Anokye's laws were conveyed by the use of proverbs that pervaded into the daily life of the Asante subjects (Müller, 2013b).

### 1.3 Adinkra: an intercultural communicative and philosophical game

Traditional African cultures score high on the use of proverbs in contrast to other areas of the world inhabited by indigenous people such as in America and Polynesia. The use of proverbs is situational. Proverbs are used in a specific context and their meaning, wit and attractiveness arise from that context (Finnegan, 2012: 379, 411). It is, therefore, unsurprising that in additional studies to a contribution of the anthropologist Edward Twitchell Hall (1976) many intercultural communication scholars have placed 'Africa' - as a reference to all African countries - at the sight of countries with a so-called 'high context culture'. This term, which was popularised by Hall, refers to a culture in which one is used to communicating indirectly. The culture of the Akans in Ghana is also highly contextual. The Akans communicate with their royals by the help of spokesmen (*akyeame*) and with them and one another by the use of symbols, proverbs and non-verbal communication. In Akan politics, the Asante ruler's spokesman (*okyeame*) - trained in the art of eloquence - is, for instance, equipped with the task of interpreting the proverbial messages on rulers staff and artefacts so that the rulers, the chiefs and queen mothers (*ohene* and *ohemma*), will remain untouched (Yankah, 1995).

Unlike low context cultures, high context ones, to which all African cultures belong, are not so much task-oriented, nor do they concentrate on the clarity and transparency

of the message. Instead, these cultures focus primarily on establishing personal face-to-face relationships and on central authority figures, such as the king and queen of the Asante people (Hall, 1959; Yankah, 1995; Meyer, 2016). The game Adinkra is an exercise in intercultural communication in a high context culture because it introduces its players to the symbols and proverbs used in this culture for indirect communication. It does so by giving its players an exercise to match symbols with proverbs, which enables them to develop a skill that prepares them to stay in a country or region with a high context culture, and especially in the region of the Asante people.

Besides that, the game enables its players to practice a form of associative creative and intercultural philosophical thinking. The players must, after all, use their imagination and, in case of being non-Akan participants, move out of their cultural comfort zone to connect the Adinkra symbols with the Akan proverbs. Adinkra is a contemplative game that also aims to enhance intercultural philosophical understanding by the focus on the proverbs and Adinkra symbols.

The Adinkra team perceives the Adinkra game players as philosophers in the nutshell. The Adinkra game masters are encouraged to create a free space that stimulates dialogical conversations between the players about how to interpret the Akan proverbs and the Adinkra symbols. The game creators' point of departure is that similar to languages, cultures are connected in a network of meaning. Cultures do not exist conceived as being closed entities or windowless monads, separate from one another (Van Binsbergen, 1999; Mall, 2000). What does exist are 'cultural fields of orientation' (Van Binsbergen, 1999). The game Adinkra aims to increase awareness of such fields

and both the differences and the cultural overlap between the Western and an African culture. The players' interpretations, which as the result of optically focussing on and philosophising about the games' proverbs and symbols, can be the same as those of the Akans; they can also be different.

To sum up, the aim of the game Adinkra is not to win but to increase moral and intercultural communicative and philosophical understanding by the method of visualisation and contemplation. The creators of this game share Mall (2000) and other intercultural philosopher's point of departure that philosophy has no centre and that one can and should converse with one another about all cultural traditions within a glocal setting and discourse and allow multiple meanings and interpretations of the game's content. The explanation of its' symbols and proverbs is thus not fixed. This flexibility in the interpretation of the game's content corresponds with the situation in an oral traditional high context culture, such as that of the Akans, in which the social context determines how the proverbs are interpreted.

#### 1.4 The Adinkra Game Pilot Reception Study

Now that we have elaborated on how the Adinkra game works, on the game's content, on its ability to increase intercultural communicative, intercultural philosophical and moral understanding, we will share our findings of its players' response. That means, we will discuss the outcome of our pilot Adinkra game reception study, which was conducted between January and March 2020. So far, the Adinkra game has been played by student-teachers at Universities of Applied Sciences, by pupils of secondary



schools in multicultural neighbourhoods and by participants of community gatherings of foundations all in the Netherlands.

The pilot study was only carried out among Adinkra game players at Universities of Applied Sciences of the ages between 18 and 25. Some reactions in the authors' reflection log concerning a group of Adinkra game playing student-teachers of a University of Applied Science in Utrecht were as follows: One student-teacher, who was herself preparing for an educational project in a non-Western culture, said: 'It was interesting and fun to put myself in the world of African symbols and proverbs although I found it difficult to fathom the world of the Akans. I learnt a lot and I enjoyed myself and, for this reason, this was a good lesson!' The log demonstrates that in this lesson the Adinkra game's objective 'to learn to see the world through the eyes of the Other' was reached. Another student-teacher in another lesson said: 'It was a good experience to become more aware of both the norms and values of my own culture and those of an African cultural group. The lesson was very educational'. This log shows that the Adinkra game can serve as both an introduction to the *ethos* of an African culture and a reflection on one's own most often (Dutch) Western European ethics.

Finally, a student-teacher mentioned that: 'the Adinkra game led to interesting conversations with my fellow students about differences in norms and values in distinctive cultures'. The pilot study thus also shows that the Adinkra game provokes philosophical conversations among its players and stimulates their active engagement with the game's content. Finally, a student mentioned that he felt that the Adinkra game did indeed prepare him well to

stay in a non-Western society with a high context culture, which he had planned to go to because he learnt how to interpret visual images in such a way that he could connect them to proverbial language. He said he wanted to play the Adinkra game again and hoped that we would also develop a game with a focus on Swahili oral-literary tradition, ethics, proverbs and symbols because that would match better with the place he had planned to go to.

A more extensive Adinkra game reception study will be necessary to further research how this game enhances intercultural communication and moral and intercultural philosophical understanding. Ideally, this reception study will not only be conducted in the Netherlands but also Ghana. In this West African country and also in Nigeria, the Adinkra game has already been received with great enthusiasm. Ghanaian teachers and lecturers have indicated that they are eager to carry out a reception study among their students and pupils because they believe that the game can make a difference in teaching a communitarian *ethos* to their youth. This *ethos*, which among the Akan is embedded in the Adinkra symbols and the Asante proverbs, is also under threat in Ghana and other African countries. Neoliberalism, urbanisation and westernization of African societies have made these societies more individualistic, which has both positive and negative aspects. Especially those Ghanaian educators involved in the preservation, promotion and protection of traditional African norms and values have expressed themselves positively about the game Adinkra and about researching the response in their educational environment (after the Corona pandemic we are currently in).

### 1.5 Adinkra's methodological angle of approach: Gadamer's hermeneutics, interreligious & intercultural philosophical dialogue and the Wheel of the Intercultural Art of Living

The first line of the British writer Joseph Rudyard Kipling's (1940 [first edit 1889]) renown ballad is stated below:

'Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet',

The line of this ballad has often been misinterpreted. What Kipling aimed to say is that even though East and West are geographically distant, it is not impossible for concrete human beings from these regions to approach one another as equal, to understand each other and show mutual respect.<sup>2</sup>

The above mentioned of Kipling's assumptions are also the basic principles of the method of interreligious and intercultural philosophical dialogue.<sup>3</sup> Both derive from the idea that there are universals, which are shared characteristics of religions or cultures by mankind that make them commensurable and facilitate comparison. Besides that, there are also particularities within religions and cultures that make them incommensurable and cannot be compared. The comparisons of religions or cultures thus comprise an overlap of certain characteristics but not all of them.

Another point of departure of the intercultural dialogical method is that the parties involved are in conversation with one another on an equal footing. The communication between parties, therefore, takes place in a centerless or only weak centred thinking space. In this space, the ideas of philosophers or scholars of religion from hegemonic countries or social organizations do not dominate those from marginalized cultural or religious groups. Besides that, these spaces are also created to shape a safe and political neutral space in which all parties feel comfortable enough to share their idea or belief. The underlying assumption of the dialogical method in philosophy and Religious Studies is also that there is no one single truth. Instead, the belief is that one can get closer to a shared truth of the *epistèmè* of the human world or the divine by comparing religions and ideas, which are pieces that altogether form a mosaic revealing a deeper truth (Sweet, 2014; Netland, 1999; Mall, 2000).

Comparative studies, including those of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, imply that it is possible to study cultures and religions from an *etic* or experience-distance point of view. Religious beliefs and cultural convictions are thus not impermeable but can be studied analytically, from the outside and shared with other believers or members of alternative fields of cultural orientation (McCutcheon, 1999).

Opinions differ on whether Akan ethics are part and parcel of Akan Indigenous Religions or whether the ethical system exists separate from the native religions of the Akan

<sup>2</sup> In Rudyard Kipling's 'We and They', this author also makes the point that at a closer look the differences between Us and Them are not as large as they might initially look like. Kipling R (1926) *Debits and Credits* Cornwall: House of Stratus., 277-278.

<sup>3</sup> The word dialogue originates from the ancient Greeks (dialogos, dia = through, logos = communication in old Greek) just like logos which in old Greek means 'to gather together' and encourage people to exchange thoughts collectively.



people (Wiredu, 2010). Because we are comparing Akan ethics with the moral thought behind neoliberal capitalism, which is not religious, we have mainly used the intercultural philosophical dialogical method rather than using the Religious Studies language belonging to interreligious dialogue. The study is, however, relevant to both scholars of religion and philosophers interested in Akan ethics. We have mined these African ethics from Adinkra symbols, Asante proverbs and the so-called Ananse oral traditional stories of the Asante people (see section 2.1). We used our creativity as we sought to mediate, translate, and interpret the meaning of these symbols, proverbs and narratives and to bring them into our horizon. We playfully interpreted the texts and symbols in conversation with one another to understand (in the meaning of *Verstehen*) them individually and as part of the Adinkra team. This community of interpreters, which engaged in multiple online and face-to-face conversations about the Adinkra game, consists of a multilingual, multidisciplinary and multinational team of scholars to which all authors of this article belong. In that sense, we used the method of playful conversation as part of Gadamer's hermeneutics. Gadamer stressed that language, including symbols, never has a fixed meaning. Instead, their connotation derives from the conversations between the interpreters about the written texts (Gadamer, 1933/1975). In the case of the Akans, these texts used to be oral sources. A characteristic of oral cultures and religious systems is that their ethical system is often less doctrinal than that of written cultures. Oral cultures, in other words, allow more flexibility of interpretation of beliefs and ideas than written ones (Goody, 2000). To simulate the situation of staying in the Asante society while experi-

encing its high context culture, Adinkra game players are, therefore, also allowed to interpret the Akan proverbs and symbols in multiple ways. Central to the game is the conversation about the chosen interpretation by its players, whose understanding of the Akan proverbs and Adinkra symbols can differ from that of the Akans.

By all means, the Adinkra game aims, and as the game's pilot reception study shows succeeds, in triggering intercultural communication and philosophical dialogue to increase insight among the players of both the Akan people's culture and that of their own. We have embedded the description of our Adinkra game into the context of the Wheel of the Intercultural Art of Living theory, which shows similarities with the academic theory of (African) Indigenous Religions.

The Wheel of the Intercultural Art of Living' (Muijen, 2018a; Muijen, 2020) (see figure 3) stands for a multidimensional and polylogical<sup>4</sup> approach to the intercultural art of living as a dynamically visualized philosophy, using colours and direction. The Wheel visualizes how different cultural traditions vary in their way of expressing core values and at the same time these various expressions circle around a pivot - a quest for wisdom about how to live 'the good life'. The colours in the four quadrants and the centre refer to the five natural elements (earth, water, air, fire and ether) and they spiral around the axis, the 'utmost centre' (void) within the white small circle in which the four coloured quadrants and the 'white sphere' of ether meet. By using the five elements of 'the Wheel' as a comparative and generative model for developing intercultural

<sup>4</sup> A polylogue is a conversation between several persons instead of two, which is a dialogue. We use the term polylogue in a more visual artistic and therapeutic way, to effectuate communication (verbal and visual art-based dialogues), Muijen HSCA and Brohm R (2018b) Art Dialogue Methods: Phronèsis and its Potential for Restoring an Embodied Moral Authority in Local Communities. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling* 46(3): 349-364.



Figure 3: The Wheel of the Intercultural Art of Living

programmes and games, the authors remain outside the philosophical, theological and political debates about the ranking of cultures and religious conflicts.

Part of the philosophy of ‘the Wheel’ is that in many indigenous cultures and religions there is an idea of natural coherence between a person as a microcosm and the macrocosm. The ecological, social, spiritual and cosmological ‘circles’ connect the soul of a person to the totality of life. The circles inside us and that surround us are the alpha and the omega, the source and the end. Mythologies from different cultures have voice captured this cyclical interconnectivity in symbolic, ritual and narrative ways. For example, in ‘The Hero with a Thousand Faces’ Joseph Campbell (2008 [origin 1949]), an American professor of Literature, describes and analyses a culture-transcending cyclical narrative structure in myths. Also, cyclical mythical-religious symbols - such as the mandala - are part and parcel of the mythology in almost all cultures. The Swiss philosopher and psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung described

how working out a mandala for oneself is an artistic therapeutic way of finding a centre in both oneself and the surrounding moral world. It is, in other words, a way to try to coordinate one’s individual or microcosmic circle with the universal or macrocosmic one (Jung, 1933; 1993 [origin.1950, transl. Pety de Vries-Ek]). Jung also observed that myths of creation are written in a symbolic (‘alchemical’) language based on the five elements earth, water, air, fire and ether; and that these natural elements intermingle in a continuous cyclical process of separation and reconnection, generating the natural order out of a primordial chaos, or emptiness, or by divine creation.

Inspired by Campbell and Jung, the Wheel of the Intercultural Art of Living has been developed to visualize the transcultural phenomenon of mythological (associative) thinking, based on the five elements and on other archetypal symbolism, whereby the periphery refers to the culturally diverse mythological expressions and the axis to the microcosm-macrocosm analogy.

The belief in the interconnectivity and harmony between human, nature and the divine is not only present in mythology, literature and art but also part of ancient philosophy and early Christianity. The philosopher Pythagoras spoke in this context of the ‘harmony of the spheres’. He regarded the proportions in the movements of the heavens - the Sun, Moon and Planets - as a special form of music. This music could not be heard on Earth and yet the melody of these celestial bodies affected life on Earth and as it reflected the complexion of this hymn (Godwin, 1992). In old Greek, *gnosis* (γνῶσις) refers to knowledge from within. It is best known from Gnosticism, where it signifies a knowledge or insight into humanity’s real nature as divine (Williams, 2020).



Scholars of religions have long ago discovered that the adage ‘as above, so below’ which has also been shared by most of the adherents of (African) Indigenous Religions. Among the Akan, for instance, it is traditionally believed that persons are born with a human soul (*okra*) consisting of a spark of Sun or High God (*Onyankopon*) and that there should be a balance between the five natural elements (the macrocosm) that affect one’s constitution (the microcosm) as expressed in several Akan proverbs. Additionally, there should also be a balance in the effect of a single element, such as fire, on a person. An Akan proverb, for instance, says: ‘Power is a fragile egg: if it is held too tightly it might break; if it is held too loosely, it might fall and break’ (*tumi te se kosua, woso mu de a, epae; na se woanso mu yie nso a, efiri wo nsa bɔ famu ma epae*). The proverb warns that as a leader one should balance the use of the element fire to reach one’s goals. If you exercise too much power and are too strict a leader, your people will not acknowledge you. If you are too loose, they will overcome you (Müller, 2020: 22). Goduka (1999: 26-27) speaks of a ‘symbolic unity of the inner and outer dimensions of the human psyche’ that has been suppressed for the rationalistic Newtonian-Cartesian paradigm of science to be legitimized. As a result, Europeans disconnected themselves from the natural world. In doing so, they also separated themselves from the wellspring of the unconscious and a deeply internalised participation in the mystique (African) indigenous ways of knowing have been undermined. That is why, in the context of the Adinkra game, the creation of an ‘inter’, an in-between space, to discuss an indigenous African ethical *ethos*, is of utmost importance. Intercultural means between (inter) cultures, enhancing exchange and development based on dialogues and in polylogical ways: not just verbally but also in the language of the visual arts and social practices.

The Adinkra game has been developed as a form of educational material to stimulate an intercultural art of living and to restore people’s connection with what Jung called ‘the collective unconscious’ - a repository of myths, stories and symbols from various cultures in the past (Jung, 1933), especially by using symbolical and ethical wisdom from African indigenous religions and cultures.

In conclusion, methodologically, the Adinkra game is thus embedded into a wider intercultural philosophical and indigenous religious framework. It also draws from Ghanaian oral literature. In the next section, we will, therefore, deepen into the literary world of Ananse oral stories to enhance understanding of the Adinkra game’s wider cultural and religious contextual significance.

## Part II: The Cultural-Religious, Oral traditionally, and Ethical Context of the Adinkra Game

### 2.1 Storytelling in the Ghanaian tradition

Storytelling is passed on in the Ghanaian context as a means by which the character of the individual in society is regulated and the code of behaviour of the people is shaped to preserve order in the community. After the evening meal, the children relax by the fireside to hear stories from their grandparents who also heard these stories when they were young. These stories, which are passed down from generation to generation, are woven with music e.g. used during percussion performances with drums, songs and dance to match the themes that are presented with them.

The principal character in many Ghanaian stories is the Spider (Ananse in Akan). This trickster spirit can break the taboos in the community. The Spider often acts like a human and displays extreme courage that wins the admiration of all people who listen to the stories. The other animals, who are characters in the story, also often think and act like humans. Sutherland (1975) points out clearly that Ananse represents a kind of every man who is artistically exaggerated and distorted to serve society as a medium for self-examination. He is also made to mirror penetrating awareness of the nature and psychology of human beings and animals. Human weaknesses and ambitions are revealed in contemporary situations in all the stories that are presented.

Urbanization and westernization could be cited as one of the reasons for which stories are rarely told today. Nonetheless, stories can be read from books and in some cases watched in video films, such as Ghanaian video films (Ghallywood) (Müller, 2013a; Müller, 2011; Müller, 2014), video documentations (Ameka et al., 2007; Merolla et al., 2013; Dorvlo, 2017) and television, where the themes from these stories are presented using mainly human characters. Rossman and Rubel (1981) argue convincingly that the hero embodies many sides around the theme narrated in the story; (s)he may freely interact with humans and at times (s)he may be an animal who talks and acts like a human being.



Figure 4. the Adinkra symbol Ab dua - palm tree

### 2.1.1 Narrative wisdom about the uncooperative attitude of people and its bad effect on the community

Among the Akans and in other African oral traditions, oral literary stories often end with a proverb that conveys a moral lesson (Finnegan, 2012). An Akan proverb that emphasizes the interdependency of the individual on the community states: ‘A person is not a palm tree that he [or she] should be complete or self-sufficient’ (see figure 4). As the philosopher Kwame Gyekye explains ‘In terms of functioning or flourishing in a human society, the individual is not self-sufficient, his or her capacities, talents and dispositions are not adequate for the realization of his or her potentials and basic needs. Human beings have needs and goals that cannot be fulfilled except through cooperation with other human beings. Our natural behaviour in society - and hence our natural relationality - provides the buttress indispensable to the actualization of the possibilities of the individual’ (Gyekye, 1997).



In one of the Akan people's spider stories, Ananse aims to convey the oral wisdom of those animals on the farm that are one another's natural rivals so that they should collaborate. Ananse planned to destroy what he considers to be affluent but envious in society and he decided to send an individual invitation to all of the animals who were the natural enemies of the other animals. What happened was that all animals accepted the invitation but advised that their natural enemies should not be asked to come. So, Cock told Ananse not to invite Hawk and Hawk was told not to invite the Hunter, the Hunter told him not to inform the Snake, the Snake informed him not to invite the Club and the Club told him to keep out mister Fire. Ananse, however, invited all these animals who are rivals to work on the farm.

To the surprise of the animals, the Club and Fire realised that all their enemies were present. Instead of collaborating, they started to criticize one another and to detract each other's contributions. The Cock got close to Corn and pointed out that he was not doing the work well. As Corn was about to explain the method he was using, the Cock did not allow him to open a defence but the punishment he gave was to swallow him. On seeing this, the Hawk pounced on him. At that time, the Hunter was close by and he shot the Hawk. The Snake bit him and the Club hit the head of the Snake. Fire simultaneously burnt everything in the farm.

Ananse from a distance saw the charred remains of these great citizens of the land. At the time, a Wasp was flying around and perched in the farm, put his hands on his tiny little waist and remarked: 'See how the gallant and brave were destroyed in this encounter'. Ananse stood by and watched how the uncooperative attitude of the people in

his community had resulted in their fatal end on his farm. And for all the children who listened to the storyteller, Ananse helped to convey the proverb that 'one tree does not constitute a forest' meaning that for there to be a forest there will have to be several individual trees. A human being is like a tree in a forest and, therefore, (s)he needs to collaborate with his peers. (S)he is not a palm tree that is self-sufficient and can thus not be complete nor function on one's own.



Figure 5. The Adinkra symbol Ananse Ntontan -spider web

### 2.1.2. Narrative wisdom about the collective nature of knowledge

An Akan proverb, which conveys that oral wisdom has a common source and is common knowledge, states: 'No one tells stories to Ntikuma, the spider's child' (*obi nto anansesem nkyere Ntikuma*). Since Ntikuma is the son of Ananse and this spider is the source of all Ananse stories, there is no need to tell stories to Ntikuma. Every Akan child grows up with the Ananse stories (*anansesem*), which have a common source and are part of shared collective knowledge (see figure 5).

The Ananse story, in which Ntikuma shows that the knowledge of the world does not come from one individual source, goes as follows....Once upon a time, Ananse wanted to collect all the knowledge in the world and store it on a high tree for his personal use. He went around the community to collect all the knowledge he could lay his hand on and put them in a gourd. He tied the gourd on his body and looked for a tall tree where he would conceal the knowledge of the world. He found a tall tree and started climbing with the gourd which was stuffed with knowledge and tied to the lower part below his chest. He climbed with the gourd and as he was some meters to reach the top, his son, Ntikuma called from below: ‘Father! If you had tied the gourd at the back, you would have climbed faster’. On hearing this, Ananse, to his astonishment, realized that he had left part of the knowledge below otherwise the son would not be able to offer a reasonable suggestion to him.

As Ananse managed to descend the tall tree to collect what was left, he came down so forcefully that the gourd broke and all the contents scattered on the ground. The loud sound of his fall attracted many people who came to offer him first-aid. On their arrival to the scene, they saw the broken gourd and all the contents. In addition to helping Ananse, they benefited by picking the part of knowledge relevant to them that had scattered from the broken gourd. *This explains how knowledge is spread over the whole world and is not at a hidden place for only Ananse.* Also, the story narrates the insight that knowledge is not an individual possession but a mental source of the collective and that it is passed on from parents to children so all the people have to cooperate and accumulate it to attain wisdom.



**Figure 6.** The Adinkra symbol *Asase Ye Duru* - the Earth has weight.

### 2.1.3. Narrative wisdom about the social laws of cultivating the land

An Akan proverb states: ‘The Earth goddess has weight’ (*Asase Ye Duru*) (see figure 6). It represents the importance of the earth for human life. The Akan proverb conveys the oral wisdom that one should respect and nurture the Earth because it is the source of all new life and its power. One should, therefore, never act in ways that might harm the Earth and should give rest to the soil to live in harmony with nature. According to custom, the Akans are, therefore, not allowed to farm on a Thursday (which is the birth date of *Asase Yaa*; the Earth goddess) and do not take an abundance of food from the land to eat all at once.

In one of the Asante oral-literary stories, the spider Ananse does not show his respect to *Asase Yaa* by eating many food items of the land at once while he lets his relatives do all the hard work to collect the harvest. Once upon a time, Ananse was too lazy and greedy to help his family members and the other village dwellers to work on the land. Instead, he pretended that he was ill and he told his wife that they should soon bury him on his farm with all his utensils so that he would continue to live a good life in the ancestral world. Once, his wife and children believed that



and when he had passed away, they complied with Ananse's last will and so he got buried on his farm. However, Ananse was not dead. He was just a lazy and greedy man. In the night, he climbed out of his grave 'to steal food' from the farm. This continued every night and his family noticed that a thief was stealing the food items. One morning Ananse's son, Ntikuma, was fed up with the situation. He carved out the face and body of a man, covered him in gum paste and planted it in the middle of the farm. The next night, when Ananse crawled out of his grave to steal the food items, he curiously walked to the gum man to find out who he was. Then, he walked closer to the man, raised his hand and slapped the gunman. To his astonishment; his arm got stuck onto the man. Ananse threatened to use the other hand and it got stuck. He used the legs and he realized that his whole body was stuck to the gum man. Ananse pleaded with the man and in the process realized that it was not a human being but a gum man planted in the farm to catch thieves. The next morning, his family and the other village dwellers saw that the thief was Ananse who was buried in the farm. They realized that Ananse was not dead and that he had tricked the family. When they pulled him from the gunman, Ananse's head drooped; he could not see the face of the members of the community. He had lost their respect and was dragged to the chief's palace where he was made to pay some amount of money and provided some drinks as punishment for breaking the laws of the community concerning the respect for Asase Yaa and the use of land. This is why, until today, spiders are believed to be animals who are constantly ashamed. They run away and hide from people and spin their web in the corner of the ceilings of our homes.

## 2.2 Narrated and dramatized wisdom in and through communal life

Anyidoho (1997) states that in oral literary storytelling there is dramatic embellishment including drumming and dancing and this is used to symbolize the form and meaning. There is a beginning in which the storyteller introduces the story to get the attention of the audience who are part of the story because they introduce songs which are related to the theme. The audience sings and dances at important moments in the story and the person who gives the tune is announced by the storyteller as a witness or a participant of one of the events in the story. Indeed, the projection of oral tradition in the stories is aimed at instilling discipline for good behaviour in the young ones in the society so that there will be a strong impact on their socialization.

Today, because there is a breakdown of these values most of the youth are not able to identify themselves with their roots and they are possible to be found doing things that will not promote their wellbeing. Even though we cannot say that the absence of storytelling is singularly responsible for this, one can claim that this has contributed to the problems which are with us up to adulthood. In the stories, the audience would be exposed to painful experiences involving the characters who do not give in to easy solutions but use sophistry and in the end, the events were resolved. Apart from being instructive, these events entertain the youth and provide them with communion pride and shape their behaviour by entering their inner feelings. These stories are not to allow the audience the opportunity to use tricks on his fellows but to make him gain confidence in himself and not to admit that one is defeated and to stop fighting when he meets the least challenge in life. One should always think about a problem and the solution will certainly come and he will emerge victoriously.

The story ends with a declaration by the storyteller that he was told the story when he was on his way by an old lady. The old lady represents an authority who possesses a store of knowledge because she has seen many generations. The storyteller also informs the audience that a story is a form of entertainment.

There are many meanings that these stories convey to us. Storytellers keep on telling these stories to us over and over again especially in communities that are not very urbanized and all the traditional practices have not died out completely. There are times that stories are told with variations but what cannot be denied is that each telling is a performance in itself. The audience and the storyteller enjoy the music and dance to the tunes. Sometimes different events and situations are introduced but these remain different versions of the same story. In the stories, we see that the trickster succeeds, other times he fails, endures public shame and he is perhaps helped by some of the people in the community. By all means, telling stories helps the young ones to internalise the societal rules and the older ones to contemplate on how to live ‘the good life’.

We are enjoined to conform to the rules of society to be successful in life. In the stories, we conclude that upholding communal life helps to promote peace and harmony in society. We realize that enmity and other vices are deviant adult behaviour that results in tragedy.

### 2.3. Restoring *ethos* and communal life through narratives and storytelling

*The Marriage of Anansewa* (Sutherland, 1975), which is a storytelling drama, shows that in the past traditional wisdom was highly revered. The chiefs who were concerned with offering gifts to the bride only helped Ananse

to get money to pay the school fees for Anansewa. The chiefs did not satisfy what Ananse used to measure how much they loved the girl. In all, the payment of the bride price was used by Ananse as the most important factor and those suitors who sent delegations were not recognised as competent in their dealings with the lady.

Ananse, therefore, importantly instructs us about the cultural setting in dealing with marriage. Indeed, Ananse presents traditional wisdom and the culture of his people as a more sustainable way of life which the characters and the audience should admire and adopt. In the presentation of the trickster spirit, we see in most cases that Ananse was caught and looked stupid and lost respect with members of the community. In the Ananse and the gum-man, the audience is enjoined to feel the shame with the protagonist not to say that he was fair in the response to the family but to point out to him that there are other avenues he should have used to discipline the family if he believed strongly that they had gone against him as a father.

In the performances, the audience was part and parcel of the story. They were allowed to halt the story and throw in a song. This takes the form of dancing and miming. This use of the hands and face and sometimes the voice places the audience in a position to show their understanding of the situation in the story. Many young people who find themselves in cities and urban areas identify themselves in these stories as they have been separated from their biological parents. Others, because they found themselves in urban areas, have to be in the care of foster parents in boarding houses because they now have been born to working mothers whose schedules will not allow them to spend so much time with them.



This has brought us to endorse the views expressed by Tutu (1999) that individual stories of African ancestry should be told and the storytellers listened to with empathy and understanding as a way of healing us of our deepest feelings. Storytelling should then be developed as an African and intercultural way of helping the (African) people to be healed from the mental wounds that they as well as other people suffer from by oppressing globally implemented socio-economic structures.

In the next section, we will concentrate on the nature of these structures, which have negatively affected many peoples' mental health worldwide.

#### 2.4 Neoliberalism and the empowering potential of games, oral storytelling, dialogue and art

Today's world is out of balance. Reflecting on our globalized world neoliberalism has been criticized as an ideology that covers up its price: sociologists and philosophers have analysed the effects in terms of a general fragmentation of moral authority in society as well as negative effects on people's mental health, such as symptoms of burn-out, feelings of loneliness and depression (Bauman, 2006; Taylor, 2006; Han, 2010). To raise consciousness about neoliberalism's negative effects we need reflective professionals (Argyris and Schön, 1978) and citizens (Appiah, 2006) to criticize unhealthy routines, both personally as well as in the groups in which we participate. A new *ethos* is needed to deconstruct pathological dynamics in 'normal' organisational life (Kets de Vries, 2011) as well as to move on and find healthier ways of interaction. How to find direction and resources for recovery?

Our stance as authors is that ethical deliberation has to precede the neoliberal reflex to do what is efficient in terms of economic rationality (DuGay, 2000). Facing the poisoning effects of the modernist, neoliberal ways of organising personal and professional practices we pose the question: How can we revalue traditional ethical wisdom and use it as a moral compass to humanize today's (organisational) life? How to prevent that vital domains in society are economized, thereby undermining human and ecological values?

For example, care, counselling and therapy in health care organizations, such as hospitals, and educational institutions, such as universities, are managed as a business for profit maximization. In higher education, promoted lecturers are held in temporary jobs, and are recruited last minute and treated as service staff offering their commodities. They are not qualitatively valued for their content but as 'products' for making profits. What matters is that the lecturers are cheap and shall be kicked out of their jobs before they have a chance to complain about the dehumanising ways of managing the organisation. Needless to say, these practices have an alienating effect on the health care professionals, therapists and lecturers operating in these systems.

For counterbalancing the economised mind-set of both managers and professionals, students and patients we require a 'cultural detox therapy'. Could we develop this by exploring narratives, social routines, rituals and art, as examples of traditional wisdom containing cultural, social and moral power (Gadamer, 1933/1975; Muijen and Brohm, 2018b; MacIntyre, 2007 [3rd edition, 1st 1981])? This question is all the more relevant since we seem to have entered even a more subtle, hidden but aggressive attack

on human values such as (relational) autonomy. According to the latest insights of Harvard professor Zuboff, we have entered the second phase of surveillance capitalism, which is an assault on democratic principles and (self-) rule, required to defend (personal and cultural) identities in the digital world (Zuboff, 2019).

In the period between 2018 and 2020 a series of oral storytelling, dialogical, playful and art-based programmes, developed from our experience as counsellors, lecturers and trainers to educate and empower people, have proven to be valuable to enhance the *ethos* of community life (Muijen and Brohm, 2018b; Muijen et al., 2019). The Adinkra game, which has the potential to serve as a ‘cultural detox’ was also developed during this period.

On all levels of society, we find similar intoxicating patterns of fragmenting and polarizing forces in its socio-economic structure, contributing to a culture of competition and aggression instead of collaboration and reconciliation. There are no simple and monocultural answers for the moral disruption that manifests itself in our personal lives, in organizational contexts as well as in society at large. We refer to an increase of bullying in the workplace and on a global scale the increasing disparities in wealth (Verhaeghe, 2014; Piketty, 2017; 2020) and a growing scarcity of resources that threatens the global process of cultural unification (Pagel, 2012). How to find a moral compass in a world without generally accepted and socially embodied narratives on ‘the good life’ for humanity in a globalised world?

To make this complex issue conceivable and operational, we will discuss the question of how to develop ‘the good life’ in a playful way. As game masters, trained to

establish an ‘in-between’ space (Arendt, 1958) for action research and co-creation, we stimulate (reflection on) human and ecological values. By this, we mean an interplay between different voices and values inside of oneself and between people and nature. Such a multidimensional approach enhances subtle modes of understanding and interaction. Thereby practical and ethical (contextual) wisdom can be developed as a group of players that can form a community.

Although we present it as a late-modern way to cope with the complex problems of modernism we are facing today in the globalized world, the ingredients are embedded in diverse pre-modern cultural traditions, like the Ghanaian wisdom on which the Adinkra game is based.

Our core activity consists of establishing dynamics - utilizing (mythical) storytelling, creative exercises and (intercultural) dialogues - between different modes of understanding, to counterbalance nowadays one-sided economical driven ways of interaction in especially West-European and Anglo-Saxon societies. These different sorts of intelligence (Gardner, 2011) - that we assume to be a transcultural and natural way of understanding life in its many-faceted dimensions, supplementing the dominant discourse of instrumental rationality - we have named after their ancient Greek roots:

*\*Pathos*: creating empathetic mythical, symbolic expressions of existential problems and emotional wisdom in-between people;

*\*Mythos*: Elaborating on the symbolic, mythical expressions and living metaphors by using arts-based methods;

\**Logos*: Installing a dialogical stage for exploring the meaning of the (artistically) expressed metaphors and mythical symbols through existential and team learning processes;

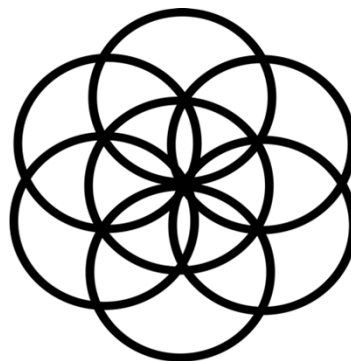
\**Ethos*: restoring relationships by appealing to people's moral sense and by developing dialogical communication;

In the next sections, we will focus on how the game Adinkra can help to become familiar with the differences in norms and values between Western cultures and an African *ethos*. We will also elaborate on how the game can serve as a 'cultural detox' to the mentioned global oppressive socio-economic structures by connecting to the aforementioned sorts of intelligence.

### 2.5 Two distinct worldviews: Western individualism vs African communitarianism

As mentioned before, the objective of Adinkra is to help its players to increase insight into the *ethos* of the Akans and that of their own culture. To that aim, we have included an introductory explanation of the underlying thought patterns, which deepen into the core of the differences between Western atomistic individualistic and African communitarian cultures.

At Abydos in Egypt, the so-called second Osirian temple, which predates the rule of Pharaoh Seti I (1323 BCE-1279 BCE), contains rectangular columns. On one of these columns, patterns have been found and photographed known as 'the Flower of Life' (see figure 7) (Melchizedek, 1999: see the photographs on page 36). This flower, which one



**Figure 7.** The ancient Egyptian Flower of Life and the interconnectivity between people.

can encounter during meditation, symbolises creation and the unity of all things. It is a sacred geometrical form that is said to be the basic template for everything in existence; it expresses that we are all built from the same blueprint (Melchizedek, 1999). Remarkably, this pattern is at the core of traditional Akan philosophy and Indigenous



**Figure 8.** The Western perception of the atomic individuals; comparable to the atoms of the periodic system.

Religions and many other so-called African ethnophilosophies and native religions. The underlying idea permeates the Akans' relations of individuals towards one another



and their community, their concepts of body and mind, their relationship between the Supreme Being (*Onyankopon*) and other (human) beings, and their ideas about the consistency between languages and cultures (Yankah, 1995; Müller, 2021; Müller, 2008; Wiredu, 1997; Gyekye, 1995).

In the Global North, the underlying pattern which affects the Western mainstream philosophy of mind, the thinking about individuals versus the community, the relationship between the individual and God and the perception of languages and cultures, is that individuals are separated and disconnected from one another; they perceive themselves as atoms in the periodic system. Since the French philosopher Descartes, this thinking has resulted in the perception that body (material) and mind (immaterial) are separate entities; that the existence of individuals is not primarily interconnected with that of a community; that individuals have a personal relationship with God (an idea that gained followers but had already become widespread during the Reformation); and that the building blocks of a community, of languages and cultures, consists of separate entities (individuals, words, cultural units) (see figure 8) (Huntington, 1993; Hervieu-Léger, 2001; Baker and Morris, 2005; Wittgenstein, 2013 [first published in 1921]). Playing the game Adinkra is meant to help to understand the mentioned differences between the worldview of communitarian and relational oriented African traditional people, such as the Akans, and the Westerner's atomic individualistic worldview which celebrates the separateness between people, minds, bodies, languages and cultures.

The section 2.6 and 2.7 will, respectively, be devoted to deepening into the cultural differences between the Akan culture and Western cultures and to the therapeutic and educational use of the game Adinkra as a cultural detox and an intercultural *philopraxis*<sup>5</sup>.

#### 2.6. Adinkra and intercultural ethics: meritocratic neoliberalism vs. Akan ethnophilosophy

One of the core ideas of meritocratic neoliberalism is that society benefits from a low degree of government interference. The point of departure is that when government regulations are restricted, everyone in society has a fair chance of making the most of life by climbing to the top regardless of one's race, gender or economic upbringing. In the founding fathers' dream for America, any hard-working citizen should be able to make it 'from newsboy to millionaire' (Burke, 2016). Anno 2020, many Americans are still convinced that the realisation of the American dream of earning a high income is the result of an individual's efforts and achievements. The flipside of this way of thinking is that anyone, who is not economically successful, should blame nothing but him or herself for his or her failures. Consequently, many people in the society perceive themselves as losers, useless creatures for whom there is no place in society but at the bottom of the hierarchical pyramid. The majority of the population fits into the category of people who are not millionaires. Many of these people have a lack of self-esteem and blame themselves for having a low standard of living, an uninteresting job and leading a mediocre life. They often feel depressed, burn-out and suffer from self-hatred since in the 'survival

<sup>5</sup> In this article, the word *praxis* refers to its educational meaning of 'a reflection [on action] upon the world to transform it' Freire P (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Harmondsworth: Penguin., p.16.

of the fittest' they have lost the game and were outcompeted by their peers. Not surprisingly, America and many European societies, which have long embraced the neo-liberal economic model, have to contend with a burn-out and depression epidemic. Flexible employment contracts, which are believed to keep the market competitive, contribute to many people's feelings of insecurity and worthlessness. At the same time, environmental concerns have become subordinate to the capitalist hunger for resources necessary to outcompete one another's businesses (Verhaeghe, 2014).

In conclusion, the market may thrive through its ability to let people compete with one another without a safety net so that all will be stimulated to work hard and the best people with the best companies or jobs will float to the surface. Only, what are the human and environmental prices to be paid for this free market and creative destruction of nature and the companies and efforts of the majority of the people?

#### *2.6.1 Environmental philosophy: exploitation of nature vs strife for balance with nature*

Central to the Akan oral tradition, philosophy and indigenous religion, with its many proverbs, is the strife for balance. The Akan are people with an African philosophy of nature. Similar to other indigenous cultural groups in Africa, such as the Bantu people, they believe that the world consists of natural elements that contain a so-called 'vital force', as the Belgium missionary Placide Tempels, the alleged founding father of African philosophy, used to call this natural force (Tempels, 1945). The art of living is to tap into this life force and to live in balance with the elements and one's natural and social environment. Rath-

er than to feel superior to their natural environment and to use it instrumentally in a race to the bottom to make as much profit as possible in rival with one's fellow human beings, the Akans believe that its animals and plants are spiritual entities that they value, thank and venerate for their being in the world that enables them to exist (Gyekye, 1995). The Akans are, therefore, less inclined to exploit their environment for maximising profit. They deliberately make different considerations in dealing with the natural resources and value balance with nature over capitalist environmental benefits. Consequently, the material welfare of the Akans and other African traditional living people is lower than those of most people in the Global North. Psychologically, however, they are less likely to feel alienated from their natural environment and are, therefore, less vulnerable to develop mental diseases, such as depression (Derksen et al., 2019).

#### *2.6.2 Philosophy of history: the distance past vs the presentism of the living-dead*

Another difference between the Akans and other natural people and those in neoliberal societies is their perception of history, which is predominantly not linear but cyclical by nature (Wiredu, 1992-3). Since the Enlightenment, German philosophers such as Kant and Hegel have developed and promoted a linear concept of history. In this view, each generation has made significant progress in comparison to previous generations. Contemporary thinkers stand on the shoulders of giants from the past and are still contributing to the further development of their society. Each generation will continue to do one's bit towards a better future for their children (Lemon, 2003). The philosophy of ongoing progress is alive and kicking in the Global North. Greenspan & Wooldridge 'Capitalism in America'



**Figure 9.** The Adinkra symbol of the Sankofa bird, which looks back to the past to learn from it.

themselves and benefit financially by out-competing their fellow citizens.

The Akans, on the contrary, perceive the past and past generations not as distant and less developed ancestors but as a valuable source of spiritual information that one can access by performing rituals to tap into the wisdom of the universe (Müller, 2013b). The Akans' philosophy known as Sankofa, which means 'go back and take it', teaches that the past illuminates and shapes the present and the future. The Sankofa symbol is a mythical bird flying forward with its head turned backwards (see figure 9). The Sankofa philosophy, which was among others developed by the renowned Akan philosopher Kwame Gyekye, is based on the idea that there is wisdom in learning from the past (the egg, which symbolises new ideas, is taken from the back of the bird, so new ideas are rooted in the past).

The Akan adage goes, *Tete wo bi*; the past has something to teach the present generation (2012; Quan-Baffour, 2008). The traditional priest(ess) most often consult the

(2019) is an example of a recent study that praises the ability of mankind to improve their welfare by competition and creative destruction. Their eyesores are all political organisations and their bureaucratic decisions that obstruct the working of the free market and, thereby, the potential of people to realise

royals' ancestors to convey the messages of past generations to the living. The ancestors are believed to be alive as spiritual entities; they are the so-called 'living-dead' (Mbiti, 1990: 83). The present generations live with the belief of the ancestors as part of ritual life their midst, who are venerated through religious objects, such as artefacts or stools. The ancestors are part and parcel of the rituals of the community of the living and their wisdom is believed to be from a spiritual and higher order than the rational thought processes of the present generation of ordinary human beings. Only a few, exceptionally spiritual gifted people such as traditional priests or priestesses, are capable of understanding and conveying the messages of the spirits and of helping people in their daily life. The ancestors are there to help the living to live in unity with nature. They are there to stay and live in between and with the present and future generations. As long as the living will venerate them, the living-dead will never really die (2013b; Müller, 2010a).

### 2.6.3 *Philosophy of social psychology; alienation vs social cohesion*

The Akans do not feel alienated from their social environment nor their past. They keep the memory of the past alive by the preservation of shrines in which they pour libation for their ancestors and by venerating ancestral bones and artefacts during ritual days (the *adae*).

In the Global North, however, alienation has long been a major threat to public health. In the nineteenth century, the German-Polish philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche already warned his contemporaries that they were being overwhelmed by factual knowledge of history without being able to use the past as a guide for living one's life. This



situation of being emotionally detached from history, not being able to use it as a framework for the art of living can cause feelings of despair and alienation triggered by deracination (Nietzsche, 1874).

Nietzsche felt that historical sense should conserve life to feed each individual's tree of life and to keep a person rooted in a place. Inspired by Nietzsche, Carl Jung, wrote 'Modern man in search of a soul' (1933); a book which organising idea is that the price of modernity and individualism is the destruction of commonality and shared values. Unlike Nietzsche, however, Jung refused to believe that God is dead. To his mind, the historical sense was not something to learn by focussing on facts, monuments or by critically analysing texts in the social world. Instead, he was convinced that the history that people needed to reconnect with themselves and one another was to be found in the collective unconscious. One could all connect to this unconscious by meditating deeply and frequently in search of one's primordial soul (1933: 126).

Since Jung, modern man in search of his soul has paid more attention to what comes from within rather than only to what happens without in psychotherapy but also one's daily life. Jung made people aware of their interconnectedness through the symbols and myths in the collective unconscious that they could access through meditation and dreams. With his mystical interests, his belief in synchronicity or meaningful coincidence he gave the beginning of a language to talk about psychological connectivity. In today's era, with its increasing interlinkages between people due to processes of globalisation, many intercultural philosophers and art and religious studies scholars are becoming more and more aware of the limitations of Enlightenment rationalities. In the margin, they

are opening up for the hidden dimensions underneath sense-data despite the dominant discourse in North-Atlantic societies and academic institutions that celebrate neoliberalism and individuality. These scholars, including Susana Conçalves and Suzanne Majhanovich, are developing intercultural and dialogical ways of organising and reflecting philosophically and artistically upon society (Gonçalves, 2016). Living in a world of multiple cultures, narratives and rationalities, we have in potential rich resources to counterbalance the reflex of making the market logic dominant in all fields of life (Bohm, 1996; Brohm, 2005; Gros et al., 2005; Habermas, 1984; Taylor, 2006), so that profit maximisation does not exclusively have to define our identities and personal and professional actions (Verhaeghe, 2014).

With this increased awareness of spirituality, they connect to the Akan philosopher Kwame Gyekye's concept of *panpsychism*. Gyekye stated that all living human beings, animals, trees and plants have a consciousness and that they are all interconnected through their life force. Kwasi Wiredu, who is also an Akan philosopher, stresses that also in social life, in line with these people's *ethos*, the Akans are expected to harmoniously adapt one's interests to those of others in society. They aim to both achieve a reasonable livelihood for oneself and make contributions to the well-being of the extended family (the *abusua*) and the community (*oman*) (Wiredu, 1992-3).

To guide global transformations today's politicians will have to listen to the previously silenced voices of African philosophers, such as those of the Ghanaians Gyekye and Wiredu, that can make a difference in creating a world that acknowledges the need to maintain the balance between economic growth and living in nature, between individual

freedom and the human need for social bonding, between social cohesion and social control. In the next section, we will see how perceiving and playing the Adinkra game as an intercultural communicative and philosophical praxis can make a difference to reach this goal.

### 2.7 The game Adinkra: a cultural detox and intercultural philopraxis

Adinkra is a contemplative game, which aims to put people into contact with the *ethos* of a cultural group in West Africa, known as the Akan. Its ethical objective is to serve three goals:

- (1) To introduce an alternative set of norms and values as those offered by the hidden ideology of neoliberalism. Today, most people living under governments dominated by neoliberal markets, often unconsciously, have internalised neoliberal capitalist values which affect their self-image, their relationships with others and their behaviour. Exposure to the Akan norms and values may help these people to become aware of this capitalist ideological indoctrination. It can help them to re-programme the mind away from the celebration of atomic individualism towards a relational community-oriented humanism.
- (2) To raise awareness of the fact that, on a global scale, all philosophies and cultures are interconnected and that by being exposed to African ethics one can also gain a better understanding of the norm and value system of one's cultural-philosophical background. This intercultural philosophical praxis explicates the archaeological

structures in Western ethics by introducing its players to an African oral cultural alternative way of perceiving the relationship of human beings with one another and with nature.

- (3) To stimulate mythical and creative thinking, based on the five elements as a symbolic language that is found in diverse cultural regions and storytelling traditions in their myths and tales (Campbell, 2008 [origin 1949]; Jung, 1933). Thereby, the enhancement of creative competences on a personal level serves at the same time to raise awareness of (mythical) wisdom and an *ethos* of an 'elemental' art of living - based on the sense of a fundamental connectedness and interdependency of all beings and all the natural elements - as a transcultural phenomenon ('the philosophy of the Wheel') and the theory of (African) Indigenous Religions.

Meritocratic neoliberalism proclaims that at birth all individuals have the same chances in life. At school and in their working life, they ought to compete with their peers to establish a hierarchy in human relationships. The value of an individual depends on his or her market value. Those individuals who by egoistic behaviour and pushing themselves to the front succeed in outcompeting their neighbours are rewarded a place on a tread near or at the top of the social ladder. Once there, their main concern is to maintain their high social status, which they realise by conspicuous consumption. The status of those individuals at the top, who mainly distinguish themselves from the rest by their material wealth, believe that they are superior to most others. They are convinced that they, therefore, deserve to be treated differently - meaning better - and are

allowed to look down on others. They believe that they have come to the surface as a result of their hard work, their physical fitness and the use of their intelligence. This belief implies that those at the bottom do not deserve the same luxurious lifestyle, because they lost the game. Their position of loser is the result of their passivity, laziness, self-caused illnesses due to their physical bad condition and irresponsible behaviour. The downtrodden, therefore, do not need any help; they are self-responsible for their failures and will have to pay the price for their inactivity and clumsiness.

What is left out from this meritocratic neoliberal ideology of ‘the survival of the fittest’ is the fact that not everyone is born with the same mental capacities, which means that from the start not everyone will be able to make it to the top. Nor is there any attention to the fact that one’s social environment, societal evaluation of one’s race and gender, and the available family capital for children’s upbringing affects people’s performances. Meritocratic neoliberalism is, in other words, a lie (Verhaeghe, 2014).

The first objective of the Adinkra game is to raise awareness of the sketched limitations of the neoliberal worldview. It aims to do so by introducing an alternative ethical system derived from an African people, whose mind-set has been somewhat less affected by neoliberalism. In the traditional Akan worldview, individuals are not supposed to outcompete one another for personal benefit. In their oral cultural society, the main source of income came from agricultural activities. In this society, people needed one another in the field and at home. They relied on each other in good times and times of duress to sustain a reasonable income for the family, the kin group and the entire community. Central to the Akan thinking was the princi-

ple of *do ut des*; social relationships were maintained by an exchange of services to one another both for mutual benefit and the advantage of the whole (Bell, 2004). An Akan maxim, included in Adinkra the game, that captures the ethereal aspects of Akan thinking is translated literally as below:

‘A person is not a palm tree that he should be self-complete or self-sufficient’ (*nipa nye abe dua na ne ho ahyia ne ho*) (see also section 2.1.1).

In other words, the Akans do not perceive themselves as atomic individuals cut off from the wider society. They primarily perceive themselves as members of a group and to achieve their goals, they collaborate for the common good (Appiah et al., 2000). This does not mean, however, that the Akans have no notion of individuality nor that they do not acknowledge that common group goals can differ from those of its members.

An Akan proverb, which is included in the Adinkra game, that proves the existence of an understanding of individual interests says: ‘Siamese twin crocodiles: they share one stomach and yet they fight for getting food’ (*funtumfunafu denkyemfunafu, won afuru bom, nso woredidi a na woreko*). The proverb is often used to explain that, despite the existence of a long term common good, individuals will aim to get the most out of a situation for their instantly satisfying personal interest. Although the Akans are thus familiar with individual thinking, they primarily perceive themselves as members of a group and mainly focus on the common good. They believe that to reach one’s goal, one has to help one’s friends to reach theirs as well. As an individual one can only grow, in other words, with the support of one’s peers (*wamma wo yonko anntwa anko*



*a, wonntwa nnuru*) (Appiah et al., 2000). This aspect of Akan philosophy shows that its values are opposed to those of neoliberal thinkers, who propagate that as an atomic individual one should not help anyone but oneself and denigrate all others to outcompete one's peers. In politics, the Akans also believe that a leader is appointed as such for the benefit of the community, which means that (s)he ceases to be one without any of the community's support. An Akan proverb says: 'A fish out of water dies, a king without followers ceases to exist' (*Nsuom nam firi nsuom a, Owu, Ohene a Onni akyitaafod no Onye Ohene bio*). The proverb, which expresses a pearl of oral Akan wisdom, implies that a traditional Akan leader, such as a king, a chief or a queen mother, does not rule alone. S(he) is elected to be a leader to serve the community and hence (s)he should listen to the elders (*abusuapanyin*) and the voices and ideas of their subjects (Müller, 2013b).

Another Akan proverb, included in the game Adinkra, says: 'One head does not make up a council' (*Enti na Akonfo ka sE:Ti koro nkod agyina - fa toto MmehusEm*). Although the king and the queen mother (the Asantehene and the Asantehemma) are on top of the hierarchical pyramid, they can neither rule without the support of the conveyors of traditional oral political wisdom (the spokesmen or *akyeame*) nor the spiritual ancestral guidance through their contact with the traditional priests and priestesses. An Akan ruler never stands alone. These and other proverbs included in the Adinkra game demonstrate that the Akan worldview is a communitarian philosophy.

The game Adinkra's objective is to make people aware that by living in an ideologically neoliberal dominated society, they have unconsciously adopted a set of values that colours their mind-set. By offering an alternative norms

and values system, namely that of the Akans, the game's creators aim to raise awareness of the limitations of this neoliberal mind-set. The language philosophy of the Austrian-British philosopher Wittgenstein is interesting in this perspective because he used the metaphor of a bottle to make his point that all people have a worldview that has an impact on the way they interpret reality. He found it important that people would become more aware of the cultural framework from which they departed and emphasized that it is possible to escape from one's interpretation framework by the playful use of language in a social setting, which he felt was of therapeutic value. In Wittgenstein's words, he wanted to show 'the fly the way out of the fly-bottle' (Wittgenstein, 1958: 103 line 309).

The objective of Adinkra is not to demonstrate that the player's interpretations of the Akan proverbs are wrong once they do not coincide with those of the Akans. Instead, the game's aim is also therapeutic. It is meant as a mental detox to increase the player's understanding of the differences between Akan communitarian ethics and their individualistic worldview; to broaden their horizon by teaching the players that they are flying around inside a bottle and that it is possible to fly out of the bottle and to heal one's mental wounds by encountering another people's cultural worldview and their method of communication.

Finally, playing the Adinkra game stimulates creative thinking by introducing the knowledge of Adinkra symbols and Akan proverbs within the context of Ghanaian oral-literary stories and wisdom. This type of thinking is often underdeveloped in today's rationalist world, in which 'logos' has superseded 'mythos'. Therefore, western logos needs to be complemented with *mythos*, *pathos*

and *ethos*. As the animals in the stories embody wit, care, faith, friendship, ambition and other moral qualities, the natural setting in the tales of harvesting, living in the woods, fields, rivers and the significance of rain, sun, winds and all natural elements that stimulate the imagination and senses (*pathos*); it serves as a symbolic language (*mythos*) to convey wisdom and an *ethos* of community life. Both the natural setting and animal wisdom that is found in Ghanaian as well as other cultural storytelling traditions indicate that symbols and narratives contain transcultural wisdom about the fundamental connectedness and interdependency of all beings and the interplay of the natural elements (Campbell, 2008 [origin 1949]; Jung, 1933). Thereby, getting acquainted with Akan proverbs and oral-literary stories and Adinkra symbols enhances the imagination and other creative competences both on a personal level, as well as it raises awareness of a transcultural *ethos* and ‘elemental’ art of living (Muijen, 2016).

### Summary and Conclusion

Adinkra is a multilinguistic game that has been developed by an international team of intercultural philosophers and African linguists, among others, from Ghana, the Netherlands and other European countries. This article elaborates on the rules and the content of the game including the meaning of some of the used Akan and especially Asante proverbs and Adinkra symbols, and on the game’s potential to enhance moral, and intercultural communicative and philosophical understanding.

It also focusses on a pilot reception study of the Adinkra game, which was carried out by Adinkra team members in the first months of the year 2020. The results of this study

demonstrate that the Adinkra game stimulates creative thinking, engagement in dialogue and reflective ethical thinking. It also shows that the game indeed contributes to the enhancement of intercultural communicative and philosophical understanding albeit a more extensive game reception study will be useful to gain a better insight in these comprehensive effects of this game on its players.

Another characteristic of the Adinkra game is that it has proven to be both an effective way to introduce an African *ethos* to a Western audience of gamers. Besides that, as shown in the pilot reception study section of this article, Adinkra is also proven to be of interest to Ghanaian game players. The Ghanaians of the Adinkra team all believe that the Adinkra game can help to reintroduce and revalue Akan traditional wisdom, which is threatened by extinction in Ghana as a result of urbanisation, westernisation, neoliberalism and other oppressive social-economic structures. Adinkra offers a playful way to contribute to the preservation, promotion and protection of Akan traditional wisdom initially by introducing the game into the classroom at Polytechnics (Universities of Applied Sciences) and Universities and by, eventually, adding the playing of the game to the standard educational curriculum. The Adinkra team’s plan is, therefore, to conduct a follow-up reception study in both the Netherlands and Ghana.

Besides that, the game has the therapeutic potential to function as a ‘cultural detox’ by its ability to make its players more aware of their cultural and/or religious interpretive framework and its limitations. In Wittgensteinian language, Adinkra can ‘show the fly the way out of the fly bottle’ by introducing its players to Akan ethics and by making them familiar with the oral-literary storytelling tradition and traditional wisdom of the Asante people of

Ghana. The play Adinkra not only introduces Akan morality on a philosophical-ideological level but also on the level of a philopraxis. Adinkra's game masters use a playful and creative dialogical method (a way towards achieving an end) to develop intercultural communities and wisdom, thereby, as an oil stain effect, facilitating community spirit in local settings in a globalised world.

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