

# Forwards

I first came across Yaw Tony's work in 2018 when my eye was drawn to a magazine cover story featuring his spectacularly coloured designs. His bracing use of colour and energetic pattern combinations were quite unlike anything I had seen, powerful graphic shapes that seemed familiar in a way that I couldn't quite place. And there was no doubt of his skill with colour, which is emphasized by the flat planes of the digital world in which he creates. This flatness gives both his abstract designs and the more complex figurative scenes his own digitally-native style (see pages XLI – XLIII.) Perhaps he comes by his striking colour sensibility by way of his West African heritage, given the overall vibrancy of Ghanaian life and the multitude of unusual and fresh colour combinations found within its tradition of printed and woven textiles. Interestingly, there is one pair of images titled "All things have their origin" on pages LXXXVI and LXXXVII in which he appears to unite the digital and traditional by alluding to traditionally woven cloth.

Many of Yaw's designs reference the Adinkra symbols of the Akan culture in Ghana. These are distinctive shapes that are drawn from traditional West African proverbs and intertwined into a fascinatingly complex type of visual language. Adinkra, literally translated as 'farewell', originated in the 19th century and are said to have originally been printed onto mourning cloth. Legend has it that when King Adinkra was defeated in battle, in his sorrow at having been captured, he wore this specially patterned cloth. Since then, populations across Ghana have applied these symbols extensively and innovatively across their culture. Proverbs and symbols are intertwined through spoken, visual and musical mediums and between literal and metaphoric ways of thinking. The proverbs tend to be delivered through oral traditions—spoken or sung—Yaw's father would play the records at home. The system of symbols is more visual, rendered in architecture, printed cloth, pottery, king's regalia and other applications including movement (dance). Adinkra symbols can be representative, shortened versions of certain proverbs, encapsulating their meaning, and several can be strung together in a relatively superficial – almost emoji-like – way, or a single symbol can take on a deeply layered meaning. Similarly, the language itself has a simpler, more modern version and one that involves a deeper understanding only available to experienced speakers.

For instance, the Akoma symbol (page CLXXVIII), recognizable as a heart shape, conveys patience and tolerance. More than love, it also represents unity, calm, goodwill and mutual understanding. It is a symbol that shows the connection between humans and conveys the importance of remaining calm with love in one's heart in the face of disruption. Taking this idea further, the Akoma Ntoso (page CLXXIX) is a separate symbol that can be read as four connected elements, literally translates as 'linked hearts' and embodies the idea of agreement, understanding and harmony between communities, families and partners. This symbol might be displayed in environments where such connection is to be encouraged. The ways in which Adinkra symbols succinctly capture expressions, ideas or emotions have, to my mind, important similarities to the expression of emotion or meaning throughout Western contemporary art history.

In the fall of 2018, Yaw Tony and I collaborated on a pop-up exhibition that would launch a line of silk scarves featuring his designs. The explosion of colour on the walls of the space where the scarves were installed, floor to ceiling, wall to wall, was dizzying and a spectacular antidote to the surrounding grey buildings and wet autumn pavement. I was given a brief, enticing introduction to Ghanaian culture that weekend, through the lively music, inclusive atmosphere and beautiful warm-hearted people who filled the pop-up with laughs, smiles and generosity. At the time, I was receiving the designs purely as visual patterns and it took time for me to begin to appreciate the extent to which the proverbs and symbols are used within west African culture.

While perusing the following pages, armed with the reference section explaining the many proverbs and symbols, you may begin to contemplate the concept of language itself and the limits and possibilities of understanding. Go ahead and fall wholeheartedly into the beauty and sophistication of the artworks illustrated throughout this book. Delve into Ghanaian culture, go deep, and relish the ability of these images to bestow their wisdom upon you. Enjoy.