



## Colour Symbolism and Its Significance: Okuapenman Odwira in Focus

Isaac Horsu<sup>[a]</sup>; Samuel Manasseh Yirenkyi<sup>[b]</sup>; Joseph Brantuo<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup> Lecturer, Department of Communication Studies, University of Professional Studies, Accra, Ghana.

<sup>[b]</sup> Rector, Institute of Film and Television, University of Media, Arts and Communication, Accra, Ghana.

\*Corresponding author.

Received 7 August 2025; accepted 21 September 2025

Published online 26 September 2025

### Abstract

This study explores the symbolic use of colours in the celebration of the Akuapem Odwira Festival in Ghana, focusing on how colours on attire reflect cultural, spiritual, and historical meanings. Using a qualitative approach and semiotic analysis, the research examined the colours worn on each day of the festival and interpreted their significance based on cultural context. Grounded in Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, the study highlights the relationship between the connotative meanings of colours among the Akuapem people. Findings reveal that colour functions as a critical visual language in the festival, conveying messages of grief, joy, reverence, and unity. The research concludes that colour symbolism is integral to understanding the cultural depth of the Odwira Festival and emphasizes the need for continued scholarly attention to such non-verbal elements of traditional African celebrations.

**Key words:** Akuapem Odwira; Festival; Colour; Symbolism; Cultural

Horsu, I., Yirenkyi, S. M., Brantuo, J. (2025). Colour Symbolism and Its Significance: Okuapenman Odwira in Focus. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 21(3), 15-22. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/ccc/article/view/13852>  
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/13852>

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of colour can be traced back to an experiment conducted by Isaac Newton in 1666. In this experiment,

Newton directed a narrow beam of light from a dark room through a hole in a window shutter onto a prism. The prism refracted the light, projecting a vivid spectrum. Newton, thus, observed that the prism did not add colour to the light but rather separated it, leading to the discovery that sunlight, which appears white, is actually composed of seven distinct colours: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet (Adedina & Taiwo, 2020).

According to Adedina and Taiwo (2020), colours are an ever-present part of our environment, and the hues we choose often reflect our inner selves and personalities. Both individuals and organizations use colours to express emotions, convey messages, or shape the image they wish to project. However, colour is not universally interpreted; it is deeply rooted in cultural context. What one colour signifies in one culture may carry a completely different meaning in another (Adedina & Taiwo, 2020). Thus, colour cannot be organized into a universal system of symbols (Brusatin, 1991). Rather, the meaning of a colour can differ not only between cultures, but also within them, shifting based on time, religion, and social context (Dilloway, 2006). For instance, white may signify joy and purity in some cultures while denoting death and mourning in others. Similarly, red is symbolically tied to both life and death, showing the duality and complexity of colour interpretation (Feisner, 2000).

The symbolic use of colour varies widely across global cultures. Within the Yoruba culture in Nigeria, red (pupa), black (dúdú), and white (funfun) serve as primary colours that communicate emotional, spiritual, and communal ideas (Fádípè, 1970). Red may convey vitality or conflict; black could represent mystery, ancestry, or mourning; and white, associated with spirituality and peace; it may also signal celebration or purity. Adeleke (2009) supports this view, arguing that colour serves functions of identification, beautification, and communication, which reinforces the philosophies, beliefs, and cultural values of its users. In Ghana,

colours such as gold and yellow represent wealth and high status, typically reserved for chiefs and elders, while white is linked to joyous ceremonies and dark colours to mourning (Kwakye-Opong, 2014). Similarly, Antubam (1963), in his seminal treatise of the “notions of colour”, detailed the traditional meanings attached to colours among Ghanaian ethnic groups. He described gold and yellow as symbols of royalty, white as a symbol of spiritual entities like God and the spirits of ancestors or for joy, victory and purity. Other colours like black is considered as a representation of night, sorrow, death or even the devil, green for fertility and newness, red for war, calamity or a show of discontent, and blue for love and serenity. Bartle (1983), while studying the Kwahu people of Ghana, also associated white with joy, fertility, victory and cleansing, black with destiny and energy and change, and red with fecundity, danger and seriousness.

---

## 2. COLOUR SYMBOLISM DURING FESTIVALS

---

Ghanaian traditional festivals serve as significant cultural expressions closely associated with various ethnic groups throughout the country (Agyarkoh, Frimpong & Abban, 2017). These festivals are significant annual or bi-annual events that are often linked to the celebration of ancestral memory, purification, and spiritual renewal. Festivals are also opportunities to display the values that are deeply connected to a community’s identity, history and continuity (Gyekey, 2005). Thus, festival activities are not only religious or historical commemorations, but also occasions for displaying identity, beliefs and values through symbolic colour in attire, paraphernalia, and performance.

Colour plays a central role in Ghanaian festivals, serving both aesthetic and symbolic purposes. In the Homowo festival celebrated by the Ga of Ghana, for example, costumes and colour are used not only for aesthetic pleasure but also to represent the identities and emotions of the participants (Kwakye-Opong, 2014). Agyarkoh, Duku, and Abban (2017), in their study on the Simpa (Effutu) Aboakyir festival, revealed that colours are not merely decorative, but carry profound cultural significance. The researchers found that the flamboyant colour schemes used during the festival embodied sociocultural values and educational messages that shaped the experiences of both participants and observers.

The Akuapim Odwira Festival is a vibrant and spiritually significant celebration observed by the Akuapim people of Ghana. The Akuapem Traditional Area is situated along the Akuapem Ridge in the Eastern Region of Ghana. It comprises three main ethnic groups: the Akan, Kyerepong, and Guan. The Kyerepong communities include Abiriw, Dawu, Awukugua,

Adukrom, Apirede, Aseseeso, and Abonse, while the Guan communities are made up of Larteh, Obosomase, Tutu, Mampong, and Mamfe. The Akan towns within the area include Aburi, Ahwerease, Amanokrom, and Akropong. Two major festivals are celebrated annually in Akuapem: The Odwira and Ohum festivals. Towns such as Amanokrom, Larteh, Adukrom, Akropong, Ahwerease, and Aburi are known for their vibrant celebration of the Odwira Festival. The Ohum Festival, on the other hand, is celebrated in towns including Larteh, Obosomase, Tutu, Mampong, Mamfe, and Abiriw. Between the two festivals, it is the Odwira Festival which receives more widespread recognition.

The word, “Odwira” is an Akan word which translates as “purification” (Ayesu, Howard & Asubonteng, 2015). The celebration of the Odwira Festival serves multiple purposes, including purification, thanksgiving, the eating of the new yam, ancestral veneration, and the renewal of political and social ties. The festival is a period of deep spiritual reflection, where the king and his people undergo cleansing rituals to ensure a prosperous and harmonious new year. It also provides an opportunity to mourn the departed, reaffirm unity, and celebrate the rich cultural heritage of the Akuapim people.

A distinctive feature of the Odwira Festival is the symbolic use of colours, which represent various occasions and performances throughout the celebration. Ofuafo (2013) defines colour symbolism, the topic of discussion, as an item, behaviour, connection, or language construction that represents a variety of meanings. According to Adejumo (2002), colours serve as a means of identification, beautification, and communication, conveying emotions and meanings through visual expression. Caivano and Lopez (2007) emphasize the significance of color as having a high level of influence on institutional communication because it can be identified and recognized more quickly than other institutional symbols.

Each day of the Odwira Festival is marked by specific colours in the attire of the celebrants. These colours are not merely decorative, but serve as powerful representations of the spiritual, historical, and social essence of the festival. They highlight the importance of the activities performed, from sacred rituals to communal gatherings, reinforcing the strength and unity of the Akuapim people. Through these colour-coded celebrations, the Odwira Festival becomes a visual and spiritual spectacle that reaffirms the identity, values, and resilience of the Akuapem people.

---

## 3. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

---

Despite the centrality of colour symbolism in Ghanaian traditional festivals, its deeper cultural meanings are often overlooked, especially within the context of the

Akuapem's Odwira Festival. While colour plays a vital role in expressing emotions, spiritual beliefs, and social hierarchies, many observers and even participants tend to perceive it as merely decorative. The week-long Odwira Festival, with each day marked by specific colours in costume and regalia, presents a unique opportunity to explore how colour functions as symbols. However, there is a gap in scholarly attention to how these colours communicate culturally embedded meanings during the festival. This study, therefore, seeks to examine the symbolic use of colours in traditional attire during the Akuapem Odwira Festival and their interpretation within the cultural, spiritual, and historical framework of the Akuapem people.

#### 4. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

To examine the color symbols and their cultural interpretation of the costumes used in the Akuapem Odwira festival.

#### 5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK - SEMIOTIC THEORY OF ROLAND BERTHES

Semiotics refers to an approach for analysing texts such as films, writings, images of colours by examining how meaning is created through the interaction of signs. Semiotics was pioneered by scholars like Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Peirce, with Roland Barthes later expanding its applications. Saussure conceptualized a sign as the union of a *signifier* (form) and *signified* (meaning) (Hodkinson, 2017). Roland Barthes emphasized that signs and symbols must be understood based on their social or cultural context. For Barthes (1968), signs evoke a denotative meaning which refers to the most direct, literal, and obvious meaning of a sign. Due to this straightforwardness—especially in the context of visual images—denotative meanings are more likely to be understood and recognized across different cultures. On the other hand, connotative meaning refers to the mental and emotional ideas associated with the denotation. In essence, Barthes views connotations as being further removed from the signifier than denotations, and being more culturally specific. Thus, connotation often depends on the audience's familiarity with the cultural and symbolic interpretations attached that make up the meanings of a sign.

In this study of colour symbolism, colours are considered as signs that have both literal (denotative) and symbolic (connotative) meanings. While the denotative meaning of a colour refers to its basic visual appearance, its connotative meaning is shaped

by symbolic associations and cultural conventions. Semiotics, therefore, helps to examine the meanings and interpretations associated with the colours used in the celebration of the Odwira Festival among the Akuapem people of Ghana.

#### 6. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research approach that relies on observation, a close interaction with some elders of the royal family, and a semiotic analysis of pictures obtained from the week-long celebration of the Odwira Festival. The analysis focuses on the use of colour as a symbol within the dressing of participants of the Akuapem Odwira festival celebration. Thus, the paper focuses on the meanings and interpretations of the specific clothing worn on each day of the festival celebration starting from Monday's road-clearing to Amanprobi, Tuesday's outdoor of the new yam, Wednesday's remembrance of the departed, Thursday's feeding of the ancestors to Friday's grand durbar.

#### 7. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

##### 7.1 ODWIRA MONDAY AND ITS CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Odwira Festival is a significant cultural celebration among the Akuapem people of Ghana. It serves as a period of purification, thanksgiving, ancestral veneration, and reaffirmation of social and political ties. As part of the festival's customs, Odwira Monday marks an essential ritual in which the path leading to the Royal Mausoleum (Amanprobi) is cleared. This sacred tradition symbolises the return of the ancestors (Nananom) to partake in the Odwira celebrations at the Okuapehene's Palace.

On Odwira Monday, a ceremonial route from the Okuapehene's Palace to the Royal Mausoleum (Amanprobi) is cleared. This sacred and private event is led by the Abrafo (State Executioners), Banmufo, Adumfo, Powmufo, and their chiefs. The act of clearing the path is rooted in the Akan belief that a chief does not die but transitions to "the village." The clearing of this path signifies that the ancestors will return to participate in the Odwira festivities.

##### 7.1.1 Significance of Traditional Attire

During this event, the stakeholders involved wear *batakari*, an ancient smock borrowed from Northern traditions. These *batakari*s are adorned in various dark colours, which symbolise the solemnity and mood of the occasion. The dark colours reflect mourning, reverence, and a connection to the ancestral spirits, reinforcing the sacred nature of the ritual.





**Figure 1**  
clearing the path to the ancestral home

The Odwira Monday ritual is an integral part of the festival, as it connects the living with the ancestors, ensuring their presence and blessings during the celebration. The ceremony highlights the deep spiritual and traditional values of the Akuapem people, showcasing their respect for ancestry, continuity, and cultural preservation.

## 7.2 ODWIRA TUESDAY

Odwira da (Odwira day) Tuesday marks a significant phase of the Odwira Festival, deeply rooted in ancestral reverence and cultural traditions. On this day, key traditional leaders perform sacred rites, including the summoning of the ancestors, the outdooring of the new yam, and rituals that lead to the lifting of the ban on noise-making. These activities symbolise the connection between the living and the ancestors, ensuring their blessings for the festival.

### 7.2.1 Summoning of the Ancestors

On Odwira da Tuesday, the Gyaasehene, one of the five Divisional Chiefs of the Akuapem Traditional Area and the Administrator of all royal courtiers, officially

summons the Banmuhene (Chief of the Royal Mausoleum and custodian of the ancestors), along with the Adumhene, Powmuhene, and their kinsmen.

The Gyaasehene formally informs the Banmuhene that the Okuapehene, also known as the Omanhene, is ready to receive Odwira. The Banmuhene and his entourage are then tasked with returning to the sacred forest, where the Royal Mausoleum (Amanprobi) is located, to consult with the ancestors (Nananom) and bring the Odwira blessings to the Okuapehene.

### 7.2.2 Outdooring of the New Yam (Krubii Ceremony)

As part of the Odwira da Tuesday rituals, representatives from the seven stool houses in Akropong participate in the outdooring of the new yam, a ceremony known as Krubii. This takes place at the residence of the Kubrihene after which the new yam is paraded through the principal streets of Akropong. Before this sacred event, it is strictly forbidden to taste the new yam in any of the Akuapem states or within the town.

Meanwhile, the Okuapehene remains seated in state, awaiting the return of the Baamuhene and his people with the blessings of Odwira. The festival celebrations can only begin once the Baamuhene has returned with the blessings of the ancestors.



**Figure 2**  
Outdooring of the new yam known as Krubii

### 7.2.3 Sacred Ritual and Lifting of the Ban on Noise-Making

Upon the Baamuhene's return, he approaches the Okuapehene, and a ceremonial cloth is placed over their heads. It is believed that at this moment, only the Baamuhene and the Okuapehene can witness what the ancestors have presented.

### 7.2.4 Significance of Traditional Attire

During the outdooring of the new yam, Nananom and all key participants wear traditional smocks (batakari). These batakari are often old and adorned with amulets, as they are considered sacred garments used in rituals. Since the day is dedicated to visiting the ancestors, Nananom wear very old batakari smeared with the blood of rams and decorated with protective charms and amulets when visiting the Royal Mausoleum.

In the late afternoon, the Okuapehene and his kinsmen change into dark or black cloths in preparation to receive the Odwira from the Baamuhene. Following this, Nananom proceed to the stool house to perform rituals, formally lifting the ban on noise-making. This event then leads into Odwira da Wednesday, which is a day of mourning the departed, where Nananom continue to wear black or dark clothes as a sign of reverence to the ancestors.



**Figure 3**  
Ushering in the Odwira from Amamprobi, the Royal Mausoleum

### 7.2.5 Cultural and Spiritual Significance

The wearing of dark clothing on Odwira da Tuesday symbolises the deep respect and reverence for the ancestors. The day is also considered a Dapaa (sacred Tuesday) preceding Awukudae, further emphasising its spiritual importance in the Akuapem tradition.

Odwira da Tuesday is a sacred and pivotal moment in the Odwira Festival, marking the official reception of Odwira, the outdooring of the new yam, and the lifting of the ban on noise-making. Through these ancient rituals, the Akuapem people reaffirm their connection with their ancestors, uphold their cultural heritage, and ensure continuity of tradition for future generations.

### 7.3 ODWIRA WEDNESDAY: A DAY OF REMEMBRANCE AND MOURNING

Odwira Wednesday is a sacred day in Akropong, marked by deep communal mourning and remembrance of the departed. On this day, the entire town unites in solemn reflection, with families gathering to honour their loved ones who have passed away. The traditional attire for the occasion is black and red, symbolising grief and the enduring connection between the living and the departed.

In adherence to custom, the Okuapehene embarks on a significant journey to the seven stool houses, offering condolences and paying respects to the ancestors (Nananom). This act reinforces the bond between the living and the spirits of the forebears.

At the break of dawn, sacred rituals are performed to honour all those who have passed within the year. Through libation and other rites, the path is ceremonially cleared, allowing the spirits of the ancestors to spiritually partake in the Odwira festival. This tradition affirms their eternal presence and guidance among the people of Akropong.

The mourning process is further expressed through the symbolic use of black and red clothes. Black (Kuntunkuni, Birisi) represents the soul and spirit of the departed, as well as the sorrow of remembering them. Red (Okoben, Koo Gyan), on the other hand, signifies the pain and anguish experienced by the bereaved. As part of the ritual, libations are poured in honour of the ancestors, accompanied by the consumption of strong alcoholic beverages, reinforcing the communal bond in mourning and remembrance.







**Figure 4**  
**Odwira Wednesday: Remembering the Dead**

Odwira Thursday is a day of spiritual reverence, cultural significance, and communal celebration in Akropong. On this day, the Okuapehene adorns himself in the finest, most colourful white regalia and sits in state to

receive homage from all who come to pay their respects. Chiefs, elders, citizens, and invited guests also dress in white attire, symbolising purity, peace, and the joy of spiritual renewal.

This day is dedicated to feeding the ancestors and honouring the sacred stools of Okuapeman. Rams are sacrificed, and traditional meals are carefully prepared in the various stool houses as offerings to the ancestors. A key highlight of the day is the procession of young maidens who gracefully parade through the principal streets of the town, carrying a special dish to present to the ancestors. This act signifies the community’s unwavering devotion to its forebears, ensuring that the ancestral spirits are nourished and content.

In the evening, the Okuapehene, accompanied by his five divisional chiefs Gyaasehene, Benkumhene, Nifahene, Adontenhene, and Kurontihene makes a sacred journey to the abode of the ancestral stools. There, each chief individually reaffirms and swears their loyalty and allegiance to the Ofori Kuma Stool, the symbol of the Akuapem Kingdom’s authority and unity. This ceremony is a testament to the enduring strength and solidarity of Okuapeman.

As night falls, a symbolic curfew is imposed, plunging Akropong into an atmosphere of profound silence and sacred observance. Under the cover of darkness, state executioners (Abrafo) carry the revered stools and regalia of Okuapeman through the deserted streets to Adami Mu, a historical river, where sacred cleansing rituals are performed. This act signifies the spiritual purification of the kingdom, washing away any negativity and ensuring continued blessings for the land and its people.

### 7.3.1 Significance of Traditional Attire

Odwira Thursday is not only a day of solemn rituals, but also one of joy and feasting. The white cloths, attires, costume and garments worn on this day reflect the happiness that comes with the belief that both the living and the ancestors partake in this grand feast. It is a moment of harmony, gratitude, and renewal, reaffirming the deep connection between the past, present, and future generations of Okuapeman.







**Figure 5**  
**A Day of Reverence, Feasting, and Unity**

#### **7.4 ODWIRA DA FRIDAY**

Odwira Friday marks the grand climax of the rites and customs associated with the Odwira Festival.

##### **7.4.1 Significance of Traditional Attire**

On this solemn, yet joyous occasion, the Okuapenehene, adorned in majestic kente and resplendent gold ornaments, rides in a palanquin through the principal streets of Akropong. Accompanied by his divisional and town chiefs, who are also clad in their finest regalia, this royal procession is a magnificent spectacle of culture and heritage.

The celebration reaches its pinnacle at Mpeniase, where the Okuapenehene, together with his chiefs, elders,

and the people of Okuapeman, congregates for a grand durbar. All present appear in their most regal attires, signifying the importance of the occasion. Dignitaries, including the clergy, government officials, and esteemed guests, grace the gathering with their presence. At the durbar, the Okuapenehene delivers a review of the past year and outlines developmental initiatives for the year ahead. In recognition of his leadership, goodwill messages are presented to him from the government and Okuapeman citizens, both home and abroad.

As night falls, Odwira Friday transforms into a vibrant display of entertainment and cultural expression. The air is filled with music, dance, and various artistic performances, including concerts and beauty pageants. Corporate bodies and businesses seize the moment to market their brands by sponsoring and hosting special side attractions.

Odwira is not merely a festival; it is the embodiment of Okuapeman's rich traditions, artistry, fashion, music, and culinary heritage. This cultural extravaganza fosters creativity, strengthens communal bonds, and paves the way for new opportunities. As the climax of the festival's traditional activities, all stakeholders appear in their finest apparel, befitting the grandeur of the occasion. Nananom, bedecked in splendid kente and opulent gold ornaments, lead their kinsmen and town folk in celebrating the rich legacy of Okuapeman.





Figure 6  
Grand Durbar

## 8. CONCLUSION

The Odwira Festival of the Akuapem people is a rich tapestry of rituals, ancestral veneration, spiritual renewal, and cultural celebration, intricately woven with colour symbolism. Each day of the festival employs specific colours in traditional attire to convey layered meanings that reflect the values, beliefs, and emotional tones of the activities performed. From the sombre blacks and reds of mourning, to the purifying whites and the majestic kente patterns of the grand durbar, these colours serve as communicative tools rooted in cultural memory and identity. This study reaffirms that the colours of attires used during the Odwira Festival are not just aesthetic

but are imbued with meaning that enhances the spiritual and social significance of the celebration. Understanding these symbols provides deeper insight into the worldview of the Akuapem people and highlights the importance of preserving such cultural expressions for future generations.

## REFERENCES

- Adedina, F., & Taiwo, V. T. (2020). Colour symbolism as cultural element in selected Tunde Kelani's video films. *LASU Journal of African Studies*, 8(1), 20-34.
- Adejumo, O. T. (2002). Developmental Strategy for Sustainable Public Open Space System in Metropolitan Lagos.
- Agyarkoh E., Duku, F. K., & Abban, E. (2017). Colour symbolism of Aboakyir. *Journal of Culture, Society and Development*, 36, 30-39.
- Antubam, K. (1963). *Ghana's heritage of culture*. Koehler und Amelang
- Ayesu, S. M., Howard, E. K., & Asubonteng, K. (2015). Socio-Cultural and Economic Significance of Textiles in Akuapem Odwira Festival. In *International Conference on Applied Sciences and Technology: Kumasi Technical University* (pp. 241-53).
- Barthes, R. (1968) *Elements of Semiology*. Cape.
- Bartle, P. F. (1983). The universe has three souls. Notes on translating Akan culture. *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 85-114.
- Caivano, J. L., & Lopez, M. A. (2007). Chromatic identity in global and local markets: analysis of colours in branding. *Journal of the International Colour Association*, 1(3), 1-14.
- Dilloway, L. (2006). *An exploration into colour symbolism as used by different cultures and religions*. National Centre for Computer Animation.
- Fádipè, N. (1970). *the Sociology of the Yorùbá*. Eds. Òkédijí, f. and Òkédijí, o. Ìbàdàn: Univer sity Press Ltd.
- Feisner, E.A., (2000). *Colour*. London: Laurence King Publishing.
- Gyekye, K. (2005). *Culture, religion and the persuit of science*, Ghana: NCTE.
- Kwakye-Opong, R. (2014). Beyond ethnic traditions: Philosophies and socio-cultural relevance of the Ashanti and the Ewe Kente cloths. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(26), 150-161.
- Ofoafo, P. U. (2013). Art Symbols as Means of Communicating Religious Concepts in Urhobo Traditional Society. *Journal of International Social Research*, 6(27).
- Tordzro, N. D. (2021). *Decolonising African costume and textiles: Naming, symbols and meaning in the Ghanaian context* [Master's thesis, University of Education, Winneba]