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Color as a Cultural Resilience Strategy: Material-Semiotic Systems in Ghana's Indigenous Spirituality

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Abstract

Purpose: This study investigates how color operates as a material–semiotic system in Ghanaian indigenous spirituality and examines the ways in which this system contributes to cultural resilience across the Akan, Dagomba, and Ewe communities. The research seeks to understand how symbolic meanings and material practices of color mediate relationships between humans, ancestors, and spiritual forces, and how these systems adapt within contemporary contexts. **Methodology:** The study employs a qualitative ethnographic design conducted between January and June 2025 in three regions of Ghana. Data were collected through 18 semi-structured interviews, three focus group discussions, participatory observation of 15 ritual ceremonies, and analysis of 48 material artifacts. A reflexive thematic analysis using abductive reasoning was applied to identify patterns across symbolic meanings, material practices, and cross-cultural variations. **Findings:** Results reveal that the white–black–red triadic serves as a stable cosmological framework but is articulated differently through temporal orientations and ritual functions: white functions as terminal (Akan), initial (Dagomba), and continuous (Ewe); black demonstrates semantic complexity through affective, ritual-operational, and genealogical-structural expressions; and red shows varying valence from negative (Akan) to ambivalent (Dagomba) to positive (Ewe), requiring cultural mechanisms of regulation. Multicolored compositions further reveal a shared compositional grammar in which black acts as a structural integrator representing ancestral continuity. **Implications:** The study offers insights for cultural heritage preservation, ethical collaboration within creative industries, and the development of policy frameworks that support indigenous knowledge systems. It underscores the need for participatory approaches that recognize color not merely as aesthetic symbolism but as a living epistemic and cosmological resource sustaining community identity amid globalization and generational shifts. **Originality and Value:** This research advances a material–semiotic framework that bridges symbolic anthropology and material culture theory, introducing the concept of color as a strategy of cultural resilience. It demonstrates that color is not a passive representational code but an active performative agent that shapes spiritual, social, and cosmological relations. The study contributes novel cross-cultural evidence from West Africa and expands theoretical discussions on intangible cultural heritage, decolonial epistemology, and material agency.

Keywords: Cultural resilience; color symbolism; indigenous spirituality; intangible cultural heritage; material-semiotic systems.

Introduction

In Ghanaian culture, color has a material-semiotic dimension that represents the interconnectedness between the social, spiritual, and cosmological worlds. Through traditional fabrics such as *kente*, *adinkra*, and *batakari*, color functions not just as an aesthetic element, but as a sign system that articulates moral values, social status, and

spirituality of society. The color configuration on *kente* contains metaphysical meanings that affirm the relationship between humans and ancestors and God, thus making them an integral part of the *intangible cultural heritage* (Oguamanam & Yeboah-Appiah, 2024). However, the symbolic and spiritual value of indigenous colors is now facing serious threats due to globalization, cultural commodification, and generational disruption. The practice of mass production and commercial exploitation of *kente* motifs and colors has shifted its sacred meaning to mere economic commodities (Okyere & Denoncourt, 2021), while the decline of the traditional textile industry has weakened the transmission of cultural values between generations (Jr, Sumaila, & Mensah, 2025). This phenomenon reflects a crisis of meaning and the loss of the social function of color as a spiritual medium and collective identity. Therefore, this research is important to re-examine the agency of color in Ghana's indigenous spirituality, by looking at how color plays a role as a material-semiotic entity that has adaptive power to the flow of modernity as well as being an instrument of *cultural resilience* in maintaining the continuity of ancestral values in the midst of rapid social change.

In the Akan, Dagomba, and Ewe cultures, color is not just a decorative aesthetic element, but a *performative spiritual technology*. The funeral ceremony will take place in three phases: red-black cloth to mark grief and social division; brown-red fabric for the transition stage; and white clothes as a sign of ancestral reconciliation and restoration of the cosmos order (Adinkrah, 2022; Faleke, Kodua, Ampong, & Gyimah, 2024). In Dagomba practice, ritual specialists use sacrificial chickens of specific colors: white (*saabiliyuli*) for clarity of divine communication, black (*chiɛyuli*) to absorb evil forces, and red to restore vitality (Bawa & Osei, 2022). Meanwhile, the Ewe kente weavers encoded historical memory and moral philosophy in color combinations: red symbolized blood and ancestral struggle, green of fertility, blue of harmony, and black of spiritual maturity (Oguamanam & Yeboah-Appiah, 2024). These practices place color as a living epistemology of sensory-symbolic language through which communities express ontological principles, build spiritual relationships, and transmit cultural knowledge across generations.

Anthropological studies have long recognized the symbolic power of color in ritual life. Turner (Turner, 1967) showed that color symbols contain compound meanings and mediate the transition between the profane and the sacred. The semiotic approach by Barthes (1977) and Eco (1979) positions color as a connotative sign of meaningful visual codes through cultural consensus. Comparative studies found color triadic systems in various African societies: Lemi (2024) observed that white, black, and red represent the cosmology of purity, death, and vitality; Watts (2024) The analysis of blood metaphors emphasizes the role of red as a sign of vitality/sacrifice that is often contrasted with white (purity) and black (death/ancestor), thus forming a triadic system that guides ritual actions. In the Ghanaian context, Hagan (1970), Yankah (1995) and Adinkrah (Adinkrah, 2022) examine the metaphor of the color of Akan; Kwakye-Opong (2014) examines *the symbolism of adinkra*; while Ross (1998) traces the Ewe weaving tradition. As the *material turn* in anthropology develops, symbolism is no longer seen as a system of passive signs, but rather an embodied practice that has social agency (Appadurai, 1988; McDonnell, 2023). Recent studies by Smith, Byrne, Bridget, Harries, and Bethan (2021) and Yakoub (2021) confirm that indigenous aesthetic systems are an arena of decolonial resistance and epistemic reconstruction.

However, there are still three major gaps in understanding the operation of color in indigenous spirituality. First, there is a theoretical bifurcation: symbolic anthropology and the study of material culture developed separately, so that few frameworks examined

color as a semiotic code as well as a material agent. Second, research in Ghana is still fragmented: studies of textiles, rituals, and spirituality run independently without looking at systemic linkages. Third, the framework for the preservation of cultural heritage has not been able to capture the sensory-semiotic knowledge that is at the core of cultural resilience. A fundamental question arises: how do communities maintain cosmological coherence in the midst of religious pluralism and market pressures? How do symbolic-material systems adapt without losing meaning? Without integrative theory, the performative power of color remains hidden, and cultural adaptation is mistakenly seen as a loss, not a survival strategy.

This research addresses these gaps through *a material-semiotic* framework that combines the interpretive power of symbolic anthropology with the attention of material culture theory to agency and practice. This approach views color as a marker code (a system of meaning that follows cosmological logic) as well as a material agent (an embodied force that acts in ritual ecology and mediates spiritual relationships). Drawing on the semiotics of Peirce (1992) and the agency theory of Gell (1998), this study asserts that the power of color lies in its formivity through the acts of wearing, weaving, painting, and presenting that produce real social and spiritual effects. The key concept offered is "color as a strategy of cultural resilience," which is the understanding that adaptation and syncretism are not forms of bleaching tradition, but strategies to maintain the coherence of cosmological structures in the midst of change.

This article aims to answer the question: How does color function as a material-semiotic system in Ghanaian indigenous spirituality, how are its meanings and practices articulated differently among the Akan, Dagomba, and Ewe groups, and what challenges and potential strategies do these systems face in the context of modernity, religious pluralism, and globalization? The specific objectives of the research include: (1) documenting the symbolic and material dimensions of the use of color in the ritual practices of Akan, Dagomba, and Ewe; (2) analyze how color mediates human relationships, ancestry, and spiritual power through material culture; (3) identify patterns of convergence-divergence in cross-cultural color symbolic-material systems, as well as mark the challenge of cultural resilience in the context of modernity and religious pluralism. This study argues that color in Ghanaian indigenous spirituality operates as a material-semiotic system that has three main characteristics: (1) mediating spiritual relations through embodied performativity, (2) maintaining cosmological coherence through adaptive flexibility, and (3) serving as an arena of epistemic resistance to global cultural homogenization.

Methods

This research uses a qualitative approach with ethnographic design, based on the interpretive anthropology paradigm as proposed by Geertz (1973). This design was chosen because the research focuses on an in-depth understanding of the symbolic systems and material practices of color in the context of the spirituality of indigenous peoples of Ghana. The ethnographic approach is considered the most appropriate to trace lived meaning through rituals, material production, and body knowledge that cannot be quantitatively measured through surveys or experiments (Cain & Scrivner, 2022). The analysis of this research is based on material-semiotic theory, which asserts that meaning (semiotic) and material practice (materiality) form each other interchangeably (Appadurai, 1988; Gell, 1998). Therefore, the research method was directed to observe both the discursive (what participants said about color) and non-discursive aspects (how

color "functions" performatively in rituals and artifacts).

The field research was conducted between January and June 2025 in three regions of Ghana that represent cultural diversity and color symbol systems: the Ashanti Region (Akan Culture), the Northern Region (Dagemba Culture), and the Volta Region (Ewe Culture). In Ashanti, research focused on Kumasi City and two peri-urban communities known for their adinkra and kente cloth traditions and colorful funerary rituals. In the Northern Region, research was conducted in Tamale City and three villages in Tolon and Kumbungu Districts, where the Dagomba people practice syncretic spirituality between Islam and traditional beliefs through healing rituals and the use of colors in batakari (fugu) clothing. Meanwhile, in the Volta Region, research took place in Ho City as well as the internationally renowned Kpetoe and Agbozume weaver communities as centers for kente fabric production. The Ewe tradition emphasizes the relationship between color, morality, and community history, which is evident in the weaving and worship patterns in the Yewe temples.

The main researcher is a Ghanaian with an Akan cultural background, but non-indigenous status in the Dagomba and Ewe regions. This "insider–outsider" position provides the advantage of ease of social access while demanding reflexivity against interpretive bias. To bridge language and cultural differences, this study involved three local research assistants who were fluent in Twi (Akan), Dagbani (Dagomba), and Ewe.

The study population includes individuals who have specific knowledge or skills related to color symbolism in the context of rituals and material cultures. Inclusion criteria include: (1) be at least 25 years old; (2) have first-hand experience in religious rituals (such as priests, temple guards), textile crafts (weavers, craftsmen), healing practices (shamans or herbalists), or life-cycle ceremonies (traditional elders); and (3) provide informed consent. Meanwhile, individuals who are unable to give consent or are traditionally forbidden to speak of sacred knowledge are excluded from research.

The sampling strategy uses the purposive snowball sampling technique. Early access was made through *gatekeepers* such as chiefs, temple guards, and senior weavers who provided recommendations to early informants. Each informant was then asked to recommend other individuals with different social roles to avoid data homogeneity. The maximum variation approach is applied taking into account gender, age range (25–40, 41–60, and >60 years), and area of expertise. A total of 18 participants were involved in the study, consisting of 6 Akan, 6 Dagomba, and 6 Ewe, respectively. This sample size is based on the principle of information power which assesses the adequacy of data based on the focus of the research, the depth of the interview, and the homogeneity of the participants. Conceptual saturation was achieved at the 15th interview, with additional interviews (16th to 18th) used as confirmation. In addition, three focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted, one each in each community to strengthen the validity and depth of the findings.

Data collection was carried out through four main methods to ensure triangulation: semi-structured interviews, participatory observations, focus group discussions, and material culture analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 informants with guidance covering four themes: personal experiences of color, symbolic meaning, material practices, and adaptation to cultural change. The interview lasted 45–90 minutes in the participant's preferred language (Twi, Dagbani, Ewe, or English) and was recorded with written permission. Linguistic validity is maintained through back-translation procedures. Participatory observation was carried out in 15 traditional ceremonies that included the funeral of Akan, the inauguration of the tribal chief and the healing ritual of Dagomba, as well as the weaving and worship of the Ewe. Field notes are compiled

immediately after the activity, and visual documentation is done with permission. Meanwhile, each FGD was attended by 5–7 participants from different social roles to discuss shared perceptions and differences between generations related to the meaning of color and the influence of global religions. Material cultural analysis was carried out on 48 artifacts, including kente fabric, adinkra fabric, brick clothing, beaded jewelry, and temple decorations. The analytical approach adapts the critical visual methodology of Rose (2016) by recording color composition, production techniques, and interpretive interviews with the creator or owner of the object.

The data were analyzed using a reflexive thematic approach according to Braun and Clarke (2006) with abductive logic, which moves between empirical patterns and material-semiotic theory. The analysis process starts from verbatim transcription of the entire interview, repeated reading for familiarization, line-by-line coding using NVivo 14, to grouping the code into temporary themes. After internal and external verification processes, 14 final themes organized in three main domains were obtained: color triadic cosmology (white, black, and red), color material agency, and adaptive resilience through cultural syncretism. The validity of the results was strengthened through member checking with eight participants, peer debriefing with two anthropologists, and negative case analysis to ensure consistency of interpretation.

Results and Discussion

This section presents ethnographic findings organized on the basis of the symbolic triadics of white, black, and red, as well as an analysis of multicolor composition as a grammatical principle. Data were obtained through 18 semi-structured interviews, three focus group discussions (FGDs), participatory observation at 15 ritual ceremonies, and analysis of 48 material artifacts from the Akan, Dagomba, and Ewe communities. Participant identities are written in the format: Cultural Group + Role + Number (*Akan* Elder 3 [AE3], Dagomba Healer 8 [DH8], Ewe Weaver 11 [EW11]).

1. White as a Mediator of Purity, Peace, and Ancestral Connection

White emerged as the most consistent symbol among the three cultural groups. All participants (18 out of 18, or 100%) attributed it to spiritual purity, ancestral blessings, and a peaceful transition to the spirit world. Nevertheless, although the meaning is relatively uniform, the context and material form of its use vary. This suggests the existence of the same cosmological logic, but expressed through different ritual practices.

In the Akan people, the color white serves as a marker of the end of suffering and the successful integration of the spirit of the deceased into the ancestral world. This color is used specifically in the last funeral ceremony (*ayie*), which is the third phase of the series of death rituals after *doteyie* (notice of death) and *ayie* (main burial), which is usually performed a few months after death. In observations of three cemeteries in Kumasi and Mampong (March–April 2025), all mourners wore white clothes, different from the red-black clothes used in the previous phase. An elderly woman in Mampong explained the meaning of this transition: “When we wear white at the last ceremony, it means that we no longer grieve. The dead have been with the ancestors and rest in peace” (AE3, personal communication, March 27, 2025). A similar view was expressed by another participant: “*White is a sign of joy after a period of grief. It tells us that the spirit has joined the ancestors in heaven*” (AE5, personal communication, March 27, 2025).

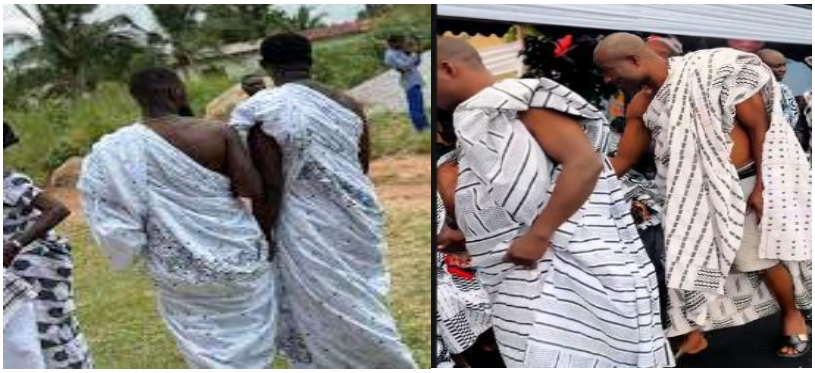

Figure 1. White funeral dress of the Akan

Figure 1 shows the white funeral clothes worn by mourners at the last ceremony of the Akan community. These garments are usually made of plain cotton or linen fabrics without motifs, reflecting the simplicity and purity that are at the heart of the spiritual meaning of white. The change from red-black to white clothing signifies an emotional and cosmological transition from sorrow to peace, from the profane world to the sacred realm of the ancestors.

Analysis of six white funeral cloths showed a simple material in the form of cotton or plain linen without *an adinkra* motif as in the previous red-black fabric. A senior weaver explained: "*White cloth brings blessings. When you see it, you know peace has come. We didn't add any symbols because white itself was already a message*" (AE6, personal communication, March 29, 2025). Thus, in the context of Akan's funeral, the color white serves to terminal mark the end of the liminal danger of death and the restoration of the cosmic order through the union of the spirit with the ancestors.

In contrast to the Akan tradition which places white as a symbol of closing grief, the Dagomba people actually interpret the same color more dynamically, as a marker of the beginning or opening of the spiritual process. In the Dagomba society, white is not limited to the context of death, but is also present in the realm of healing, governance, and kinship.

Three traditional healers (DH8, DH10, DH14) in Kpating explain that white chicken (*saabiliyuli*) is used to treat visual impairment and "spiritual darkness". A senior physician said: "*When we offered a white rooster, we called upon the ancestors to restore vision. White symbolizes light; without light, there is no vision*" (DH8, personal communication, April 15, 2025).

During the healing ritual, researchers observed the shaman applying white clay (similar to *hyire* in the Akan tradition) to the patient's forehead and eyelids before sacrificing the white rooster. The color sequence of white clay, white chicken, white container shows the principle *of chromatic reinforcement*, which is the repetition of color elements to magnify spiritual power. Another physician asserted: "*Without white, medicine is not perfect. It was white who called the ancestors to bless the work*" (DH10, personal communication, April 15, 2025).

Figure 2. White Kolanut

The white kolanut, as seen in figure 2, is the seed of the *Cola acuminata* tree that is often used in various cultural and spiritual practices of West African societies. The color white has a strong symbolic meaning, signifying purity, honesty, and goodwill. In addition to healing, white is also present in social interactions. White kolanut is used in a variety of contexts such as thanking the healer, marriage negotiations, and paying homage to the chief. A local historian explains:

> White kolanut is sacred. When you give it, it shows your heart is clean. The chieftain, the physician, and the in-laws all accepted it because this relationship demanded purity (DE9, personal communication, April 16, 2025).

The sacred meaning of white is also seen in the Dagomba death ritual. The body was wrapped in a white cloth before being buried. The same historian says: "*White ensures that the spirit departs in peace, free from earthly dust*" (DE9, personal communication, April 16, 2025). Even in traditional political contexts, white retains its role as a symbol of cleanliness and spiritual legitimacy. At the observation of the two Dagomba leadership festivals (*Fire Festival*, March 2025), the chiefs wore *white batakari* (traditional clothing). The community historian explains: "*The chieftains wore white during the celebration to show joy and joy with their people*" (DE13, personal communication, April 16, 2025).

Thus, in the Dagomba community, white has a multidomain function of marking the beginning of spiritual processes (healing and death) as well as strengthening social relationships (government and kinship). The various forms of materials such as chicken, cloth, kola, and clay became a medium of summoning and mediation with the ancestral world, confirming the function of white as a link between the human realm and divine power.

If in the Akan people white functions as a terminal (closing grief) and in the Dagomba people it is an initial (opening the spiritual process), then in the Ewe people, the same color acquires a continuous meaning, namely a symbol of purity that must always be maintained and updated. In the Ewe tradition, white is a symbol of purity that is constantly maintained by the priests of Yewe, the god of thunder and the guardian of the balance of the cosmos. This color does not mark the beginning or end of a rite, but rather it marks the continuation of the sacred status inherent in the body and the ritual life of its adherents.

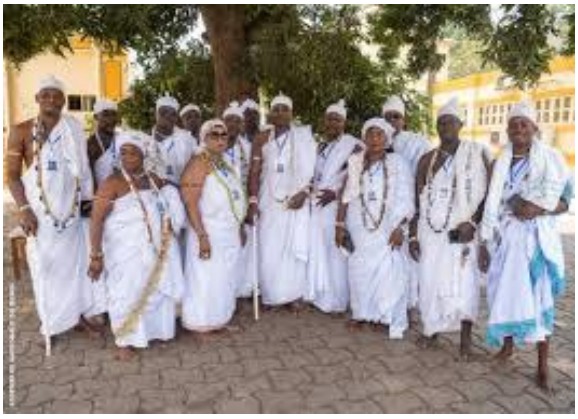

Figure 3. Pastor in white

In the Ewe context, the meaning of white acquires a continuous orientation, functioning not as a marker of ritual beginning or closure but as an enduring sign of sacred purity that must be constantly maintained by Yewe priests. As illustrated in Figure 3, the Yewe priest's full white attire materially expresses his embodied connection to divine power, signaling purity, surrender, and readiness to host the presence of the deity. During observations of Yewe ceremonies in Sogakope and Ho (April 2025), all priests were dressed entirely in white, reinforcing the idea that whiteness is a prerequisite for entering and sustaining sacred space. A senior priest explained: "*When I wear white, everyone knows I am no longer myself. The gods have taken my body*" (EP11, personal communication, April 25, 2025). Field observations also revealed spatial regulation in the temple: only those in white garments were permitted to enter the inner sanctum, indicating that white operates as a form of material authorization for accessing sacred realms. Analysis of four priestly garments confirms that the absence of additional colors reflects a cosmological requirement for uninterrupted purity, "*spiritually, it is still white*," as one priest noted, "*even when human eyes see stains*"

Additional field observations further demonstrate that the performative role of white extends beyond priestly dress into the broader social organization of the Yewe community. As depicted in Figure 3, groups of initiates, elders, and ritual specialists gather in coordinated white clothing during ceremonial assemblies. Although the styles of dress vary the uniform chromatic field creates what participants call *nyuie dzi*, "the atmosphere of holiness" A middle-aged initiate explained: "*When all of us wear white, the gods see unity. It shows we come with clean hearts*" (EP14, personal communication, April 26, 2025).

Field notes from the Ho temple compound support this statement: participants in white were observed forming the inner circle of ritual proceedings, while non-initiates and visitors remained at the periphery. This spatial hierarchy, which aligns bodily proximity with spiritual eligibility, highlights the material-semiotic logic that white both signifies and enacts ritual authority. One ritual assistant articulated this clearly: "*White tells the gods who is ready. It is not fashion. It is obedience*" (EP15, personal communication, April 26, 2025).

Analysis of ritual sequences further shows that white objects serve as conduits of sacred force. White calabashes, white beads, and powdered white clay (*kaolin*) were consistently used in purification rites prior to invocation chants. During one ceremony, a

priest placed a white bead necklace on a new initiate, stating: "*This is not decoration; it is the breath of Yewe that stays with you*" (EP12, personal communication, April 25, 2025). Across four ceremonies, researchers documented a recurring pattern in which white materials preceded any ritual involving drumming or trance, indicating that whiteness establishes the required spiritual condition before more intense ritual energies are introduced.

These observations confirm that in the Ewe spiritual system, white operates not simply as a visual code of purity but as an ontological medium that stabilizes the relationship between human bodies and divine presence. The color does not merely indicate sacredness; it activates and sustains it. Consequently, whiteness in Yewe practice is best understood as a materialized cosmological discipline, a condition of being that must be continuously embodied, performed, and renewed through both personal comportment and collective ritual action.

Table 1. Differences in material enactment

Culture	Primary Material	Function	Logic Temporal
Akan	Cloth worn	Concludes mourning	Terminal
Dagomba	Fowl, kola, cloth (gifted/sacrificed)	Initiates healing/relationships	Initiative
Ewe	Cloth (worn continuously)	Marks priestly status	Continuous

Based on Table 1, the symbolic function of white in the three cultural groups of Akan, Dagomba, and Ewe indicates a similar cosmological pattern but expressed through different ritual orientations. In Akan, white serves as terminal, marking the end of the period of suffering and the successful integration of the spirit into the ancestral world. In Dagomba, it is initial, opening up the healing process, spiritual transition, and social relations. While in Ewe, white has a continuous function, affirming a status of purity that must be permanently maintained in ritual life. All three are based on the same logic: white is the color that negotiates the boundaries between the profane and sacred worlds, but the temporal direction is different in closing (Akan), opening (Dagomba), and retaining (Ewe). Thus, the meaning of white is not static or universal, but rather is articulated situationally within the framework of their respective cosmology, showing how color becomes a transcendent medium that bridges the human, the ancestral and the divine. These findings support the material-semiotic framework, which asserts that material meaning and practice form each other without a deterministic relationship: the same symbolic code can give rise to different material practices.

2. Black as a Marker of Spiritual Transition, Power, and Intensity

Black appears as a color that is semantically more complex and contextual than white. Cross-cultural participants associated it simultaneously with grief, spiritual strength, protection, and connection to ancestors. In contrast to the relatively consistent meaning of white as a symbol of purity, the meaning of black shifts depending on the ritual phase, material form, and intention of the ritual practitioner. Six participants *Akan*

Identifying black clothing as a direct and emotional marker of grief, worn during the initial phases of doteyie (notice of death) and ayie (main funeral) before the final funeral procession wearing white clothing.

Figure 4. Mourners in black

Figure 4 shows mourners in Kumasi wearing black clothes in a funeral procession. Observations of two cemeteries in Kumasi (March 2025) show that almost all members of the nuclear family wore black clothing, while relatives and members of the community wore a red-black combination. A middle-aged female mourner explained the communicative power of black in an interview at the funeral site: "*When we wore black, everyone knew grief had entered the house. It was the color of a broken heart*" (AE2, personal communication, March 27, 2025). Another participant emphasized its relational function: "*Black is sadness, but it also signifies that we are still connected to those who have left*" (AE4, personal communication, March 27, 2025). This dual function expresses personal grief while also marking an ongoing relationship with the deceased, placing black as a liminal color that marks a period of dangerous transition before the spirit of the deceased fully merges with the ancestral world.

Material analysis of the mourners' clothing showed an interesting adaptation: of the 12 mourners photographed (with permission), 7 wore traditional black cloth, 3 wore Western-style black suits, and 2 wore black T-shirts with photos of the deceased. One elder explained: "*Black is still black. Whether it's traditional fabrics or Western suits, the message is the same. What matters is the weight of the heart, not the style of clothing*" (AE6, personal communication, March 29, 2025...).

This statement shows pragmatic semiotic flexibility: the marker (traditional or modern type of clothing) can change, as long as the marker (grief) remains culturally readable. People interpret the color black as an affective communication that expresses the emotional state of the mind outwardly and is socially recognized. Its liminal temporality (imposed between death and final burial) marks a spiritually risky transitional period.

In contrast to its representational function in the Akan community, the Dagomba

people understand the color black not only as a symbol of grief, but as a spiritual force that is active in healing and protection rituals. If in the context of black Akan it signifies sadness that must be expressed, then in the context of Black Dagomba it functions to absorb and neutralize evil forces that threaten the balance of life.

Three physicians (DH8, DH10, DH14) describe the black (*chiɛyuli*) as the main agent in curing diseases believed to be caused by human evil intentions (witchcraft, curses, or poisons). A physician explained in detail in an interview after the observation of the healing session (February 2025):

> Black is a powerful medicine. He calls the spirit to action. If the prophecy indicates that a person's illness is caused by human deeds, we first sacrifice the black rooster to the gods and ancestors in order to release the patient from the darkness and evil forces that envelop his body. After that, red chicken is used to cool the body (DH8, personal communication, February 5, 2025).

The logic of this ritual of the black rooster (absorbing evil) preceding the red rooster (restoring vitality) suggests that black serves as a spiritual cleanser, removing negative forces before positive healing can occur. This is contrary to the function of white chickens which play a role in opening communication channels with ancestors.

Field records document how the healer moved a black chicken over the patient's body several times while chanting a mantra, before being sacrificed outside the fence. Spatial movement from the inside out and the direction of the body to the limit indicate that black serves as an extractive agent pulling diseases out of the body. One elder explained the practice of protecting the household using black pigments: "*We used black paint from charcoal mixed with shea butter to draw the sign of the cross on the walls of the living room, especially above the doorway, to ward off evil and evil spirits*" (DE9, personal communication, February 5, 2025).

Observations of three houses in the Kumbungu countryside confirmed the presence of a black cross above the entrance. The adoption of cross symbols (derived from Islamic or Christian traditions) integrated in local protection practices shows a form of syncretic adaptation, without losing the core protective function of the color black. The Dagomba people interpret that black functions as an *agentive force*, not just a representative symbol. It actively absorbs, rejects, or pulls out negative energy. These findings clearly reveal the material-semiotic framework of "color as an agent"

This agentive role of black is also present, albeit in a different form, in the Ewe people of southern Ghana. If in the black Dagomba community it works through the ritual process of healing and protection, then in the Ewe community it functions as a medium of memory and ancestral continuity. In this context, the color black is no longer a tool of exorcism, but a prop of the symbolic structure that connects humans to their collective past. An expert weaver explained the meaning of black thread in an observation session in Agbozume (April 2025): "*The black line on the fabric is not embellishment. It is the voice of the ancestors who preceded us*" (EW11, personal communication, April 25, 2025). He then showed how black warp yarn forms the basic structure for a colorful weft yarn pattern: "*Without black holding on, other colors can't stand. Like our ancestors are invisible, but always supportive*." A young woman met at the funeral added her emotional reflection: "*When we see the black, we feel the weight of death. But it also reminds us that life goes on elsewhere*" (EW13, personal communication, April 25, 2025).

Material analysis of eight *kente* fabrics showed that black threads make up about 15–35% of the total composition (based on visible surface area), mainly appearing as structural lines (warps) and edges of the fabric. This predominance of composition

materially embodies its conceptual role: the ancestor as the foundation and marker of the boundary between the visible and the invisible worlds. The Ewe people interpret the color black as a genealogical inscription that materially embeds the presence of ancestors into the woven structure. Its physical position (as warp and edge) metaphorically represents its conceptual role (foundation and boundary).

The meaning of black shows a much more complex diversity than white among the three ethnographic communities studied. Behind that variation, however, emerges one main convergent theme: black is understood as an intense, ambivalent, and potentially dangerous spiritual force, which demands ritual competence to be used safely. Almost all participants linked this color to a spiritual dimension that goes beyond its representational function. Of the 18 cross-cultural informants, 17 referred to black as a color that contains *spiritual potency*, 18 associated it with death and ancestors, and 13 emphasized the importance of *ritual expertise* in its use. These findings show that black is not just a marker of suffering, but an active entity that operates in the relationship between humans, spirits, and matter.

Although they share the same basic theme, each culture displays a different function and direction of work in black according to its cosmological structure.

Table 2. Differences in material enactment

Culture	Primary Function	Material Form	Directionality
Akan	Affective expression of grief	Clothing (worn)	Inward (personal emotion)
Dagomba	Spiritual absorption/protection	Fowl, pigment (applied/sacrificed))	Outward (extract harm)
Ewe	Ancestral encoding	Thread (woven)	Structural (foundational)

The table 2 shows how black manifests a broad spectrum of material-semiotic functions: from emotional-affective (Akan), ritual-operational (Dagomba), to genealogical-structural (Ewe). In Akan society, blacks operate introspectively expressing grief and a liminal inner state between loss and acceptance. In the Dagomba society, black moves extrovertively to pull out and neutralize evil forces through ritual actions. Meanwhile, in the Ewe people, black became the structural basis of kente weaving, serving as a *mnemonic device* that recorded continuity between generations, and signaled the presence of an invisible ancestor that still sustained social life.

Interestingly, two young Dagomba participants (under 40 years old, highly educated, and living in urban areas) expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of black chickens in healing practices. They judged that healing depended more on the composition of the herbs than on the color of the sacrificial animal. Although minor, this view suggests a generational shift in ritual epistemology, in which beliefs in the agency of color are gradually eroding in the context of urban modernity. This phenomenon is important to note because it signals a possible change in the cosmological consensus that has been supporting the spiritual meaning of black, as well as opening up space for reflection on the challenges of preserving intangible cultural heritage in the contemporary era.

3. Red as a Symbol of Vitality, Danger, Authority, and Heat

Red emerged as the most semantically dense and emotionally charged color. Participants described it as ambivalent colors that were positive (vitality, power, passion) as well as negative (danger, anger) often in the same context. All participants (18 people; 100%) associated red with the concepts of "heat," "intensity," or "strength," although the value of its meaning changed drastically depending on the context of the ritual and the form of the material used.

For the people of Akan, red clothes are used to mark "fresh *grief*", especially in sudden or tragic deaths. A female mourner of about 52 years old explained the emotional meaning of this color in an interview at the funeral of a 35-year-old accident victim (March 2025): "*When we wear red, it shows that our pain is still fresh. People know that we are angry at death because he has taken someone too soon*" (AE5, personal communication, March 27, 2025). Another male mourner adds a spiritual dimension: "*Red tells the spirit world that we demand answers to the grief we are experiencing*" (AE6, personal communication, March 27, 2025).

Observations of three funeral ceremonies show a typical pattern of red use: Age differentiation: red is used mainly for deaths under the age of 60 (7 out of 7 cases); very little is used for the death of the elderly (1 out of 8 cases). Kinship differentiation: the nuclear family wears plain red or a combination of red-black, while distant relatives only add red accents. Ritual phase differentiation: red dominates the early stages of *doteyie* (the first three days), then gradually replaced by black in the *ayie phase* (the week of the main funeral).

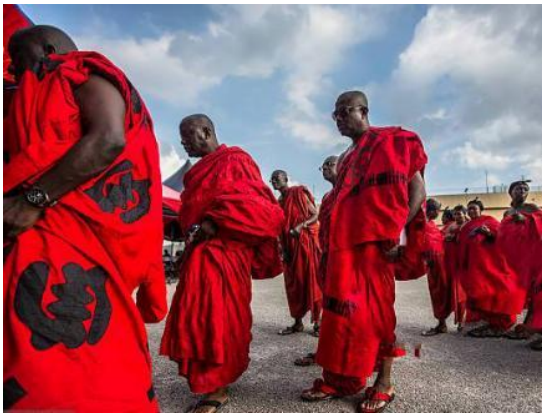

Figure 5. Mourners in red

Figure 5. Mourners in red show the atmosphere of the funeral ceremony where mourners wear red clothes in various variations of color intensity and patterns. This visual composition emphasizes the role of red as a marker of the early phase of grief, when grief is still burning. The presence of black among the red elements in the mourners' clothing also shows the principle of emotional and spiritual balance that is maintained through color symbols. Analysis of four *red adinkra* fabrics showed the use of dark red dye with the black adinkra symbol, without any plain red fabric. A cloth merchant explained the reason for this color balance: "*We never wear red alone it's too dangerous, like inviting more deaths. Black has to balance it*" (AE4, personal communication, March 29, 2025).

This chromatic rule (that red must be accompanied by black) confirms the existence

of *a compositional grammar* in the culture of Akan: certain colors should not appear on their own without causing spiritual imbalances. The society will interpret red as a marker of the affective intensity of "hot" grief and spiritual anger at death. It is used temporarily (in the early stages of grief) and is sensitive to the age of the deceased (especially young death), and is always balanced with black to avoid harmful excess spiritual energy.

In the Dagomba society, the color red has the most complex symbolic system, encompassing the context of healing, political power, and the death of the king. In all of these realms, red is consistently associated with "heat" and "vitality" In the context of healing, healers (DH8, DH10, DH14) agree that red chicken (*saanayuli*) is the main agent for treating fever and "hot" body disorders. A physician explains the homeopathic logic underlying this healing ritual (February 2025):

> Red chicken is offered when the patient's body feels hot from fever. By sacrificing the red bird, we implore the ancestors to cool the patient's body, relieve the heat inside, and provide healing (DH8, personal communication, February 5, 2025).

This logic seems paradoxical to use "heat" to relieve heat, but in Dagomba's cosmological view, red actually functions as a balancing medium through the *sympathetic* principle: "fire against fire" Another physician explained: "*Red chicken brought the patient's heat to the ancestors. It's like sending fire to meet fire, so that the body can cool again*" (DH10, personal communication, February 5, 2025).

Field records show that the physician rubbed a red chicken on the patient's hot forehead before being sacrificed, then threw the carcass away from the house. This spatial movement away signifies that the red chicken serves as a hot container, absorbing and bringing out excess energy from the human body. In the context of leadership (chieftaincy), red is also a marker of supreme power. An elder historian explains the role of red in the funeral of the king of Dagbon (*Yaa Naa*):

> When a Yaa Naa died, he was bathed and dressed in extravagant clothes before being buried in a robe, traditional trousers, cloth, and turban, complete with rings and sandals. The important thing is a red hat and sandals decorated with red tassels. This red element signifies the dignity and relationship of the king with the ancestors in power and honor (DE9, personal communication, February 5, 2025).

Figure 6. Dagomba Paramount Chief in red hat

Figure 6 shows Dagomba Paramount Chief wearing a fez-style red hat over a colorful robe during a *durbar* ceremony in Tamale (March 2025). The red color on the hat serves as a visual marker of the highest status in the Dagomba customary hierarchy. Based on field observations, only the main chief (*Paramount Chief*) is allowed to wear the red hat, while the sub-chiefs and subordinate officials are obliged to choose another color. Thus, the color red in the symbolic system of Dagomba is not only an aesthetic element, but also a political and spiritual code that affirms the relationship between power, ancestral legitimacy, and the balance of the cosmos.

This limited access to red suggests a profound hierarchical logic: red symbolizes great power that should only be imposed by those who have the spiritual and political legitimacy to bear its burden. The Dagomba people interpret red as functioning in two logical orders: (1) thermodynamic logic (heat management) in the context of healing, and (2) hierarchical logic (supreme authority) in the political context. Both contexts place red as a very powerful but high-risk force, which can only be dealt with by those with ritual competence or legitimate social legitimacy.

The Ewe people interpret the color red in the context of *kente* textiles as a symbol of ancestral sacrifice, blood, and collective struggle that sustains community life. An expert weaver in Kpetoe (April 2025) explained: "*The red thread is like blood flowing in a cloth. It reminds us of the struggle that keeps this community alive*" (EW11, personal communication, April 25, 2025). When asked to explain more about the "struggle," the weaver referred to historical conflicts with neighboring groups, the long drought that was successfully overcome, and the sacrifices of the community's founders. Thus, red functions not as a symbol of the dangers of the present, but as a memory of past sacrifices that are a source of courage for the present generation. A female festival attendee added: "*When we see red, we know it's for courage. That color gives us the strength to face adversity together*" (EW12, personal communication, April 25, 2025).

Analysis of six *kente* fabrics showed that the red thread makes up 20–40% of the visual composition, usually appearing as a thick horizontal or vertical band intersecting with green, blue, yellow, and black. Interestingly, there is not a single cloth that places red on the edges of this region always filled with black that indicates the existence of compositional rules: black as a controller, red as the energy in it.

In a group discussion in Ho (April 2025), there was a difference of opinion regarding the gender association of red. Four participants attributed it to the tradition of male heroism, while two women asserted that red also symbolizes women's reproductive power and sacrifice in childbirth. This difference does not indicate inconsistency, but rather shows the multivocality of red's ability to contain layered and sometimes contradictory meanings in a single cultural system. The Ewe people interpret that red functions as a historical inscription and a symbol of collective mobilization. It embodies the blood and sacrifice of the past that gives moral strength to the present. His energy is always surrounded by a black border as a counterbalance, showing the logic of visual and spiritual balance.

Intercultural synthesis. In the context of cross-cultural comparisons, red occupies the most complex and ambivalent position among the three groups studied by Akan, Dagomba, and Ewe. Although each has a different emphasis on meaning, they are all united by one conceptual common thread: red represents the intensity of heat forces, emotions, and authority that always demand management through cultural mechanisms, whether in the form of rituals, political practices, or rules of visual composition. Based on interviews with eighteen participants, all (18 of 18) interpreted red as an intense emotional, physical, or spiritual condition; sixteen participants (16 out of 18) emphasized

the need for balance in their use; And all informants also associate it with blood or *life force*. The following table summarizes the variation in the meaning value (valence) of red in the three cultures:

Table 3. Variation in the meaning value (valence) of red in the three cultures

Culture	Positive Valence	Negative Valence	Management Strategy
Akan	Minimal	Fresh grief, anger at death	Temporal (early phase only) + Compositional (mixed with black)
Dagomba	Authority, vitality restoration	Fever, excessive heat	Spatial (removal) + Political (restricted access)
Ewe	Courage, resilience, sacrifice	(Minimal)	Compositional (contained by black borders)

Table 3 shows that the assessment of red varies culturally. People tend to interpret red negatively, as a symbol of grief and anger at death. For the people of Dagomba, red is ambivalent: on the one hand it symbolizes authority and the restoration of vitality, but on the other hand it deals with excess heat or energy that must be disposed of or politically controlled. Meanwhile, the Ewe people emphasized the positive valence of red, associating it with courage, resilience, and sacrifice, although its use remained compositionally restricted to maintain symbolic balance.

Thus, the three cultures agree that red is a dangerous color as well as sacral a force that cannot be ignored, but must be managed. The main difference lies in the mechanism of control of that energy: whether it should be muted, regulated, or utilized. One of the participants Will highlighted a generational shift in understanding the meaning of red: "*Young people now wear red at funerals like fashion. They don't know that color is not for beauty but for pain*" (AE6, personal communication, March 27, 2025). This statement indicates an erosion of the symbolic meaning of red among the urban youth, an important finding that highlights the challenges in preserving the semantic heritage of color in West African spiritual culture.

4. Multicolor Color as a Philosophical Composition and Expression

Beyond the symbolism of a single color, participants from the three cultures of Akan, Dagomba, and Ewe affirm that color combinations bring new meanings that cannot be reduced to their constituent parts. Multicolored colors in textiles, clothing, and ritual objects function as material texts that contain communal philosophy, the principle of political unity, and spiritual complexity.

In the Akan society, kente cloth is understood as a wearable biographical narrative, where the arrangement of colors represents personal and collective history. An expert weaver at Bonwire explained in an observation of the weaving workshop (March 2025): "*Every yarn has a meaning, but when many colors come together, the fabric becomes a*

story. He tells of the joys, struggles, and blessings of us all in one work" (AE4, personal communication, March 27, 2025). Analysis of six kente fabrics showed the presence of twelve different colors of red, black, white, green, yellow, blue, gold, orange, purple, brown, gray, and pink arranged in complex geometric patterns. Some patterns have special names and meanings, such as *"Fathia Fata Nkrumah"* (green-gold-red) which commemorates President Nkrumah's wife; *"Adweneasa"* (yellow-purple-black) which signifies the richness of the mind; and *"Emaa Da"* (multicolor) which signifies new creation. When asked if the sequence of colours has any meaning, the weaver asserted: "If I put black before red, it means that sorrow comes before the struggle. But if red comes first, it means that the struggle brings death. The color sequence shows what happened first" (AE4, personal communication, March 29, 2025). This statement reveals the existence of narrative grammar in color, sequence, color, to be a representation of chronology and causality in life stories. A young weaver added: "*Wearing a colourful kente is like carrying history on your body. It shows that life is not one color, but many experiences*" (AE6, personal communication, March 27, 2025). Thus, multicolor colors for society will serve as a material archive that stores memory and communal identity.

In the Dagomba community, multicolored colors stand out in the batakari (traditional robes) worn by traditional leaders as a symbol of political responsibility and inclusivity. A community elder explained at a traditional leadership event (March 2025): *"*The chief's robe carries many colors. It is a sign that he bears all the people with him the warriors, the women, the peasants, and the youth" (DE9, personal communication, March 15, 2025).

Figure 7. Dagomba chief in multicolour smock

Figure 7 shows a Dagomba chief wearing a Multicoloring batakari with a combination of eight to fifteen different colors arranged in a horizontal striped pattern. Field observations show that leaders wear batakari with eight to fifteen different colors in

a horizontal striped pattern, while ordinary people wear only two or three simple colors. This difference reflects a political hierarchy regulated through color complexity: the more colors, the broader the social responsibility. Another elder added:

> When we see a robe with many colors, it signifies power. The chief does not live for himself, but for everyone. Therefore, we Dagomba do not wear hats with the same color as robes with different colors, showing that humans cannot live alone (DE10, personal communication, March 15, 2025).

This compositional rule reflects the principle of anti-otarchy (anti-absolute independence) in Dagomba's worldview. Analysis of the four bricks shows a general pattern: all have black frames. When asked why, DE9 explained: "*Black held everything back from falling apart. Without it, the colors would be scattered. Just like the ancestors who kept the community from collapsing*" (Personal communication, March 15, 2025). This principle suggests that the color black serves as a structural buffer and an ancestral symbol that binds communities in moral unity. In the context of traditional healing, multicolored colors are also used therapeutically. A physician explained: *"When we sacrifice a multicolored chicken (no'yoli), we ask the ancestors to clean up the various problems that cause disease. Colored chicken is widely used to remove many mistakes at once*" (DH8, personal communication, March 15, 2025). This logic is homeopathic: many colors are used to deal with many types of suffering while showing that the complexity of color is associated with all-around healing abilities.

Meanwhile, in the Ewe weaving tradition, multicolored colors are understood as the principle of harmony that reflects social and spiritual balance. A senior weaver in Kpetoe explained during a weaving demonstration (April 2025): "*We mix red, green, black and blue so that the fabric speaks of unity. Each color is strong on its own, but when together, they show that communities survive because they support each other*" (EW11, personal communication, April 25, 2025). An analysis of six Ewe kente fabrics shows that no single color dominates more than forty percent of the fabric area. This principle of balance becomes the main rule of composition: no color should dominate or "dominate" other colors. When asked if there were any prohibited colour combinations, EW11 replied: *"We don't mix too much white with red with no black in between. It was like mixing medicine with blood into a mess*" (Personal communication, April 25, 2025). This statement reveals an implicit grammar of color: white (spiritual purity) and red (blood and heat) must be mediated by black (ancestral counterbalance). At one festival, a young participant declared: *"When we dance with colorful fabrics, it reminds us that we are many people, but still one family*" (WE13, personal communication, April 25, 2025). In a group discussion in Ho (April 2025), the participants agreed that the older generation prefers dark colors with black dominance (symbolizing closeness to ancestors), while the younger generation chooses bright colors such as red, green, yellow (symbolizing vitality). This shows that color preferences also reflect the stages of life and generational identity.

Across cultures, multicolor colors do not function as a color vocabulary with fixed meanings, but as a compositional grammar that regulates the relationships between color elements in order to produce visual balance and philosophical meaning. All three cultures show the same principles: black acts as a structural integrator, color proportions are maintained so that no one color dominates, and there are certain syntactic rules that govern the relationship between colors (such as the need for a black mediator between white and red). Although the meaning of each single color varies, for example, red means sorrow in

Akan, authority in Dagomba, and courage in Ewe, the compositional rules governing its use are similar. This shows the existence of a universal color scheme in West African culture, where multicoloring is an expression of the philosophy of balance, togetherness, and connection between humans, nature, and ancestors.

Discussion

Ethnographic findings suggest that color in Ghana's indigenous spirituality operates as a material-semiotic system, in which symbolic meanings and material practices form each other interchangeably in ritual, social, and cosmological contexts. The consistent white-black-red color triadic in the Akan, Dagomba, and Ewe groups indicates a stable but articulated cosmological structure through diverse material practices according to temporal orientation: functional terminal (Akan), initial (Dagomba), and continuous (Ewe) functioning. Black displays a high semantic complexity from affective expression (Akan's mourning garment), operational-ritual (Dagomba black chicken), to genealogical-structural (Ewe kente thread) that affirms its material agency in extracting negative energy and sustaining ancestral continuity. Red, although universally associated with "heat" and "intensity," shows a significantly varying valence of meaning: negative in Akan (grief and anger), ambivalent in Dagomba (authority versus danger), and predominantly positive in Ewe (courage and sacrifice). All three cultures agree that red is a potential as well as a dangerous spiritual energy that demands management through temporal, spatial, or compositional mechanisms. Multicolor color combinations form a complex compositional grammar, in which black consistently functions as a structural integrator that reflects the ancestral role of the guardian of communal unity, while the principle of compositional balance (no dominant color >40%, white-red combination must be mediated by black) indicates a system of color syntax that regulates visual harmony as well as spiritual balance based on the ontological principles of interdependence and interconnectedness Cosmological.

This pattern of convergence-divergence makes an important contribution to the dialogue with the existing color anthropological literature. This research reinforces Turner's (1967) proposition of the multivocality of color symbols that mediates the profan-sacred transition, but goes further by highlighting its material dimension: black does not merely "symbolize" grief or ancestry, but serves as an affective expression, ritual agent, and genealogical inscription. These findings are in line with Khassenov, Adilova, and Rapisheva (2022) who show that color in Turkic culture is situational and cosmological, as well as with Almahasees and Albudairi (2024) who affirm the shift in the meaning of color in Islamic sacred texts according to the context of reading. Thus, this study expands Turner's understanding by emphasizing material agency and color performativity as a link between the profane and the sacred. This material-semiotic approach confirms Gell's (1998) argument about *distributed personhood* and the agency of art objects, in which kente fabrics, sacrificial chickens, or ritual pigments function as active agents that mediate spiritual relations through the performativity of the acts of wearing, weaving, painting, and offering that produce real social and spiritual effects. Lemi (2024) and Watts' (2024) comparative study of color triadics in Africa is confirmed but expanded by showing that the meaning of triadics is not universal or static, but rather is articulated situationally within a specific cosmological framework through different temporal orientations.

In the Ghanaian context, this study complements the work of Hagan (1970), Yankah (1995), Adinkrah (2022), Ross (1998), and Kwakye-Opong (2014) with a cross-cultural

comparative approach that identifies pan-West African color grammar that operates beyond ethnic boundaries, in line with the arguments of Smith et al. (2021) and Yakoub (2021) on Indigenous Aesthetics as an Arena of Epistemic Reconstruction and Decolonial Resistance. However, findings on generational shifts in the meaning of red and skepticism of the effectiveness of black chickens suggest that cosmological consensus is not monolithic, but rather is constantly negotiated in the context of modernity, confirming Ranger & Hobsbawm's (1984) argument that tradition is an active process of reconstruction. The difference in gender interpretation of red in Ewe shows *the semantic density* of Turner (1967), where color contains layered and situational meanings depending on the social position and experience of the ritual perpetrator.

Although this study did not systematically examine the dynamics of temporal adaptation through a longitudinal approach, some early indications in the ethnographic data show the phenomenon of cultural *resilience* of indigenous Ghanaians in the face of globalization, cultural commodification, and religious pluralism. Color appears to serve as a "strategy of cultural resilience," in which communities maintain cosmological coherence while adapting material forms and ritual practices to contemporary contexts. The adoption of Western clothing in Akan ceremonies demonstrates the pragmatic semiotic flexibility that material forms can change without losing symbolic meaning in line with the concept *of selective acculturation* (Gbor, Appiah, & Asinyo, 2022; Lemi, 2024; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Von Hesse, 2023). The integration of the symbol of the cross in Dagemba's protective practices indicates an active syncretism that maintains cultural agency, supporting Peel's (2003) argument that religious conversion in Africa is "translative" rather than "substitution" However, the erosion of meaning among the younger generation of skepticism of black chickens, bright color preferences without cosmological understanding, the use of red as a "fashion" without ritual awareness indicate a disruption of knowledge transmission due to *the disembedding* of modernity (Alegbe & Uthman, 2024), which uprooted the practice from the local context. This phenomenon requires its own longitudinal research to comprehensively understand the mechanisms of cultural resilience. This study limits itself to the identification of initial patterns and hypothesis formulation for future research on the dynamics of color system change in contemporary contexts. More fundamentally, this study marks an epistemic contestation between sensory-embodied experience-based indigenous knowledge, ancestral relations, and cosmological understanding with modern knowledge regimes that claim higher epistemic authority through empirical proof. Acknowledgment of customary epistemology is not sufficiently symbolic, but rather must be embodied in material and institutional practices that allow the transmission of knowledge to continue in a lively and relevant manner.

From a theoretical and epistemological perspective, this research contributes to the development of a material-semiotic framework that addresses the dichotomy of symbolic representation and material practice. Color does not "symbolize" purity or danger in a purely representational way, but materially enacts the act through ritual practices that alter spiritual conditions, social status, and cosmological relationships. The concept of "color as a strategy of cultural resilience" offers a new perspective in understanding the dynamics of immaterial cultural heritage: true resilience lies not in the freezing of material forms, but rather in the maintenance of the coherence of cosmological structures that allow adaptation without losing its core meaning. This perspective is in line with UNESCO's concept of *living heritage* which emphasizes its continuous relevance in community life. This framework paves the way for further research on other sensory and aesthetic dimensions (sound, smell, texture) as material-semiotic systems in ritual and

spiritual contexts. The findings of the convergence-divergence pattern in which the same color triadic produces different material practices based on temporal orientation enriches Peirce's (1992) semiotic theory by showing that the relationship between *signs* (colors), *objects* (spiritual entities), and *interpretants* (meaning) is not deterministic, but is mediated by temporal structure and socio-ritual context. This confirms the symbolic anthropological argument that symbols are polysemic but not arbitrary; Its meaning is limited by cultural *grammar* that governs its combination and use in specific contexts. Epistemologically, the symbolic-material system of color represents an alternative epistemology based on sensory-embodied experience, ancestral relations, and cosmological understanding that has intrinsic value without having to be judged based on modern instrumental rationality standards. This recognition demands an epistemic transformation in the way of understanding and valuing indigenous knowledge as an equal, not inferior, system to modern knowledge, a demand that is relevant not only to Ghana or West Africa, but to the project of decolonization of knowledge globally.

The findings of this study also have practical implications for various stakeholders in efforts to preserve intangible cultural heritage and empower indigenous communities. Identified color compositional rules can be used to develop traditional textile product authentication standards through certification systems or geographical indications that protect kente and adinkra fabrics from cultural appropriation and counterfeiting. The Ghana National Commission on Culture needs to collaborate with weavers communities to document these rules and integrate them into mechanisms for the protection of economic rights and cultural integrity. The Government of Ghana needs to formulate a policy for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage based on the principles *of living heritage* and community participation, including systematic documentation by involving indigenous elders as co-researchers, development of certification systems, training programs for young people in weaving and ritual practices. In the context of religious pluralism, policies that recognize and respect the plurality of religious forms, including indigenous spirituality, can create a space for coexistence and mutual enrichment between traditions, instead of suppressing syncretic practices that are actually a strategy for cultural resilience.

Collaboration between the creative industry and indigenous communities requires *a co-design* or *participatory design model*, in which professional designers work alongside traditional weavers and indigenous elders with community participation in the design, production, and marketing processes. These principles of ethical collaboration include long-term partnerships based on fair benefit-sharing and recognition of communal intellectual property rights, the development of industry ethical standards developed with indigenous community organizations, and transparency in supply chains and marketing communications. Research institutions need to adopt the principle *of reciprocal research*, where the community is involved as co-researchers from the time of planning, results are re-communicated in an accessible format, knowledge can be leveraged by the community for advocacy and empowerment, and researchers are committed to long-term relationships. Indigenous communities themselves can strengthen internal mechanisms through the revitalization of initiation systems involving the younger generation, the formation of associations of weavers and ritual practitioners, independent documentation through digital archives and *oral history videos*, and the development of periodic cultural festivals that function as intergenerational pedagogical spaces.

More fundamentally, an epistemic transformation is needed in the way of understanding and valuing indigenous knowledge through the formal recognition of epistemological equality in law, reform of the higher education curriculum that integrates

pluralist and decolonial perspectives, and an equal dialogue between indigenous knowledge holders and academics. The implementation of this policy faces structural obstacles such as cultural commodification by external actors, institutional and social resistance to the integration of indigenous knowledge, and weak implementation of multiculturalism policies in Ghana. Nevertheless, holistic preservation that emphasizes community agency can maintain the symbolic and spiritual function of the material-semiotic system of color as a source of identity and social cohesion. Academics, policymakers, and creative industry players must play the role of participatory partners, not rescue authorities. The preservation of immaterial cultural heritage means ensuring communities have control over the evolution of their traditions, rather than freezing them in a static "original" form. Cultural resilience lies in adaptability without losing core cosmological coherence, with all actions based on respect for community agency and the recognition that they are the best experts of their own heritage. The theoretical and applicative model of this research can inspire global indigenous communities to preserve cultural heritage in a participatory and contextual manner in the midst of globalization.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that color functions as a material–semiotic system in Ghanaian indigenous spirituality, with the white–black–red triadic serving as a stable cosmological structure expressed through distinct temporal orientations and material practices across Akan, Dagomba, and Ewe communities. White operates as a terminal marker among the Akan, an initial catalyst among the Dagomba, and a continuous embodiment of purity among the Ewe; black exhibits semantic complexity ranging from affective expressions of grief to ritual agency and genealogical inscription; and red, while universally linked to intensity and heat, carries negative meanings for the Akan, ambivalent significance for the Dagomba, and positive connotations for the Ewe, always requiring deliberate cultural management. Multicolored compositions further reveal a grammatical system in which black acts as a structural integrator, symbolizing ancestral cohesion. Collectively, these findings show that color is not a passive symbol but a performative agent that mediates spiritual relationships through embodied practices such as wearing, weaving, and offering, while also enabling cultural resilience through adaptive syncretism without compromising core cosmological coherence, even amid the erosion of meaning among younger urban generations.

This research makes several key contributions to the scholarly understanding of color, spirituality, and material culture in West Africa. Empirically, it provides one of the most comprehensive cross-cultural datasets on chromatic symbolism and material practices among Akan, Dagomba, and Ewe communities, integrating ritual observations, material artifact analysis, and embodied practices. Conceptually, the study advances the field by proposing the framework of "color as a strategy of cultural resilience," which bridges symbolic anthropology and material culture theory through a material–semiotic lens. This framework reframes color not merely as representational symbolism but as an active agent that mediates spiritual, social, and cosmological relations. Methodologically, the research demonstrates how temporal orientations offer a powerful analytic tool for comparing cultural systems that share structural similarities but differ in enactment. Theoretically, it enriches ongoing debates in intangible cultural heritage, decolonial epistemology, and the anthropology of material agency by highlighting how color operates simultaneously as a sensory code, a ritualized practice, and an ontological condition. Collectively, these contributions broaden anthropological and heritage studies' understanding of how embodied aesthetics sustain cosmological coherence amid global

cultural pressures.

Despite its contributions, this study faces several limitations that open avenues for further research. First, its temporal scope is limited to a six-month ethnographic period, which restricts the ability to capture long-term transformations in color practices, especially those shaped by generational change and evolving ritual ecologies. Second, although the research incorporates multiple regions, it focuses primarily on three major ethnocultural groups, leaving out other Ghanaian communities whose chromatic systems may offer additional comparative insights. Third, the study privileges visual and material dimensions of color, while other sensory modalities were beyond its methodological reach but may play equally important roles in ritual cosmologies. Finally, while indications of symbolic erosion among younger generations were observed, the research did not systematically analyze socio-economic, educational, or media factors driving this shift. Future studies should consider longitudinal designs, participatory action research with youth practitioners, expanded multi-sensory analyses, and comparative work across West African cultural zones to deepen understanding of how aesthetic systems adapt to modernity. Such approaches would allow for a more comprehensive account of the dynamics of cultural resilience and the evolution of material–semiotic systems in contemporary contexts.

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