

Understanding Slavery Initiative

What is USI?

The Understanding Slavery initiative (USI) is a national learning project supporting the teaching and learning of transatlantic slavery and its legacies using museum and heritage collections.

Six museums across the UK worked in partnership alongside external experts to share expertise, develop resources, training opportunities and school sessions.

These museums were:

- Museum of London Docklands
- The International Slavery Museum, Liverpool and National Museums Liverpool
- Bristol Museums Galleries and Archives
- Hull Museums
- American Museum in Britain
- National Maritime Museum



One of the main tenets of the USI partnership is that the history of transatlantic slavery does not belong to any one cultural group, or nation. It is a global history whose legacy can be seen and felt in various areas of today's societies on an international scale. The USI partners have developed resources and approaches with an understanding that by reviewing the history, and understanding its wider global impacts, teachers and learners gain a better understanding of how to read history and ways in which to make sense of the world in which they live today. This is an ongoing process.

Each USI partner continues to maintain shared ethos and approaches to their work through the development and delivery of learning sessions and further resources.

USI was funded by the Department of Culture Media and Sport and the Department of Education (formerly the Department of Children Schools and Families) through the Strategic Commissioning Programme between 2003-8.

If you have a question it may already be answered by our [Frequently asked questions](#) page.

We welcome your feedback on how to continually update and improve this learning resource please contact us at learning@rmg.co.uk

The previous version of the website is still available at archive.understandingslavery.com.

USI guiding principles

The USI Partnership undertook a process of evaluating the project's objectives to determine the overarching values and the ethos behind the work that we do. The following **Adinkra** symbols were chosen by the partnership to symbolise our commitment to the teaching and learning of subject of transatlantic enslavement.

Adinkra are visual symbols, originally created by the Akan people of Ghana and the Gyaman people of Cote d'Ivoire in West Africa. The symbols represent concepts or general truths or astute observations. Whilst the symbols have a decorative function, they also represent objects that encapsulate evocative messages that convey traditional wisdom, aspects of life or the environment. There are many different symbols with distinct meanings, often linked with African proverbs. According to Anthony Appiah, "they were one of the ... for supporting the transmission of a complex and nuanced body of practice and belief."

FAWOHODIE: "independence"



Symbol of independence, freedom, emancipation.

From the expression: Fawodhodie ene obre na enam. Literal translation: "Independence comes with its responsibilities."

MATE MASIE: "What I hear, I keep"



Symbol of wisdom, knowledge and prudence.

The implied meaning of the phrase "mate masie" is "I understand".

Understanding means wisdom and knowledge, but it also represents the prudence of taking into consideration what another person has said.

NEA ONNIM NO SUA A, OHU: "He who does not know can know from learning"



Symbol of knowledge, life-long education and continued quest for knowledge

NKONSONKONSON: "chain link" symbol of unity and human relations



A reminder to contribute to the community, that in unity lies strength

NKYIMU: the crossed divisions made on adinkra cloth before stamping



Symbol of skillfulness, precision.

Before adinkra cloth is stamped with the symbols, the artisan blocks off the cloth with lines in a rectangular grid using a broad-tooth comb. This preparation is symbolic of the exacting technique which results in the highest quality product.

NKYINKYIM: “twisting”



Symbol of initiative, dynamism and versatility

NSAA: a type of hand-woven fabric



Symbol of excellence, genuineness, authenticity.

According to “The Adinkra Dictionary” by W. Bruce Willis, the nsaa symbols reflects a saying: “nea onnim nsaa oto n’ago”, which he translates as “He who does not know authentic Nsaa will buy the fakes.” The quality of Nsaa has come to represent quality of workmanship in general.

PEMPAMSIE: “sew in readiness”



Symbol of readiness, steadfastness, hardiness.

According to the The Adinkra Dictionary, the design of this symbol resembles the links of a chain, and implies strength through unity as well as the importance of being prepared.

SANKOFA: “return and get it”



Symbol of importance of learning from the past

WO NSA DA MU A: “If your hands are in the dish”



Symbol of participatory government, democracy and pluralism

From the aphorism, “Wo nsa da mu a, wonni nnya wo” — “If your hands are in the dish, people do not eat everything and leave you nothing.”

HWE MU DUA: “measuring stick”



Symbol of examination and quality control.

This symbol stresses the need to strive for the best quality, whether in production of goods or in human endeavors.

ANANSE NTONTAN: “spider’s web”



Symbol of wisdom, creativity and the complexities of life

Ananse, the spider, is a well-known character in African folktales.

BESE SAKA: “sack of cola nuts”



Symbol of affluence, power, abundance, plenty, togetherness and unity.

The cola nut played an important role in the economic life of Ghana. A widely-used cash crop, it is closely associated with affluence and abundance. This symbol also represents the role of agriculture and trade in bringing peoples together.

BOA ME NA ME MMOA WO: “Help me and let me help you”



Symbol of cooperation and interdependence

AKOMA NTOSO: “linked hearts”



Symbol of understanding and agreement

Taking into account the collaborative meaning behind each symbol, USI intends to display and encourage:

- Initiation; dynamism and versatility
- skilfulness and precision
- readiness; steadiness, courage and boldness
- unity in how we related to each other and our stakeholders; also encouraging
- unity with communities
- quality of workmanship as a symbol of excellence genuineness/authenticity

For further reading and more Adinkra symbols please visit: www.adinkra.org.
