

# **Traditional Festivals in the Political Economy: The Case of Contemporary Ghana**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Public events often express, reflect, and reinforce community social relationships and cultural values. Traditional festivals are performed to observe certain rituals and/or a type of event that communicates important cultural themes, often through the use of special forms of language, music, and dance. This community rite of passage – one that accomplishes a change in the situation or status the community is a vital part of contemporary Ghanaian society. Ghanaian festivals, both secular and ritual are becoming “pan-African” events during which enterprising and competitive activities are performed. As public events, festivals are accessible to traditional leaders, local citizens, elected and appointed political officials, tourists and entrepreneurs. The analysis of public events is particularly useful for understanding differing mechanisms of socioeconomic development. The evolving role that elected government officials play is perhaps a key to understanding the continuing value of traditions in an age of modernity.

## **Introduction**

Ghana's renewed and invigorating attention to cultural events and tradition is increasingly visible in the performance of popular local and national festivals. As is common in traditional societies, membership in select groups is more often than not ascribed. Individuals become a member of a group that performs the esoteric rituals of festivals by virtue of kinship ties, rank, office or other predetermined factors. They put on the festivals a religious stamp that, in the final analysis, they are intended to bear (Bame, 1991). However, the roles of those responsible for dictating the nature of these festive events is also evolving in response to the country's economic agenda (Daily Graphic, 1994).

An important indicator of the government-citizen interface is being played out in an arena that calls on cultural sentiments to provide a bonding for the loyalties of the masses to local and national government policy. Ghana's chiefs are now

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gazetted by government, so that the ultimate power of recognising them is through a legislative instrument. The Ghanaian Constitution also explicitly addresses and accords status to the chieftaincy institution (1992:164-8). In a systematic effort to be included in the affairs of state, The National House of Chiefs is currently documenting the genealogies for ancestral stools and skins of the 180 traditional councils in Ghana. This documentation project that focuses primarily on traditional chieftaincy affairs is also expected to provide a historical record to lessen local disputes and protracted litigation. The general public and the current government are each concerned with the increasing role being played by the civil law courts in (re)defining the traditional leadership for contemporary Ghana.

This paper examines the contemporary roles of those who orchestrate traditional festivals in Ghana's urban and rural communities. Focusing in on the contemporary versions of festivals in Ghana shows both the sustainability of these events and the political climate within the country between the central government and local communities.

In many ways traditional festivals are the past made present, which as historical constructs, may legitimate actions of the present (Prosterman, 1995). It is my hypothesis that participation in festivals and the re-focusing of chieftaincy affairs provides only a partial explanation for the attention to cultural affairs in contemporary Ghana. Cultural events are now the arena in which many issues within Ghana's political economy are actively played out locally and beyond.

My findings are based on field research conducted during the summers of 1994 and 1995, which included direct participant/ observations at the Bakatue Festival of Elmina, the Asafotufiami Festival of Big Ada, and the Twins and Homowo Festivals of Greater Accra. These festivals were selected on account of their high visibility and the multiple functions they serve within their local communities and for the entire country. Manifestly, each festival also represents:

- 1) a communal understanding of fertility associated with local subsistence;
- 2) connection to the ancestors;
- 3) an oral history of settlement patterns;
- 4) the need to reconcile inter-group animosities for peaceful co-existence; and
- 5) a revalidation of local leadership.

Oral history informs the youth and provides an important part of community folklore that instructs them in the value of honouring local gods. A primary and recurring lesson focuses on the community in its wholeness to meet the reciprocal needs of all in changing and uncertain contexts.

Equally significant but less understood/articulated by local residents is the role of festival events for the national economy. All festivals attended, except for the Twins' Festival, are recognised as national festivals by the Ghanaian government.

National festivals are publicised by the National Tourist Board, and are attended by senior government officials and large numbers of Ghanaian citizens and visitors to the country. Local residents take great pride in these public celebrations that bring recognition to their communities. Local authority figures seem acutely more aware of the potential for financial gain and recognition by central government officials.

## Continuity and Integration

Considerable literature exists that examines Ghanaian festivals as aesthetic art forms in performance (Assimeng, 1976; Asihene, 1978; and Bame, 1991). Research findings also report the role of festivals associated with subsistence and as part of the ritual spectacle in popular culture (Opoku 1970; Cole & Ross, 1977 and Cole, 1975). Traditional Ghanaian festivals, updated and modernised, continue to have the same significance of former times where the world of religious, social, moral, political, cultural, and historical events often merged. (Chantler, 1973). Less attention has been paid to the 'staying power' and economic value of festival performances.

Ghanaians are socialised to value shared experiences. For the average Ghanaian the proliferation of annual local and national festivals, conservatively numbering more than seventy, represents their rich cultural heritage and the uniqueness of ethnic and regional differences. (Werbner, 1977; Therson-Cofie, 1992; & Wyllie, 1994). (See Figure 1 for a list of Ghanaian festivals). In former times annual events lessened rural isolation and contributed to a sense of extended community with migrants to urban centres. This urban-rural connection continues to represent significant financial inputs into the rural sector economy and a constant labour resource for the urban sector.

Ethnic and lineage affiliation, important markers of self identity, is also exemplified today by community members who return for communal celebrations, thereby validating the legitimacy of "traditional" beliefs and practices in the midst of modernity. For most, the sense of place refers to both social and physical locations for the residential population (Mazrui, 1986 & Sarpong, 1974). Festivals, as social-cultural events, have also become for many communities a symbol for ethnic citizenship. Evidence of this phenomenon is attested to by calls to the citizens of local areas as reported in the daily newspapers:

1. Ghana Times. Thursday (August 4, 1994) Annual Akwanbo Festival. The chiefs and people of the twin towns, Gomua-Antseadze/Odumase are celebrating their annual festival on Tuesday, 9th August to Tuesday, 16th August. The climax of the week-long celebration will be a fund-raising

harvest on Sunday, 14 August to raise funds for various development projects in the twin towns. All citizens of Gomua-Antseadze/Odumase residing in every part of the country are therefore requested to return home during the period to assist in our development efforts. The general public is cordially invited.

2. Ghana Times (Friday, August 5, 1994) Gomoa Eshiem. The Annual Akwanbo Festival of the chiefs and people of Gomoa-Eshiem and the installation of the Nkosohene will be held at Gomoa-Eshiem on Saturday August 6 at 10 am. All citizens are reminded to attend the ceremony.

3. Ghana Times. Friday (August 5, 1994) Gomoa Dago. The chief and people of Gomoa Dago will celebrate their Akwanbo Festival on Friday August 12. There will a fund-raising harvest on Saturday in aid of development projects. A fine of 6,000 cedis will be imposed on any citizen who fails to attend.

In the Ghanaian situation where press freedoms are extensive, the coverage of "traditional" events not only keep the public informed but highlights local initiatives where the festival performances provide the driving force. This kind of agenda-setting by the media can be traced back to Lippmann (1922), who suggested that the media were responsible for the "pictures in our heads." Traditionally, agenda-setting has been seen as the ability of the mass media to influence the level of public awareness about issues (McManus, 1994).

Ghanaians hold a deep faith in the power of symbols and public presentations to produce the desired effects for the betterment of self and community. Festivals are a more obvious expression of symbols with practical ramifications (Bame, 1991).

## **Politicisation at Work**

Through strategic manipulations Ghanaians have preserved many of their traditions despite rapid social changes within government, economic instability, and externally driven policy mandates. Notably, in the last ten years, and with the creation of the Ministry of Culture and Social Development, things cultural and/or traditional now have government sanctioning and increased sociopolitical legitimacy. Elected politicians now give speeches at the public *durbars* that follow all significant festivals, and play active roles in the ritual events of their constituencies (personal communication with PR Director, Ministry of Culture, Accra,

1996). Speeches include calls for a return to simpler times and communal values of assistance to aid government in meeting the needs of the people. The Ghana Daily Graphic newspaper of August 5, 1994 carried as one of its lead stories, "CULTURAL FESTIVAL OPENS." The Deputy Minister of Education, reportedly said:

*"one aspect of the education reform program is to give our children a good grounding in the positive aspect of Ghanaian culture that would help free the minds of our youth from slavish dependency on foreign culture."*

He stressed the importance of culture as a powerful tool for unity, adding that:

*"Our culture should indeed reflect the requirements of our time and aspirations of the popular masses in our efforts to build a peaceful Ghana. Government continues to struggle with the role that culture plays in national development and the ministries that oversee Ghana's cultural traditions. This is unfortunate."*

(informant interview, Ministry official, 1995).

Additional examples of attempts to inculcate a feeling of individual and collective responsibility to local concerns is evident in the appeals and greetings extended during local festivals. The following is a speech by Awulae Annor Adjaye III, the Omanhene of the Western Nzema Traditional Area during the annual 1994 Kundum Festival:

*"The Season has gone its full cycle and once again Kundum festival is here with us. Thanks to God's bounties, mercies and steadfast love. The reunion of families, friends and loved ones are so central to the celebration of this festival that one cannot help but seize this unique opportunity to wish all sons and daughters of Nzemaland the best of the Season's festivities and a happy welcome home.*

*I salute all of you on this occasion for the dedicated services you have in various ways rendered to your friends, families and the state during the pasty twelve calendar months in our joint efforts to uplift the banner of self-identity, unity and self actualisation in the areas of economics, politics and social-cultural development.*

*I pray that you enjoy your stay and continue to contribute towards the improvement of the material conditions of our people. May God and our ancestors bountifully bless and guide you to wisely spend our leisure during this festive period.*

**AKWAABA!"**

Speeches such as the one above and proclamations are increasingly a medium for local leaders, in and outside the formal government structure, to lobby for limited resources. In anticipation of these requests, elected and appointed representatives prepare responses that call for unity and demand loyalty to the reigning government.

In addition to public announcements, event organisers now produce glossy programme brochures that give historical accounts of the people of the area, the festival and other high points of local development. In the Cape Coast area, where residents pride themselves on being the first Ghanaians to have access to Western education, festival publications are now formatted as academic journals. The 1994 *Kundum Journal* includes the formal greeting given by the Omanhene of the Western Nzema Traditional Area; an academic paper by a university professor; a public relation piece to attract tourists; and a development statement produced by the local government council. For another Cape Coast community, the *Journal Oguasa Afahye* professes to be an Annual on culture and history. With sixty-eight pages that include: advertisements, historical accounts, presentations, public service announcements, and local news items, this publication has become a major promotional forum for local leaders.

## **The Political Economy**

The chieftaincy institution in Ghana has always played a pivotal role for mobilising local communities for development. According to one informant, chieftaincy in Ghana should be thought of as a juro-political institution first, and a cultural institution, second (PR, Ministry of Culture). In the absence of a recognised chief, within any community, local government administration often becomes difficult. In modern times, even colonial administrators saw the importance of traditional rulers and used them for easy governance. At independence, some of these "government elected chiefs", handed over the stools and skins to their rightful owners, while others inexorably refused, and ended up creating new royal clans. Today, the role of the chieftaincy institution is even more important, such that it has been given a place of prominence in the national political and administrative systems.

Politically, festivals afford paramount chiefs the opportunity to reassert their authority over their sub-chiefs and the local citizenry. During this period all sub-chiefs and the people renew their allegiance and loyalty to the paramount chief by paying homage in the palace. The paramount chief, the sub-chiefs and the elders also use the occasion to discuss political issues affecting the welfare of the community. Petty disputes between the paramount chief and any sub-chiefs or

among the sub-chiefs, themselves, are expected to be resolved. Especially important for all those who ensure that the festival continues as an annual event, it portrays the rich cultural heritage of the people. This is illustrated by the traditional dances, drumming, songs and the chief's regalia, all which form an important aspect of the festival. It also shows that the traditional chief is still the embodiment and custodian of Ghanaian political culture and tradition (personal interview with Asst. Director of Ministry of Culture, 1995).

African festivals are seasonal and elaborate ceremonies involving entire communities that rely on traditional values to sustain the people's interest. These ceremonies provide an opportunity for diverse groups to acknowledge the blessings of the "Supreme Creator" and the lesser deities and ancestral spirits, manifested in good health, good harvest and abundance of children.

Types of traditional festivals most often include:

- 1) harvest festivals that incorporate group sacrifice, supplication and some form of abstinence;
- 2) commemorative festivals that focus on activities aimed at honouring the memory of the dead and giving offerings to the gods and ancestor spirits for the past as well as future well-being of the participants;
- 3) festivals for the gods which are celebrated annually in honour of specific titular spirits or gods. All festivals have a commonality in that they also have as part of their focus the dramatisation of sacred myths, legends and traditions of origin or real historical events in the life of the participating group (Bame, 1991).

Crucial to understanding the continuing vitality of Ghana's festival performances is the ways in which people make a living. Knowing the basic subsistence systems gives insight into other levels of socioeconomic and cultural phenomena that are inextricably bound together. Agriculture and food processing activities continue as the productive mainstay for many Ghanaians. Issues of land, fertility, and prosperity remain central to local survival. Many festivals celebrate local vocations such as farming, fishing, and hunting. Chiefs, priest, priestess, and local historians combine their knowledge to forecast the future and explain the past. Ghanaians positioned by indigenous traditional institutions to offer sacrifices, libations and prayers to the gods and the ancestors to honour them for all their help hold a very high status, locally and nationally. Those with natural and/or supernatural power to ensure the livelihoods of citizens play an increasing important role in times of financial insecurity and international financing interventions.

The gods and ancestors are uniquely placed in the performance of many celebrations in which sacrifice plays a pivotal role. It is a time to pacify and/or appease the gods for all the crimes that members of the community might have committed against them. These sacrifices thus renew and consolidate the bonds between the living, the deities and their spirit powers. Participants ask for long life, peace, prosperity, safety in all risky undertakings, potency for men and fertility for women. After these sacrifices, people are relieved psychologically of all their fears and anxieties and enter the new year with great hope (personal communication with Sempe Manste, of Ga people in 1994).

Out of sixty-four festivals that we documented, ten celebrate the harvest season, seventeen honour ancestors for the role they play to ensure that a good harvest and prosperity continue. Ten festivals mark and rejoice by offering the first harvest to the ancestors (Clarke-Ekong, 1995).

Ghanaians have also followed the Marxian maxim that: "Production will create a consumer." Change from local productions of paraphernalia to mass production and consumption is being accompanied by other cultural changes in Ghana and the way Ghanaians perceived traditional culture (Gilbert, 1992). Students of material culture, Mary Douglas (1970), and Pierre Bourdieu (1983), to Jean Baudrillard (1988) all agree that objects are not simply meaningful in their relations to human purpose, but in their collective consumption, their relations to other objects as a field of significance.

Market demands and the growing tourist sector trade have enticed some to create festivals in places and for events that were never recognised or celebrated before now. An issue of current debate among Ghanaian purist is the role that government is actively playing in inventing culture, via festival performances, to further the economic development agenda of the current administration.

According to statistics available from the Ghana Tourist Board (1994), between 1985 and 1992, the estimated gross foreign exchange earnings from tourism increased from US\$26 million to US\$170 million. With this kind of phenomenal growth potential, the power of the cedi has for many communities replaced the purely spiritual value of festival performances. In addition, some worry that the instrumental qualities and the sanctity of certain objects, such as traditional paraphernalia reserved for ritual and chieftaincy affairs, has now come under threat (personal interview with Big Ada historian, 1995). He lamented that, "Competing for attention in the town square we now have vendors of all sorts."

The festival 'event' now takes on a commercial aspect unknown in the past. Area traders and hotel proprietors use the occasion to make brisk business. It also attracts foreign exchange for the country since a lot of tourists flock to Accra to witness the celebration. During the 1994 Homowo opening ceremony, the American Council was represented, along with other expatriate dignitaries stationed in Accra.

Economically, chieftaincies throughout Ghana now have a "Nkusuohene" and recognise the "Nkosuo Stool" whose occupant mobilises resources for local development. Financial contributions and fund-raising activities help raise funds for infrastructure developments and scholarships.

## Summary

Ghanaian festivals perform many traditional functions, but in a more modern sense they serve to secure a community's place in the nation and reinforce the nation state's pre-eminence in the lives of communities. Government officials now use the occasion to deliver policy speeches, to dedicate newly completed government projects and unveil new ones. Football matches and state dances are now organised to mark such events and raise funds. Many community elders feel that all of these new factors have robbed local festivals of some their traditional glamour and authenticity.

My observations suggest that recognising the authenticity of local traditions and the arrangement of and participation in festivals is a contemporary political challenge. Gaining an understanding of the daily workings of local communities, how key persons attain prestige, and how the disadvantaged lessen their economic marginalisation are significant in any viable government development planning strategy.

My research reconfirms the basic holistic and contextual tenets of group membership that persist as the central consideration in the staging of festivals, traditional and contemporary. Paramountcy, which establishes local leadership with rights of access and distribution, underscoring conflicting interests amongst chiefs and the people, affect development. It is now time to determine the long-term impact of tradition and modernity and understand those elements that facilitate or distract from Ghana meeting her full potential.

The importance of festivals in land and group membership issues and their position at the nexus of local and national development agendas, is worthy of further research. Informed discussion must address avenues that exist or might be opened to reestablish the needs of whole communities at the core of what is staged in performance and practised in the use of land and human resources. These much neglected and misunderstood institutions need the attention of national and international development theorists, planners, and impact assessors just as much as the commissioning of new dams and roads, whose value is obvious. If the new value-added approach of Western government program planning has a lesson here, it may be that value will be added to those development projects that understand and apply culturally comprehensive integrative principles. This will require using constructive lessons from cultural events, such as festivals as vehicles for human and natural resource integration, much like they were effectively employed in the past.

Figure 1: Ghanaian Festivals

MONTH	FESTIVAL	TRADITIONAL AREA	REGION
<b>Recognition of first harvest and the ancestors festivals</b>			
January	Rice	Akpafu	Volta
June	Ohumkan	Kyebi	Eastern
June	Ahoboa	Abura/Anyam/Kwamankese	Central
July	Yam	Enyam Maina	Central
August	Homowo	Ga/Gamashi	Gt Accra
September	Yam	Ho/Bankoe	Volta
September	Yam	Aboaddse-Dominase	Central
September	Yam	Aburi	Eastern
September	Yam	Kpedze	Volta
December	Yam	Anfoega	Volta
<b>Harvest Festivals:</b>			
March	Asikhoe	Anfoega	Volta
March	Gologo/Golib	Tongo/(Tallensi)	U Eastern
July	Bakatae	Elmina	Central
October	Kobine	Lawra	U West
Nov/Dec	Ayultigyi	(Ope)/Krachikrom	Volta
December	Samanpiid	Kumasi at Bawku	U Eastern
December	Akomase	Senya	Central
<b>Ancestor Festivals:</b>			
January	Ntoa Fokuokes	Nkoranza	Brong Ahafo
February	Papa	Kumawu	Ashanti
March	Kurubi	Nyamase	Brong Ahafo
April	Kotokro	Yilo Krobo/Odumase Krabo	Eastern
May	Aboakyer	Effutu/Winneba	Central
August	Ahoba Kese	Abura	Central
August	Ndim Kese	Sekondi	Western
August	Fetu Afahye	Cape Coast	Central
September	Akyempim	Agona	Ashanti
September	Akwambo	Enyam Maim	Eastern
September	Odwira	Akuampem/Akropong	Eastern
October	Kundum	Ahanta/Nzema	Western
November	Bohyemhuo	Essumeja	Ashanti
November	Odwira	Denkyira/Dunkwa	Central
December	Odwira	Akan/Asante	Eastern
December	Addae	Kumasi	U Eastern
December	Denkyemoso	Juaso	Ashanti
December	Mafi Hogbetsotso	Adidome	Volta
NOTE: Compiled with assistance of Mr E H Mends, Department of Sociology, University of Ghana, Legon, July-August, 1995.			

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