

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC BENEFITS DERIVED FROM FESTIVALS. A CASE STUDY OF ASOGLI YAM FESTIVAL IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

In this study, an attempt was made to evaluate the socio-economic prospects of the Asogli traditional festival (a festival celebrated in the Volta region of Ghana). A multi approach data collection technique was employed which included participant observation (30), interviews (32) and administration of questionnaires (560). The results indicated that 500 respondents representing 89.2% of the accessible population accept that the celebration of the festival possesses some social, cultural and economic values. Furthermore, the main finding of the study is that, the festival creates a platform for social cohesion and the launch of developmental projects such as school buildings, toilet facilities, road construction and good drinking water. This study also revealed that farmers derive a lot of economic benefits from the sale of yam which is the staple crop on which the celebration is founded. Additionally, art and craft dealers, food vendors and the hospitality industry benefit greatly from the sales of their products and services. It is hoped that this study will serve as an eye-opener for more researches to be conducted into our culture.

Keywords: Socio-economic, Asogli, traditional festival, cultural, art and craft.

INTRODUCTION:

The economic development of a nation is a matter of great concern to its citizens. Various economic policies are adopted by governments to change the financial woes of the people for the better. Mention can be made of financial bodies such as the IMF, the World Bank and the HIPC economic policy. Ghana nonetheless has also sought for various economic aids from these financial institutions. However, little has been done by past governments and the present one to explore other avenues such as our rich cultural heritage. The cultural traditions of Ghana are effective tools for national development. Culture expressed in the form of festivals as in the Asogli Yam festival possesses rich economic values worth promoting.

S.K. Gadzekpo (1978) admits that, festivals are seasons of gainful economic activities for local craftsmen and food sellers. He further states that, festivals promote tourism; as foreigners come to catch a glimpse of the artistic development and the rich culture of the society. According to him, they purchase some of these things, giving the dual advantage of income for the society and the boosting of the African's image abroad. His explanation points out the economic benefits that a society stands to derive from the celebration of festivals.

Chachah (1990) also talks about the religious and social aspects of festivals he states that, festivals provide occasions for social re-union among Ghanaians. He further states that relatives and friends see each other again during festivals, also, gifts and drinks are exchanged, disputes settled and an atmosphere of mutual co-operation established. Another writer: Attah-Fosu (2001) in writing about the economic importance of festivals describes festivals as ceremonies which bring most of the citizens of a society together. This, according to his submission helps them to initiate development projects and to contribute financially towards these projects. Visitors who also come to witness the festival contribute economically to the locality. It is evident from the above submissions that festivals are not mere joyous occasions but they are occasions for social re-union and economic advancement.

This study is therefore aimed at exposing the socio-economic prospects of the Asogli Yam festival in Ghana to the outside world.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Festivals are manifestations of the practices and beliefs of a people. They are promoters of culture and builders of one's identity. Festivals perform many functions in the society. They serve as a means of commemorating and remembering important events in the history of a people. In the process, they perform other functions, both intended and unintended. As they involve re-creation of the past, they provide occasions for transmission of traditional cultures and values from one generation to the other. They help in uniting the people in expressing confidence in themselves and loyalty to their leaders. M. Cole (1975) discloses that a festival is a relatively rare climatic event in the life of any community. It is bounded by a definite beginning and end, and is a unified occasion which is set above daily life. Its structure is built up on a core or armature of ritual. Festivals bring about a suspension of ordinary time, a transformation of ordinary space, a formalization of ordinary behaviour. It is as if a community becomes a stage set and its people actors with a battery of seldom-seen props and costumes. Meals become feasts, and greetings, normally simple, become ceremonies. Although dependent upon life-sustaining rituals, a festival is an elaborated and stylized phenomenon which far surpasses ritual necessity. It often becomes the social, ritual, and political apotheosis of community life in a year, Cole (1975) Festivals are not mere occasions of enjoyment and merry-making, but they are also platforms for social, religious and economic development of the society in which they are celebrated.

In her submission, Boamah (1972) describes the *Aluolie* festival as a social function which spearheads the belief of the people of *Sehwi* and also brings joy, unity and good tidings to them. She further states that, the festival has improved the development of the town, because before the start of the festival, family heads put up new buildings or extend their houses to cope with the accommodation problems experienced during the festival.

Ayisi (1980) comments that, festivals combine economic and religious activities, for they are observed with material things. The submissions of the three authors: Gadzekpe (1978), Boamah (1972) and Ayisi (1970) talk about the social and economic functions of festivals. This point is emphasized by Naylor (2000) in her statement that "festivals are integral to the life of Ghanaian communities. They are occasions for prayer, dance, and song, for eating, drinking and socializing and even for making money."

Bame (1991) touches vaguely on the social importance of festivals and attests to the fact that Africans who celebrate annual festivals enter the New Year which is ushered in at the end of the festival buoyed up with hope that their objectives will be achieved. Thus, he is of the view that the well-being and continuity of their societies are always of paramount importance to them. According to him, Africans therefore celebrate festivals for no

other reason than that which has to do with social benefits.

METHODOLOGY:

ETHNOGRAPHIC BACKGROUND OF ASOGLI STATE:

The study was carried out in the Asogli State which comprises four traditional set-ups namely: Ho, Kpenoe, Takla and Akoefe. They are located in the southern part of the Volta Region in Ghana. These four traditional set-ups are linked together in terms of economic orientation, culture and general way of life in view of the fact that they have a common migration and settlement history. The Asoglis are believed to be the descendants of Togbe Kakla, the brave man who masterminded the escape of the Ewe tribe from the walled city of Notsie in the republic of Togo in the 17th century. They speak Ewe as their mother tongue.

ACTIVITIES OF THE FESTIVAL

VOVLOWO FE NKEKE:

This is all Souls Day; and its rituals precede all the other rituals. It is the feeding of the departed souls through which their blessing and guidance are solicited for the years ahead. The ceremony is performed preferably on a Sunday morning at the forecourt of the *Agbogbomefia*'s palace. Libation is first poured to invoke the spirits of the departed after which various sacrifices are performed. Some of the items used are a calabash containing a solution of corn powder and water (*ewortsi*), two bottles of schnapps and sacrificial animals preferably, one male and female goats and one male and female fowl. The sacrifices are performed amidst various incantation, invocations, and drumming and dancing.



Plate 1: A goat being sacrificed during *Vovlowo fe Nkeke*

NUBLABLA (THE TYING OF HERBAL LEAVES):

It is a ritual performed at Akoefe (a town in Asogli State) to cleanse the Asogli State after the feeding of the departed souls. All chiefs and their elders are brought together to go through the cleansing rituals performed with powerful holy herbs by traditional priests of Asogli State. According to custom, this ritual takes place on Thursday morning that precedes a market day under a big tree at Akoefe. This day must be *Asitoegbe* or the last day in the cycle of the four-day week. The main functionaries in this ritual are the *Blabu* custodians of the land, a privileged group whose main duty is to protect the interest of the paramount stool in particular and the community in general by acting as watchdogs. Membership is therefore drawn from the various stool lineages and is hereditary. Before the commencement of the rituals, gong-gong is beaten to inform the people that no woman born of man should be seen outside. This is because some aspects of the ritual are performed naked. Any woman or female who flouts this directive is punished accordingly. The concluding rituals are carried out amidst incantations, sounding of gong-gong and drumming. It is believed that all the evil spirits which do not want the well-being of the Asogli State would be tied in the process. The highly charged bundles of leaves and plants are distributed to the various stool occupants, which they keep at the entrances of their house to ward off evil forces. The other participants serve themselves drinks of palm wine, after which the *Blabu* gather the remaining consecrated plants in sheepskin.



Plate 2: The *Nubabla* ritual in progress

TEYUYRU (THE HAILING OF THE NEW YAM):

The end of the *Nubabla* ritual officially permits entry of “new yam” into the town and marks the beginning of public participation in the festival. *Teyuyru* therefore is an activity which signals the official lifting of the ban on entry of the “new yam” into the towns. It is a period of joy during which the “new yam” is brought into all towns in the Asogli State and hailed amidst drumming and merry-making by both the young and the elderly through the principal streets of Ho. The ceremony begins at the central market where rituals are performed in the shrine of the *Hosi* (market goddess) to solicit her protection, and guidance throughout the *Teyuyru* ceremony.



Plate 3: A celebrant displaying artistry

The celebration is marked by joy and happiness which are displayed in various forms. The celebrants are seen clad in all sort of funny clothing such as masquerades, tattered cloths, and all forms of body adornments. Men dress like women while women dress like men all to express their happiness at the entry of the new yam. Other rituals are performed at shrines on the way to Heve, their final destination. The procession finally converges at Heve (one of the suburbs of Ho) where celebrants are met by all the chiefs of Ho seated in state. At this gathering, there is much to eat and drink.

GRAND DURBAR OF CHIEFS AND PEOPLE OF ASOGLI:

To round off the festivities, a durbar is held during which the Paramount Chief and other divisional clan chiefs sit in state to receive homage from their subjects. The occupants of various stools and families converge at the centre of the town to form a colourful procession with the paramount chief to the durbar ground. As the procession moves through the principal streets of Ho, they are joined by the other sub chiefs to form a more formidable and complete human transposition to the durbar ground amidst singing, dancing and drumming. Characteristic of this occasion is the recitation of appellations which tend to place the various chiefs at different levels of traditional function. The retinue of the *fiaga* (paramount chief) to the durbar ground depicts the true culture of the Asoglis. There is an interesting display of paraphernalia which includes various stool properties,

spokesman's staff, state swords, state drums, specially decorated sandals, state umbrellas and the effigy of the *Hosi*(market goddess) among others. Other items on display are: cosmetics of all kinds, expensive *aggrey* beads (expensive beads) traditional lamps, blocks of incense and neatly packed bundles of women's clothing. The various items are nicely arranged in brass pans and these are carried by teenage girls with symbolic body adornments. Also among the procession are old women dressed in *atufu*, a dressing with protruding "back", portraying the philosophies of the state concerning fertility. The procession is led by the gong-gong beater, followed by the drummers, horn blowers, spokesmen, state sword bearers, stool carriers and the carriers of various native items including cosmetics and jewellery.

The occasion presents the setting for the delivery of special messages by the *Agbogbomefia* and Government officials. It is the biggest setting for the display of Asogli and Ewe culture through the performances of various groups. It is also an occasion for awarding outstanding citizens for their contribution to progress in Asogli. At the durbar ground, libation is poured by both the male and female priests: rites of sowing and harvesting of yams are dramatized. There is drumming and dancing, followed by speeches and greetings. This brings the ceremony to an end.



Plate 4: The *Agbogbomefia* seated in state during a grand durbar

DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLING TECHNIQUES:

A multi-approach data collection technique was adopted in this study. This is because of the complementary effect of the strength and weakness in each technique. The techniques employed were interviews, participant observation and survey.

INTERVIEWS:

In –depth interviews were conducted for 5 chiefs, 10 traditional priests, 8 spokespersons, 25 clan leaders and 14 queen mothers from the various communities that constitute the Asogli traditional state where the festival is celebrated. Purposive sampling technique was used to select these respondents from among other respondents. These respondents have adequate information regarding the essence of the festival since they are very important key stakeholders in the festival planning activities and execution. Furthermore, respondent's willingness to participate in the study was also another factor that was considered for sample selection.

PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION:

The researcher participated in every stage of the festival on three different occasions to solicit for more information regarding the festival. This approach adopted has enabled the researcher to appreciate, perceive and observe key features about the festival. This was based on the physical characteristics of the festival. Among the significant features observed were the various art forms on display and the appearance of the different communities especially on the durbar day.

SURVEY:

In all 560 questionnaires were administered to respondents from the various communities who participated in the festival. They included the indigenes of the communities, aliens living within the communities, tertiary

students, some chiefs, queen mothers, opinion leaders, clan heads and heads of family from the participating communities. The questionnaire has both closed and open ended questions, with the questions focusing on the art forms, festival knowledge level, festival importance and challenges.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS:

The questionnaires were coded, edited and entered into SPSS version 16 for analysis. The tables were generated from the program to show the relationship between variables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of respondent's interviewed. More males (55%) participated in the study than females. The results further showed that majority of the respondents (47.7%) were in the age bracket of 31 – 40 years and youths. This is not surprising since youths are the core groups who are attracted to festivals and like having “fun”. In addition, most respondents had up to secondary education (58%) and were natives (65.7%) from the different communities that formed the Asogli state where the festival is celebrated. Most respondents (49.8%) have participated in or witnessed the festival for more than three times. Therefore, the researcher believed that most respondents had adequate knowledge or information regarding the festival.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of respondents

Characteristics	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
Sex		
Male	306	55.0
Female	256	45.0
Age Range (years)		
18-30	145	25.9
31- 40	267	47.7
41 -50	59	10.5
Above 50	89	15.9
Educational level		
Primary	78	13.9
Secondary	325	58.0
Tertiary	110	19.6
Informal	47	8.4
Status of respondents		
Native	368	65.7
Non native	156	27.9
Visitor	36	6.4
No. of times participated in festival		
Once	75	13.4
Twice	193	34.5
Thrice	13	2.3
More than thrice	279	49.8

Source: Field Data (2008)

GENERAL KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE FESTIVAL:

Festival celebrations in Ghana are an ancient activity which is often associated with planting and harvest time or with honoring the ancestor (Bonya, 2011). The Asogli Yam festival is a type of festival associated with planting and harvest time. According to this study, 45.4% of the respondents mentioned that the festival was celebrated to take stock and honour the ancestors that have guided them (Table 2). However, according to history, the Asogli Yam festival is celebrated to thank the gods for giving them fresh yam, which a significant proportion of respondents have attributed the celebration of the festival to. Currently, most festivals are celebrated for unity and development purposes. A study by Bonya, 2011 indicated that celebration of festivals goes beyond the preservation and maintenance of tradition but to create a platform or an opportunity where participating communities are engaged in dialogue with donors and through advocacy for development projects. Traditional

rulers or leaders also use this opportunity to account to their people and outline their developmental activities of the community for the coming year.

This is not surprising because these activities attract more people than the other activities which are mainly carried out by the chief priests and other traditional leaders. However, during the durbar which is the climax of the festival, people from all walks of life are invited including political leaders and government officials. Chiefs from sister communities and friends are also invited to show solidarity and fraternize with the celebration.

Table 2: Awareness level of why the festival is celebrated

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
To thank the gods	51	9.1
For stock taking and to honour the ancestors	254	45.4
For unity and development	124	22.1
To signify yam cultivation	131	23.4
Total	560	100

Source: Field Data (2008)

RESULTS ON WHETHER ASOGLI YAM FESTIVAL POSSESSES ECONOMIC VALUES:

The economic values of Asogli Yam festival are over-whelming. These can be seen in areas such as yam farming, art and crafts, tourism, native games, the hospitality industry, trade, housing. This is evident in the results collated for the awareness level of respondents on the economic values of the festival as shown in table 3.

Table 3: Awareness level about the economic values of the festival

QUESTION	ANSWER	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Does Asogli Yam Festival possess any economic values?	YES	560	100.0
Total		560	100

Source: Field Data (2008)

ECONOMIC VALUES OF ASOGLI YAM FESTIVAL:

Celebration of festivals is one main important activity that increases economic activities of the community especially during that festival period. It was observed by the researcher that the celebration of the festival serves as a family gathering and stock taking especially for the indigenes where activities planned for the year are evaluated and assessed. Also, infrastructure in various households is improved upon, such as painting of houses and general renovations. During the festive period, people return to their homes to strengthen their family ties and reinforce the customs and values of the community. In addition, foreigners and tourists are attracted to the area which results in high patronage of hotels, increase in trading activities and businesses. Similar research carried out by Ahithophel (1982), Braima (1989), and Nwinam (1994) also shows that festivals attract foreign exchange for towns or communities since a lot of tourists flock to the area. This is because the patronage at the festival is high, traders and hotel proprietors use the occasion to make brisk business.

The celebration of the festival also serves as a period of fund-raising for developmental projects. During interview with one key stakeholder, he stated that *“the community KVIP was built from the funds raised from the festival celebrated; hence celebration of the festival is very useful”*. Ahithophel (1982) also stated that festivals are occasions for mobilizing people for fund-raising towards development in the traditional area. In addition, Bonya(2011) identified that celebration of traditional festivals plays two roles (i.e. traditional and contemporary roles) in development. Drumming, dancing, art, songs, belief systems, values, norms and practices are vital components of culture that need to be preserved and maintained for posterity. Festivals were therefore traditionally celebrated to preserve and maintain these cultures. Hence, community elders and leaders use these fora to enhance the perpetuation of values and belief systems and also pass on folklores to the younger generations (Bonya 2011). However, in recent times, festivals have gone beyond their traditional roles. Their celebrations are consciously planned with concrete action plans aiming at a particular project or activity. Slam and Falola (2002) declared that traditional festivals are centered on religious, socio- economic, political and cultural beliefs and values of a society.

A lot of money is made by farmers from the sales of yam. This is the case because of the festive period which

makes the demand for yam higher. Over thousand tubers of yam are sold by the farmers for consumption. Some of the tubers of yam are sold directly to consumers while some are also sold to retailers on wholesale basis. Towards the end of August, most yam tubers are ready for sale. However, the new yam is only consumed after the *Dzawuwu* rites have been performed. A lot of fun is derived from the sales of yam during the festive period, to the extent that some buyers try to hoard yam prior to the celebration of the festival. Yam tubers are sold during the festive period in various ways. Some yam tubers are sold by hawking, and others are sold on shelves in the market. Some are also sold on mobile trucks. In all these, the ultimate aim is to get yam to the people for consumption so as to ensure the continuity of the festival. Without yam, there will be no yam festival because it forms the basis for the celebration.

The celebration of the Asogli Yam festival makes it possible for the economic advancement of the local artists and craftsmen. The festive period presents a setting for the patronage of made-in-Ghana art works. The culture, philosophies and ideas of the people are expressed in their art works. During the festival, people travel from all walks of life both far and near not only to witness the festival but also to buy something in the form of a souvenir to send home. Most foreigners flood local art shops, trade fairs and durbar grounds to buy all sorts of gifts for their loved ones. Most of the artifacts bought are souvenirs which are handy and easy to carry. They include statuettes, figurines, dolls, beads, leather works, kente, tie and dye, batik, calabash art, replicas of spokesman staff, state swords, stools, basketry and metal works. When these artifacts are bought, there is economic growth; as taxes are generated for the development of the district and Ghana as a whole. Employment is also increased for both artisans and the marketers of the artifacts and as a result, social vices such as armed robbery will be eliminated from the society.

Table 4 below tabulates some of the views of respondents on the economic values of the festival:

Table 4: Economic values of the festival

Results	Frequency	Percentage
1) It provides a good season for farmers to sell their produce.	200	36.0
2. The festival attracts tourists.	150	27.0
3. Promotion of development projects	160	28.0
4. Artists sell their works.	50	9.0
Total	560	100

Source: Field Data (2008)

THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ASOGLI YAM FESTIVAL:

The celebration of Asogli Yam festival boosts the social and cultural status of the people. The festival in the first place offers the natives of Asogli the opportunity to visit home at least once in a year. In the course of these visits, outstanding disputes and misunderstandings are settled. Therefore socially, Asogli Yam festival promotes unity and peace within the family system and the society as a whole.

Culturally, the festival creates a platform for the people to recount their historical past. During the festival, everything about the past history of the people is brought to light or remembered for the young ones to learn. This is very important because no society can forget its history. Apart from using the Asogli Yam festival to remember the past, its annual celebration helps to transmit, conserve and project the culture of the people. Also, the riches of the different clans are brought to light for visitors as well as the towns' people to ascertain the wealth of the various clans which will lead to respect for their values. The festival also creates a platform for natives to learn about their traditional dances, songs and folklores.

The Asogli Yam festival helps to break the monotony in the life of the people. The daily routine of going to the farm every blessed day to cultivate yam for food is halted by the advent of the yam festival. The yam festival brings a sort of relieve and joy to the people most especially, the farmers from a continuous period of hard work and labour. The farmers most especially are happy because yam cultivation is considered to be, tedious and cumbersome. A lot of time and energy is required for the preparation of the land. Much care and attention is needed for the yam plants to grow well. The harvest time is another energy-sapping venture in yam farming. Here a lot of strength and energy is used to carefully harvest the yam fruits. Therefore to the Asogli farmers, the yam festival is a period of rest and a period that they rip the fruits of their labour.

The festival also serves as a primary source from which the people draw their strength. That is with the idea that the festival will be celebrated in some few months, the men and women and children work vigorously on their farms in order to celebrate the festival well. To them any joyful celebration such as the Asogli Yam festival

requires some money and enough resources in terms of food and other accompaniments. The festival in a lucid point is an instrument for hardworking and the acquisition of strength. Natives living outside the Asogli towns are not left out in the quest for money to celebrate the festival. Those staying abroad and other places in Ghana work harder to secure money to buy new clothing and other accoutrements needed for the festival. The festival also brings together the whole Asogli State to profess unity and to swear their allegiance to the present *fiaga* (paramount chief). Throughout the year, the *fiaga* due to his tight schedule does not have adequate time for his people; therefore during the yam festival the *fiaga* sits in state to receive homage from the people. The social status of the people is thus enhanced.

CONCLUSION:

The economic emancipation of many nations has been propelled by different approaches adopted by governments in power. The trend was changed when the researcher decided to embark on a study to explore what the people “have” and are known for. That is their identity. The identity of a people is imbedded in their general way of life which has to do with their culture. The culture of a people shows what they are capable of doing to fight for their own survival. The so-called developed nations such as the U.S.A, Germany, Russia and France did not attain their economic freedom on a Silver Platter, they fought for it. Africa is not a continent cursed with poverty. She has both human and natural resources which when harnessed well, will help in saving the continent from abject poverty. With these facts at hand, the researcher took a bold step to explore the culture of the people to see whether there are some assets that can be used as tools for development. This was done by bringing out the social, cultural and economic benefits that citizens of Ghana stand to derive from the celebration of Asogli Yam festival.

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