

# The Role of Art Forms in the Celebration of Festivals: A Case Study of Asogli Yam Festival, Volta Region, Ghana

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## Abstract

In this study, an attempt was made to evaluate the role of art forms in the celebration of Asogli traditional festival. A multi approach data collection technique was employed which included participant observation, interviews (62) and administration of questionnaires (560). The results indicated that most respondents (45%) said the celebration of the festival is for stock taking and honouring of ancestors. Furthermore, the main art forms showcased during the celebration of the festival were visual art (38%) and performing arts (30%) (i.e. drumming and dancing). The main role art forms played in the celebration of the festival is attraction and beautification of the festival. The celebration of the festival serves as thanks giving to God, merry making and discussion of developmental projects of the area.

**Key words:**Asogli, Traditional Festival, Art forms, Roles, Ghana

## 1.0 Introduction

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. 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 can be classified into harvest festivals and festivals in memory of ancestors and past leaders. A popular harvest festival in Ghana is the Asogli Yam festival which is celebrated by a section of the *Ewe* tribe in the Volta region of Ghana. It is celebrated with pomp and pageantry to mark the end of the long period of yam cultivation and to thank the gods and ancestors for protection and guidance throughout the year. During the festival, art in the form of music, textiles, pottery, body art, drama, the act of pouring libation, incantations and many others are used to portray the activities of the festival. Artifacts and art are used in the performance of various rites and rituals throughout the festival. To the celebrants, those artifacts are mere objects which ensure the continuity of the festival but to the critical observer, art is totally enshrined in the celebration to the extent that negligence of them has the tendency to spell the doom of the festival.

Observation by the researcher showed that the Asogli Yam festival possesses some economic values worth researching into but this could be possible if and only if the role of art is highlighted in the celebration.

Although art plays an important role in the celebration of Asogli Yam Festival of the people of Ho, Kpenoe, Takla and Akoefe in the Volta region of Ghana, there is no or little information on artistic aspect of the festival. Furthermore, the socio-economic significance of the festival to the development of Ghana has not been explored. It is therefore necessary that a study about the Asogli Yam Festival be carried out to inform the general public about the role of art in the festival and to bring to bare its socio-economic significance to the development of Ghana. Therefore this study was carried out to identify the specific art forms which play various roles in the festival, and also create a platform for the exploration of the socio-economic benefits of the festival in relation to the arts.

## 2.0 Methodology

### 2.1 Ethnographic background of the study area

The study was conducted in the Asogli State which comprises four traditional set-ups, 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 Ewes from the walled city of Notsie in the republic of Togo in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. They speak Ewe as their mother tongue.



Plate 1: Location of Ho in Ghana

## 2.2 Geographical Location of Ho

Ho, the most powerful clan at *Glime* (the walled city of Notsie), had warlike and clever elders. It was through the revolution which resulted in their escape that the name “Ho” came into existence. In Ewe, the word “Ho” means to move with bag and baggage. So when calling the people who are now known as Ho people the “Hoawo”, one is unknowingly referring to them as people who moved with everything they had from the great wall of Notsie.

Ho, which is the Volta regional capital serves as the seat of the paramountcy of Asogli and has over the years legitimately assumed prominence. It is located between the Galenku Hills to the north and the Adaklu peak to the South. It is about 32 square miles in size

## 2.3 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.

### 2.3.1 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.

### 2.3.2 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.

### 2.3.3 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.

#### 2.4 Pre-testing of research instrument

The research instrument was pre-tested. This activity was carried out to remove any ambiguity the questionnaire may pose. This testing was done to reveal unanticipated challenges with question wording, instructions to skip questions, etc. It helped the researcher to know whether the respondents understood the questions and could give useful answers. This was done in a different community outside the Asogli traditional state but with similar characteristic to the community where the festival is celebrated. After the pre-testing, the research instrument was revised appropriately.

#### 2.5 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.

#### 2.6 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 (%)
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	306	55.0
Female	256	45.0
<b>Age Range (years)</b>		
18-30	145	25.9
31- 40	267	47.7
41 -50	59	10.5
Above 50	89	15.9
<b>Educational level</b>		
Primary	78	13.9
Secondary	325	58.0
Tertiary	110	19.6
Informal	47	8.4
<b>Status of respondents</b>		
Native	368	65.7
Non native	156	27.9
Visitor	36	6.4
<b>No. of times participated in festival</b>		
Once	75	13.4
Twice	193	34.5
Thrice	13	2.3
More than thrice	279	49.8

Source: Field Data (2008)

##### 2.6.1 General Knowledge and roles of art forms in 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.

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
<b>Total</b>	<b>560</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Data (2008)

The Asogli Yam festival is normally a week and half celebration with various activities. Different traditional rites are performed on each day signifying a particular activity or belief. Bonya, 2011 stated that action plans for the festival would be referred to as outline of planned activities with inputs from stakeholders (community, service providers) agreed upon by a community (host of the festival) prior to a festival and after the festival spelling out roles and responsibilities to be carried out. According to the study, 53% of the respondents stated that hailing of the new yam; all souls' day and durbar were the main activities for the festival (Table 3). 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 by show solidarity and fraternize with the celebration. This is where various art forms are enormously displayed by chiefs, various culture groups, visitors and individuals.

Table 3: Activities that constitute the festival

Activities	Frequency	Percentage
Hailing of new yam, all souls' day, durbar - " <i>Dzawuwu, Nubabla</i> "	297	53
Feasting, dancing & drumming & durbar	129	23
Pounding of <i>fufu</i> , singing and dancing	84	15
Merrymaking and thanksgiving - " <i>Gbormekplorkplor</i> "	50	9.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>560</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Data (2008)

According to further revelations by the results, 98% of the respondents mentioned that art plays roles in the celebration of the festival. They identified various art forms as shown in Table 4. Most of the respondents identified colourful kente cloths, beads, sculpture (i.e. stools, linguist staffs etc.) as the various art forms for the celebration of the festival. These art forms play various roles in the celebration of the festival.

Table 4: Art forms identified by respondents in the celebration of the festival

Art forms	Frequency	Percentage
Visual art- colourful kente cloth, beads, sculpture- stool, linguist staff	213	38
Visual art, verbal art, & performing art.	168	30
Sign board, cloth design, posters, printing of documents.	129	23
Kente, stools, sandals, state sword.	50	9.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>560</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Data (2008)

The study indicated that 53% of respondents believed that the main role art forms play in the celebration of the festival was its beautification which draws the attention of most observers and participants (Table 5). This was on the durbar day where all the chiefs from the various suburbs and those invited from outside the suburbs dress in their beautiful regalia depicting their chieftaincy titles and engaging on a procession through the principal streets of the community towards the durbar ground. Various art performances are displayed especially during drumming and dancing of the different cultural troupes that are invited. The festival certainly is crowned with important and beautiful art works from all participating traditional communities. A study by Ayine (2009) about the Adaa-kuya festival in the Frafra traditional area-Bolgatanga in the northern part of Ghana also indicated that the Adaa-kuya festival is an art event because it is an occasion when the people's works of art is transformed into kinetic sculpture. Drums boom and messages of praise and philosophical proverbs, ornaments and special

craft objects are displayed.

Table 5: Roles of art forms in the festival

<b>Roles</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
It draws people's attention to the beauty of the festival	297	53
The traditional dressing of the celebrants –shows culture	84	15
The procession to the durbar ground – colourful	134	24
The dressing of the chiefs and queens – elegance	45	8.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>560</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Data (2008)

### 2.6.2 Socio-economic values of the 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, Bonye (2011) identified that celebration of traditional festivals play 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 (Bonye 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.

### 2.7 Conclusion

Festivals are important cultural activities in Ghana and they are very significant and indigenous to the very people who celebrate them. It is an occasion that affords the traditional leader of the community to give accounts of the past year and plans for the future. During celebration of the festival, an appeal for fund is launched for developmental projects such as construction of schools, healthcare facilities, libraries etc. It is an occasion where tourists are attracted into the community and income may be generated for area local projects. Various art forms are also showcased during the celebration of the festival; some depicting the traditional area. These art forms include colourful kente cloth, beads, sculpture, linguist staff, different sandals, state swords and designs of cloths. The art forms play different roles during the celebration of the festivals. The roles comprise beautification of the festival, portraying of culture of the people and elegance of traditional leaders. In all, celebration of the Asogli Yam festival marks the occasion where indigenes of the Asogli traditional state within and outside come home to thank God, make merry and discuss issues concerning how to develop the area.

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**Author's Biographical notes**

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