

# **Cultural Festival as a Salient Tool for Strategic, Holistic and Sustainable Rural Development in Africa: The Case of the Opemso) Festival of the Asantes of Ghana**

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## **Abstract**

The Opemso) cultural festival is one of the iconic cultural festivals among the Asante ethnic society in Ghana. It is historically and culturally charged, glued to the beginnings of the most vibrant Asante kingdom because of its affiliation to the birth of the founder, Otumfuo Osei Tutu I. Using qualitative approaches, the researcher accentuates the immense contributions of the festival to the cultural, historical, social and economic development of the people of Anyinam and Kokofu in the Ashanti region of Ghana. Semi-structured interviews as well as direct observations were the main instruments for the collection of rich data on the great significance of the festival in the lives of residents and visitors from respondents who were purposively and randomly sampled. The data were qualitatively analyzed using the Data analysis spiral method to interpret the archetypal roles that the Opemso) cultural festival plays in the everyday life of the people. The study contends that if cultural festivals are strategically planned and well tailored in line with developmental policies and ideologies of a society or nation at large, they can be salient tools for the development of rural areas especially in festival-prone nations in Sub-Saharan Africa.

**Keywords:** Cultural Festival, Opemso), Sustainable Development, Holistic, Asante Kingdom

## **INTRODUCTION**

Cultural festivals are ancient traditional events that played pivotal roles in the development of societies in the past generations especially of the African descent. They have been and still are powerful but latent agents for sustainable development in festival prone communities in the Sub-Saharan region of Africa. Jaeger and Mykletun (2013) posit that cultural festivals play universal roles basically cultural, social and economic in the host community that observes the event. These seemingly ancient roles played by cultural festivals are still significant and even more instrumental in the rural and urban development of modern societies. O'Sullivan and Jackson (2002) reveal about cultural festivals in modern societies that their important roles are now established fact, boosting local economies of particularly the host communities. McClinchey (2008) agrees that today, cultural festivals' influence has become a central element in developmental affairs. This is due to the cultural, historical, social and economic exchanges that ensue between residents of the host community and visitors. However, it is distressing to know that despite these age-long, pivotal impacts of cultural festivals in societal rapid and sustainable development, many organizations searching for avenues for sustainable forms of development, especially in rural communities either turns a blind eye to its great potentials and/or are ignorant to the weld in developmental affairs. Quinn (2006) is in a league with this argument when he admitted that many scholars, researchers and policy makers have not explored on how festivals can be used as effective vehicles in sustainable development. This notwithstanding, few scholars have sensitized the need to factorize them in developmental agendas of modern societies owing to their indispensable impacts (Crespi & Richards, 2007).

Richard and Hall (2000) contend that sustainable development via cultural festivals promotes renewable economic, cultural and social benefit to modern communities.

The refusal of many modern developers and policy makers to incorporate and consider cultural festivals in the sustainable development agenda in societies might be as a result of failure on the part of event organizers and host communities to strategically plan its organization resulting in poor service delivery as well as inadequate marketing and publicity (McClinchey, 2008). This makes the event less enticing for developers to invest huge sums in their organization. Also, the focus of cultural festivals today plays much currency on the economic benefits without looking at the other very essential services that can be tapped for sustainable development such as the cultural, historical and social values. Thus, as Crespi and Richards (2007) noted, such misplaced emphasis result in total failure of the event. Therefore, the researcher suggests that to boost the interest of developers in considering and factorizing cultural festivals in developmental agendas, they must be a sensitization of the potential holistic developmental impacts that they exert and not just the leaping economic benefits. This includes accentuating the historic, social and cultural implications for sustainable development in addition to the economic players. Therefore, the research was targeted at highlighting these holistic developmental roles of cultural festivals using the Opemso festival of the Asantes commemorated by the Anyinam and Kokofu host communities in the Ashanti region of Ghana. The study was also to enlighten ill-informed scholars and developers on how festivals can be strategically planned to achieve a holistic and sustainable development in especially rural communities in Ghana and other Sub-Sahara African states where the spirit of cultural festivals has and is still looming very high in the everyday life affairs of the people.

### **Cultural Festivals and their Significance in Sustainable Development**

Cultural festivals contribute immensely to the historic, cultural, economic and social development of communities and nations. Historically, cultural festivals illuminate the rich origins of clans, families and ethnic societies. They are instruments for expressing the historic tradition of a group of people (Getz, 2007). Odotei (2002) concurs that the events in cultural festivals usually depict the traditional history of a group of people. She cited the Hogbetsotso festival of the Ewes of Ghana that is commemorated to mark the journey their ancestors made to their present location with the events depicting the ordeals their forebears went through. In the same line of thought, Nketia (1975) on historical account said that the people of Elmina celebrate the Bakatue festival to remember the beginnings of their fishing profession at the Elmina lagoon traced to the god La-Kpa. Thus, the festival is carried out to propitiate him for a bumper harvest before the annual fishing activities commence. Likewise, the Krobo in Ghana observe the Ngmayem festival to mark the historic food Ngma (Millet) that sustained their forebears when they lived in the Krobo hills in the Eastern region of Ghana. These are but a few examples of the historical content that drives the observance of festivals in Ghana. This knowledge is very important in tracing the geographical identities of ethnic societies in a particular region on the continent. It will assist public and private developers in deepening their understanding of the local people whose communities they may be undertaking projects and this would reflect positively on their outcomes.

Commenting on the cultural significance of festivals, O'Sullivan and Jackson (2002) state that festivals are used as platforms in unveiling and sharing the rich culture of towns, villages and societies to visitors who attend. It is the perfect event in the community that reveals the total culture of a people such as their worldviews, values, religious beliefs and norms. Festivals are used in affirming or denouncing certain values and social structures in the community while

giving the local people a sense of belongingness (Quinn, 2006). It paints the authentic portrait of the celebrant community. This is what Crespi and Richards (2007) refer to as 'place identity'. This place identity is the cultural makeup that identifies the host community of the festival. Jaeger and Mykletun (2013) add that the cultural tradition, the geographical confines as well as important practices of the host community is marketed and branded in grand style to outsiders during the festival observance. A premium should always be placed on this cultural element that pivots every cultural festival. This underscores why Quinn (2006) strongly argues that the cultural ingredient must never be overlooked in festival commemorations. Odotei (2002) makes a general assertion which is true of all cultural festivals in Africa especially Ghana that it's binding element is its religious beliefs, values and practices which is a definition for culture. Thus, any celebration of a cultural festival which swerves the cultural flavor eventually fails (Crespi & Richards, 2007). Therefore, cultural festivals must always be aimed primarily at celebrating, maintaining and ensuring the cultural development of a society with the economic attracters being secondary (McClinchey, 2008). This should be the goal of event organizers and festival organization committees if sustainable cultural development is to be achieved. After all, if cultural festivals lose its core responsibility of cultural education, which other event would aid in publicizing the unique cultural heritage of a people?

Socially, cultural festivals strengthen the political powers of the traditional institutions. It is in fact, a celebration of the political powers of the chief and members of his traditional council (Odotei, 2002). Members of the local communities deepen the awe and respect they have for the ruling traditional powers when their authority is much felt during festival celebrations. O'Suvillan and Jackson (2002) remark that cultural festivals enhance the leadership roles of the traditional authorities. The local people are able to see their influence and the distinct duties that they perform in the society leading to improved governance structures which is linked to achieving the developmental objectives of the host communities. The physical structures in the town such as road networks, lanes, community centres, traditional palaces and other historic buildings receive maintenance and repairs as a result of the festival observance (Janniskee, 1996). Tree planting exercises and environmentally friendly activities that are undertaken in the societies improve the ecological conditions, thereby impacting positively on health and good living. Quinn (2006) adds that heated arguments, age-long social tensions and conflicts are solved during such festivals. Solutions to very perplexing social and economic challenges are sought during society gatherings leading to the festival (McClinchey, 2008). It is even said that the gods and ancestors would be incensed at persons who disturb the peace of the town at such celebrations and as such headlong individuals are even quick to compromise or yield to understanding in the name of peace. Odotei (2002) emphasizes that the reunion of family members and friends, engagement in traditional gaming and leisure activities helps in ensuring peace, unity, oneness and social cohesion and integration culminating to sustainable social development.

The economic values of cultural festivals have been well noted by the few scholars who have written about this event and even branding it as tourism bait. This is very noticeable because the local people are able to maximize the sales of their products and services, thus, booming the local economy (O'Sullivan & Jackson, 2002). Traders, shopkeepers, service providers, food vendors and public transport owners have earned bountifully since the soaring numbers of attendees at the festival. As Odotei (2002) noted, there is high expenditure as a result of accelerating consumption of food, drinks and other products and services on the part of visitors and the local indigenes during the festival. The event sponsors offer valuable monetary sums to the traditional council, which revamps the local economy and assist in the carrying out development projects in the community. On the other hand, the event sponsors use the festival

platform to advertise and mobilize sales for the products and services. The exploitation and excessive pulling of the economic thread of festivals have been criticized by some scholars as making the event lose its other impacts. Getz (2007) warns against an overly emphasis on the economic benefits of festivals by scholars with little or no attention assigned to the cultural and social values. He argues that to make cultural festivals, instruments for sustainable development, their social, cultural and historic values must be highlighted. This informs the focus of the study undertaken by the researcher to unveil the holistic developmental benefits of cultural festivals using the case of the Opemso) festival of the Asantes in Ghana.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The qualitative research design was used for the entire research from the gathering of data through to its analysis. This method was seen as appropriate for the study because of its exploratory, inquiry nature and its ability to thoroughly describe phenomena (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). Seeking for rich and thick description of the history as well as the cultural, economic and social significance of festivals would require seeking views of the people who engage in those practices which can best be carried out using qualitative approach and not in statistical forms as in quantitative research.

Its time-tested research methods, thus, descriptive study, narrative study and phenomenological study which seeks to systematically document current event, situation or phenomena were adopted (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012). The narrative study helped the researcher in accurately relaying the oral tradition as was told him by key respondents interviewed. The long hours of inquiry with respondents as well as its naturalistic field work which are peculiar of phenomenological study assisted the researcher in gaining in-depth information and understanding of the festival and its significance in ensuring the development of Anyinam and Kokofu towns.

The researcher intentionally focused the interviews which were semi-structured and sometimes in focus group discussions, to the two chiefs, two queen mothers, one traditional priest and eleven elderly ones in the communities as well as six members in the traditional councils who were first purposively sampled and later randomly sampled because they were seen as well versed in the history and significance of the cultural festival. However, eight local youths were interviewed to find out how much they know about the festival and its significance in the development of their communities. Traders, service providers, drivers, sponsors of the festival as well as the event organizers totaling eighteen respondents were interviewed to ascertain the economic relevance they accrue from the festival. Direct observations of the Opemso) cultural festival by the researcher and his research assistants gave him a personal experience and first hand information on the festival's significance in the development of the people of Anyinam and Kokofu (Kumekpor, 2002).

Finally, the gathered data via interview and direct observation were analyzed qualitatively using the data analysis spiral method. In qualitative research data analysis utilizes inductive reasoning, sorting and categorization of data into thematic forms for easy analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The data were organized and perused severally to get the entire overview, after which the general themes that runs through the data are identified and categorized. The meanings or interpretations are then projected by the researcher (Creswell, 2009). After rigorous analysis, the common themes identified were: The historical significance of the Opemso) cultural festival to the development of Anyinam and Kokofu towns, the cultural significance of the Opemso) cultural festival to the development of Anyinam and Kokofu towns,

The social significance of the Opemso) cultural festival to the development of Anyinam and Kokofu towns, and the economic significance of the Opemso) cultural festival to the development of Anyinam and Kokofu towns. Conclusions were drawn and recommendations made concerning how cultural festivals can be used as agents for sustainable and strategic development of societies and countries in the sub-region of Africa.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### **The Historical Significance of the Opemso) Festival to the Development of Anyinam and Kokofu**

The name of the festival 'Opemso)' is the title that was given to the first king of the Asante ethnic society, Otumfuo Osei Tutu I who is credited as the one who single-handedly united the seven Akan clans and forming the vibrant Asante kingdom (Opanin Kofi Nti, personal communication, September 2, 2016). The festival is commemorated to mark the events that led to his birth, acknowledging and celebrating the bravery of his mother, the assistance of the three hunters who rendered immense assistance to the mother of the great king culminating into his birth, the parlor, care, motherly love, affection and kindness showed by the then queen of Anyinam, the numerous assistance of the deities, spirits and ancestors in the everyday life activities of the Asante people and many more.

Concerning the events that led to the birth of the first Asante king, Otumfuo Osei Tutu I, the oral history, as told by the respondents has it that his mother, Nana Gyamfua Manu Kutusi, who craved so much for a child due to her spontaneous loss of her conceived children was fortunate to have been blessed by the gods and ancestors for another child. This was through a consultation and a prayer to the Tutu deity at Awukugua, a village in the Akuapim district of Ghana. She was determined this time round not to lose this child. Therefore, she did not engage in any strenuous activities like rigorous farming activities and household chores that were peculiar of married Asante women in that era. In the ninth month when the birth of the child was imminent, she decided to visit the mother so that she can successfully deliver. It was a Friday. This was because it was a custom among the Asantes that every woman who was about to give birth, lived among her kind, especially the mother for her to assist in the delivery and care taking of the child for the next forty days to as long as two years.

On her journey to the mother's town called Esiase, the birth pangs increased suddenly when she got close to the Kakaawere River. Owing to the belief of the Asantes in animism, which postulates that both animate and inanimate objects and things like rivers, mountains, trees and so forth have spirits and are even deities, Osei Tutu I's mother asked for the assistance of the river deity to help her in her delivery of the child since she was caught up in a thick forest with no human being around to assist her. She promised to appease and thank the river deity with a male cock (Akok) asense) and schnapps. The river deity, is believed, spiritually prompted three hunters who were in the forest to come to her aid. These hunters who are celebrated today by the Asantes as epitomes of mercy and kindness, patiently took her to an elderly woman called Afranewaa Gyasi of the closest village to help her in the delivery processes of the child who became an iconic figure in Asante politics.

A certain respondent, however, had a different view that it was only one hunter who chanced on the pregnant woman who was nude and as a result, the hunter was killed since it was tabooed in the Asante community for a man to see the nakedness of a woman who is not his wife (Akosua Frema, personal communication, September 3, 2016). Her view was objected by the majority, especially members of the traditional council that the three hunters rather saw the woman who was not naked but in birth pains and assisted her by taking her to the nearby

queen mother of Anyinam. They said that these hunters were handsomely rewarded contrary to the view by some that they were killed. Even in the festival commemoration, as observed by the researcher, the current queen mother of Anyinam together with three hunters came to the venue where the grand festival was commemorated. These hunters played mock roles of the deceased hunters to remember and honor their kindness and assistance to the mother of Otumfuo Osei Tutu I which is to be mimicked by society members to especially visitors, some of whom are believed to be deities visiting the residents in the area.

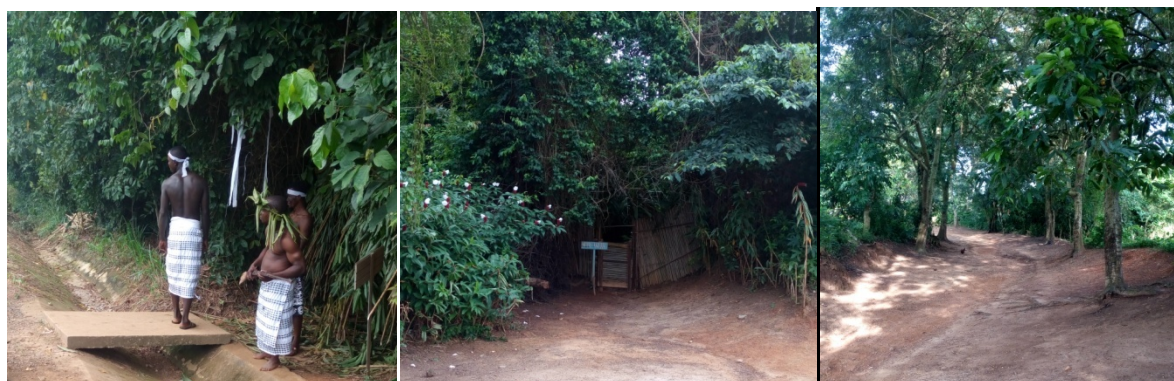
With the assistance of the river deity and the ancestors who are believed by the Asantes to have sent the child from the spirit world to unite the Asantes, the woman was able to successfully give birth. The queen mother took Otumfuo Osei Tutu's mother to a giant tree which is called Onyina Sei Ase and it is orally said that it was under this tree where the first Asante king who made history was born. It is interesting to note that even today, that spot where the king was born in the gazette forest tract do not grow grass and is plain. This may probably be as a result of spiritual protection of the gods and deities. After the delivery, the elderly woman took up a temporary motherly role and assisted the mother of the first Asante king to wean the child till her real mother was summoned. Thus, the small village of Anyinam became the birthplace of the first Asante king, Otumfuo Osei Tutu I.

The researcher asked whether anyone under any circumstance can enter the forest tract where Otumfuo Osei Tutu I was born. The spokesperson of Anyinam who was interviewed told the researcher that:

"Today, it is tabooed for anyone to enter the forest tract where the king was born unless the necessary rites and ceremonies are performed by the Kokofu and Anyinam chiefs, the present Asante king and their traditional priests. Usually, such rites are performed as part of the Opemso) festival, which is commemorated once every two years. However, only the chiefs and residents of Anyinam are to enter the forest tract (Ban mu)' (Oluman, personal communication, August 5, 2016).

During the rites earmarking the festival, the river deity called Kakaawere is offered a cock and schnapps by the chiefs and the current Asante king on behalf of the deceased mother of the great first king of the Asantes. This was observed by the researcher during the commemoration of the festival when the chiefs in palanquins halted at where the river is located in the street about two metres to Anyinam. The traditional priest engaged in some miming and recitations when he performed the libation and offering of a cock to the river deity as promised by the mother of Otumfuo Osei Tutu I.

At Anyinam, the pathway to the gazette forest tract where the first Asante king was born is laid with kente clothes and the kings walk barefooted to the premises. Prayers are said to thank the gods and ancestors and incantations as well as appellations of the deceased kings of Asante are chanted by the traditional priests. Libation is performed with the slaughtering of a fat white sheep and the blood is spilled on the spot under the tree where the birth took place. The researcher noticed that the spot was bare ground with no grass. It was hinted to the researcher by one spokesperson that that spot has not grown grass since time immemorial.



**Fig. 1. Entrance and Pathway to the Birth spot of Otumfuo Osei Tutu I (Photographed by the researcher)**

After the rites, the chiefs and their queen mothers' as well as the jubilant crowd of indigenes and visitors troop in the big football field where the actual commemoration takes place called 'Adwab)' (Gathering of dignitaries and their subjects).

## **The Cultural Significance of the Opemso) Festival to the Development of Anyinam and Kokofu**

### ***Bragoro Rites***

The festival is an avenue for the display of traditions, customs, beliefs, norms and values of the Asante kingdom. For instance, puberty rites, known in the local parlance as 'Bragoro' is carried out by the elderly women and the queen mothers of Anyinam and Kokofu for the girls who have reached their puberty stage. This rite was and is still very important in the cultural life of the Asantes. This is because it helped greatly in barring against any pre-marital affair that impugned the marriage rites and curbed the abundance of teenage pregnancies, single parenting and family insecurities.

These adolescent girls strictly abstained from sex and any foul acts that defile their virginity. Due to the fear that the gods and deities would incur their deep wrath on girls who engaged in premarital sex as well as any foul acts before the rites and their eventual marriage, these girls lived a good moral life. Also, gifts are offered to the initiates during the Bragoro rites by the members in the society especially the elder women to acknowledge the good moral behavior exhibited by these girls. The number of the gifts offered to these girls varied greatly. The variance was dependent on the gravity and extent of the respect, hardworking and exhibition of traits peculiar to the ideals of womanhood set by the elderly women in the society. Thus, a girl who was able to demonstrate these moral values to the fullest of her abilities was offered and showered with the highest numbers of gifts. Aside from this, the event served as an advertising tool for the girls who have reached the marital age for suitors or husbands. It was and is still a great honor and pride for any responsible man in the Asante society to marry an initiate.

Owing to this, every Asante girl demonstrated good moral life and not the carefree, loose moral life pertinent of most teenage girls today so that they would have this wonderful privilege and its accolade benefits. Thus, at every Opemso) festival, the Bragoro rites are organized to educate the young girls of the need to exhibit and lead good moral life. During the rites, powerful instructions pertaining to the laws of the land, personal hygiene, home management skills, good marital relations and many more are offered to these young girls. It is in fact, an avenue for a workshop of cultural values, norms, beliefs and expected code of ethics accepted in the Asante society.

The young girls are adorned with cultural clothes like kente in different arrays of colours and designs. Their bodies are also lavishly and artistically decorated with body painting, marks and coiffure in extravagant symbolic styles. As part of the rites, mashed cooked yam, known as 'et' is prepared for the initiates and is eaten with cooked eggs. The initiates are made to eat the cooked egg without chewing it because it is asserted that if they do, they were literally eating their would-be-children in their womb. Finally, they parade through the streets with the playing of music and the display of various dances. The cultural significance of the Bragoro rites which is part of the Opemso) festival is to accentuate the essence of living a good moral life in line with the accepted ethics of good societal living.

This cultural practice is significant today, even in the face of globalization since it constantly serves as a moral regulator for the youth against bad behavioural practices like teenage pregnancy and its allied sexually transmitted diseases, poor and single parenting, and loose moral life that stifles development in the society especially among the rural folks. This was the general impression noticed by the researcher from the responses given by especially the elderly women.

'Today young girls do not respect their parents and husbands. Marital problems are always in the ascendency as a result of bad traits by today's young girls who are influenced by the carefree moral life perpetrated by western culture and education. Bad dressing styles that reveal private parts of wearers with no dread of shame are the order of the day. Thus, this Bragoro cultural rite serves as a correcting and sensitization tool for the young girls of today on the need to exhibit good moral lives' (Obaa Panyin Adwoa Pinaman, personal communication, September 2, 2016).

The festival is also marked by numerous contests and competitions which are all culturally driven. They include local food preparation contests, explanation of difficult riddles and proverbs, cultural dress codes and their cultural interpretations, traditional games, traditional music and dance forms, beauty pageants and many others.

### ***Food and Cooking Contest***

The women from different homes in the Anyinam and Kokofu jurisdictions come together to compete in the preparation of local and cultural dishes like Aprapransa, Et), Abunabunu soup (prepared from a type of local green leaves known as 'Kontomire'), Adibe (prepared from corn dough with palm oil), palm nut soup with fufu (prepared from yam and plantain) and many others. The prepared meals are taken to the traditional palace of Kokofu for the skilled elderly women in cooking as well as the queen mothers to taste and judge the best cook who is awarded with a monetary sum as well as gifts such as kente clothes, jewelry and others. When the researcher asked the essence of this cooking contest as part of the festival commemoration, these were some of the responses given:

'This cooking contest is aimed at reviving, advertising and promoting the cultivation of local crops which is grown by the farmers in the society' (Abrewa Monica, personal communication, September 2, 2016).

Another elderly man of 74 years also stressed on the contest promoting the food culture of the Asantes. He argued that 'If healthy and delicious local meals can be prepared from them, it would sensitize those who are blinded exclusively by western culture to patronize the eating of



these local meals and aid in promoting and preserving the food culture of the Asantes' (Agya Nketia Kumankoma, personal communication, September 3, 2016).

### ***Contest on the Knowledge of the Customs and Wise-Sayings of the Elders***

Moreover, the riddle and proverbs contest organized by the traditional council of Anyinam and Kokofu was aimed at unveiling the philosophical meanings behind these wise and geared-to-life sayings of the Asante old sages. They are usually used in highlighting the good and acceptable societal values and norms while frowning against the vile and unacceptable traits in the Asante society. Only youngsters are allowed to participate in this contest to ascertain their knowledge about the customs as well as the deep thought of the elders in the community which is embedded in the wise and thought-provoking statements of riddles and proverbs. The young girl or boy who is able to explain and unearth the latent but morally invigorating meanings of the wise sayings is awarded by giving him a monetary sum. This contest is held in the traditional palace amidst a large group of attendees of both young and old from the two local communities and visitors from in and around the country. The cultural significance of this event as part of the festival was clear to virtually all the attendees. It was about the need to know the meanings of one's local customs, especially the imports of verbal art forms like riddles, proverbs and folklores.

A young man of 28 years had this to say: 'I am very elated to attend this festival. This contest has really enlightened me about various wise sayings of the Asante forebears and their meanings. It is interesting that the meanings are very applicable to contemporary situations. I think that if all members of the society live by the virtues in these sayings it will help in ensuring cordial human relations in homes, workplaces and the entire Ghanaian community'(Kofi Appiah, personal communication, September 11, 2016).

When the researcher asked him the best proverb he was taking with him home, he mentioned the proverb 'Woforo dua pa a na pepia wo' (You are assisted and helped when you climb a good tree) which was translated at the contest that when a good course which is beneficial to the society's advancement is applauded while bad ones are disdained and even talked against by societal members it will help in Ghana's socioeconomic advancement. He explained that when politicians take a wrong course that would not benefit the Ghanaian society, all and sundry must talk against it including his own political party supporters and not those in opposition. This he said would bring peace and development in Ghana. He also alluded to the import of the proverb to the morally degenerating songs played on Ghanaian airwaves that dramatizes bad moral lifestyles and disrupt the moral upbringing of children and the youth. He said that these songs are ill-mannered and is a bad course the singer has taken thus, 'climbed a bad tree' and must not be assisted or helped by buying or playing that song by the entire Ghanaian populace. The researcher was enthused about how eloquent the young man was in highlighting the philosophical values.

### ***Contest on Cultural Dresses and their Interpretations***

The people engage in a special cultural dress contest where various forms and ways of adorning oneself in various cloth styles are shown. Elaborate interpretations of the meanings of the styles of wearing the clothes as well as occasions when they are worn are explained and demonstrated to the attendees. Some of these styles of wearing traditional clothes such as Ntomakwaha (rolling the cloth thickly around the waist to cover the lower part of the body with the torso laid bare), me yere besi ama me (My wife will wash it for me- a cloth wearing style where the cloth is worn in such a way that some of the piece drags the floor) and other styles are worn by participants of the contest. The first three contestants who are well able to

demonstrate the traditional styles through the wearing of the clothes as well as explained their meanings were awarded.

Also, traditional ways of wearing the headgears are also keenly contested by the young women. Each of these styles has their names as well as their meanings. Awards in the form of money are given to deserving contestants who tactfully describe and demonstrate the various styles and their meanings.

Dressing styles form part of the culture of every society. Thus, celebrating the culture of the people of Anyinam and Kokofu in the Opemso) festival cannot be complete without instructing the attendees of the festival on the cultural dressing styles of the people. The display of the traditional clothes such as Kente, Kobene, Kuntunkuni and others helps in advertising and promoting the purchase and wearing of them by the young ones as well as visitors. This would boost the sales of these products produced by the indigenes of the towns assisting in the economic development of the entire towns. The explanations of the styles of wearing the clothes and headgears serve as a cultural education and sensitization tool for the youth in the community about their culture and visitors also have the same advantage, ensuring the cultural development of the societies.

### ***Traditional Games***

Traditional games that were educative and health beneficial to the forebears of the people, but are almost forgotten as a result of numerous modern computer games are also revived and promoted through the festivals. These indigenous games aside their entertainment and health relevance groomed the young and old in grasping problem-solving skills, developing their intellectual abilities in mathematics, public speaking and many more. It was interesting to note that the elderly ones played with the young ones making the traditional games age-friendly and not restricted to gender too. Traditional games such as Ampe, Antokyere, Dame, playing of Ludo, skipping, running, playing of football, netball, volleyball among others.

Traditional music and dance forms are performed alongside the game performances, setting the entire festive mood in a cultural atmosphere. These indigenous music forms are full of the cultural values, norms and ethics of good living which impacted positively on the moral behavioural upbringing of the youth who attended the festival unlike most of today's modern music stepped in loose moral activities. Societal and family members mingled with each other promoting social cohesion and unity in the society.

### ***Miss Opemso) Beauty Pageant***

This beauty pageant clearly describes who is said to be beautiful traditionally. It reveals the traditional ideals of beauty which is not just the outward appearance, but also and more importantly, the inner traits of a woman. The contestants were drilled in the traditional customs, ethics of social living as well as moral values of the land. They were given mock situations or scenarios in the family circles and asked their practical opinions. The judges included the queen mothers of Anyinam and Kokofu, two influential elderly women in the two communities and two elders from the traditional councils of both communities. The pageant serves as an eye opener on what the young men desiring to marry must look out for in their prospective wives. This contest educates the young girls in the communities on the need to demonstrate good behavioural traits which would make them 'marriageable commodities'. The best behaved young lady was acclaimed with the prestigious title 'Miss Opemso) 2016'. This enviable title most graced by the young ladies in the two communities has its own benefits.

Aside the monetary worth and gifts given the winner, it gives her the wonderful privilege of being a prospective wife of any of the chiefs and other dignitaries who grace the occasion.

## **The Social Significance of the Opemso) Festival to the Development of Anyinam and Kokofu**

### ***Promotes Social Integration and Cohesion***

The Opemso) festival is seen by most of the members in the Anyinam and Kokofu communities as social events and gatherings. It is on the eve of this festival where long time family members, friends and even marriage partners who have travelled to urban centres and greener pastures abroad for employment avenues return back home. Thus, the festival is a big family, kin and societal affair. A seamstress who was interviewed along the street buttressed this social significance of the festival. She said:

‘To us, the Opemso) festival is more than Christmas or Easter celebration. It is a joyous occasion because all my brothers who have travelled to the city or urban centres return home with their families. It is indeed a moment of belonging because it is during the festival that you actually feel that you have a big family. When I tell my brothers to visit me, they usually say that I will come during the Opemso). Therefore, it is indeed a great social affair for all of us. Old, childhood friends and classmates return to Kokofu due to the festival and we engage in a lot of chatting and association that makes me very happy’ (Sister Joyce Ampafo, personal communication, September 4, 2016).

Another elderly woman I met and interviewed in a big family house of just two residents before the festival hurriedly responded when I asked her about the social benefits she derives from the Opemso) festival. She said:

‘Look at this house and how empty it is. All my siblings, children and grandchildren have all left to the city as a result of schooling and job placement. During the Opemso) festival, you come and see that this house is filled to its capacity with some of us sleeping in this inner space of the house where we spread our mats. I am happily anticipating the return of my family so that we can have a good time together’ (Auntie Connie, personal communication, September 4, 2016).

Out of curiosity, the researcher went again to the house on Saturday evening during the Opemso) festival to ascertain the truth and noticed that it was just as narrated by the elderly woman. The house was filled to the brim with people feasting, watching videos, playing music and dancing. The researcher observed that some family members were sitting together chatting.

Families living in neighboring houses shared meals together, others ate from the same bowl, the common one found was the Kodo) bowl. There was indeed social integration among local residents. This same social integration was noticed among visitors and local residents. The latter with open arms welcomed visitors to their homes and offered them meals. The festival helped in uniting the people together in a communal fashion.

### ***Agent for Societal Development***

Before the actual event that took off on Saturday, Monday to Wednesday are used for massive environmental sanitation and cleaning activities. Choked gutters in residential lanes are diligently scrubbed, sweeping of homes and streets, refuse wrongly disposed are cleared, and weedy areas are also cleared by members of the community. The work is done on communal fashion and it is believed by the people that those who wholeheartedly support and partake in

the cleansing activities are blessed by the gods and ancestors. This was noticed by the researcher as the sole motivating factor behind the participation of community members. For instance, the researcher asked an elderly woman in her late sixties who was part of the cluster of elderly women who were spotted sweeping the street why she partook of the cleansing exercises before the festival. She said:

'My ancestors would be visiting us during the occasion and they will be very annoyed at us and vouch their anger on us, including me and my family if they found the entire society in filth and dirt. I know that they would reward me and my lineage for participating in this exercise' (Aunty Ama, personal communication, September 2, 2016).

However, the elite indigenes who were engaging in the cleansing exercise, especially the youth were very happy for participating. They were proud to see their community in a very clean, tidy state. Aside the blessings they said would come from the gods and ancestors, most of the elite group also highlighted the health and ecological benefits of the sanitation exercise. This is what Martin, a twenty-five years old student of Kumasi Polytechnic, an indigene of the Kokofu vicinity said:

'It is prideful for me to see my community in clean and tidy condition as a result of the festival. I wished this exercise is carried out monthly and stays since it has several health benefits to society members. For instance, clearing choked gutters would help in preventing cholera, malaria and other waterborne diseases' (Martin, personal communication, September 2, 2016).

Indeed, the health benefits and environmental aesthetics which are by-products of the cleaning exercises is very commendable and contributes to the social development of the Anyinam and Kokofu towns. Most of the houses in the communities were renovated because of the festival. The researcher noticed as he surveyed the community with his research assistances that weak and leaking roofs were removed and replaced, surfaces of the buildings received new paintings, and old entrance doors were replaced with new ones. This really improved the aesthetic appeal of the landscape of the towns.

Aside the sanitation exercises, the Kokofu chief, Nana Barima Ofe Akwasi Okogyasuo II led a two day planting exercise in the streets and special spots in the Kokofu and Anyinam jurisdictions. In an interview with the researcher, some members of his traditional council revealed that the chief sees the ecological relevance of trees in preventing global warming, giving fresh air to societal members and thus good health, preventing floods and bush fires.

In addition, the elders felt that they were mandated as per their positions in the community to ensure that the biodiversity resources in the environment were protected from extinctions. Thus, the trees that were cut in the environment for usage needed to be replaced to maintain a stable ecological condition in the towns. More importantly to these elders was their accountability toward the ancestors with respect to the upkeep of the society that was left in their care. This is what one of the elders told the researcher:

'When I was a child, our surroundings were crowded with a lot of trees and we had a lot of domestic and even forest animals and birds that frequented our homes and streets. These trees are being cut down at an alarming rate due to habitation as a result of increases in human population. Therefore, these trees must be replanted so that when the ancestors re-visit us, especially during occasions like this, they would not be angry at us and even feel that we have

destroyed the towns they left in our care' (Opanin Manu, personal communication, September 4, 2016).

### ***An Avenue for Settling Disputes***

The festival is an event for uniting family members who are at loggerheads due to pertinent issues in the family. These conflicts among families are mostly as a result of unfair sharing of family property such as lands. Others are due to marital problems which result in conflict between the two families that contracted the marriage. Thus, the festival is used as a platform whereby the family head or abusupanyin and the elders in the family settle family disputes. This event is seen as the right time for settling and ironing out differences among kinsmen because every family member is present. The family head and elders usually capitalize on the spirit of the festival as propagating peace and unity which the gods and ancestors act as advocates to resolve age-long problems.

In a larger spectrum, the chief and his traditional council members also use the festival as grounds for settling disputes among the big wigs in the community that cannot be mended at the family level. Families are reconciled together by the chief who preaches unity and peace. A married woman who fought with the husband was eagerly waiting for the festival so that the heated dispute that has arisen between her and the husband that was nearly submerging the marital union in divorce can be solved by the two families. This is what the mother of the woman said:

'My daughter is no more living with the husband as a result of some problems and she is now living with me. I have tried everything possible to meet him so that the issue can be resolved but to no avail. Because he will attend the festival, I am hoping that the heads of the families will see to it that the issue is resolved for her to return to her marital home' (Obaapanin Abenaa Pinamang, personal communication, September 5, 2016).

This account and many others that were made known to the researcher indicates the social relevance of the festival in ensuring social cohesion within families, between families and the entire society as a whole.

### ***As Platforms for Relaying Local and National Policies***

The Opemso) festival is used as an avenue by policy makers, government officials, civil workers and other agencies for explaining policies, programs and plans on social issues like health, environment and biodiversity conservation, education and so forth. The researcher noticed that health workers from the Kokofu government hospital, peace and love hospital used the festival gathering at the football field to explain and alert societal members of diseases and ailments such as breast cancer etc. as well as ways they can protect themselves from attack.

Due to the political atmosphere in the nation, the researcher observed that the Member of Parliament and their contestants from the other political parties like the C.P.P. Flag bearer, N.P.P. Ashanti regional chairman and others, also used the festival as platforms in telling the members of the communities, their vision and plans for developmental projects and stressing the need for why they have to vote for them in the upcoming elections.

### **The Economic Significance of the Opemso) Festival to the Development of Anyinam and Kokofu**

Opemso) festival is a week long feast that boosts the local economy of the sister communities thus, Anyinam and Kokofu. Individuals, small-scale industries and companies in the vicinity

that offer various products and services earn greatly during the week. Thus, as noted through observations and interviews, is as a result of the soaring number of attendees of the festival both indigenes of the towns and visitors.

### ***Increase in Sales of Products and Services***

The traders interviewed confessed that the sales that they get during the one week celebration equate the sales that they make within as much as four months! The food sellers told the researcher that they prepare thrice or sometimes four times the quantity of meals that they prepare for a non-festive day on a daily basis during the festival. A rice seller happily told the researcher:

'I sell almost two bags of cooked rice every day during the festival, which is four times what I sell when there is no festival. Because of this, I am able to tell for the fees of my children in the new academic year commencing this September' (Maame Nyarko, personal communication, September 11, 2016).

Those who sell foodstuffs like yam, cassava and plantain also toned the same line as the rice seller that, they also make triple sales every day. Since most of the indigenes in the two communities are farmers by profession, this would eventually boost the rural economy and ensure its economic advancement.

Prior to the commencement of the festival, the traders would demarcate where each of them will sit and sell their products during the festival. The local people and visitors are given equal chance for the allocation of space for selling their products. This, however, did not sink well for most of the indigenes of the communities. One elderly woman in Anyinam who was aggrieved told the researcher:

'The visitors who come here to sell are usually given the spaces to sell at the expense of us. I have to hawk my products and this is very tiresome for an elderly woman like me' (Nana Dufie, personal communication, September 12, 2016).

The event organizers and some sellers denounced this claim by those who made the same claim as the interviewed respondents. They said that the offer for space allocation was given first to the local people one month before the commemoration of the event for free. The remaining spaces were then given to the outside traders for a small fee.

The service providers like the restaurants, guest houses and hotels also heap their pockets with a lot of gain during the festival. Many visitors both inland and overseas troop in to enjoy different meals and lodge in the hotels. The manager of one restaurant in Kokofu told the researcher that during the festival, they intensify the local foods that they serve and even include those that are seasonal to attract more people.

The drivers at the Kokofu transport station also told the researcher that they work all day and night during the festival week transporting clients to and from the festival premises at Anyinam and to their places of lodging. 'It's a cocoa season [time for boosting of sales] for us drivers', Mr. Nsiah, the transport station assistant told the researcher.

### **Generation of Funds for the Traditional Councils and Event Sponsors**

The traditional councils of Anyinam and Kokofu also earn revenue from the Opemso) festival. Usually, sponsors of the events give them a whopping sum of money to cater for the smooth organization of the festival and for the development of the towns. Books, T-Shirts, Plastic fans, calendars and magazines displaying pictures of chiefs, past and present, members of the traditional council, history of the festival and others are sold as festival souvenirs to attract revenue for the traditional councils.



**Fig. 2. Festival Souvenir Items Sold by the traditional council (Photographed by the researcher)**

The event sponsors also get the chance to sensitize, promote and sell their old and especially, new products and services to all the attendees. For instance, the main sponsor of the festival, SAI CRUX Limited used the platform to explain their construction, real estate developing and industrial management to those present. Likewise, Coca-Cola brewery, Goil Fuel Company, Bosumtwe Rural Bank and many others who were supporting sponsors also used the occasion to market their products and services. Winners of the various contests are also given some of the products for them to experience their usage. This would eventually result in the patronization and mobilization of sales of their products and services.

### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The main thrust of the research was to investigate into the significance of the Opemso) festival and highlight its quintessential roles in the strategic and sustainable rural development of the people of Anyinam and Kokofu. The findings gleaned from the research affirms that indeed cultural festivals like the 'Opemso)' impacts greatly on the historic, social, cultural and economic development of societies and nations. The historical significance was with the festival being linked to the birth of Otumfuo Osei Tutu I, the founder of the Asante kingdom and thus form part of the historic heritage of the Asante people. Culturally, the festival is a regulator of the moral behaviours of residents in that it accentuates the values, norms, beliefs and code of ethics expected of every Asante and these as indicated by the research, are the ideals that ensures societal developmental growth. Socially, the event assists in changing the state of the communities by impacting positively on the environment and the architecture of the communities while propagating unity, oneness and social cohesion and integration. Economically, the Opemso) cultural festival boosts the businesses of individuals, small-scale enterprises and companies while aiding the traditional councils of host communities in generating revenue for societal development. The study emphasizes that though cultural

festivals are not much considered in the developmental agenda of especially the rural folks, and its voice is not much heard in academic discussions as being a viable means of sustainable development, the findings of the study buttresses that if cultural festivals are well crafted and strategically organized by societies, they can be used as efficient and salient tools for development.

However, the researcher has put forward some powerful suggestions and recommendations on how to improve cultural festivals to intensify and strategize the development of societies and countries in the sub-region of Africa.

1. Cultural festivals must be carefully planned ahead of time so that event organizers can have adequate time to prepare the event to maximize development in the host communities by liaising with cultural analysts and economists to draw up programs that would perfectly aid in achieving sustainable development.
2. Cultural festivals such as Opemso) of the Asantes which is a great weapon for the development of the host communities must be undertaken annually instead of the observance being carried out once in every two years. The government and the district municipalities must generate funds from sponsors to help its annual celebration.
3. Financial institutions must offer soft loans or credit to the local residents who have long term or short term businesses and/or attractive business plans, especially on the eve of cultural festivals to assist financially, those who do not have the financial strength to increase the numbers of their products and services.
4. Prior to the commemoration of cultural festivals, there should be massive sensitization and awareness programs in the country via the social media (Internet social networks like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Whatsapp, and others) and the mass media (Television and radio adverts and discussions, newspaper advertisement) as well as traditional visual communication tools (posters, flyers, banners, billboards etc.). This would publicize the event, deepen its significance, mobilize and entice event sponsors while increasing the number of attendees.
5. The greater number of the space allocated for trading at the premises where the cultural festival is being held must be offered to the local/rural residents in the host communities with low fee or without a fee. This would encourage them to engage in petty trading during the event to raise money to cater for themselves and their families, thereby reducing the percentage of the rural poor in Ghana and her other sub-regional counterparts.

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