

# Kundum Festival – A Repository of the Rich Culture of the Nzema at Axim in Western Region, Ghana

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**Abstract—** In this survey, an attempt has been made to give an account of the functions art forms play in the cultural preservation of the Kundum festival. A mixed method approach which included observation of scenes, interviews and questionnaire administration was employed in collecting data. The sample size for the research analysis was Sixty-eight (68) made up of Fifteen (15) royals and significant community members and fifty-three (53) individual respondents comprising participants, elders, opinion leaders among others. Responses from the royals and significant community members were through interviews conducted while research questionnaires were used to gather information from fifty-three (53) individual respondents. The survey outcome indicated that 100% of the individual respondents said that Akotoko Yanzu is credited with the introduction of the festival from Aboadze. In addition, the outcome from the interview with some royals affirmed that all respondents (i.e. [15] 100%) interviewed mentioned the "sienu" (i.e. rites at outskirts of Axim town), the "akpazo" (i.e. sacrificial rites on Tuesday), singing of Kundum dirges, lighting of the Kundum fires among others as some of the important rites, rituals and taboos associated with Kundum celebration. The important role arts play in cultural preservation is that it helps to educate the celebrants to imbibe their cultural practices to help in the preservation of the arts and culture of the people to set the pace for the celebration and to harmonize the relationship between the people and their ancestors.

**Index Terms—** Kundum, Culture, Art-forms, Axim, Festival

## I. INTRODUCTION

The people of Axim celebrate their annual Kundum festival with a colourful durbar of chiefs. Kundum is the most popular and significant festival celebrated among the Ahanta and Nzema of the Western Region of Ghana and the people of Grand Bassam in Cote d'Ivoire. The festival is celebrated in the fish season or the harvest of agriculture products of the farm. Apart from being an agricultural festival, Kundum is also the occasion for the mourning of dead relations and ancestors. The religious aspects of Kundum is symbolised by the sacrificial rites, which are performed in the course of the

**Manuscript received October 11, 2016**

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festival, especially during the fourth and last week of the four-week celebration.

In all these, art and culture play very significant role in the celebration. Example, the costume they wear, the palanquin of the chief, the chief regalia, music, drumming and dancing, the body arts, etc. It is also the time to display the rich culture of the Ghanaian. Festivals help to preserve and conserve our culture. Festival grounds are places where assortment of art forms, culture and other essential values of the people are portrayed. The art forms exhibited show the real aspect of the culture of the people and this applies to all the ethnic groups. Some of these arts that are peculiar to festival celebrations include, sculpture in the form of state swords, palanquins, stools, linguist staff tops, umbrellas; textiles shown in the costumes of the people; music; dance; drama; bead making; goldsmithing (golden jewellerys and symbols of office worn by the chiefs) and blacksmithing (the locally manufactured guns used by the musketeers in the festivals). Meanwhile more attention is paid on the economic and the merry making aspects of the festival to the neglect of the Art and Culture, hence the need to identify the functional roles art plays in the preservation of culture in the Kundum festivals.

## Brief history of Axim

Axim lies 60 kilometres west of the Port of Takoradi and 252 kilometres from Accra. Axim is the largest town on the coast west of Takoradi, located almost halfway between Elubo and Takoradi. This settlement of approximately twenty-four thousand (24,000) people is situated in a quiet and sheltered natural bay. Axim, like Discove, was formed from two settlements known as "Upper Town" and "Lower Town". The people are mainly fishermen and farmers. In the 16th century Axim was one of the busiest trading posts on the West African Coast. History has it that, Axim was a major port for the export of mainly timber products and gold.

## The Historical Meaning of the Kundum Festival

Kundum is the annual festival of the Ahanta and Nzema people of the western region of Ghana. It is commonly referred to by non-Ahanta and non-Nzema as Kuntum. Another name given to the same festival by the Ahanta and Nzema is Abisa. In the evaluate-speaking area yet another name of the festival is Awua, but that name is not in common use (Ansah, 1999 p:1) Apart from being an agricultural festival, Kundum is also the occasion on which the dead relations and ancestors are religiously remembered. The religious aspect of the Kundum is evidence by the votive and sacrificial rites which are performed in the course of the festival, especially during the fourth and last week of the four weeks- long celebration. Although drumming, dancing and feasting

occupy a major part of the celebration, these may be rightly regarded as the embroidery which adorns the central religious theme of the Kundum. Ansah (1999, p:2), again writes that “traditional belief, and respect for supernatural beings- the gods and goddesses, demons and the spirit of the ancestors who live in the spirit world indirect from our view, is the key note of the Kundum festival. In former times, it was also during this annual festival that demons and devils were ritually expelled from the town. Today, Kundum has become the means of which the Nzema and Ahanta people use to preserve their cultural ideas of social political and economic structure. It brings families who have moved away back together. Kundum forces debts and disagreements to be reconciled prior to celebration which instills moral values of humility and fairness. Kundum also, takes a great deal of financial planning to cope with the economic burden of feasting and gift giving. Akotoko Yanzu is credited with introduction of the festival to Axim from Aboade. He and his wife Ahonloma Azia had lived at Aboadze for years. He probably had two wives, for some say, his wife was Gyanewa. Akotoko Yanzu is immortalized in one of the songs sung during the first three weeks of the festival when drumming and dancing takes place at the outskirts of the town each evening. The source of the Kundum is traced to Aboadze. (Ansah, 1999 p:6)

### Meaning of Culture

Culture as defined by the culture policy of Ghana (2004) is the totality of the way of life evolved by people through experience and reflection in an attempt to fashion a harmonious co-existence with the environment.

Osei (2002, p: iv) explains culture as the particular art, thought and customs of a society. Culture describes the cumulative influences on a group of people or society - their collective knowledge, characteristics and learned behaviours. This knowledge is passed on from generation to generation and accounts for the different cultures seen around the world, for example, Western culture, Eastern culture, African culture etc. Each of these cultures is defined by values, traditions, social habits and behaviours, language, belief systems, concepts of the universe, dress, music and arts that they encompass (www.worldtransformation.com 2013). According to Falola and Salm (2002 p. ix), the Africans regard culture as essential to their lives and future development. African cultural forms continue to survive and thrive because of its uniqueness. The Ghanaian culture encompasses long standing interactions between the past and the present, the traditional and the modern. It is dynamic and gives order and meaning to the social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious practices of the people. Culture also gives a distinct identity as a people especially through the arts.

### The Art and Culture

According to Laude (1973, p: 98), the African artist is not free to choose his themes which are prescribed by the future owner; neither is he free to choose his technique since, theoretically, he is bound to the style of the group or the community in which he works. Ghanaian traditional art, an integral part of social life, reflects the social, cultural and the values of the community. The symbolic and practical use of

costumes, ornamentations, and religious objects enhance the presentation of the performing and visual arts. Falola and Salm (2002, p: 84) stress that the fine arts cannot be separated from other forms of cultural expression because they are linked with musical, dance, and dramatic performance as well as other cultural forms such as festivals. Ghanaian textiles are important artistic expression of culture because, in their various forms, they utilize the entire range of symbolic images and can be seen in all aspects of Ghanaian life. Queens and chiefs wear expensive ornamentation and textiles to enhance their prestige within the society during festivals and other occasions.

### The Culture and the Festival

Ghanaian festivals are a colourful and vibrant part of the culture. Each year festivals and durbars are held in various parts of the country for reunion, development purposes and to strengthen beliefs of society. Most people believe that festivals help them forge close bondage with their ancestors and ask for their protection. Festivals are also held in order to purify the whole community so that people can enter the year with confidence and hope (Falola and Salm, 2002, p: 113). The rich cultural heritage of Ghanaians is manifested during festival. For example, chiefs are decorated with traditional regalia and carried in a palanquin. The hospitality of the Ghanaian is also exhibited during festivals. The ways the people speak and relate to others during festivals also portray their culture of friendliness. The artefacts, cuisine and other social activities portrayed during festivals also show their unique culture.

### Festivals and the Art

Art plays a symbolic, functional and aesthetic role in the various festivals that are held each year throughout Ghana. The ceremonies bring people together to strengthen the bonds between the community, the ancestors and God. The cleansing acts utilize art forms. In the room where the state stools are kept, the chief and elders pour libations over the chief's stool and invoke the spirits of the ancestors for prosperity and protection. There is often a durbar in which the participants are decorated with different forms of textiles and display colourful umbrellas, state swords, linguist staffs, ornamented drums personal jewellery etc.

## II. METHODOLOGY

### Ethnographic background of the survey area

The study was carried-out in Axim a principal Nzema town – one of the custodians of Kundum festival celebration in the western region of Ghana, West Africa. Axim is a town in the western region of Ghana. Axim's most interesting features is the triangular-shaped Fort San Antonio, sub-Saharan Africa's second oldest fort, constructed by the Portuguese in 1515, after Fort St. Jago in Elmina. San Antonio was conquered by the Dutch in 1642 and its control exchanged hands many times, ending with the British. Today, the structure is fairly well preserved.

### Data collection and sampling techniques

A mixed method approach which included observation of

scenes, interviews and questionnaire administration was employed in collecting data. This is because of the corresponding effects of the strength and weakness inherent in each technique. The techniques employed were interviews, observation and questionnaire administration.

**Interviews**

An in-depth interview was used to source information from fifteen royals and chiefs made up of sub-chiefs, linguists, queen mothers, clan or family heads of the Axim traditional area. Purposive and systematic random sampling techniques were adopted to select these respondents for this study. These respondents have in-depth knowledge with respect to the above subject. Furthermore, respondents willingness to participate in the study was also considered for sample selection.

**Observation**

Most of the observations were done through unobtrusive means on the durbar ground in order to be able to identify and capture all the art-forms used. Critical observation was done on the various carved and modelled symbols representing the various sub chiefs and benevolent societies as well as linguist staff tops of the various clans and chiefs; the costumes of the Kundum dancers and performers as well as the chief and elders; the way the chiefs danced in their palanquins; the different sizes and styles of umbrellas and palanquins used by various chiefs, the beads worn by the chiefs and citizens; the various rites and rituals performed; the observation of taboos during the festival ,the colourful regatta of canoes on the sea and the way people attached importance to the festival.

Pictures were taken as observation was ongoing with specific scenes of interest.

**Survey**

The survey administered 53 questionnaires and conducted 15 interviews from participants of the festival. They included the indigenes of the communities, aliens living within the communities, tertiary students, tourists and some chiefs participating communities. The questionnaire had both closed and open ended questions, with the questions focussing on the art forms, festival knowledge level, and respondents' perception of how it preserves culture.

**Pre-testing of research instrument**

The researcher pre-tested the research instrument employed in the survey. This activity was carried out to remove any ambiguity of the questionnaire and ensure validity. 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 Axim traditional state but with similar characteristic to the community where the festival was celebrated. After the pre-testing, the research instrument was revised accordingly.

**Data Analysis**

The questionnaires were coded, edited and entered into SPSS version 16 and Microsoft Excel-2007 for analysis. The tables were generated from the programme to show the relationship between variables.

**Table 1: Demography of respondents**

Characteristics	Number (n)	Percentage (%)
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	20	37.3
Female	33	62.3
<b>Age of respondents(years)</b>		
18-30	19	35.8
31-40	24	45.3
41-50	6	11.3
Above 50	4	7.6
<b>Educational Level</b>		
Primary	3	5.7
Secondary	30	57.0
Tertiary	15	28.3
Informal	5	9.0
<b>Status of respondents</b>		
Paramount chief	2	3.7
Sub-chief	10	18.5
An elder Axim	9	16.7
Opinion leader	12	22.2
Participant of Kundum	18	33.3

A tourist	2	3.7
<b>No. of times of participation</b>		
Every year	43	81.1
First attendance	10	18.9

Source: Field survey (2013)

**Discussion of results**

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of respondents interviewed. More females (62.3%) participated in the study than males. The results again indicated that majority of the respondents (45.3%) were in the age bracket of 31 #40 years and youth. This is a revelation that the youth are the core groups who are attracted to festivals as a proof of their youthful exuberance. In addition, majority of respondents (i.e. 57%) received secondary education. 33.3% were also native participants from the different suburbs of the Axim town where the festival is celebrated. Again, majority of respondents (81.1%) participate in the festival every year. Hence, it is believed that majority of respondents have acquired adequate knowledge about Kundum festival.

**Roles of art in the celebration of Kundum festival**

As depicted by table 2, 10 people representing 66.7% of respondents stated arts such as palanquin riding, body arts, dirges as some of the art forms displayed during Kundum festival celebration. Yet, 2 people representing 13.3% of respondents said that sculpture works and the costumes worn during Kundum are some important art forms in the celebration of Kundum. This it is believed symbolizes unity, further preserves the culture of the people, and shows the identity of the people. Another 3 representing 20% of respondents interviewed are of the opinion that there is the display of all forms of art during the celebration of Kundum. These categories of respondents further explained that the very sight of these art exhibitions brings relief and serves as a form of leisure after the hard day's work.

Table 2: Arts displayed during Kundum celebration

Art forms displayed	Frequency	Percent
Palanquin riding, body arts, dirges as they have been used since time immemorial	10	66.7
Sculpture and the costumes as they promote unity, preserves culture and shows true identity	2	13.3
All aspects of arts display as they bring relief and give leisure after the hard day's work	3	20.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Field Survey, September 2013

The data in table 3 depict below other art forms respondents stated to have seen at the exhibition during the festivity in addition to the ones already stated in table 4 above. 15% affirmed that there was the extensive display of palanquin riding and umbrella display, another (7) 13.2% of the respondents said that there was the extensive display of arts in the gourd, metal and vegetable jingles which formed an important part of the celebration, also (5) 9.5% mentioned folktales told to the youth during the festivity and another (2) 3.8% of them said there was the exhibition of the arts in the consultation of the gods (oracle). However, 58.5 of the respondents could not name any other art forms exhibited. This is a very striking revelation of the fact that some respondents know that art is the totality of the expression of a people and this may reinforce Moore (1993) assertion that how one expresses his or her creative spark is what defines him as an artist.

Table 3: Other forms of art exhibited

Art forms displayed	Frequency	Percentage
Palanquin and umbrella display	8	15.0
Gourd, metal and vegetable jingles	7	13.2
Story telling (folktales)	5	9.5
Consultation of the oracle	2	3.8
Can not name any	31	58.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Field Survey, September 2013

The respondents gave certain significant roles that art plays in the festivity. They believed that art forms a central part of every cultural setting and for that matter, paramount in the celebration of festivals. Table 4 therefore depicts the views of respondents on the significant role(s) arts play in the celebration of Axim Kundum. The majority of respondents 33(62.2%) said that the arts preserve and promote the culture of the people. Another 13(24.6%) respondents affirmed that the arts are significant in the performance of rites and rituals. Again, additional 6(11.3%) of respondents asserted that the significance of the arts in Kundum

celebration is the identification of the people while 1(1.9%) of the respondents believed that the arts have other significance in other areas of the festivity but were unable to name them. In a nutshell, no festival can go without arts.

**Table 4: Significance of arts**

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
Promotes associated rites and rituals	13	24.6
Ensures culture preservation and promotion	33	62.2
Identification	1	1.9
<b>Totals</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source: Field Survey, September 2013*

### ***2.6.2 How to Promote and Preserve the Arts and Culture of Kundum Festival***

Responses	Frequency	Percentage
It should be taken over by the custodians of the Kundum celebration	5	33.3
Educating the Youth and the continuous exhibition of the people's arts	3	20.0
Promoting the use of the Nzema language	3	20.0
Education and promotion of the Nzema language	4	26.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source: Field Survey, September 2013*

The statistical declaration in table 5 above shows that about 33.3% of respondents suggested that Kundum has its custodians. In that respect, the pre-organization, the actual organization and post organization of the Kundum should be handed over to the true custodians of the Kundum festival. There is the belief that Kundum festival belongs to the Marjoley family (Field work data, (September, 2013) & Ansah 1999: p16). They have been in-charge of the celebration since time immemorial. However, the paramount chief of Axim has taken over the celebration from this family. Yet another 26.7% suggested that Axim Kundum be used to educate and promote the speaking of the Nzema language. This suggestion is critical and be taken seriously by all and sundry as majority of the natives of Axim prefer speaking Fante to Nzema. In order for a group to be identified as unique from others, their unique language should be used to identify them. Nzemas and Fantes are all Akans, however, the Nzema and Fante languages are completely distinct languages in all respects. The association of Nzemas with Fantes one of their immediate neighbours had made it possible for every Nzema to speak the Fante language fluently and continues to use it in most of their daily transaction. That might create the erroneous in the minds of some young Nzemas that the Fante language is Nzema and Nzema language is Fante. There were several instances that speaker-uponspeaker combined both Fante and Nzema languages in communicating at the Kundum durbar grounds. It is in that regards that 20% of respondents also asserted that the celebration be used to solely promote the speaking of the Nzema language especially among the young Nzema. Indeed this can be widely displayed in the recitation of the appellation and folktales during the celebration and hence promote the Nzema language. Another 20% of the respondents also stressed that the education of the youth and the continuous use of arts should be seriously emphasized since the youth will soon take over from the elderly, and as such the need to equip themselves in all aspects of the festival especially the arts.

### **Conclusion**

Festivals are important cultural celebrations 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 from all walks of life troop into the community which helps in income generation for developmental projects. Various art forms are also showcased during the celebration of the festival; some depicting the traditional area. These art forms: beads, sculpture, linguist staff, different sandals, state swords and designs of cloths help in the preservation of the culture of the people. 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 Axim Kundum marks the occasion where natives of the Axim town near and afar

come home to thank God, make merry and discuss issues concerning how to develop the town.

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