

# **Cultural and Social Festivity as a Silent Contributor to HIV Infections: A Moral Challenge of the Easter Festivity to the Kwahuman Leadership in Ghana**

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## **Abstract**

This article takes a look at cultural and social festivals celebrations, particularly the Easter festival celebrated amongst the people of Kwahu in Ghana. It argues that the festival has the potential to become a silent contributor to HIV infection in Ghana. This claim is based on recent incidence during the celebrations. The three day Easter observance among the Kwahu in the Eastern region of Ghana has become one of the most celebrated festivals in Ghana, far exceeding any other festivals in terms of popularity and participation. Currently the festival attracts both local and international tourists with many activities on offer including paragliding and street carnival, jam night and the like. Drawing on a personal observation as well as available literature on the current developments of the festival, the article argues that notwithstanding the economic boost that may accompany the festival, as a result of the tourist attraction and other activities, the growing presence of people from different communities and countries who travel to the festival presents a chance for unintended, unprotected sexual networks. This and many more activities and occurrences can be a major contributing factor to the increase risk of HIV infections in the country. This is because during the Easter festivities, most of the people who travel to the Kwahu area engage in excessive drinking of alcohol, and abuse of drugs which makes them vulnerable to HIV infections. Others also use this opportunity to showcase their wealth with the view of attracting potential girls and women as life partners.

These behaviours do not only compromise the cultural and religious values of the festival, but also pose a serious risk to HIV infections. This unintended activities, ultimately challenges the gatekeepers of the Kwahu communities and other stakeholders to offer a contextual and relevant voice within the complex challenge of tourism, cultural and social festivity, morality and HIV.

**Keywords:** Culture, social festivity, HIV infections, unprotected sex, morality and sex, alcohol and sex

## **Introduction**

Since the dawn of HIV more than 30 years ago, many behaviours and factors have been identified as risk factors contributing to the spread of the disease. Among the numerous factors include the following: migration (Crush 2005), gender violence (Haddad 2002); misleading information on HIV and STDs (Dinkelman *et al.* 2006); harmful cultural practices, (Steven Sovran 2013); exposure to globalisation on electronic media that distort local culture and values (Lee 2007); cultural practices that promote early marriages, and traditional practices such as forced or arranged marriages (Wellings *et al.* 2006; Clark 2004); Polygyny (Reniers 2010); concurrent partners (Mishra 2009; Morris *et al.* 2007; Halperin *et al.* 2007); Excessive alcohol intake (Mitchell *et al.* 2006); poverty, famine, low status of women in society, corruption (Nyindo 2005) just to mention a few.

With the current global move in response to the UNAIDS target call of the 90, 90 90 strategy by the year 2020 which suggest that by the year 2020, about 90% of people living with HIV should know their HIV status, 90% of people who know their HIV-positive status are accessing treatment and 90% of people on treatment have suppressed viral loads and lay a foundation to end HIV epidemic by 2030, (UNAIDS 2016). As a result of this call, all countries are being challenged to intensify their responses by educating as well as making resources and treatment available to their citizens. Ghana is no exception, for example, the recent estimation of HIV infection as at the end of 2015 was: 270 000 [230 000 - 330 000] Adults aged 15 to 49 prevalence rate was 1.6% [1.3% - 1.9%], Adults aged 15 and over living with HIV was 260 000, [210 000 - 300 000], Women aged 15 and over living with HIV 150 000

[130 000 - 190 000], (Girmay Haile 2015). As can be noted, the above statistics indicates a low infection rate which may be attributed to 2 major reasons: either most people have not confirmed their HIV status through testing or it can be attributed to the strong governmental dedication in providing affordable and accessible antiretroviral (USAID 2010). Of the two major reasons given, the later maybe a strong possibility because it has been noted that the President of Ghana, John Dramani Mahama has been instrumental in seeing the eradication of the disease, he was quoted as saying that in order to get HIV under control, 'This is not the time to let our guard down. This is the time we should be stepping up our responses to get to the end of aids' (Girmay Haile 2015). Surely, with the moral responsibility to step up responses to end aids in 2030, all potential contributing factors to HIV infection must be explored and interrogated, given the devastating impact the disease has had in the country in the year 2015. The recorded death due to AIDS in that year was, 13 000 [10 000 - 16 000] and Orphans due to AIDS aged 0 to 17 were 160 000 [130 000 - 190 000] (Haile 2015). It is with this background that this article proposes an area where much attention has not been drawn to particularly in the Ghanaian context. This is the potential contribution of cultural and social festivals to the risk of HIV infections.

To my knowledge, there has been little work done on the possible contribution of social and cultural festivals and to the risk of HIV infections. Yet such occasion has been noted as a potential environment for promiscuous behaviours and unplanned sexual networks activities. Erick Tenkorang reiterated this idea that 'community festivals may be hotspots for HIV transmission, as they enable casual sexual relations and complex sexual networking' (2014: 75). One of such festivals is the Kwahu Easter in Ghana, unofficially known in recent times as the Kwahu Pilgrimage (Musah Yahaya Jafaru 2015). This festival is celebrated by the Kwahus' in the Eastern Region of Ghana.

This article argues that the recent high visibility and the new developments in terms of the multiple activities that has drawn the attention of both locals and internationals can be a hotspot for HIV infection. The article maintains that notwithstanding the economic benefit that is attached to it, moral values are slowly being compromised during the festivity presenting a potential risk of HIV infections. This argument is based on a personal observation of the festival over the last three consecutive years from 2014, 2015 and May 2016, peculiar incidences that has been highlighted as well as available literature. It must be noted that in recent times, the festival attracts more young people

particularly aged between eighteen (18) and thirty-five (35) who are classified as the key population group within the HIV discourse, more than the older generation. Also there is excessive abuse of alcohol and drugs which contributes to immoral sexual activities contrary to traditional and religious essence of the festival. In addition, there are a number of people both young and old who also use this occasion as an opportunity to showcase their wealth with the view attracting innocent girls, women and young men. At the same time some also use the occasion as a homecoming period to look for potential life partners. Thus the current activities and practices is not only upsetting the cultural and religious values of the 12 towns on the Kwahu ridge namely Obo, Mpraeso, Obomeng, Abetifi, Tafo, Nkwatia, Bepong, Pepease just to mention a few, but to the Ghanaian society as a whole. Gatekeepers of the festival are therefore being challenged to provide a contextual and relevant voice within the complex crisis of immoral status that has taken over the festival. For which I consider to be the major contributing factor that is not only destroying the image of the once an honorable celebration but also presenting a risk of HIV to the Kwahu Communities and indeed the country as a whole, giving the culture of the unusual sexual behaviours that goes on during the festivity.

I begin the article by describing the recent practices during the festival. Second I will show how the current activities can be a potential a contributor to the spread of HIV in the area. The third section will ethically challenge the Kwahuman traditional council who are the gatekeepers of the Kwahu cultural, moral and religious values and other stakeholders on the need to strategically interrogate the situation to minimize people's vulnerability to HIV. They have ethical duty to practically respond with a contextual and relevant voice.

### **The Current Development of Kwahu Easter Festivity**

One of the most colorful aspects of the Ghanaian culture is its annual traditional festivals and durbars held in almost all the ten regions of the country. These festivals that are protected by the traditional leader's appeal to the very heart of each local community in the country. The common features of these festivals are that the communities involved use the occasion in the remembrance of ancestors, purification of the traditional state, fund-raising activities for development projects, and a general feeling of family reunion, which comes with lots of feasting, drinking and merry making over a number of days.

Among the numerous festivals include: The Odwira ‘purify/cleanse’ festival which is mainly observed among the traditional people from Akuapem area in the Eastern region. It is a time to remember the dead, harvest, thanksgiving as well as to settle any dispute that may have arisen during the year within the families and the community alike. (Warren 1973: 32). The Homowo festival is observed among the Ga people in the Greater Accra Region, the Ewes’ from the Volta Region also have Hogbetsotso as their annual festival, the Fantes in the Southern region have the Aboakyere (deer hunt) festival which is celebrated yearly, the Akwasidae and Wukudae for the people in the Ashanti region, this is celebrated twice every 42 days where they offer food and drinks to ancestral stool (Nukunya 2003: 59, 64-65).

While almost all the traditional areas of Ghana have succeeded in keeping the core of their traditional festivals, there is one group of people: the Kwahu from the Eastern region, who appear to have totally changed their traditional festival: the ‘Kwahu Brenya Afahye’ over the years and have adopted Easter, which is rather a religious celebration among Christians as their main traditional festival (Raphael Ofori-Adeniran 2013). The Kwahu people are of the view that the Easter festival has been handed down to them by their forefathers as a traditional heritage to be followed (Kate Gyasi 2013:20). It is believed that the Kwahus’ original festival: the ‘Kwahu Brenya Afahye’ was replaced with the Easter festival, and the reason for this change is that the Kwahus’ are noted as the most intellectual traders among the various ethnic groups in the country and as such, most of them have to migrated from their traditional communities to other major trading centers such as Accra, Kumasi, Suhum, Koforidua, Takoradi to pursue their trading activities. Statistics have it that by the end of 2011, the estimated number of migrant populations among the Kwahus was 32.1% of all the twelve towns on the ridge (KSDA 2011). This suggests that in almost every homestead on the Kwahu ridge there was at least one family living outside the traditional community. It must be noted that most of these migrants only come home occasionally for funerals, marriage ceremonies and other important occasions that might arise. For some, the only time they came home was during the festival. Gyasi cited the Kwahu traditional council that the Kwahu ‘afahye’ used to be celebrated during the peak of trading activities which was between October and December (2013:20). But being migrant traders, their attendance to the festival was affected negatively because between October and December are usually the peak season for the traders and consequently the Kwahu traditional council had

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to adopt the three days Easter period as the appropriate season to celebrate the festival, hence the Kwahu Easter Festival. To the traders, the three day Easter period was the appropriate time to close down their trading activities since that period is not as productive as the Christmas period. Over the years, the festival was accepted by all as the fitting period to celebrate the achievements of the previous year, fundraise for community development projects in the Kwahu area, as well as homecoming period for these business minded people (Gyasi 2013:20).

However, in recent times, this festival has taken on a new dimension, it has become part of the tourism industry in Ghana, through the introduction of many activities. According to a document by the Ministry of Tourism Culture and Creative Arts, the recently developed and branded of the Easter Festival in Kwahu has promoted social and economic growth with the introduction of paragliding activities at Atibie in 2005 (2016:6). The new development has contributed in making the festival an international event, attracting local spectators and many visitors to the once insignificant communities on the Kwahu ridge. For instance, the paragliding activities attracts both experienced and new pilots from all over the world such as the United States, Peru, France, Japan, Belgium and Switzerland to the Kwahu area. (Emmanuel Torny 2015). In addition, activities such as street carnival, highlife concert, choral festivals and joint-traditional durbar of chiefs, health walks, and a number of sporting activities, continue to attract people to the Kwahu area every Easter. Food vendors and a number of curio sellers from all over the country also take advantage of the tourists to showcase and sell their products.

It is also a home coming event for the native Kwahus' from other cities as well as people from the Diaspora. As mentioned above, for most of the people this is also an opportunity for choosing their potential spouses. Others use this opportunity to showcase their acquired wealth in the course of the year. The common scenario during this time is that a number of people are seen dressed in their best and latest fashion clothing and driving in their latest vehicles up and down the streets of the 12 towns on the Kwahu ridge. Gyasi cited a newspaper article which gave a vivid picture of some of the scenario that has become the common trend across the 12 towns that: 'some young men and women sitting on the doors of saloon cars with the upper part of their bodies outside and clutching to some bottles of liquor kept zooming from one end to another on the main street, amidst tooting and shouts of '*yaba bio moo*'!

To wit we have come again. That kind of dressing, during Easter is a major challenge to the cultural norms' (2013). Food vendors are also seen everywhere, all day and night taking advantage of the local and international visitors around. Hotels and drinking bars as well as pubs are seen filled to their capacity with music dancing and noise everywhere. These activities go on all day and also into the night. In the night sex workers are seen standing along the major streets in the towns waiting for clients. Pedestrians are seen moving up and down the streets all day and night throughout the three days.

### **The Easter Festivity Practices and its Implication for the HIV and AIDS Context**

As mentioned above, even though the current tourism touch to the Kwahu festival presents an opportunity for development in the area, the number of activities that goes on exposes a number of people to the risk of HIV infection. Some of such activities includes the Street Carnival, street dance and jams led by famous artists and various FM stations amidst thousands of fun lovers, drinking, dancing and screaming throughout the night. During the 2015 celebration, *Adom FM* one of the famous FM stations in Ghana present at the celebration, was unofficially named 'Adom FM Street', because people from all walks of life filled about a kilometer of the street to participate in their street performances amidst heavy drinking, merry making and the like. Even though to a number of people, such events, 'provide the host community with an opportunity to secure a position of prominence in the tourism market for a short, well defined period of time' (Hall 1992), as well as creating revenue for the local communities, authorities as well as the entire country, the down side of it is that moral values are compromised at such popular events, putting a number of people at risk of HIV infection through exposure of casual sexual activities and networks at the event and the aftermath. Undoubtedly, at the end of the festivity and after indulging in such activities, the participants return to the wider society and to their husbands, wives, partners and lovers, thereby spreading any sexually transmitted diseases they might have picked up. Therefore, the moral challenge that confronts the gatekeepers of the Kwahu Easter is their obligation to uphold the moral values of their people. The Kwahu South District Assembly's 2014 report revealed that the, 'prevalence rate of HIV in the District is still high as at fourth quarter 2013 (2015: 16). If the rate

of infections in the District is high, then the important question that may arise is whether the present activities at the festival have potentially contributed to the high rate of HIV prevalence in the area? As mentioned above, the behaviours evident during the Easter festivity could have implications for HIV infection. A typical example is an article published by the Daily Guide, with the headline 'Open sex at Kwahu Easter' (Thomas Ofori 2011). This article sparked a number of public debates thereby tarnishing the image of the communities in Kwahu, even though the incident was deemed fallacious in the long run. Further to this, the Kwahu Traditional Council reacted and warned the public against indecent behaviours, excessive drinking and immoral activities with a tough penalty. However, Victor Kwawukume and Seth Bokpe believe that the 'advice has fallen on death ears' (2015), because subsequent years have seen activities and behaviours that put people at risk of contracting HIV. An incident that became a great concern was when it became public knowledge in 2015 that condoms had run short in all the pharmacy shops in the whole Kwahu area during the Easter festivity. In a personal communication with a leader from obo, Opanyin Kofi Antwi-Boasiako, he lamented that 'the festivity has to be interrogated because the current practices were not the original intention of the festival. Our elders revered the festival, but now the younger generation has changed the content. The new development is not honoring our culture, but has giving the Kwahus' a bad reputation' (personal communication 2015). This comment confirms the fact that the traditional leaders are concerned about the new trend that the festival has taken because it is possible that the reported cases are just the 'tip of the iceberg' there may be a number of unreported cases. However, speaking to some fans of the street carnival at Obomeng: the heart of the festival, they argued that it is their right to be happy and have fun. Nobody gave them the money so they decide where, how, when and on what to spend it (personal communication 2016). From all that has been discussed so far, the question that comes to mind is, how do the traditional authorities ensure that their moral values are upheld in the era of human rights and freedom? This may be an area worth researching into. The next section examines the ethical implications of the practice.

### **Moral Implications of the Practices of the Festival to the Traditional Authorities**

As stated above, the recent development of the Easter festival as an interna-



tional event attracting both local and foreign, young and older tourists to the Kwahu area in Ghana do not only carry with it an economic gain for the local communities and the country but also has in many ways attracted a number of acts and behaviours that can potentially contribute to HIV infection. These acts have compromised the once honourable and cherished Easter celebration presenting a challenge to the traditional authorities in all the 12 towns on the Kwahu ridge. The traditional authorities have shown grave concern at the negative messages cast over the festival and they believe that the current generation have missed the essence of the Easter celebrations and are gradually turning it into something that the Kwahuman never imagined (Prince Kwasi 2015). Gyasi reiterated the sentiments made by the Kwahu Traditional council that ‘Immorality by the youth during the occasion cast a slur on our cultural heritage as Ghanaians and we would not countenance that’ (2013: 95). The sentiments above, portray the unpreparedness of the authorities for the booming tourism in the area. Being unprepared for the changing nature of the festival in terms of the new dimension, explosion of attendees to festivity and the challenges accompanying it require an ethical interrogation. An important concern is the relationship between, the moral status and standards cherished by the Kwahus’ amidst the new developments of the festival. Should the need for economic boost in the name of tourist attractions overlook the moral values of the local people and making them vulnerable to HIV infections? In as much as the festival is generating income, this article is a call to the traditional authorities to evaluate their leadership role in the current situation. An Akan proverb says that: *‘opanyin a ɔtena fie ma mmɔfra we nanka no, yebu nankawefo a ɔkaho bi’*. The literary meaning of the proverb is: ‘The elder who looks on as the young people feasts on a snake, is considered a snake eater himself’ (Isaac, Opuni Frimpong 2014). The moral of this proverb is that the eating of snakes is not allowed in the Akan culture. To them, a snake has a spiritual representation that is, it may be seen as a god, and in most cases as a symbol of evil, as such the elders have the responsibility to prevent hungry children from eating snakes’ meat. If they overlook their important responsibility of warning as well as preventing the children from feasting on the snake and calamity strikes, they will not be spared. Of course some snakes are poisonous and once eaten, there will definitely be negative consequences. Using this proverb as a moral lens in viewing the situation at hand, it is clear that the traditional authorities and the other stakeholders have a moral obligation to interrogate and confront any negative activities and behaviour

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that is likely to increase people's vulnerability to HIV as well as tarnishing the name of the festival. Overlooking such obligation and adopting the silence route can have tremendous negative consequences not only on the community but the country as a whole.

So practically how can the situation be contained so as not to increase people's vulnerability to HIV? Haddad has drawn our attention to the fact that 'issues of sexuality and cultural practices shape responses to the epidemic both negatively and positively' (2009:17). Therefore, in the current discussion, such a task demands the input not only of the traditional leaders in the Kwahu area but also other stakeholders such as the District Assemblies, National tourism board, National AIDS commission, the Media, religious leaders and families. They are being challenged to understand their responsibility within the ongoing development and trends of the festival and how some of these activities at the festival are likely to increase people vulnerability to HIV in order to respond positively. A major positive respond can be that these stakeholders can strategically use this period as an opportunity to educate the crowd on issues of HIV. For example, since the FM stations attract more people to their stands, they can use such platforms to break the taboo of speaking about sex and HIV in public places.

Another practical response can be the response from the churches in the area. In addition to the high turnout of people to the organised football galas, coral musical performances, drama etc, during this period, it is clear that churches are also filled to their capacity, therefore church leaders can use their pulpit to preach messages that go beyond the dos and don'ts, of sex and sexualities to issues of disruption of normal social relations in families, promiscuity, YouTube videos and other social media portraying the unhealthy sexual behaviours and networks.

The local council can also use the traditional durbars as a platform for HIV education. An important collaboration that can contribute effectively in responding to the current situation can be the joint effort of the National tourism, Board and the AIDS commission and the Kwahu traditional leaders. These structures can collaborate to set up stands during the three day celebrations where people could be invited for HIV counselling and testing. At the same time these structures have the obligation to ensure that condoms are readily available to avoid the situation where condoms run out in all the pharmacies in the 12 towns on the ridge.

## Conclusion

In order to achieve the global HIV target of 90 90 90 by the year 2020 and the subsequent eradication of HIV by 2030, governments particularly the Ghanaian government will have to intensify its efforts to reduce the risk factors of HIV in the country. One important area of concern that is still under research is the contribution of cultural and social festivals to the HIV infections. In this article, it has been argued that the activities at these events can be hotspots for HIV infection. This claim is based on the casual sexual relations and complex sexual networking that characterizes the period of such celebrations. One of such events as noted in this article is the Kwahu Easter celebration in Ghana that has been transformed over the years to an international event. From the discussion above, the festival now attracts local and international tourists to the area yearly. Though the article is by no means arguing against the transformation of the festival and the tourism touch or the number of people who come to the area. But HIV being a global problem, there is a need to emphasize and interrogate the risk factors that are accompanying such events. At the same time, the article has challenged the gatekeepers of the Easter festival and the Ghana tourism board to take their responsibilities around the events of the festival seriously. In order to reach the AIDS free generation, there must be efforts to control all contributing factors to HIV by all stakeholders where possible. Certainly the key success for reducing the new incidences of HIV and prevent people contracting the disease is to be aware of all contributing risk factors.

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