



PLACING PUBLIC HEALTH AT THE CENTER OF NEOTRADITIONAL FESTIVALS: THE PROS AND CONS OF GODIGBE BORDER FESTIVAL OF AFLAO, GHANA

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Cite this article:

M. A., Klugah, R., Awubomu, S. B., Akakpo (2026), Placing Public Health at the Center of Neotraditional Festivals: The Pros and Cons of Godigbe Border Festival of Aflao, Ghana. African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research 9(3), 1-21. DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-25TIKFIT

Manuscript History

Received: 8 Feb 2026

Accepted: 10 Mar 2026

Published: 16 Apr 2026

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ABSTRACT: *Neotraditional festivals play crucial roles in preserving and transmitting the history and culture of Ghanaian communities, while crucially bolstering public health. Among the Ewe, health is a state of wellness in the physical, spiritual, environmental, and psychosomatic dimensions of society. One major festival celebrated by the Aflao Ewe people is Godigbe, a border festival that attracts both Ghanaian and Togolese participants. Though Godigbe is critical to environmental, spiritual, social, and physical health, its celebration in recent times has raised concerns due to its adverse impacts on public health. Using qualitative methods, this study chronicles the effects of the Godigbe festival on public health outcomes. The study found that community clean-up exercises, communal exercise, sporting activities, cleansing rituals, and spiritual healing promote positive community health. Despite the benefits of the festival, increased substance abuse, open defecation, violent youth conflicts, environmental pollution, increased sex work, and indiscriminate sex portend the festival. This article argues that the Godigbe festival is a double-edged sword, contributing to positive health outcomes with unintended negative health impacts. This phenomenon calls for solutions to mitigate its negative impacts on society.*

KEYWORDS: Aflao border festival, Godigbezã, Public health, Pros and Cons, Ghana.



INTRODUCTION

Traditional and neotraditional festivals are special occasions, observances, or celebrations that may be religious or secular in nature and which are generally marked by merry-making and the performance of music and dance (Ejizu, 1990). They are important socio-cultural occasions in many parts of the world that provide an opportunity not only for social cohesion and economic development but also for the projection and reinforcement of cultural identity and belonging. “In traditional African societies, festivals constitute a celebration, a feast, and a season of musical or other performance which involves joyfulness and merrymaking” (Bentina, 2014, p. 366). In Ghana, “there has been a rise in cultural festivals because they have become a platform for putting one’s community on the map or making them visible to the political authorities and the wider Ghanaian society to attract the needed social amenities” (Adotey & Ntewusu, 2024, p. 1). These festivals are sacred (Awolalu & Dompamu, 2005), seasonal, and elaborate, targeting the interest of community members (Jansa, 2017). Festivals are characterized by animal sacrifices, prayers and libations, narration of community histories, musical performances, and transmission of cultural values. More important is the extent to which public health issues remain crucial on the program outlines of these festivals in the quest to achieve positive health outcomes.

Public health refers to activities that communities engage in to prevent diseases and promote good health and hygienic practices in society. These practices are enacted to provide holistic strategies to combat issues of diseases and ill health in the society. Charles Winslow, an American public health scientist, defined public health as follows:

The science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life, and promoting physical health and efficiency through organized community efforts for the sanitation of the environment, the control of community infections, the education of the individual in principles of personal hygiene, the organization of medical and nursing services for the early diagnosis and preventive treatment of disease, and the development of social machinery that will ensure to every individual in the community a standard of living adequate for the maintenance of health (Winslow, 1920, p. 183).

The Committee for the Study of the Future of Public Health (1988, p. 19) defined public health as “fulfilling society’s interest in assuring conditions in which people can be healthy.” Turnock (2001, p. 19) further operationalized the concept of public health as the “collective effort to identify and address the unacceptable realities that result in preventable and avoidable health outcomes, and it is the composite efforts and activities carried out by people committed to these ends.” Public health is concerned with conscious planning, organizing, engaging, and implementing activities by communities to improve community health. Apart from promoting community history, entertainment, and merry-making, *Godigbe* exemplifies community initiative towards promoting public health in the Aflao-Lomè border region.

The Aflao-Lomè border provides a complex space and context characterized by specific health issues that deserve attention in order to properly ground this study. First, the border lacks adequate water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities. Second, it has limited access to potable water, poor infrastructure for healthcare workers, and a lack of isolation facilities to deal with suspected diseases and emergency cases. More challenging is the porous nature of the border and the presence of numerous illegal entry points known as the ‘beats’ and ‘pillars’, which facilitate easy movement of immigrants across the border on a daily basis (Akakpo,



2021). In effect, the border is severely affected by disease outbreaks due to the high rate of movements and cross-border migrations, featuring diseases such as cholera, tuberculosis, and Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) which spread quickly, escalate, and impact border communities and livelihoods. For instance, due to cross-border trade, a poultry disease known as avian influenza often spreads quickly in the border region (Goka et al., 2024). Between 2019 and 2022, the border witnessed the outbreak of Lassa fever and the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the high rate of trading activities across the border adds to escalating environmental health issues due to the production of both solid and liquid waste. Ghana-Togo border officials, the Ghana Health Service, the Border Health Unit, etc., collaborate to promote border governance and the overall management of border health issues. While border officials play their roles to promote border governance and health in the border region, it is important to understand how *the Godigbe* festival shapes community health in the borderland.

Three research questions guide this study: 1. What is the origin of *Godigbe* border festival? 2. To what extent does the *Godigbe* festival contribute to positive health outcomes in the Aflao community? and 3. What are the adverse health impacts of the *Godigbe* festival on Aflao and its environs? The study is organized into four thematic sections. First, the study reviews literature on festivals and public health, the place of festivals within Ghanaian social context, and the global landscape of border festivals. This article further discusses the methodology, highlighting issues of design, sample size, participants and recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and ethics. The historical origins of *Godigbe*, its contributions to positive and adverse community health outcomes are argued in this article. The article shows that *Godigbe* promotes community clean-up exercises, communal exercise and physical fitness, sporting activities, cleansing rituals, and spiritual healing, which facilitates positive community health. In spite of these, increasing drug and substance abuse, open defecation, violent youth conflicts, environmental pollution, increasing sex work and indiscriminate sexual activities characterize the festival. The study concludes that though *Godigbe* contributes to positive public health outcomes in Aflao and its environs, it has adverse effects on the Aflao community. The chiefs and people of Aflao must therefore institute some measures to curb these ramifications in order to promote a healthy society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Festivities and Public Health

According to Wood (2018, p. 1), "...despite a growing body...of event literature outlining the many motivations for and subjective benefits of attending festivals, the reporting of positive health outcomes remains undeveloped." Studies show that mass gatherings present unique health and safety challenges to communities that celebrate festivals. For instance, Hassan et al. (2024) averred that the Glastonbury Festival celebrated in Somerset, England, poses significant public health challenges such as rapid spread of infectious diseases, substance use and abuse, violence and injuries, environmental hazards, and challenges related to mental health. In local communities of Saudi Arabia, *a gala* is staged in honor of God. The joy and jubilation of this festival alleviate psychological stress and contribute to one's health. However, evidence exists that the *gala* is associated with health hazards and risks such as road traffic accidents, firework mortalities such as burns and eye injuries, and worsening conditions of asthmatic patients due to the emission of fragrant smoke (Aboud, 2013).



In India, the *Janmashtami* or *Govinda* festival is noted for the formation of human pyramids or human towers to access pots containing milk, curd, and other nutritious substances. This activity promotes teamwork and improves upon physical fitness, agility, and other physical and psychomotor skills. However, the formation of the human pyramids contributes to severe injuries such as fractures of the limbs and spinal cord damage. In terms of food, evidence exists that safety measures are put in place to prevent foodborne illnesses, which can emanate from improper food handling in festival settings (Rajakrishnan et al., 2022). In effect, health officials collaborate with food vendors to regulate, inspect, and promote good food hygiene practices during such festivals (Derrick, 2024).

Finally, during the Mgmayem festival celebrated by the Krobo people of the Eastern Region of Ghana, national public health agencies and institutions train the youth to respond to health emergencies and improve upon public health. The festival gives space for activities including health screening, disease awareness campaigns, breast cancer awareness, diabetes and hypertension checks, community engagement and outreach¹. These activities are geared towards improving public health and safety in the Krobo society. It is worthy to note that even though the festivals discussed above are not border festivals, they contribute in understanding public health. Thus, this article argues that traditional festivals in Ghana create space for health issues to be engaged. As a border festival celebrated within a complex socio-cultural environment and within a complicated health topography, *Godigbe* offers an opportunity to investigate the effects of the festival to boost the literature on border-centric festivals and public health, an area which is yet to be fully developed in academia.

Festivals within the Ghanaian Social Context

Traditional festivals are ancient and associated with planting and harvesting time or with honoring the ancestors (Lentz, 2001, Getz, 2010). Ghanaian festivals are manifestations of the practices and beliefs of the people. They are promoters of culture and builders of one's identity. They serve as a means of commemorating and remembering important events in the history of people (Gbadegbe, 2013). In Ghana, traditional festivals have acquired importance for community development of consciousness and pride and are deeply rooted in the worldview and belief systems of the people (Odotei, 2002). Notable festivals include *Akwasidae* (Asante), *Homowo* (Ga), *Kundum* (Nzema), *Odwira* (Akuapim), *Apoa* (Techiman), *Bugum* (Mamprusi), *Damba* (Dagomba) *Bakatue* (Elmina), *Oguaa Fetu Afahye* (Cape Coast), *Aboakyir* (Winneba) and *Kwafie* (Dormaa Ahenkro). In the Volta Region of Ghana, festivals such as *Asogli Tezã* (Ho), *Agbamevorzã* (Agotime), *Gbidukorzã* (Hohoe and Peki), *Dezã* (Dzodze), *Hogbetsotso* (Anlo), *Somé Tutuzã* (Agbozume), *Zendoglimetsozã* (Klefe, Klikor and allies), *Tortsogbezã* (Sokpoe), *Avenortutudozã* (Avenor) and *Godigbezã* (Aflao) have captured the attention of many participants in and outside Ghana. They are multi-dimensional, combining religious, political, social, and artistic performances. These festivals focus on different activities and have spiritual elements that serve as a binding factor and a source of sustenance by the spiritual world through the gods and ancestors (Nketia, 1975).

¹ Ensign Global University Promotes Health and Well-being at the 131st Ngmayem Festival: <https://ensign.edu.gh/ensign-global-college-promotes-health-and-community-well-being-at-the-131st-krobo-ngmayem-festival/>



For instance, during *Odwira* Festival of the people of Akwapim, Eastern Region, sacrifices, mourning the dead, ban-on-noise making, preparation of a sacred feast, and purification of black stools are observed (Amoako-Attah, 2001). Among the Anlo Ewe, *Dɔdɛdɛ* (physical removal of dirt/diseases), *Afɛkpɔkplɔ* (mental/house cleansing), *Nugbidodo* (reconciliation), *Tsifofodi* (libation), and *Abaɔɔdo* (laying of bed, a ritual to mourn the dead) characterize *Hogbetsotso* Festival (Dorvlo, 2017). The *Asogli Tezã* in Ho, Volta Region, also features rituals such as *vovlowo fe nkeke* (all souls day), *nublaba* (tying of herbal leaves/herbs), *teyuyru* (hailing of new yam), and *dzawuwu* (feeding the deities and ancestors) annually (Bewiadzi, 2018/2019). These spiritual activities maintain cordial relationships between the communities and the supernatural beings. Beyond the spiritual significance of these festivals, they promote peace, unity, and solidarity through the settlement of disputes and misunderstandings (Gbadegbe, 2010, p. 66). These narratives about traditional festivals in Ghana remain relevant for this study, especially the opportunities they create for community development. However, scholarly work on the *Godigbe* festival in Ghana is lacking. Besides, critical attention has not been paid to the health effects of the festival, particularly from the perspective of public health.

Global landscape of Border Festivals

Border festivals are celebrated regularly and consistently by border communities across the world for different purposes. In Asia, the Mekong cross-border festival bridges the cultural and physical gaps between Thailand and the Laos riverside community of Nakhon Phanom. Known as *Lai Reua Fai* (Floating Fire Boat Procession Festival) in Thailand and *Boun Lai Heua Fai* (Candle-Light Festival) in Laos, the festival showcases the rich culture of the residents of Nakhon Phanom astride the Thai-Lao border (Root, 2025). At the India-Pakistan border, Menon (2013) and Bochkovskaya (2022) highlight the theatrical aspects of the festival at the Wagah-Attari border, where the Indian Border Security Force and Pakistan Rangers jointly perform the '*Beating Retreat*' ceremony to showcase nationalism, patriotism, and diversity between the two countries.

In America, Peña (2020) provides a deeper understanding into the joint celebration of *George Washington's birthday* by two border communities, Laredo, Texas (USA) and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas (Mexico), featuring parade goers, civil society organizations, border officials, ordinary citizens, political figures, business leaders, and other local actors from both countries. This symbolizes the importance of cross-border community life and cooperation between the two border communities. In West Africa, Muñoz and Peña (2024) give insights into the *Tokna Massana* festival celebrated at the Chad-Cameroon border. Instituted in 2003, the festival features artifacts such as woven shields, armor, gourds, and spears, which portray the bravery of the Masa people. Again, the festival showcases large color posters that depict bustling market spaces and dancers in procession. In essence, the festival demonstrates border community life and how people define the border in their own terms. Similarly, Nugent (2019, p. 486) chronicles how residents of the Casamance borderlands, Senegambia engages in cross-border religious festivals such as *Mawlud* (the Prophet's birthday), *al-Koran Karamo*, marriage, and funeral activities, attracting participants from Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Gambia, and Mauritania.

In Ghana, Nugent provides insights into *Avakezã* or *Agbamevorzã* festival celebrated by the people of Agotime, astride the Ghana-Togo border. Nugent argues that this festival attracts participants from communities in Ghana and Togo, with important rituals rotating among communities across the border. He mentions communities such as Kpetoe, Afegame,



Akpokofe, Wodome, Sarakope, and Agbesia (Ghana), Batume, Amoussoukordzi, Zukpe, Nyitoe, and Adzakpa (Togo) as communities that jointly participate in this border festival (Nugent, 2019, p. 499ff). Finally, Adotey and Ntewusu (2024) highlighted *Dezã*, the palm festival, celebrated by the people of Dzodze (Ketu North Municipality) in the Volta Region. These scholars argued that *Dezã* attracts celebrants from Ghana and Togo, featuring musical performances, unique dress codes and regalia, feasting, and other related activities. The crux of their argument was that the celebration of the festival undermines the reality of the border as residents define the border in their own terms. While these works contribute immensely to understanding the dynamics of borders and community life in terms of cross-border trade, marriage ceremonies, religious celebrations, border communities, identities, and ethnicities, they do not focus on festivals and public health in the context of a border, creating a gap in the border-centric festive literature that this current study seeks to fill.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts three different theoretical standpoints – Cultural Ecology Theory, Structural-Functionalist Theory, and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. The Cultural Ecology Theory was propounded by American Anthropologist Julien Steward in the 1950s to explain how societies adapt to their environment through a ‘culture core’ of subsistence-related behaviors and technologies (Lapka et al, 2012). Basically, this theory is used to analyze how traditional cultural practices, rituals, and community gatherings (festivals) impact environmental health and community wellbeing. It links cultural activity directly to health outcomes in the environment. This theory resonates with the study as the goal is to understand the positive and negative impacts of the festival on public health.

The Structural-Functionalist Theory provides the premise that cultural owners are both the creative subjects and participants in festival practices. Scholars such as Van Gennep (1909), Durkheim (1915), and Turner (1974) have used this theory to explore the origins, structure, and functions of festivals as well as the symbolic meanings they portray (Geertz, 1973). For instance, Van Gennep (1960) and Falassi (1987) provide detailed understandings into the structure of festivals. Radcliffe-Brown (1952) further emphasizes the functions of rituals in maintaining ‘the integrity of the social system’ for the community and society. The Structural-Functionalist Theory therefore aligns with this study as it pays attention to the origins of the *Godigbe* festival, its functions in promoting the health and wellbeing of the people of Aflao as well as the adverse impacts of the festival on community health.

Finally, the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis is concerned with understanding the lived experiences of people, and the meaning making that occurs in relation to those experiences (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). Regarding this study, this analysis approach is useful as the study seeks to interrogate the personal perceptions and the deep meanings the residents of Aflao attach to festival activities, particularly how these activities impact public health outcomes. These three analytical frameworks lay the foundation for this study. The justification for using these three frameworks lies in their ability to provide a lens through which researchers understand people, their cultural practices and rituals, and the place of those rituals within the community. In this study, the use of these theories provides a deeper understanding of the origin, celebration, and functions of the *Godigbe* festival, centred on participants' personal and lived experiences, perceptions, and opinions regarding public health issues.



METHODS

This study collected primary data from Aflao. It relied on interviews, participant observations, (Ugwu & Eze, 2023), and photography as data collection methods. This approach is informed by constructivist ontology and relies epistemologically on interpretivism (Hlovor & Botchway, 2021), where the lived experiences of a group of people are studied in a natural setting (Punch, 2013). Data collection was guided by ethnography (Cresswell, Clarke, & Vicki, 2007) and phenomenology (Quotoshi, 2018; Van Manen, 2017) to interrogate the *Godigbe* festival. The justification for using these two approaches was the fact that the authors sought to verbally engage with participants and immerse themselves in the festival activities to understand, interpret, and produce meanings of the lived experiences of the participants of the festival in relation to the negative and positive impacts of the festival on community health. Three data collection techniques were employed in this study. These are interviews, participant observations, and photography. In total, thirty (30) in-depth interviews were conducted during the 2022 and 2024 *Godigbe* editions. The 2022 edition was selected for two reasons: first, it was the first time the festival was reactivated following a two years ban due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic; second, it marked the 25th anniversary of Togbui Adzonuganga Amenya Fiti V, paramount chief of Aflao Traditional Council.

The 2024 edition provided an opportunity for the researchers to do follow-ups on new dimensions of the public health issues in the community. These two special editions attracted participants from across the country as well as from Togo, Benin, and Nigeria. Thus, it was necessary to engage with the two editions of the festival due to the increased participant population, varied human activities, and their implications on public health. The interviews were conducted in Ewe and English and supplemented with photography. Data was analysed using the narrative approach as espoused by Bliss (2016) and Bochner (2007). First, interviews were transcribed and translated from Ewe into English. The interviews were later coded through open coding, where each interaction, action, event, or idea was compared with others in order to draw similarities and differences. Major themes that emanated from the coding formed the basis for short memos to be written, where the vivid quotes of participants were incorporated into the analysis and interpretations of data.

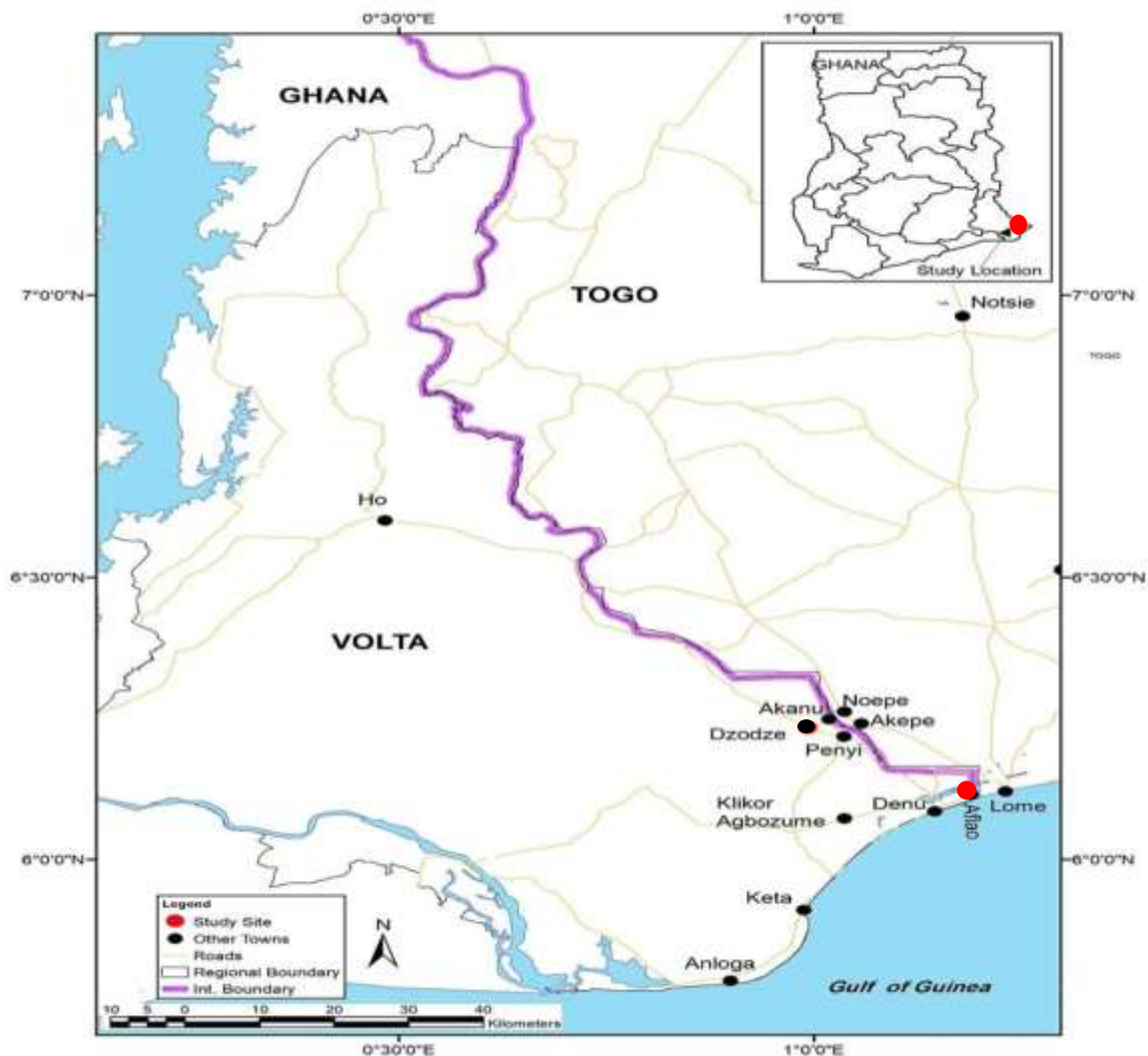
The study was conducted in Aflao. Located in the southeastern corner of Ghana, Aflao serves as a gateway to Lomé, the capital of Togo (GSS, 2010). The Aflao Traditional Council is a patrilineal society organized under a paramount chief, sub-chiefs, clan heads, family heads, priests, and priestesses who perform diverse roles to promote the development of the community. Aflao is part of the Ewe subgroup largely described as *Anloawo*, comprising Avenor, Somè, Klikor, Wheta, and Dzodze (Nukunya, 1997). Geographically, Aflao North is characterized by savannah woodland, short grasses, and small clumps of bushes, while the southern zone features coastal scrubs, grassland, mangrove forests, and marshland (GSS, 2010, p.2). Notable communities include *Avoeme*, *Awakome*, *Viefe*, *Agblekpui*, *Flagbo*, *Wudoaba*, *Kabutukofe*, *Kumadekofe*, *Akame*, *Tagbakofe*, and *Akporkploe* and *Gaklikope* located directly on the borderline. As a busy border town, it hosts two major markets, seven banks, and two rural banks, making Aflao a hub of trade and commerce. Communities on the Togo side who share the borderland with Aflao include *Nyekonakpoe*, *Tokoin*, *Kodjoviakofe*, *Klikame*, *Avenou*, *Soviefe*, *Sagbado*, and *Adidogome*. Figure 1 below gives a graphical outlook of the borderland.

Figure 1: Aflao-Lomé on the Ghana-Togo border.

Source: *Reproduced with permission from Walther (2021).*

Indigenes of Aflao who find themselves in Togo due to the fact that the arbitrary demarcation of the border by the colonial masters has defied the boundary to participate in *Godigbezã*. Togolese nationals who want to learn, entertain, and have fun also cross the border to engage in the festival. The *Godigbe* festival is therefore one of the biggest cross-border festivals in Ghana because of its international scope. The Aflao indigenes residing outside the community also participate in the festival biennially in the quest to promote their culture and identity.

Finally, participants for this study were drawn from four categories of people – chiefs (traditional leaders), border agents, subjects/residents of Aflao, and health workers. The chiefs were included because they, as custodians of lands, formulate and implement the rules and regulations governing the celebration of festivals in the area. Border agents were included to understand how they exercise border governance during the celebration. The celebrants (subjects/residents) are stakeholders who make the festival happen, while the health workers who engage with health issues were included to provide their expert knowledge on the subject matter.

Figure 2: Study site

Source: *Adopted and modified from Adotey and Nteuwusu (2024, p.4).*

In sum, four (4) chiefs, two (2) queen-mothers, two (2) clan/lineage heads, four (4) opinion leaders, ten (10) subjects/residents, four (4) health workers, and four (4) border agents participated in the study. Data saturation in qualitative studies is determined when there is enough information to replicate the study (O'reilly & Kiimba, 2013, Walker, 2012) and when further coding is no longer feasible (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). The sample size of thirty (30) is justified as saturation generally occurs between ten (10) and twenty (20) participants (Hennink et al., 2017). As an ethnographic study, fieldwork respected all ethical requirements such as voluntary participation, anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent in order to strengthen the ethical framework of the study.



FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Origins of Godigbe Festival

According to oral tradition, the people of *Flawu* (Aflao) are royals and descendants of King Hussein of Jordan. They migrated from Jordan through Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt through to Ethiopia. Later, they migrated through Sudan to Oyo in Yorubaland in Western Nigeria. From Oyo, they continued the journey to Ketu in modern-day Republic of Benin; and the modern-day Tandoh (Tado) in the Republic of Togo before finally settling at Notsie (Togo) in the 12th Century. The people of Aflao are known as *Flawu-Kpokliawo*.² This appellation shows the bravery, smartness, power, resilience, and resourcefulness of the Aflao people in their history.

Prior to 1967, the people of Aflao did not celebrate any festival of their own. For this reason, they had to visit their neighboring communities, especially Anloga, to participate in *Hogbesotso* festival. During the reign of Torgbui Amemaka Fiti IV, the grandfather of Torgbui Adzonugaga Amemaka Fiti V, he observed that his subjects took deep interest in celebrating festivals of the neighboring communities. For this reason, together with his sub-chiefs, they deliberated and decided to institute a festival. However, to make the process participatory, he tasked the youths of his community to deliberate on a name of a festival that would be suitable for the Aflao community. Following thorough research, the youths reported to Torgbui Fiti IV that they came up with the name *Godigbe*, which literally means “The day we landed.” On 1 April 1967, Torgbui Adzonugaga Amemaka Fiti IV instituted the *Godigbe* festival, and it was celebrated for the first time in the community.

The festival symbolizes the mass exodus and triumphant departure from the tyrannical rule of Fia Agorkoli of Notsie. *Godigbe*, therefore, means “a day of liberation”, commemorating the landing (arrival) of the forefathers of Aflao people at the beach (present settlement). For the first time, the festival was observed in the confines of individual homes and clan houses. The festival further expanded with pomp and pageantry, featuring traditional dances such as *Agbadza* and *Yewe*, a spiritual dance that communicates both physically and spiritually to the people. The favourite meal of the festival is *akple* and *ademedetsi* or *detsi*, a local dish prepared from corn flour and vegetables. In recent times, the festival is celebrated to preserve the people’s history of migration from Notsie, and it also showcases the rich culture of the people of Aflao. The festival’s climax is a grand durbar³ where the chiefs and people gather at Victoria Park, Aflao, to conclude the festival. This occasion attracts politicians, government representatives, businessmen, ambassadors, and high-ranking international business representatives both from within and outside Ghana.

² Kpokli - The term *Kpokli* is an appellation or expression of the people of Aflao: *Kpo kli kpo, tsimadzamadza baba diqim*. This means mountain meets mountain, the rain has not fallen but the earth is slippery. It is a strong appellation for the people of Aflao and they take a lot of pride in it.

³ Durbar: it is the gathering of chiefs and people of a community to showcase their rich culture, traditions, values and it is characterized by traditional music, dance, firing of musketry with chiefs dressed in their royal regalia to symbolize cultural pride.

Festival Preparations

The first preparation is the formation of a planning committee whose function is to plan the program for the festival. This committee consists of stakeholders such as chiefs, queen-mothers, youth groups, community elders, and women representatives. The 2022 and 2024 committees were chaired by Torgbui Nyakeli Tortsofia VII, a sub-divisional chief of Aflao Traditional Council. During the 2022 edition, the program line up for the festival included inter-Senior High School King Fiti gold football tournament held at St. Paul SHS Park, and a route tour from Aflao-Notsie-Kara (Togo), through to Abomey-Allada-Cotonou (Benin). Other programs included Aflao Inter-Churches Bible quiz competition, health walk, soccer competition between Aflao chiefs and border security agencies, Muslim durbar of chiefs, basketball tournament, Aflao Inter-Junior High School quiz competition, borbobor music, and *Godigbe* Beauty Pageant (See figure 3 below). Programs that connect to local beliefs and religious practices include the ban on funeral activities and noise making, a state sacrifice (*Duvɔsasa*), a procession featuring clan and chieftaincy stools⁴, offerings to shrines through prayers, libations in the presence of the Paramount Chief and sub-chiefs at *Agorkpanu* Main Palace where visitors and dignitaries paid homage and presented gifts and donations to the community.

Figure 3: 2022 *Godigbezã* program outline



(Source: authors' fieldwork, Aflao, November 2022)

⁴ A stool is a carved wooden seat with profound spiritual, cultural and political significance. Among the Akan, Ga, and Ewe societies, a stool symbolizes the office, power, and authority of a traditional leader (chief). All chiefs in southern Ghana have black stools as their source of authority.



During the 2024 festival, programs included: street carnival; health walk; clean-up exercises, carnival from Aflao to Denu through Agbozume, Akatsi, Tadzewu, Dzodze, Penyi back to Aflao; music jams; beach games; and numerous traditional activities. Publicity for the festival included community-based announcements, flyers, radio station announcements (on Holy FM (98.5 MHz), Victory FM (96.1 MHz), Flow FM (102.3 MHz) and Light FM (101.1 MHz) among others, and on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (or X), Instagram, and Tik Tok. These platforms contributed to a wide dissemination of the festival lineup, attracting local and international participants.

Celebration of the festival

The festival is celebrated biennially in November. Participants include chiefs and people of Aflao, indigenes astride the border (Lomè, Togo), Benin, Nigeria, and other non-indigenes across the country, with the majority of them coming from Accra (national capital), and other parts of the Volta region - Anloga Keta, Dzodze, Akatsi among others. The trans-border residents and other Aflao citizens who reside in other parts of Ghana reunite with their families at home. The festival is therefore characterized by cross-border migrations. The 2022 edition took place on 26 November at Victoria Park, Aflao. The celebration began with the *Yewe* dance at the public square in the night where devotees danced intensively to drum music. During the process, there was spirit possession where the possessed devotees danced in ecstasy and also fell into trance, enhancing communication between the people in trance and the deities. The next day was marked by pouring of libation, prayers, and state sacrifice (*duvosasa*) where three cows were slaughtered and their blood served to community deities to enhance spiritual cleansing of the state.

Next, Togbui Adzonugaga Amenya Fiti V and his sub-chiefs sat “in state” at *Agorkpanu* Palace amid performances of indigenous dances such as *agbadza*, *brekete*, and *borborbor* while the Muslim community also showed solidarity with their *Donno* performances. Invited guests, government officials, and citizens paid homage to the paramount chief while they listened to a progress report on development initiatives in the community. The dress code for this activity was all white which communally signifies joy. The festival was concluded with a procession of chiefs and people of Aflao through the principal streets to Victoria Park where the grand durbar was held. The Paramount Chief of Aflao, Togbui Adzonugaga Amenya Fiti V sat in his palanquin as drummers performed while the chief displayed intriguing dance gestures amidst firing of musketry by protective warriors. Symbolic of the festival were the old women who dressed in local costumes, carrying different loads (stools, sticks, earthenware pots, local mats, ladle, mortar, pistil etc.) on their head to portray the migration process from Notsie to their present settlement.

Other dance groups such as Zangbetor, Akpi, children's dance groups, Gota group, Borborbor, and youth groups all featured their performances in the arena. The grand durbar was chaired by Nana Soglo Alloh IV, Paramount Chief of Likpe Traditional Area of Oti Region, Ghana. Notable dignitaries graced the occasion, including the current President of Ghana, His Excellency John Dramani Mahama, Honorable Dzifa Abla Gomashie (Member of Parliament for Ketu South), Regional Chairman of the National Democratic Congress, Mr. Mawutor Agbavitor among others (See figure 4 below for more details of dignitaries)

Figure 4: A list of invited special guests during the 2022 *Godigbe* festival.



(Source: Authors' fieldwork, Aflao, November 2022)

Nana Akufo-Addo, Ghana's recent ex-President, was represented by the Minister for Interior, Honorable Ambrose Dery at the festival. In his address, Mr. Dery urged the people of Aflao to use the celebration to respect and tolerate each other and to promote peace and security of the area for the sake of national development. In all, the participation of government officials in the festival was aimed at soliciting financial support to promote community development. There were also sponsorship packages from various local companies, indigenous associations, and unions to exhibit their corporate social responsibility towards the Aflao community.

***Godigbe* festival and Public Health: Positive Outcomes**

Godigbe contributes positively to public health in a number of ways. First, it promotes *community clean-up exercises*. The exercise is conducted in the Aflao community, targeting homes and public spaces such as lorry stations, markets, and the main border. With the support of the Municipal Health and Environmental office and Zoomlion Ghana Limited, tools such as hand gloves, shovels, wheelbarrows, and Wellington boots are provided for use in the clean-up exercise. The exercise features the clearing of encroaching bushes along the roadside, sweeping public spaces, desilting choked gutters, cleaning the beach and incinerating the main refuse dump around Avoeme and the Police station area (Diamond Cement Factory road). The essence of this exercise is to keep the community clean since visitors and other dignitaries would visit the community during the festival. A participant expressed:

The community clean-up exercise is an important component of the festival as the community must be well prepared for the festival. If we do not clean the community and it is dirty, it can lead to health challenges and on the other hand, we cannot be celebrating our festival in a dirty environment. It will be a disgrace to us as a community. It is on this note that we set a day aside to clean the community in order to promote public health and safety (Source: field interview, November 2022, Aflao).

The festival also contributes to public health through communal and fitness exercises (See fig. 5 below). During the 2022 and 2024 editions, health walks were organized to promote bodily exercises among community members. The walk began from the Aflao lorry station through the principal streets of Aflao to Denu and Tokor. The walk witnessed the participation of chiefs, queen-mothers, men, the youth, children, women, border officials, and other security agencies. Many participants were dressed in club jerseys such as Barcelona, Arsenal, and Real Madrid while others dressed in festival-branded T-shirts. Exercises including aerobics, arm-pressing, and jogging were conducted to enhance physical fitness of community members.

Figure 5: A health walk during the 2022 *Godigbe* festival.



(Source: Author's fieldwork, Aflao, November 2022)

To boost their exercise, sound systems were mounted on Kia trucks which provided energetic music as a way of ensuring diversion therapy and to prevent people from feeling the long-distance walk. Accordingly, the young men and women showed their dancing skills, thereby releasing stress, and enhancing positive emotional, mental, and physical balance. A participant narrated:



The health walk is an essential element of *Godigbe* festival. Every edition of the festival sees the young and old participating in this exercise to improve upon their physical fitness and health. For some of us, this is the only time we get – every two years to participate in this type of walk because the nature of our work will not allow us. In addition, the walk is a moment where you meet old friends, school mates and classmates and showcase your physical fitness abilities – and sometimes feel like a competition which is a healthy way of reuniting community members (Source: field interview, November 2022, Aflao).

The narrative from the interviewee underscores the relevance of the fitness exercise during the festival as it is not just a moment of physical exercise but also a moment of reunion of old friends in the community. This ensures reconnection and bonding for community development.

Another important contribution of *Godigbe* to public health is through *sporting activities*, particularly football (soccer) competitions. On the side of the youth, the 2022 edition featured a Senior High School King Fiti Gold Cup Tournament at Saint Paul's SHS Park which attracted schools such as Three Town Senior High School, Saint Paul's Senior High School, Somé Senior High School, and Aflao Community Day Senior High School. This event took place on November 5th, 2022 with Saint Paul SHS winning the trophy. To get the elderly involved, the chiefs of Aflao engaged in a soccer match with border security agencies. These games promoted physical exercise, communalism, and good health among participants. Apart from the games improving the cardiovascular system, enhancing effective blood circulation, and the burning of fat and calories, the football competition fostered positive community bonding among participants and, in the case of the chiefs and border officials, it contributed to cordial and healthy social relations between government officials and traditional authorities.

The final importance of *Godigbe* to public health is *spiritual cleansing and healing of the community*. While community clean-up exercises, fitness exercises, and sporting activities physically contribute to positive health outcomes, the spiritual health of the community is also considered. The deities and ancestors of the community are invoked to protect, guide and bless the community during and after the celebration. This is the reason why state sacrifice (*duvɔsasa*) is performed to invoke the spirits of the deities to protect the chiefs and community members. In this process, a cow was slaughtered and the blood was presented to the various shrines and deities of the community. The nationally known local liquor, *akpeteshie/sodabi*, and other local and foreign drinks are used to offer libations as part of the spiritual cleansing and healing process. This ritual is believed to heal the community from evil afflictions including spiritual and physical afflictions. To verify the efficacy and success of this ritual, *Yewe* religious music is performed at night where selected devotees are possessed and the wishes of the deities and other spirit mediums are revealed, as they prescribe measures to promote community health. This spiritual exercise is believed to ward off any malevolent spirit present in the community during the festival. Spiritual cleansing and healing are therefore pivotal in the festival. According to a priest:

The spiritual cleansing is a necessary component of the festival. We believe that the deities are the first promoters of health. They protect the community against all forms of spiritual attacks. They protect our chiefs and people and prevent certain diseases from affecting people in the community. It is because of these roles that we feed them during the festival so that they will continue to protect the community (Source: field interview, November 2022, Aflao).



For this community, public health goes beyond the physical dimension and requires a holistic approach. The Aflao community uses the festival to promote physical health most visibly, but tending to the spiritual health of the community is necessary for positive community health outcomes. The next section pays attention to the negative implications of the festival to community health.

Godigbe festival and community Health: Potential Drawbacks

Increasing drug and substance abuse remains one of the major health challenges of *Godigbe* festival. During the festival, participants, especially the youth from both Ghana and Togo engage in the use of substances such as marijuana (weed), shisha, cocaine, red label, and low quality local liquors that may be produced with little oversight. These substances are used during street carnivals, beach and public jams, pubs and night clubs, and in the inner-city ghettos. These substances make the youth mentally unstable and aggressive, leading to youth conflicts. These result into bodily injuries, violence, and bloodshed. This phenomenon always affects the beauty of the festival and contributes to negative health outcomes. An informant reported:

One major outcome of *Godigbe* festival is youth conflict. The festival has consistently witnessed violent conflicts among different youth groups and ghetto boys in the community. Most of these conflicts emanate normally between ghetto youths in the community and youth groups from outside the Aflao community. The reason is always tied to romantic relationship issues with girls (ladies) and many of these young men who are under the influence of hard drugs tend to showcase their strength through fight (Source: field interview, November 2022, Aflao).

Closely related to the above problem is *road and motor accidents*. Due to the use of these hard substances, some of the youth who own motorbikes get involved in accidents. Aflao is noted for a commercial motorbike business known as *Zemidza*, an economic activity that spread across the border from Lomé (Togo). Thus, *Zemidza* is the most common commercial transport system in the town. Traders and other commuters patronize their services on a daily basis to trade across the borders. Under the influence of hard drugs, some of them ride recklessly, failing to observe road traffic regulations, leading to serious road accidents and their consequent injuries during the festival.

Environmental pollution is another health challenge of the *Godigbe* festival. Due to the high number of festival participants, their activities generate substantial liquid and solid waste. The health walk, street carnival, and other public performances generate plastic and other waste amid many other pollutants. The waste contaminates public spaces, gutters and nearby natural environments, escalating environmental hazards along the border region. The most affected places are the main border, market spaces, the Aflao lorry station, and the beach. A participant revealed:

One major challenge to the festival is environmental pollution. The level of pollution in the community leaves much to be desired. There are rubber bags, sachet water rubbers, plastic bottles and a host of other pollutants. You see them in market places, the beach, lorry station, streets. More revealing is the fact that the two refuse dumps in the community become highly filled, making the work very difficult to the Zoomlion officials. These officials must move



through the streets to sweep the place in order to keep the town clean. This is a major problem to the environment (Source: field interview, November 2022, Aflao).

Closely related to environmental pollution is *open defecation*, the open discharge of faeces that is common in areas without accessible toilets. Some visitors who do not have hotel accommodation or live in houses that do not have toilet amenities defecate near the town. Open defecation is especially common around the refuse dumps at *Avoeme* and along the diamond cement road leading to *Akporkploe* community, creating health problems to residents of the area. Unfortunately, these refuse dumps are closer to the lagoon where many locals engage in petty fishing. During the rainy season these faeces are washed into the lagoon and surrounding swamps, contributing to water pollution which affects the water biodiversity. An interviewee expressed:

Open defecation is one of the major challenges of *Godigbe* festival. Due to the increasing number of visitors and participants in the community, the various accommodation facilities get full. Those young people who do not have enough money to rent hotels and guest houses are left with no choice than to openly defecate around the nearby bushes and refuse dumps in the community. This is a major cause of air pollution and water pollution in the community (Source: field interviews, November 2022, Aflao).

The view expressed by the informant provides a clear understanding into the challenges posed by open defecation to residents and community health in Aflao.

Finally, *increasing sex work and indiscriminate sexual activities* remain one of the major health challenges of the festival. Data gathered from the field showed that Aflao is a volatile border community noted for different crimes such as armed robbery, theft, smuggling of goods, and sex work which sustains the livelihoods of many youths. During the festival, these activities intensify, with prevalence of sex work in an area called *Akakpodzi*, *Lowcost* and communities such as *Décor* and *Kodjoviakopé* astride the Aflao-Lomé border crossing. Similarly, non-residents also take advantage of the festival to engage in indiscriminate sexual activities. The festival has the potential to become a vector for the spread of sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis, gonorrhoea, and HIV/AIDS, which already exists as a canker along the border region. Though this study cannot prove the contraction of such diseases by festival participants, it is possible that the indiscriminate sexual activities and increased presence of commercial sex workers has the potential to spread these diseases. Similarly, this also has the tendency to increase teenage pregnancy cases, which can lead to injury and death with the improper use of abortion drugs. An informant argued:

The increasing nature of unprotected sexual activities among the youth is one major challenge of the festival as many young men and women indulge in sexual activities during the festival which brings about teenage pregnancy, unwanted abortions and other related health challenges especially sexually transmitted infections (Source: field interview, November 2022, Aflao).

This study therefore argues that sex work and indiscriminate sexual activities constitute a major health drawback of the *Godigbe* festival.



THE WAY FORWARD

The findings show that the *Godigbe* festival contributes to positive and negative health outcomes in the Aflao community. However, there is an urgent need to implement certain measures to curb the negative public health challenges. Informants argued that there is the need for rigorous *public education and awareness campaigns* as a strategy for curbing the negative impacts on society. Participants maintained that organizers of the festival must assign radio stations in Aflao to educate the youth to practice healthy lifestyles by observing road traffic regulations during the festival. Officers of the Drivers and Vehicle Licensing Authority (DVLA), and the Motor Transport and Traffic Directorate (MTTD) of the Ghana Police Service should be engaged to create awareness on traffic regulations and safe use of the road, and subsequently arrest motorists who disobey these regulations during the festival. In relation to youth conflicts, a border agent asserted that the *use of dialogue* should be encouraged among the youths as an amicable way of settling disputes rather than resorting to petty fights that lead to injuries and violence. This will help reduce youth conflicts during the festival. In addition, public education must focus on issues of indiscriminate sex, outlining its implications for individual and community health. An officer of the Municipal Health Directorate indicated that there must be collaborative efforts from the organizers of the festival and public health professionals such as Disease Control and Health Promotion Officers in the municipality to provide detailed education on the negative impacts of sex work and indiscriminate sex among the youth. Similarly, the organizers should engage the services of the Narcotics Control Commission (NCC) to educate the youth about the implications of the use of hard drugs. This is necessary as the NCC is mandated by the Ghanaian Government to combat drug-related crimes by promoting public safety to enhance a drug-free society.

According to a chief, the Environmental and Sanitation office of the Ketu South Municipal Assembly with the support of Zoomlion Ghana Limited should place *refuse containers* at designated locations during health walks and street carnivals to help curb the problem of waste and environmental pollution in the community. To achieve this, *community-based public announcements* should be made through public address systems on the mandatory use of these refuse containers. Again, during the health walk and street carnivals, intermittent announcements should be made to inform participants to eschew littering the environment and to deposit waste and other pollutants in the refuse containers. These measures will help reduce environmental pollution that characterizes the festival. A participant also pointed out that to curb the problem of open defecation the organizers must liaise with Zoomlion Ghana Limited in the municipality to place *mobile toilets* at designated places like lorry stations, the beach, and other related spaces that host big gatherings so that participants who want to ease themselves can use these toilets rather than visiting the nearby bushes and refuse dumps.

Finally, participants pointed out that the use of hard drugs is criminal in Ghana. They argued that though *prosecution* remains the conventional way to deal with this canker, other alternative measures and solutions such as *counseling, rehabilitation, and job creation* can be fine-tuned by the organizers of the festival engage with the youths who use hard drugs. In spite of this, some chiefs are of the view that due to the volatile nature of the border, a diplomatic approach to solving this problem will not achieve the desired results, hence, the authorities must face the issue of drugs head-on in the community before, during, and after the festival. The Ghana Police Service and the Narcotics Control Commission therefore must assume their responsibilities in the fight against drug use in the community.



CONCLUSIONS

This study focused on the *Godigbe* border festival celebrated by the people of Aflao, Ghana. Posing three research questions, the study sought to investigate the pros and cons of *Godigbe* in relation to public health. First, the study found that *Godigbe* was instituted by Togbui Amemaka Fiti IV and was first celebrated on 1 April 1967 to mark the migration and settlement of the people of Aflao to their present settlement. The festival is characterized by numerous preparations and rituals such as libation, prayers, sacrifices, and music and dance. In addition, the festival attracts participants from other parts of Ghana, Togo, Benin, and Nigeria, showcasing the rich culture and tradition of Aflao community. Findings also revealed that *Godigbe* is focused on a number of positive health outcomes such as community clean-up exercises, health walks and physical fitness, sporting activities, and spiritual cleansing and healing of the land by the deities and ancestors. These activities involve numerous participants, promoting social bonding, physical fitness, music and dance, and numerous bodily exercises to contribute to improving the physical health of participants. Priests and priestesses conduct spiritual cleansing of the community through libation, prayers, and sacrifices to heal the land from all evil deeds and protect community members from malevolent spirits and outbreaks of certain diseases. Finally, the study asserts that increasing drug and substance abuse, road and motor accidents, youth conflicts, open defecation, environmental pollution (waste), and increasing sex work and indiscriminate sexual activities portend adverse impacts of the festival to community health. To curb this menace, public education and awareness creation, youth dialogue, community-based public announcements, provision of refuse containers and mobile toilets at designated points and public spaces as well as counseling, rehabilitation, and job opportunities remain crucial response mechanisms to the adverse impacts of *Godigbe* in the Aflao community. The study concludes that *Godigbe* is a double-edged sword; it impacts constructively on health; and at the same time, promotes negative public health outcomes. Thus, chiefs, people, and other stakeholders must implement the response mechanisms in order to reduce these negative public health impacts and promote a healthy society.

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