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## AXIM KUNDUM: A PRELIMINARY SURVEY

J.K. AGOVI<sup>x</sup>Introduction

Every year between September and October, the people of Nzema celebrate their Kundum Festival. It is estimated that a total of about 154,000 people<sup>1</sup> from Dutch Sekondi to Half-Assini, a distance of about 300 kilometres, take part in this festival.

Not only are all these people (which include the Ahanta, the Evalue and the Jumoro) united by the Kundum festival, but, with very minor dialectical differences, they are also united by a common language - Nzema. The Ahanta spread from Sekondi to Agona with their traditional capital in Busua. The Evalue, which mainly refers to the Nsein-Axim traditional area stretch beyond the Ankobra to include Esiana and Atuabo. Beyin, the traditional capital of Western Nzema or the Jumoro, completes the picture.

Among the Nzema speakers of the West, the festival is known as 'Abisa'<sup>2</sup>. But from Atuabo to Dixcove in the Ahanta district, the festival is called 'Kundum'. Although throughout my enquiries no one was able to tell me exactly what "Kundum" means in the Nzema language, one reliable informant told me (and this was later confirmed by one of the 'Kundum Elders') that the word Kundum was rhythmically

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1. 1970 Population Census of Ghana, Special Report "D"  
(Census Office, Accra, 1971).
2. Nowadays the word 'Kundum' has spread to Western Nzema, and is used to refer to the festival as a whole. The word 'abisa' however, is being used in the context of the festival to refer to the creative artists - musicians, singers, drummers and dancers - who motivate the festival.

derived or inspired by the sound of the Edomgbole,<sup>3</sup> the most important drum in the Kundum ensemble.

In this article, we shall focus attention primarily on how Kundum is celebrated in the Nsein-Axim traditional area; and as far as possible, we shall also attempt to trace the origin of the Axim Kundum, underline its social and historical importance and finally describe its significance as a major cultural event among the Nzema of that area. In the course of our analysis we shall endeavour, where appropriate and applicable, to make comparisons, contrasts and provide evidence to substantiate the points we make.

Most of the material for this paper was collected at first hand when I went on a research trip to Axim during the celebration of the Kundum festival in September 1973. In August 1974, I spent a week in Axim to verify the information I had already collected. On both occasions, the Amanhene of Nsein and Lower Axim and various elders associated with the celebration of Kundum in that area were interviewed on tape. Various people and informants also volunteered information which was recorded; and photographs were taken and important rituals, ceremonies and events were observed.

#### AXIM KUNDUM FESTIVAL

Anyone travelling from Takoradi towards Axim will not fail to be impressed by the luxuriant growth of trees and dense forest which seems to guard the tarred road all the way to Axim. All at once, one is in the area with the highest annual rainfall in Ghana.<sup>4</sup>

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3. There are four drums in the Kundum Ensemble: Kuukuu, Apasoo, Adenhenle and Edomgbole. Each is distinguished by the sound it contributes to each performance.

4. The average annual rainfall in the Axim area ranges between 80-85 inches. The heaviest Monsoon rains are experienced between May-July.

Located between Latitude  $4^{\circ} - 5^{\circ}$  above the Equator and Longitude  $2^{\circ} - 3^{\circ}$  West of the Meridian, the Axim-Nsein traditional area has a luxuriant rain forest which contains not only timber, but also gold and diamond. The area is noted for the production of coconut, rice, cassava, plaintain and cocoyam. By the middle of August the heavy monsoon rains leave off, giving way to a relatively dry spell, which marks the beginning of the main harvesting and fishing season. It is at this time that the Kundum Festival is celebrated.

As we shall see, the very special timing of the festival is significant in itself. For, the immediate occasion for the festival secure when there is plenty to eat from the sea, farms and rivers of the area. But although there is this outward material bounty there seems to be a spiritual void in the society. The attempt to close this seeming 'spiritual void' may therefore be seen as the primary motif of the Nsein-Axim Kundum. As we shall see, through a system of organised dramatic symbols, events, ceremonies and rituals (which make up the sum-total of the festival), the Nsein-Axim society attempts to dramatize the reconcilliation of spirit and matter in the celebration of their Kundum.

### Origin

In the course of our research, it became clear that there was common agreement about the origin of the Kundum Festival. Among the Nzema speakers of the West, the festival is believed to have originated from Ahanta Aboade, a village on the Tarkwa-Takoradi road. According to tradition, it is in this village that the legendary palm tree associated with the origin of the Kundum festival is supposed to exist. The primary legend has it that in the olden days this palm tree used to ripen once in a year. With time this period became a symbolic calendar in the lives of

the people. In other words the ripening of the palm tree became the signal for the festival to begin. This explanation is so widely accepted that the Evalue and the Ahanta themselves acknowledge the historical and cultural significance of this village of Aboade.

However, in both Axim and Nsein, Kundum Elders and various informants were at pains to underline the fact that the Kundum or Abisa was brought into these areas by a particular family or Abusua; and that this Abusua did not (and still does not) belong to the ruling chieftaincy Abusua in these areas.<sup>5</sup> Thus it is believed that it was the Nvavile clan who introduced the secrets of the Kundum to Western Nzema; and that their totem - the Palm tree and the Parrot - bears eloquent testimony to their control and custodianship of the festival. In Axim, we found out that a branch of that family is called the MAJORI family. According to our main informant, Madam Kobinaba of Lower Town, Axim, it was her great, great, grandfather called Akoto Nyanzu who brought Kundum to that area. A hunter by profession, Akoto Nyanzu went to hunt one evening and was not seen again till three months later. He returned with Kundum. He asked his family to make drums. The drums were made and the Kundum was first celebrated for three months. It proved difficult to spend this length of time, so it was reduced to one month. Later on, the one month was further broken down into two phases: phase one lasted three weeks when artists, drummers, performers and old men versed in the art of Kundum isolated themselves to learn new songs, new dance forms, body movements and generally plan the artistic course of the festival. The second phase of one week sees the actual celebration of the festival.

For above account two impressions seem to stand out: the first; is the very interesting discovery that the Kundum festival was

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5. The major ruling families in the whole of Nzema from Nsein to Beyin traditional area, belong to the AHWEA or DOG CLAN. In Nsein, the Omanhene's crown is inscribed with the symbol of a dog with fire in its mouth.

originated by a family which is completely unrelated to the families which rule or occupy the stools in these areas. In the words of a member of the Majori family in Lower Axim, it is his family "which is responsible for the actual celebration of the Kundum festival with the help of the Omanhene".

(Emphasis mine). Infact, throughout the celebration of the festival, it was noticed that all the four drums used for the festival were always deposited, at the end of each day's activities, in the household of the Majori family.

This situation reveals aspects of the complex balance of power within the political system of the area. Given the traditional power structure of Amanhene, subchiefs, Court elders, clans, interest groups (Asafo Companies, Stool Custodians, Women's guilds etc.), it was very interesting to find that one family or clan - the Majori - emerge as the custodians or 'arbitrators' of the course of the festival; and further, as a result of their historical claims in relation to the festival, gain considerable political authority during the festival. By exercising supervisory powers over the main instruments of the festival, i.e. drums (of which they are believed to be originators); the Majori family seems to direct the festival in the sense of seeing to it that the festival is celebrated in accordance with established historical protocol. It can be said however that although these considerations are acknowledged and the Majori family in particular is tenacious of its prestige and power deriving from its principal role in the festival, it was very difficult not to realize that the festival has been transformed into a completely public affair involving the whole community.

The second impression is that the Kundum festival is a well-planned activity. It was obvious that a lot of skill and intelligence had gone into the planning of the festival. I was greatly impressed by the way in which people acted out their roles without

introduction prompting or stage-fright. No where was there a hitch. Everything was smooth and orderly. Drummers, dancers, singers and performers were there when expected and lived out their roles to everyone's expectation. Clearly, there was an organizing mind behind such a complex cultural activity. We found out that such a mind existed in a group of people known as Kundum Elders who were responsible for the <sup>actual</sup> planning of the festival. Although in principle these elders are responsible to the Omanhene they are in fact independent of Court since they are mainly artists whose primary objective is to see to the artistic direction of the festival. They therefore owe their ultimate allegiance to the festival hence their name - "Kundum Elders"<sup>6</sup>.

A better insight into how well the Kundum is a planned activity will have to begin with the "preparation stage" of the festival. As indicated earlier, although the actual celebration of the festival takes only one week, the total time spent on the realization of the festival covers one calendar month from mid-August to the end of October, in each year. During the period between August and October, each Kundum centre in Nzema and Ahanta land is at liberty to select one month convenient to the community so as to prepare and celebrate the festival. The selection of the appropriate time is done by the Omanhene in consultation with Kundum Elders and the family which is recognized as the Custodians of the festival.

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6. This situation of course further complicates the political relationships at the festival. The interesting thing here is that, the principle of diversity of roles in unison obtains. Political entities and various Kundum performance groups seem to know their limits during the festival, and so skilfully is this done that one is not immediately aware or even conscious of the highly volatile nature of social relationships which in fact obtain at the festival.

Three weeks of the selected month is usually set aside as the preparation period. Kundum Elders, artists and people with acquired knowledge of the festival go to live in isolation. This period of isolation from the community is appropriately known as "Eyele nu" or "Cold weather". Outside the community, in a place where no one other than those involved ~~would~~ know of their activities, they learn the relevant repertoire of songs and various dance movements which add beauty and artistic dimension to the festival. In addition, new songs are composed, new dance movements which add beauty and artistic dimension to the festival. In addition, new songs are composed, new dance forms initiated, old drums are repaired or replaced and costumes for various occasions are discussed in detail. Almost simultaneously, drumming and blowing of horns as well as anything which generally involves the use of musical instruments is banned. It is believed that if this ban is violated before the Kundum is outdoored, the legendary "Afakye" (who is believed to symbolize disease in the society) will come prematurely to plague the society with disease.<sup>7</sup>

### Outdooring

The first Sunday of the fourth week (of the appointed period of one month) is the occasion for the outdooring of the Kundum. In Axim, as we witnessed, it was a dramatic occasion. The time was about 8.30p.m. There is darkness everywhere, but the brilliant moon in the sky clearly reveals a beautiful stretch of sandy shore in Lower Town Axim.

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7. It is on the last day of the festival that according to belief, "Afakye" is actually expected. At midnight of this last day, the festival is literally "hooted out" or "Afakye is hooted out" symbolizing the spiritual emancipation of the society from disease and bad omen, at least for the ensuing year.



The waters of the sea had receded, giving rise to a beach-line which shone in the moonlight. A large group of women, men and children gather on the beach. Everybody is carrying a huge bundle of flame, made of coconut fibres. Meanwhile, the four drums are poised on the heads of four stalwart men. Suddenly the Edomgbole drum sounds. Three smaller ones join. Men's voices are joined together. The whole mass of people carrying huge torches, move as one man towards the town. Their song is simple and to the point: they sing of the origin of the Axim Kundum:

It happens today  
Gyanewa<sup>8</sup>  
Akotoko Nyanzu bring your  
flame<sup>9</sup> to celebrate Kundum,...

Gradually, the procession moves in majesty along a well-defined route on the beach for about four hundred yards; then the procession moves over the wall on the beach into town and is pitched at one spot. With the drums in the centre, the whole throng dance and sing around in a circle. What was interesting was that there was no attempt to carry the procession through the town. It was localized at one spot, which from enquiry was the household of the Majori family, the clan who traditionally is believed to have originated the Kundum. The drama of song, music and dance continues for about two hours. But the point has been made: Kundum has been outdoored.

#### Monday:

Nothing very much happens in the morning. But towards evening, every household becomes busy. Three heavy logs of firewood are

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8. Gyanewa was the wife of Akotoko Nyanzu who brought the Kundum.

9. The symbolism of this flame in the festival is complex. In its practical use, the flame serves to heighten the dramatic entry of the Kundum into the society. But in a more important way, the flame suggests the conflict between 'good' and 'evil' (darkness and light), a regeneration of a new type of energy and life force in the society, which are the most important recurrent themes of the festival. Finally, the symbolism of the flame recalls the political totem of the ruling family in the state the AHWEA (DOG CLAN) whose totem is 'dog with flame in its mouth. Symbol of power and sovereignty.

arranged in the open courtyard of each household. This is obligatory. By four o'clock in the evening, every household we visited had already made this arrangement in its courtyard. About 7.00p.m. or when it is sufficiently dark, the three amanhene in the Nsein-Axim traditional area and their divisional chiefs perform the ceremony of setting fire to the prepared firewood. Libation is first poured after the logs had been set on fire. Thereafter, all households surrounding the amanhene and their divisional chiefs are free to light their logs or go to the Ahenfie to gather the flames from there to their house. The logs so lighted will constitute a kind of "perpetual flame", which will be used throughout the festival in every home. All kinds of cooking both during the day and at night, which normally are done in the privacy of the kitchen, will, from henceforth, be done on the perpetual flame. In reality all meals cooked during this time are expected to be done in the open so that any member of the public who wants food can just walk in and help himself to the food on fire. For, it is a time of plenty when charity and hospitability abound. A deep sense of hospitality which is so much at the core of the way of life of the people is therefore given dramatic and symbolic expression throughout the festival in this way.

About 8 p.m. a gun is fired. It was now time to mourn those who had died in the course of the previous year. However, the privilege to mourn was restricted to only families or households who had actually lost members during the course of the year. We visited a few of such households and we noticed that the families concerned had organized funeral dirges to be sung in memory of their deceased. What was interesting was that all the mourners wore black costumes and actually wept, and the atmosphere was like a live funeral.

In effect, the "realism" of the occasion was symbolically commemorative being a dramatic expression of each household's sense of spiritual continuity with its ancestors and the dead. The overall

drama, thus embodies the symbolic gesture of renewing the society's sense of continuity with the past; affirming the relevance of the past (and therefore of history) to present and future developments. This is given concrete expression in the libation texts and dramatic acts which are enacted on this occasion. Of special interest perhaps was our discovery that the dirges were being sung in Ahanta - a fact which emphasises the Ahanta origin of the Kundum.<sup>10</sup>

### Tuesday

Early in the morning on Tuesday, all "black stools" in various households and families are outdoored. There is no mourning or open weeping this time, but the ancestors are remembered. In the secret enclosures erected in these households for this purpose, family elders pour libation to their ancestral stools. Prayers are said, sheep is slaughtered and fowls sacrificed. Members of the family who had travelled home for the festival as well as those who had stayed behind are given the chance to once again renew their sense of identity with the ancestors by providing drinks for texts of prayer to be said for them.

Immediately afterwards Kundum groups of children, youngsters and elderly women parade from household to household. These groups have no drums and they do not use any of the Kundum drums. For they are mainly singers and dancers who move from house to house singing the praises and genealogies of well-known families. Accompanying their songs were cymbals, dumbbells, rattles, gourds and whistles. The use of these musical instruments definitely gave dramatic intensity to the songs and dances being performed. But it was their costume which attracted me: the performers wore beads on their hands, necks and chests. Each also wore a white singlet from the top. The whiteness of the singlets was emphasised by the white powder which was liberally daubed on their faces, necks and chests. Immediately below the waist were short, red or crimsoned tunics which were heavily studded with

dumbbells. The red recalls the memory of the ancestors and white the joy of the living. Put in symbolic terms the two colours together seem to emphasise the people's belief in the continuity between the world of the ancestors and the human world of the living. The occasion therefore has a total religious significance in that it expressed the fact that the ancestors are a vital part of the world of the living community.

### Wednesday:

Like on Monday, nothing significant happens on Wednesday morning. About two o'clock in the afternoon however, a major event takes place. The venue is the Axim Castle.<sup>11</sup>

By 2 p.m., the Omanhene of Nsein and all his Divisional chiefs were ready at the boundary of Lower Town to proceed to the Castle. The Kundum drums were in front followed by the Divisional Chiefs, the Omanhene and members of the public. The procession was magnificent in colour and majestic in movement. On reaching the entrance of the Castle, the Omanhene was lowered from his palanquin and, together with his retinue (for members of the public were forbidden), he entered the Castle. The main event here was the pouring of libation on a grave in the Castle. In the accompanying text he recounted the history of the state, prayed to the ancestors and pleaded for unity and prosperity among his people. As the Omanhene later confirmed in his interview with us, his visit to Axim Castle was symbolically political. Long before the arrival of the Whiteman, all the lands of Axim belonged to Nsein and it was the Elders of the stool of Nsein who gave the land to the Whiteman to build the Castle on. It was therefore necessary and appropriate on this occasion for the Omanhene of Nsein to go to the Castle in his splendour and majesty to recount history, straighten the records and in that symbolic procession, affirm his sovereignty over all the lands in Axim.

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<sup>11</sup>. Built originally by the Portuguese in the first half of the 16th century, Fort. St. Anthony seems to dominate the Axim landscape. Later in the same century, the castle was captured by the Dutch who sold it to the English in the 18th century.

In addition, the occasion was also a unique opportunity for all the Seventeen Divisional Chiefs of Nsein to renew their political allegiance and to assure the Omanhene that there is still unity among all the stools of the state.<sup>12</sup>

### Thursday and Friday

Thursday and Friday are mainly days of rest. No event of any importance happens except that in the evenings, all the Kundum groups in the area come together at one spot where they drum, sing and dance traditional Kundum dances. These occasions are important to the youngsters both male and female. In practical terms, it provides an opportunity for the young to socialize, and it is not unheard of for prospective marriages to begin from here.

### Saturday

Saturday, the last day of the festival is significant. Usually, there is a durbar of chiefs in the morning but this really depends on which government official is willing to come. From 2 p.m. onwards, there is continuous drumming, singing and dancing at the Town Square. All the Kundum drums are fully exercised. Between 9 p.m. and midnight, the whole mass of people still in their festive mood begin to move towards the outskirts of town, this time carrying no torches. Instead, each one carries either a piece of stone, stick or wood, just anything he can readily throw away. On reaching the outskirts of the town a signal is given; the singing stops. . Drumming ceases too. Then, all of a sudden there a stampede, everyone anxious to run back. Sticks, stones and sand will flow into the outer darkness. No one looks back. Amid shrieks and shouts all run back swiftly to their respective homes. The Kundum has been "hooted out". Afakye, the symbol of disease and bad luck in the society has been expelled, and he goes away with the evils of the society cleansing and

purifying it for the coming year. This symbolic gesture therefore brings the Kundum celebration to an end. There is no more Kundum drumming, dancing or singing till the following year.

### Conclusion

Unlike the Aboakyr festival of Winneba and the Homowo of the Ga people, Kundum is not a festival which primarily emphasises the people's migrational history or reveals their agricultural success in a newly settled area. Kundum is primarily a cultural event, although there are observable socio-political levels as well. It provides occasion for artists and performing groups within the community to display their talents in diverse ways. It also provides the opportunity for the community to dramatise its way of life and reveal the social and religious values within it. In the end, the festival reveals that the people of the area cherish hospitality as a way of life, and value their relationship with their ancestors; and just as a sense of history is important to the survival of a people so also is a sense of unity and political stability important in the Nzema culture of the Nsein-Axim traditional area.