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## **The Role of Traditional Festivals as Forums for Action Planning, Advocacy, and Social Accountability Discourses**

### **Abstract**

*Sufficient evidence indicates that there are adequate policies and programmes that create the enabling environment to ensure that local people participate and articulate their views in the development process. The reality is that these policies and programmes are not responsive enough to the needs and demands of the people. This paper attempts to examine the potential of using traditional festivals as platforms through which rural communities can dialogue with duty bearers and make demands for development projects. Hence, analyses were made using a case study of a traditional festival in the Lawra traditional area of Ghana. The findings established that the traditional role of festivals purported to preserve and maintain culture, remember, honour and give thanks to God, the gods and the ancestors for their help and protection, is increasingly being influenced by government policies and programmes that call for community self-development initiatives. Prominently, traditional festivals are being used all over Ghana as platforms to plan and advocate for development projects and programmes. The study recommends that: local government use these forums to collect views on development actions; government policies recognize and incorporate the celebration of festivals into development action plans; and that relevant authorities use inter-festival sharing to promote best cultural practices.*

**Key words:** Traditional, Festivals, Advocacy, Social Accountability, Action Planning.

### **Introduction and Background**

*However far we go back in history and in whatever locality we find ourselves, there have always been a cultural identity that portrays our religion and practices, moral values, the chieftaincy institution, drumming and dancing, drama and art, and craft as a way of marking our traditional years. Traditional institutions (festivals) are often the embodiment of knowledge through which these cultures are expressed. It should be recalled that, centuries of old traditions of the people of Africa and the diversity of the distinct ethnic groups have created a rich culture that has become a lasting legacy of contemporary Africa (Kuada and Yao, 1999). Africa's ethnic groups are credited with the preservation of unique customs through their traditional festivals.*

Many people of Ghana joyfully carry on with everyday life despite the obvious poverty that surrounds them. The secret lies in the Ghanaian culture from which the citizens derive high-spirited attitude to life in general. Their hope and determination is reflected in various forms of traditional festivals found and celebrated by the diverse ethnic groups and clans in the country. These diverse festivals are depicted in the way of life of the people. They are pre-historic and characterize all traditional areas in Ghana. They reflect the rich diversity of history and culture of indigenous life in the various traditional groupings in Ghana. The manifestation of beliefs and practices associated with the supernatural is found in these festivals. It may well be, of course that, we find it difficult to understand the way of life of the people expressed in these events, yet they contribute to the revival of our indigenous knowledge and cultures that were previously marginalized and demonized (Ngoma, 2001). Certain styles and forms of music, art and dance have been privileged over the years, mostly at the expense of indigenous traditions (Suzanne, 2001). Festivals are, therefore, part of the strategies to revive these traditions.

Government policies and programmes over the years have also made attempts to create the enabling environment through which festivals can be used as platforms for dialogue with duty bearers (GPRS, 2003). Communities have therefore used these occasions to dialogue with policy makers and politicians for development projects (Nukunya, 2003).

Even though sufficient evidence indicates that there are adequate policies and programmes that create the enabling environment for local people to participate and articulate their views in the development process, the reality is that these policies and programmes are not responsive enough to the needs and demands of the people. Yet, some indigenous institutions (traditional festivals) are pertinent to ensuring effective community organization, communication and accountability systems in their societies.

In this paper, I intend to situate my discussions on first, a clear understanding of traditional festivals. I will then proceed to explore the conceptual framework of social accountability, action plans and advocacy in relation to traditional festivals and the extent to which festivals are used as platforms to plan and make demands from duty bearers. Analysis will also be carried out using a case study of one traditional festival in a particular traditional area, examining the background of the festival, when it is celebrated, activities involved, what goes into each stage of the activity, the planning process and the relevance of the festival. I will conclude by making an evaluation of the case study in relation to its role on advocacy, action plans and accountability and then make recommendations for policy action.

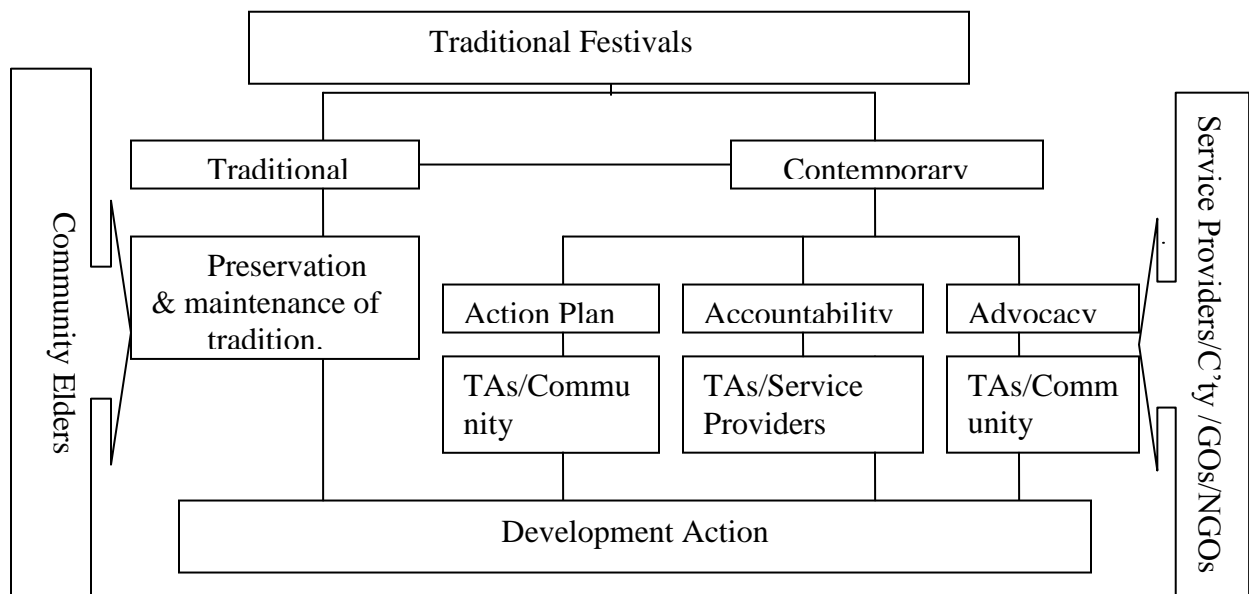
### **Conceptual Framework**

The celebrations of traditional festivals in Ghana are prehistoric. General agreement (Sriniva, 2005; Robin, 2002; Kader, 2004; and Nold, 1998) exist that the most ancient traditional festivals were associated with planting and harvest time or with honoring the ancestors. Folklorists believe that the first festival arose because of the anxieties of early people who did not understand the forces of nature and wished to placate them (Kader, 2004). According to Nold (2004), traditional festivals were supposedly celebrated to

preserve and maintain tradition through songs, drumming, dancing and art. They provided the opportunity for elders to pass on folk knowledge and the meaning of indigenous lore to younger generations. These celebrations are diverse and characterized by different ethnic groups across the country. As said earlier, these festivals have important religious, historical and agricultural significance.

In the contemporary period, the celebration of festivals goes beyond the preservation and maintenance of tradition to create a platform or an opportunity where communities invite and dialogue with duty bearers through advocacy for development projects. Besides, traditional authorities also use these forums to account to their people and also evaluate service providers on what they have been doing and what have been done so far in their communities. The outputs of these festivals eventually culminate into action plans with assigned roles and responsibilities to various stakeholders in the community. Figure (1) gives an illustration of the roles of traditional festivals

Fig. 1: TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY ROLES OF FESTIVALS



**Source:** Author's Construct

The role of traditional festivals in community development cannot be overemphasized. The illustration in figure (1) identifies two roles traditional festivals play (Traditional and Contemporary roles) in development. Drumming, dancing, art, songs, belief systems, values, norms and practices are vital components of culture that need to be preserved and maintained for posterity. Festivals were traditionally celebrated to preserve and maintain these aspects of culture. Hence, community elders and leaders used these forums to transmit values and belief systems and also pass on folklores to the younger generations as indicated by the arrow in figure (1) at the extreme left. In recent times,

festivals have gone beyond their traditional roles. They are consciously planned with concrete action plans and goals. The boxes at the extreme right of figure (1) illustrate the contemporary roles festivals play. In addition to the preservation and maintenance of culture, festivals create a platform for dialogue with duty bearers. Traditional authorities and service providers use these forums to give account of their actions in relation to development activities and also make passionate appeals for and on behalf of the community to governments, non-governmental organizations and politicians on development policies that bothers them. The general outcomes for both traditional and contemporary roles are to enhance and initiate community development programmes.

### **The Concept of Traditional Festival**

According to Nold (2001), traditional festivals are communal celebrations involving carefully planned programmes, outpourings of respect, rejoicing or high revelry, established by custom or sponsored by various cultural groups or organizations. In his view, they are generally designed to encourage the practice, preservation and maintenance of traditional dance, song, and art. In many cases, these festivals are celebrated to mark the founding of some communities through conquest, like the *Feok* among the *Builsas* of Northern Ghana. Hence, it is more difficult to understand traditional festivals that cannot be traced to any known event. It is a way of keeping an important event alive.

In another view Prah (2002) noted that, traditional festivals mark special occasions in which a community gathers annually to remember, honour, and give thanks to God, the gods and the ancestors for their help and protection. This definition therefore, agrees with Nukunya's (2003) argument that traditional festivals are associated with planting and harvesting of which the gods are approached for protection and good yields for the season.

This therefore suggests that numerous festivals would be celebrated across Ghana. These may be generally linked to thanksgiving for a harvest, commemoration of an event, paying of respect to the dead or celebrating a culture. In Ghana, all these are categorized into two main types namely, the harvest or agricultural festivals and festivals in memory of ancestors and past leaders. A festival may portray the traditional beliefs in life-after-death and the dependence of the people on their ancestors and the spirit beings. These beliefs are attested by the fact that during festivals such as the '*Adae*' among the *Akan* of Ghana and crossing of the cattle among the people of Mali, elaborate rituals are performed to propitiate and venerate the ancestors while soliciting all manner of assistance from them. Others such as the '*Homowo*' among the *Gas*, the yam festival of the *Ewe*, the *Kundum* of the *Nzema* and the *Kobine* and *Kakube* among the *Dagaaba*, among others, are celebrated to mark the beginning of a harvest season. The relevance of these festivals may go beyond enjoyment and the propitiation of gods.

In pre-historic societies, festivals provided an opportunity for the elders to pass on folk knowledge and the meaning of indigenous lore to younger generations. In recent times, festivals have created opportunities for communities to invite national leaders to their areas to put before them their social and economic problems. Traditional authorities also use this occasion to re-assert their authority over their subjects and carefully plan actions for their communities (Dubnick, 2004).

### **Action Plans**

According to Hawkin (2002), action plans are written documents describing the steps that a trainer, learner will complete to help maximize the transfer of learning. It is initiated prior to training intervention so that everyone who can support the transfer of it evolves from the beginning. This explanation describes an action plan designed by technocrats for the purpose of training others. It does not however describe actions evolving from the people themselves. The content and layout of the action plan should support the users of the plan and, therefore, must be initiated and planned by the user.

For the purpose of this paper, action plans would be referred to as outline of planned activities with inputs from stakeholders (community, service providers) agreed upon by a community (host of the festival) prior to a festival and after the festival spelling out roles and responsibilities to be carried out. An action plan by this description would entail discrete steps of the activities that are realistic and practical, measurable and attainable, with clear responsibilities and specific time schedule for carrying out and completing the activities, the resources necessary to complete the activities, as well as plans for acquiring those resources.

Prior to the commencement of festivals, communities are often faced with the task of having a firm idea of what activities would be running and the logistics associated with them. This, therefore, as a first step, starts with an initial planning session of the festival with inputs from traditional authorities, indigenous organizations and the community at large, as well as the District Assembly and NGOs operating in the community. The second plan of action is initiated after a dialogue on development actions with duty bearers and the communities have been reached and commitments made. This, therefore, culminates into composite action plan with assigned roles and responsibilities. Figure 2 is a sample of an action plan initiated after a development forum during the *kobine* festival in Lawra traditional area, Upper West region.

FIGURE 1: SAMPLED ACTION PLAN AFTER THE LAWRA KOBINE FESTIVAL.

Activity	Responsibility	Action to be done
1. Training of TBAs	Traditional Authorities (TAs)/GHS.	TAs liaise with clan heads to identify some women from the and submit their names to the district health unit for subsequent training.
2. Environmental issues	Town Development committees(TDC)/DA	The TDC will liaise with the clan heads and the District Assembly to mobilize their members for communal labour in cleaning and maintaining a clean environment in the community.
3. Personnel from community to trained as health workers	Clan heads/Ghana Health Services/District Assembly.	Clan heads to encourage their wards to be enrolled/pursue training in community nursing
4. Follow-up for support and pledges made by politicians.	Traditional Authorities/opinion leaders	The chief and elders and opinion leaders to contact appropriate quarters for pledges made.
5. Tree planting and employment generation for the youth.	Traditional Authorities/youth/groups	Initial action to be undertaken by the youth. They are to compile and submit names of interested youth to TAs who will in turn follow-up with the relevant institutions.
Group formation	Clan heads	Platform to be created for the various clan associations to form a community youth association
Dry season gardening <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formation of farming groups</li> <li>• Land acquisition.</li> <li>• Construction of dam</li> </ul>	TAs, Youth, and MOFA Farmers	-Farmers to put themselves into smaller farming groups -Traditional authorities to provide land for the construction of the dam and for the farming activities. -TAs will lead the community to seek financial and technical support from the relevant institution. Community to provide labour as their contribution,

**Source:** Development Forum of Kobine Festival, October, 2004.

### Social Accountability

Let us begin with the simple view of accountability implied in Anglo-Norman (1990). In this view, accountability is described as the condition of being able to render a counting of something to someone. It requires the accountable party to provide an explanation or satisfactory reason for his or her activities and the results of efforts to achieve the specified tasks. How such a condition gets established remains an empirical question. It can be imposed from outside through force or legal mandate; it can come from within, through feelings of guilt or a sense of loyalty. Whatever its source(s), the condition itself is a significant development in social and ethical terms.

Being accountable is thus a social relationship. Under Nozick's (2003) "ethical theory" orientation, the condition of accountability is inherently ethical. Nozick uses the label "ethical theory" to highlight a view of human behavior that sees action as the outcome of tensions between forces of "moral push" and "moral pull." In this regard, Nozick is relying on two great traditions in the history of ethical studies. On the one side is the Greek philosophical tradition with its stress on the urge to be a "good" and virtuous person - and thus the "moral push" to live up to one's values. On the other side is the Jewish tradition that emphasizes the need to respect the value of others - the "moral pull." Ethical action, Nozick argues, is the result when *moral push* is equal to or greater than the *moral pull*.

To put it more explicitly, our ability to understand organizational/institutional behavior will be significantly enhanced if we begin with the ethical theory assumption that actions result from choices organizations/institutions must make among contending values - values that create moral pushes and pulls in the broadest sense of "moral." Given this basic orientation toward action, the role of accountability in shaping these institutions/organizations becomes a central issue. In the light of the above argument, I will start by looking at other concepts of accountability and then situate contextually what I mean by accountability in relation to the role of traditional festivals.

Generally, social accountability is used to describe the process and procedures used to hold an organization/ institution responsible for its performance (TEA, 2001). It involves identifying the goals and objectives of an organization, measuring its performance, and comparing its performance to internal or external standards (Marsh, 2002). It also requires that an organization/institution provide an account (or justification) of its activities to another stake-holding group or individual. It presupposes that the organization has a clear structure on who is accountable to whom and for what. It involves the expectation that the organization would be willing to accept advice or criticism and to modify its practices in the light of that advice and criticism.

From the foregoing, social accountability for the purpose of this paper would be referred to as the platform (festivals) through which traditional rulers and duty bearers give account of their activities to their subjects. In this platform, traditional rulers and service providers are called upon to account to their communities. This takes the form of presentations and clarification of issues by the community. It also creates an avenue where a cross section of the citizenry of the traditional area makes demands on duty bearers and other organizations that operate in the area to give account of their development programmes in the area for the past years and make suggestions on how to improve upon development in the area.

The potential of using festivals as platforms through which citizenry can make demands on traditional institutions and duty bearers to give account on their actions have been

tested in Nandom and Lawra and Manya-Jorpanya traditional areas in the Upper West and Greater Accra regions of Ghana respectively by the Center for Indigenous Knowledge and Organizational Development (CIKOD), an NGO. The forum brought together chiefs and people, the District Assembly and NGOs operating in the traditional areas to have positive dialogue on their activities and performance over the past year and what can be done for the ensuing year. Hence, appeals are made to relevant stakeholders to support development activities in the area.

### **Advocacy**

The concept *advocacy* is defined variously by various actors depending on the context in which it is used. It therefore implies advocacy is not simply defined, as it should be outworked in a framework of principles and beliefs, such as a belief in the right of individuals to self-determination (i.e. be involved in decisions which affect them). A narrow definition as given by Nold (2003:35) as "*one who defends, vindicates or espouses a cause by argument, an upholder, a defender, one who pleads for or on behalf of another*", is not in keeping with current advocacy trends or philosophy. The term "advocacy" is defined by Suzanne (2001) to mean "*to be called to stand beside*"; to seek a solution with and for people with particular problems or needs, so as to enhance their rights and dignity; to influence the 'system' (e.g. the policies and procedures of agencies/governments) to change in response to people's needs; and to facilitate community organizations to represent the interests of groups of persons.

These definitions at least get hold of the concept and convey what advocacy should be, e.g. working in partnership and 'standing beside'. Advocacy in this direction is therefore needed to address discrimination, empower individuals through information, support and knowledge of their rights, for community action, increasing the quality of life of individuals and their families, making public servants accountable, and addressing inequity of service provision. Hence I posit that, advocacy is when one is not alone.

In line with the above definitions, advocacy in the context of this study would be referred to as making a passionate appeal for and on behalf of a group of people to governments, non-governmental organizations and politicians through a special forum – a festival. Generally, rural communities are often confronted with the difficulties in channeling their grievances to the appropriate quarters. Policy influencing through advocacy invariably has always been at the top with little or no participation at the grassroots level. As such, rural communities are least represented in decision-making on policies that affect their livelihood. They are mostly left in the 'wild' as to where, how and to whom to articulate their voices for policy inclusion. Of late, traditional festivals have been used as platforms through which the chiefs and people of rural communities make their views explicit for consideration in development policy formulation.



These festivals bring together decentralized departments of the district assembly, NGOs, politicians and relevant organizations where community's view on relevant development issues are made bare for consideration. For practical understanding of the above concepts (advocacy, accountability, and action plans) in relation to traditional festivals, I would describe a traditional festival (*Kobine*) celebrated in the Lawra traditional area, looking at the background, when it is celebrated, activities involved, what goes into each stage of the activity, the planning process and the relevance of the festival. This will give a clear picture and an insight into the discussion.

### **A Case Study of Kobine Festival**

This is not intended to trace the origin of the *Kobine* festival. *Kobine* literally means, "Farming Dance". It is celebrated among the *Dagaaba* in the Lawra Traditional area of Ghana. It takes place yearly between the months of September and October. It is generally celebrated to thank the ancestors for guiding them to the end of the farming season and ushering in the harvest season. This indicates that the time it is performed coincides with the end of farming. At this period all farmers should have reshaped their mounds and ridges and weeded all farms. It is believed that during this period if a farmer is bitten by a chameleon on the farm, such a farmer dies. Therefore, no one is expected to do farm work irrespective of whether the farm work is complete or not; the rest of the work must be abandoned. The period goes simultaneously with the harvesting of some crops e.g. groundnuts.

Prior to the festival, preliminary preparatory dance practices are observed in the evenings in all the surrounding communities of the traditional area and market days where rehearsals are made by various dancing groups in preparation for the actual date of the festival. As the season sets in, children also begin dancing in the compounds and playgrounds in the night. This practice is referred to as *dale*. The song of the festival is composed, usually two days prior to the rehearsals. The song usually covers historical events, socio-cultural and politically events and other discoveries. These rehearsals continue for six market days.

### **Planning for the festival**

The festival generally takes three (3) days to celebrate and brings together participants (dancers) beyond the Lawra traditional area, including politicians, NGOs and other stakeholders in development, hence the need for careful pre-planning. In terms of organization, under the leadership of the paramount chief of the Lawra traditional area, various committees made up of sub-chiefs, clan heads and representatives of youth leaders are tasked to agree on the days, the resources required and how to access them for the festival. For the resources, every divisional chief is tasked to provide a cow and a specified amount from their divisional areas. Citizens of the traditional area in other parts of the regions are also made to contribute towards the celebration. When all these resources are in place, the days are then set for the celebrations.

### **Celebration of the festival**

Formalities such as libations are performed at the Chief's palace to seek permission from the ancestors for the celebration. This is often performed by the earth priest (*Tingasob*). In the past the festival had no proper official opening until in the 1970s when the traditional council of Lawra and some prominent citizens saw the need, after series of deliberations, to give the festival a national recognition and wider publicity. It officially started on a selected Lawra market day for just a day celebration in every year. Currently, the festival takes three days to celebrate yearly.

Day one (1) marks the arrival of the various dance groups - *bawa* and hunters dance, *sissala* dance, *kalba* dance, the *buruburu* dance from Burkina faso, and the *sandema* war dance, among others.

Day two is the climax. The day is characterized by competition among the various dancing groups. These groups comprise children, adults and capable elderly persons. The dance groups wear costumes ranging from beads, white cowries, smocks, and decorated skins of animals. Musical instruments used in the dance also include *gojes*, round top of *pito* pots sealed with the skin of monitor Lizards. Wooden flutes and a horn of an animal are also used. In all, seven persons form the group drummers. The flute and the horn are blown in praises of the ancestors, the chiefs, clan heads and great men and women of their place.

Day three (3) mark the end of the festival. This day, until recently, was characterized by eating and drinking. The day three is used for a development forum. In this forum, various development actors (Traditional authorities, the youth, GOs, NGOs and politicians) are brought together to deliberate on development issues in the traditional area. This takes the form of advocacies, planning actions for the community, and how issues on development have been managed over the years. This platform gives Chiefs and elders the opportunity to re-assert themselves over their subjects; MDAs and NGOs give account on their activities in the area by making presentations about their activities in the traditional area and a feedback from the community. The forum concludes with an all-round action plan for the traditional area, as a measure of the extent of development in the traditional area to be discussed in the successive year.

### **Evaluating the Festival**

One major significance of festivals in Ghana is that they afford the people of a community the chance to correct past mistakes and to plan the future. During this celebration, the chiefs and other members of the community appeal for funds for such development projects as schools, libraries, health centers, streetlights, and so forth. These festivals also attract tourists to the community, from which some income may be generated for the traditional area for local development.

In terms of religious significance, the festival serves as a period of thanksgiving to the Supreme Being (God) and pacification of the gods, as well as the ancestors. In sum, the festival is also meant to strengthen the people spiritually and to enable them to be successful in the coming year. The occasion also offers citizens of the area the opportunity to visit the homeland at least, once in a year to join their families. In the course of these visits, outstanding disputes and misunderstandings could be settled. This therefore, promotes unity and peace within the family system and the community as a whole.

Culturally, the festivals help to transmit, conserve (maintain), and project the culture of the traditional area. The celebration is also used in learning the traditional dances, songs, drumming, and art of the area. This is very important form of cultural education because no society should forget its culture.

Politically, chiefs use the festivals as a means of promoting the principle of governance by consent. This, they do, by giving account of the events of the previous year and making projections for the coming year. They also afford an opportunity for subjects and sub-chiefs to pay homage, and renew their loyalty to, the paramount chief.

## **Conclusions**

The traditional role of festivals purported to preserve and maintain culture, remember, honour and give thanks to God, the gods and the ancestors for their help and protection is increasingly being influenced by government policies and programmes that call for community self development initiatives. Therefore, communities have resort to the use of various strategies for self-development initiatives in their traditional areas. Traditional festivals are increasingly being used all over Ghana as platforms to plan and advocate for development projects and programmes. These festivals bring together decentralized departments of the district assembly, NGOs, politicians and relevant organizations where community's views on relevant development issues are made bare for consideration. The efforts to use traditional festivals as platforms for development still leave much to be desired for traditional festivals are still breeding grounds for chieftaincy disputes and political talks. We, therefore, need to consider seriously using traditional festivals as the most participatory forms of engaging with duty bearers devoid of political ambitions and ulterior chieftaincy concerns.

## **Recommendations**

As stated earlier, the celebration of traditional festivals is an occasion where all sons and daughters within and without come home to rejoice, and discuss development issues in the area. It therefore suggests that views at this forum are cross-cutting and well represented. I therefore recommended that: local governments use these forums to collect views on development actions; government policies recognize and incorporate the

celebration of festivals into development action plans.eg local government to set aside special budgets to support the planning and celebration of festivals and; inter-festival sharing of best practices (conflict resolution, gender issues, and community health messages).

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