

Rural Tourism in Ghana: Potentials and prospects of Asebu Traditional Area

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Abstract: Rural tourism is an emerging strategy for cultural heritage and sustainable development in most rural areas. The Central Region is touted as the tourism hub of Ghana, however, there are still a number of communities which have not been discovered or if discovered have not had their potentials fully harnessed. Asebu, the home of the Legendary Amenfi, few kilometers from Cape Coast, the Central regional capital, possesses the requisite environment and cultural landscape needed for viable rural tourism industry. This paper aims at assessing the potentials and prospects of rural tourism in the Asebu Traditional Area. With trends like increasing levels of awareness, industry partnership, heritage and cultural education, improved accessibility, the prospects of Asebu as a tourism base can be realized and subsequent community development achieved.

Key words: Rural tourism, Asebu, cultural heritage, cultural legacy, community collaboration, community development.

I. Introduction

Recent visits to The Patajevesi Old Church and Struve Geodetic Arc, Oravivouri, both located in small rural communities in the province of Jyväskylä, Finland really struck me and I readily accepted the assumption that, heritage tourism is the emerging trend to developing the economic potentials of rural and smaller communities. According to the 2017 Jyväskylä Tour Guide, this historic site receives not less than three thousand tourists every summer. Interestingly, the Patajevesi Old Church is a 17th century building whose structure is made of logs but has been preserved till present day. This building is the only prominent historical legacy for the Patajevesi community, but the community and its development stakeholders have been able to create a robust and viable rural/heritage tourism around it. Its economic benefits are enormous and a visit to this community tells the story. There are other examples of these historical cultural sites in Jyväskylä, Finland. However, in Ghana, there are communities that possess two or more of such ancient sites but have not had their potentials of being promoted as possible tourist's sites fully assessed and harnessed. These communities are ironically brandished as communities with no economic resources for development; poverty has therefore become the order of the day. One of such unfortunate communities in Ghana is the Asebu Traditional Area. This paper is an attempt to assess the tourism potentials of this area and suggest ways by which rural tourism as a community development strategy can be realized. The discourse of this paper revolves around these key thematic areas;

- a. the major historical and cultural landmarks in the Asebu community.
- b. the potential tourism business opportunities available to community.
- c. Key barriers impeding the development of cultural tourism activities in the community.
- d. key rural tourism intervention that may be applicable in the community.

II. Review of Related Literature

In recent years, tourism has been touted as a possible tool that can assist improve the socio-economic problems confronting rural communities. The main appeal for the development of tourism as a tool for socio-economic development in indigenous communities, may well be due to recent tremendous increase in the number of international tourists, especially from developed countries who are willing and have the financial ability to travel to various destinations including visiting indigenous communities in far off Third World destinations. Akama (2000) in his study on new trends on tourism in Kenya concludes that Third World will continue to increase in the foreseeable future in the area of tourism. He observed that in recent years, the tourism industry is increasingly being perceived, in many quarters, as a major growth sector which has great potential in assisting ameliorate the developmental problems that are confronting indigenous communities in Africa in particular. An emerging phenomena in the tourism industry is cultural/heritage tourism especially in rural communities; where such communities package and commodify their heritage and cultural activities as tourist's products. Cultural

heritage is seen as the legacies and other intangible attributes of a society. The definition given by Wikipedia is more profound. It describes Cultural heritage “*as the legacy of physical science artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations*”. It goes on further to list some aspects of Cultural heritage which includes tangible culture (such as buildings, monuments, landscapes, books, works of art, and artifacts), intangible culture (such as folklore, traditions, language, and knowledge), and natural heritage (including culturally significant landscapes, and biodiversity).

Cultural heritage serves as foundation for local Identity- a sense of belonging to that cultural set-up (Siivonen, 2015). This cultural heritage can and should be recreated to meet the daily life needs of the people. Through the recreation, culture is preserved as well as creating economic opportunities for its people. One of the best ways of preserving heritage is commoditising it and creating the possibilities of showing it beyond the boundaries of one’s community. Tourism as a rural development strategy can serve this purpose by opening up the community’s space for a larger number of people. People from urban settings have a new vogue for knowledge about traditional ways of life, arts and crafts and experiencing the unexplored (Seaton,1994). Rich in traditions of culture, arts, artefacts, and naturally scenic landscape, Asebu can emerge as the new hub for travellers and sightseers. According to Lane (2009), Reid (2001) and Shaffer (1999), rural tourism has the capacity to:

(1) establishment of new employment opportunities and alternative sources of income for rural people; (2) retention of economically active population and young people in rural areas, lower migration outflows; (3) establishment of a market for local agricultural and organic products, local specialties and products of folk crafts; (4) preservation of the natural, environmental and cultural heritage of rural areas. The Asebu community stands to gain these benefits and more if this cultural enterprise is introduced and fully operationalised.

III. Methodology

Situating the study within the theory of cultural functionalism by Malinowsky (1944) the study employed basic qualitative methods to assess the potentials of tourism industry in the Asebu Traditional Area. The theory of cultural functionalism treats cultures as organisms and demonstrates how specific customs and institutions, heritages are interconnected and ‘function’ to maintain a total system to the benefit of the society. The theory examines culture and other cultural practices in their own small-scale terms rather than seeing them as survivors of inferior development stages.

Participant for this study were grouped under three (3) main categories namely; Royalty, Indigenes and Non-indigenes. Royalty denoted persons belonging to the bracket of chiefs, queen mothers, clan heads, linguists and members of the Asafo companies. Indigenes referred to respondents who hail from and are living in communities within the Asebu Traditional area. The last category represents persons who come from different towns but have resided in the Asebu Traditional Area for more than (5) years. **Purposive** and **simple random** sampling methods (Patton 2001, Dawson, 2002) were employed in selecting participants for the study. Interviews, observation, participation performance practice and focus group meetings were some of the techniques used to collect data for the study. There was an extensive transact walk within the traditional area and its environs. Main activities undertaken to do the assessment process included but not limited to:

- a. Community and sites assessment.
- b. Visitation to potential ecotourism sites.
- c. Observing and participating cultural activities.
- d. Assessing of key and basic infrastructure needed for tourism industry.
- e. Assessing the readiness of the people for such an economic venture.

The methodology adopted for this work created a clear picture of the local cultural identity of the people and how it can be packaged as economic commodity in creating sustainable development. Both tangible and intangible cultural heritage of the people were fully assessed and are seen as good source of tourists’ products.

IV. The Asebu Traditional Area

The Asebu Traditional Area is in the Abura/Asebu/Kwamankese District in the central region of Ghana. The Asebu Traditional Area can be found at southernmost part of the district named above. It shares boundaries on the west by the Cape Coast Metropolis, on the north by Abura Traditional area and on the east by Nkusukum Traditional Area. The Asebu Traditional Area is made up of eighteen (18) communities or towns each presenting a unique touch to the entire historical culture of the traditional area. These communities are Asebu Amantsindo, Moree, Amosima, Mmiensa, Ekroful, Putubiiw, Sordoful, Abaasa, Apewosika, Old Ebu, Mframandwe, Ohiaba, Asekyerebedzi, Brafoyaw, Fawomanye, Amponsie Pataase and Akonoma. The people of

Asebu refer to themselves as Fantis but historically have a connection with the old Egyptian Empire. Subsistence farming is the main occupation of the people in the traditional area with crops like Maize, cassava, sugar cane, orange and yams as some of the main crops. Most of the women are into the production of “Fanti kenkey”. The areas along the coastal side are also noted for fishing with a lot of settlers due to the fishing activities. This rural community can boast of as many as five different natural/historical landmarks, artifacts and rich cultural activities that have the potential of making a beautiful tourism business for the benefit of the community and the people at large. A baseline survey conducted on a section of tourists in Ghana especially around the Central region indicated that, few knew about the Asebu community and the potentials it wields as a tourism enclave. This is the reason for selecting the community as the focus for this paper study.

V. Findings and Discussions

Factors for potential rural tourism industry in Asebu

i. The Amenfi Factor

The cultural hero often plays a prominent role in the historical narratives and performative formats of remembering the past, shaping current situations and projecting into the future. Heroes condense history in persona and thus make history adaptable to the individual members of a memorial community. The history of the people of Asebu surrounds Amenfi; Amenfi has become the embodiment of the peoples’ history.

The Asebu Traditional Area has a legendary rich history revolving around Amenfi, the founder of the Asebu State. Amenfi, whose origin is traced back to the house of Pharaoh; a scintillating history which can be equated to the great works of Alexander the Great and other famous individuals who fought selflessly for their people at the peril of their own lives. According to oral tradition, Amenfi was a giant whom many have described to be in the stature of Goliath. Aside his physical stature, it is said he possessed special super natural powers which enabled him carry out many things which were out of the ordinary. His conquest and ability to bring his people together under harsh realities and opposition is worth listening to. This historical figure left a number of legacies-both tangible and intangible within the Traditional Area which can be used as a base for heritage/rural tourism coupling with his life history. Most of the cultural activities-rituals, ceremonies and other life related events revolves around his history and persona. Sadly, this cultural hero has not been touted much and his feats remain within the small corners of the Asebu community.

ii. Historical/Cultural Sites

Obokesedo is a beautiful rock located in Amanstindo, the capital of Asebu Traditional Area. Oral history has it that Amenfi farmed along the banks of this river. He used to sit and relax on this stone after working on his farm. He also mostly sat on this stone to plan the protection of his kingdom.

The beauty and wonders of this rock is that, it has the foot prints (especially the toes) of Amenfi. It is said that, his strength and constant use of the place caused the stone to have those markings. Another beautiful sight on this same stone is the mark the legendry’s testis made on the stone. On this stone is a wonderful spot that looks exactly like the drawing of the male organ (the penis and testicles). According to oral history, most often, when Amenfi finished working on his farm, he will bathe in the river after which he will sit, probably naked on this stone under the sun until he was dried. It is believed that as a results of regularly sitting on this stone ‘naked’ his manhood left those marks on the stone which has become one of the main cultural landmarks of the people.

The Amenfi Sword

Located at Abura Dunkwa, on the banks of river Asokwa is a sword believed to have been used by the giant in his escapades. This sword or rod is believed to possess special magical powers which he used in his conquest. According to oral history Amenfi thrust the sword into the ground and it has forever remained so. All attempts to “uproot” it have proven futile. According an informant, there was a struggle over that parcel of land between the group of people and Asebus. To show his strength and powers, Amenfi pierced the land with his sword and challenged his opponents to pull it off. The condition was that, if they were able to pull off the sword then they could claim ownership of that parcel of land otherwise the land will forever belong to the people of Asebu. As much as they tried, they could not pull it out and so they called a truce and left that area for the Asebus. This sword has remained in that position till date and has become of the main historical sites for the people. With the accompanying history, it is a beautiful sight to behold.

The cover stone

Around the same river, Asokwa is a big rock which has finger prints believed to be that of Amenfi embossed on. There is a big cave on the bank of this river. According to oral historical accounts, after Amenfi and his men took total control of the area after piercinghis sword, he decided to hang around the place to fully secure the

place and ward-off other intruders. It is believed that, while on the watch, he slept in the cave during the nights and used the said cover stone; a big flat-like rock to seal the entrance of the cave. Logically, each morning he will lift the 'gate' before coming out of the cave. It is conjectured that, the constant lifting of the stone each night and morning left his finger prints perpetually on the surface of that piece of rock. This rock/stone has thus become a part of the cultural and historical landmarks or sites for the Asebu State.

iii. Cultural Artifacts

Twene Kwabena

Twene Kwabena is a sacred drum of major importance and historical value to the people of Asebu. Like the Golden stool of the Ashantis, the people of Asebu see this drum as their very soul of existence. Oral history makes us understand that this sacred drum was a personal property of Amenfi which he acquired through his friendship with a fetish priest. According to key informants, Amenfi was given this drum to keep as the soul of Asebu Kingdom. This drum has been passed on from generations to generations and has remained one of the main historical artifacts of the people of Asebu.

iv. Cultural Activities

Apart from the above stated tangible cultural and historical goods, Asebu has rich cultural activities that can equally be packaged as cultural commodities for tourists' consumption. The major amongst these cultural activities is the Apayemkese festivals. Apayemkese is a week-long celebration with varied cultural activities and rituals. It is held in November every year.

Apayem, this signifies a period of Passover, where clan members go there, around their shrines, that's *Akrono* which is believed to be a communication point when the living speaks through their ancestors for protection, success, good yield, fortunes and so on and so on, singing dirges and pouring of libation slaughtering of sheep which is cooked with fresh yam for the season, showing appreciation to the gods and ancestors, people put in their needs to be satisfied by donating cash and drinks to the family linguist to pour libation for the success of their demands. (Nana Mbrom, Gyaasehene of Asebu Traditional Area).

Apayem is a festival used to remember the dead and usher in new food crops, where the gods are fed with new yam and other farm produce. It is a very colourful event especially on Saturday which is the grand durbar. The main purpose for the grand durbar is showcasing the traditional culture of the people. It is also to take stock of what they have achieved as a people within the traditional calendar year.

VI. Barriers to sustainable rural tourism in the Asebu

The re-use or utility of culture in both tangible and intangible forms can be at times best economic factors. They can be used to create businesses in local communities with proper management (Brendon & Mayo, 1999). Rural tourism has been promoted as a holistic approach which aims to bridge the poverty gap between urban and rural settings. However, there are grave barriers combating the successful application of this development approach. In an attempt to find the reasons for the community's inability to harness the great potentials of cultural business in Asebu Traditional Area, the following were revealed;

- Limited awareness on various cultural business potentials
- Lack/limited interest in cultural related businesses due to low level of education.
- Lack of capacity to run cultural business, in this instance, cultural tourism.
- The problem of accessibility to most cultural and historical land sites.
- The fear of displacement of cultural values and ideals.

Some rural folks are too cultural adherents, holding on firm to their culture and other cultural practices. These people do not give the slightest inkling to the "*culture is dynamic*" parlance. The fear of negative impact cultural business will have on their local culture has thus become a major barrier to sustainable cultural business in their community. Their perception is that, if not properly managed, cultural business may lead to undermining of local traditions and ways of life.

VII. Strategies to develop tourism economy in Asebu

The study has identified rural tourism as an effective tool to attract investments and promote interest in rural ways of life, traditions and local identities of rural communities. However, there seem to be a level of ignorance or disregard for these prospects in rural tourism. This is corroborated by Page and Getz (2015) that in many

parts of the world, tourism organisations and their promotion focuses on urban areas and resorts and specific approaches to tourism planning and other application in rural context have attracted comparatively little action. The following strategies can work in the case of Asebu.

- **Local level conscientisation**

Rural folks need to be conscientise on the usefulness of their cultural assets. An avenue for discussing issues of such nature must occasionally be created to expand the knowledge of rural folks on the usefulness of their local culture and heritage.

- **Promotion of tourism potentials in the community-** Rural communities with beautiful and special landscape have often been reduced to sightseeing areas rather than being viewed as distinct and important tourism products. There should be a conscious paradigm shift from viewing these areas as mere sightseeing products which does not really affect the communities' economic development. These cultural landscapes should be consciously promoted as potential tourists' sites.

- **Collaboration between local community and industry players**

Like any community cultural development project, the Asebu community requires collaboration between them and private sector or individuals in order to carry on the vision of churning their cultural heritage to development avenues. After introducing community folks to the importance of their cultural landmarks, monuments and numerous artifacts they expressed interest in going a step further of tapping into the development advantages but the funds and know-how become huge stumbling block. Collaborations are ways for communities to make productive use of their land and resources by bringing in capital and technical know-how which they most often lack (Adams&Goldbard 2005). It is a way of engaging with expertise and exposure to outside ideas which have potentials of enriching the rural community.

- **Periodic cultural related events within the community**

Cultural events are central to how people celebrate their heritage in many ethnic groups and are thus a tool for community organization in communities where such celebrations are valued. Periodically planning and organising such activities within the community will raise the consciousness of the people toward their culture. It is likely to also attract people from neighboring communities to witness and learn of the great culture of the Asebu community. This is also a strategy for increasing support of local culture, thus, offering programs and events that encompass the range of styles and types that people who participate identify as their culture.

VIII. Conclusion

Cultural legacy are the legacies of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a group of people or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefits of future generations. The historical and cultural legacies of Amenfi constitute a major part of the Asebu cultural resources which can be used as a means for a potential community cultural enterprise. Culture should not only tell us who we are but what we can also do. Culture presents us with a project which we could design for a living.

Rural tourism is a rural enterprise to preserve the decline traditional culture by indigenous people as well as providing gains. In this scenario, it can be considered as a perfect model for the revitalization of culture through the promotion of tourism. A key finding of this study is that, the tourism potentials of the Asebu community have not even been tapped. One of the objectives of this study is to use the cultural heritage preservation as means of creating development avenues for the Asebu State. It is the view of the researcher that, events surrounding Amenfi's legacies can be used to create a very viable rural tourism for the benefit of the Asebu state and Ghana as whole.

Pearce (1993) opines that most coastal, mountainous and rural areas are favorable destinations for adventure seeking tourists. He further states that tourism could serve as means of redistributing wealth geographically from rich metropolitan areas to poor ones. Considering the first part of Pearce's submission, Asebu is a fine rural area with all the landmarks, artifacts and culture which can attract tourists. A community like Asebu which lacks several development resources should take a strong advantage of their tourism potentials. This will be in fulfillment of the World Trade Organisation (2003) recommendation that, areas where local conditions are not strife for development of other economic activities should take advantage of their landscape, climate, water and cultural resources as raw materials. Richards (2007) makes a stronger case for the tourism development of Asebu when he asserts that the presence of large collection of cultural artifacts, historical landmarks, architectural monuments, coupled with the large stock of entertainment plants, make rural areas major tourist markets, with the propensity for holiday-taking being highest there. Reviving Asebu and its environs could therefore be achieved through tourism promotion. Respondents made it clear during the interview sessions that,

mostly people especially students come to the community for sight- seeing but sometimes people who will lead them to the various sites become difficult. The road leading to the various sites are bushy and bad. Already people have heard about the place and are interested, once the community and development partners focus on issues such as customer service, partnerships and packaging opportunities, education, branding and marketing, in no time, the community will be flooded with a lot of tourist for the social and economic growth of the community.

The festivals; Kae Ako, Apayem, Apayemkese and the various associated rituals can also be commoditised as cultural goods which can be of high economic value to the Asebu State. Cultural tourism represents an area of significant economic benefit to museums and heritage sites. Challenging economic times in particular require cultural and heritage facilities to explore ways and means to increase attendance and self-generated revenues and to develop its potentials. Rural tourism is as a means of promoting environmental protection and meaningful cultural interaction, while still achieving significant economic growth and must be encouraged for the benefit of rural communities that possess the factors of creating such. Asebu is a suitable base for rural tourism. The community with its numerous land sites, historical monuments and relics has the capacity of being turned into a little rural tourist site. Successfully achieving this will open up the land space to receive the numerous clients that will visit there. Direct and indirect jobs will be created and this may reduce the movement of the youth from the area to big towns and cities in search of jobs. There will be booming economic activities. Farming which is the main occupation will be supported since the demand for food will be high.

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