

Festivals, Farming & Twins

Dear Friends,

September in Ohio brings the beginning of autumn and children returning to school. September in Akrampa, Ghana is also the beginning of a new school year for our students. In Ohio or Ghana, most of the kids are happy to return to school and their friends, but the students in Akrampa have the extra blessing of returning to school knowing that they will have breakfast 3 days a week. This is thanks to you, FLC and Bethesda, and friends of our mission!

September is also going to bring another event to get excited about, the Second Annual Global Day of Worship at FLC on September 29th! I wish that I could be there to celebrate with you! But I know that Pastor Rosy, Brian and the Ghana Committee will do a wonderful job. I hope that all of you will attend to share in the fun. If you are new to the church or unfamiliar with our Ghana mission, I invite you to read all of my past articles. I'd like to thank Brian again for keeping all of my articles posted there. You can read the entire story of our mission from the beginning. Articles can be found by going to: www.firstlutheranlorain.org

We are thankful to God for the purpose of our mission, to make the presence of Jesus Christ real in the life, thoughts and practices of the people of Akrampa. It's a journey that has been led by lots of prayer. It was a deliberate struggle against all of the odds on the road to spiritual, social and physical/material emancipation. Thanks to the Lord Jesus for doing what only He can do: set the people of Akrampa free (Isaiah 61:1-3) - and for all who believe in Him to have life in abundance (John 10:10).

We have had the opportunity, again and again, to tell the story of their deliverance from illiteracy and economic and social disadvantages that have gradually opened up lives in Akrampa. A people who had lived for most of their lives serving a fetish, 'traditional gods', and unhelpful cultural & traditional practices. There is continued joy for me, and the people of Akrampa as they learn that Jesus can and will set them free.

The people of Akrampa are called **Fantses**, this is the **ethnic group** that I also belong to. But the people of Akrampa belong to the **clan** called **Efutus**. The clans all hold annual festivals, each celebrated in towns or by groups of people from the same clan. Some towns do band together to celebrate the same festival. The people of Akrampa, in the Efutus clan celebrate the festival called **Akomase**. The Akomase festival is celebrated to thank the 'gods' for the land providing in plenty. This means plenty of food harvested by the farmers and plenty of fish caught by the fisherman to feed their families.

Festivals are held in August each year and since the children are on summer vacation from school it is an opportune time for them to fully participate in the fun and merrymaking. It's kind of a carnival time, with masquerading and the perfect time for the gathering of family members home and abroad to meet to discuss issues for the strengthening of family ties and settling of disputes.

Except for a few instances and episodes of match-making outside the family, it is at this time that men find future wives as well as women, their future husbands; and, the occasion for marriages to

take place. In our system and part of the world marriages are conducted in the family home, after which, if the couple so desire, they can have a Christian ceremony - wedding - to enhance their social status.

The Akomase festival recounts the greatest historical famine that ever struck the community and how their ancestors were able to use a systematic agricultural process to combat the affliction, eventually ending it with bumper harvest. During this celebration, one emphasis of their life and cultural belief is the attention they draw to the cultural, social, and religious significance of performing rites for **twins**.

Let me explain this, as I know that in the USA twins and multiple births are both common and considered a wonderful blessing to the parents and family. Although what you are about to read is shocking and heartbreaking, it is just one more reason that our mission exists in Akrampa to bring Jesus Christ to the people.

The Efutus belief is that it is **normal** to give birth to a single baby, and **evil** to have more than one at a time. In the not too distant past (some three centuries ago), when a woman gave birth to twins or multiples, she was considered a witch. Her husband would divorce her and the babies would be buried alive. Or if the husband chose to stay in the marriage to a woman who had twins (or multiples) the children would be sacrificed to the 'gods' to ensure that twins were never born again into the family.

There's actually a book titled, "Things Fall Apart", written by a Nigerian (Chinua Achebe) that says that the '**Igbo tribe**' destroyed twins when they were born, a practice that the Efutus of the Akrampa/Bereku traditional area had continued. The Efutus are part of the larger **Guan clan** that is believed to have migrated from the East, from Nigeria, to settle in Ghana, so it is not surprising that their descendants also practiced this dreadful tradition. However, over time, the people of Akrampa moved away from destroying the babies. They began to perform rites to, as it were, **cleanse** the twins of any evil and make them acceptable in the society.

This special rite of **appeasing** the 'gods', and **cleansing of the twins** is so elaborate that the whole community is involved in it. The ceremony starts at the home of the twins and the people walk and dance in the streets, some appearing to be **possessed** by the spirit of the 'gods', as they carry vessels containing specific items for sacrifice on their heads. The street procession ends at the shrine of the 'god' where the priests of the shrine will perform the rituals ostensibly to **purify** the twins to live in the society. The act of cleansing of twins, as they are done in the particular homes, is done on the day of their birth (Monday through Sunday) throughout the week. Then the following week, Saturday, is set aside for the whole community to come together and do it at the shrine. The rest of the day is spent socializing, with partying and merrymaking of all sorts. It is an annual event.

This practice was one of the research requirements for me in a college class to earn my Masters Degree. My studies and surveys of the people revealed that among some of the devotees of this **cleansing** were some individuals highly placed in the Ghanaian community (CEOs, and other upper echelon of the society, even a few church goers). One respondent of the survey I undertook explained that he initially didn't believe in the significance of the rite, but after submitting to it, he realized that certain setbacks in his life were completely removed, he believed in the efficacy of the process.

In modern times, for every set of twins (triplets, quadruplets, etc.) the process of cleansing starts soon after birth - to preserve them before they become part of the yearly ritual - and continues their entire lifetime. The yearly ritual for a twin only stops when the individual becomes a **committed Christian**, who personally believes that they are as pure and as good as those born alone. That child/adult twin has to come to the personal belief that God is the Giver of children, and that all children are Christ's heritage to mankind. This means that, even though a few of the committed Christians may be present in the festival, they don't participate in the rituals. It helps them to appreciate their specialness in the society in the sense that they are not 'normal', single-born children. The twin that is born first is described as **ata panyin** (literally, 'senior twin') while the other that follows, in the birth process, is described as **ata kakra** ('junior twin').

From a Christian Pastor and mission view, yes, we are concerned about the people worshipping 'idols'. But before we could help them and teach them the truth we needed to understand their fears. We realized that because of their belief in those things they understand as 'spiritual' about twins they would be afraid to stop practicing the cleansing rites. When a child who was a twin entered school their status in society was affected by these 'rites'. The people did **not** understand or believe that twins and multiple births are a biological/genetic phenomenon and something that our Lord Jesus sees as a blessing. We needed the people to understand this truth first, and then teach them to understand that God, as the Creator of the world, is the one who made man and that to have twins is not an evil thing as their 'traditional gods' had taught them.

By the Grace of God our mission has been able to break the fear, among most of the people in the Akrampa community, of the traditional belief that twins are evil and until the 'gods' cleanse them, they are considered unacceptable in the society. That, to our joy and encouragement is evidence enough of the power of the Gospel of Jesus (Romans 1:16) that brings salvation to all who believe.

In the recent past, twins (and multiples) had not only been barred from benefiting from education but also denied their rights of existence. But currently in our mission school, there are twins, who are functioning as normally as every 'single' child. We are fervent in the hope, and trust that our great God continues to move among the people of Akrampa, freeing them from the shackles of beliefs and practices that kept their forebears from prospering.

Blessings, Pastor Ben