

FESTIVALS IN AFRICAN COMMUNITIES AND THEIR FUTURE PROSPECTS

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Abstract.

Festivals have been part of the human society with origin in religious beliefs, historical events or some socio-political desire for social bonding; a part of traditional “theatre of old” which inseparably forms part of man’s existence and intent to express a need that will bind him together with the society and culture. Although festivals are seen almost in all corners of the earth where human beings are found, African festivals are richly embellished with masquerading, dancing and singing. Festivals in Africa can be categorised as festival of the rites of passage, festival of the feast of the farming cycle, occasional festivals, festival of deity worship and ancestor veneration. Not only that they generally provide education of the young towards an understanding of the cultural life and traditions of the people, festival remains a major communal event that expresses the people’s general philosophy, attitudes, culture, norms, and the likes which receive general acceptability and participation by the members of that community and non-members who watch the celebration. However, African festivals’ performances are tilting towards commercial ventures with the founding traditional ethos dwindling. This paper therefore explores the future of African Festivals. Personal observation and literary approaches were explored. Despite having helped in unifying people and providing opportunities for communities to showcase their history and tradition through the display of the various aspects of their socio-cultural heritage, festivals most likely with new technologies, could steer to business venture.

Key words: Festival, Festival performance, Carnivals, Future of African Festivals, Iri-ji.

1. Introduction

Unequivocally, the black man is emotive and intuitive. He is a man of dance, of rhythm and song. The attributes ascribed are characteristic constituents of African festival which is a shared “dramatic experience” which expunges communal flaws and heightens therapeutic catharsis in the celebrating community.

Festivals have been part of human society “and have their origin in religious belief, historical events or some socio-political desire for social bonding” (Akporobaro 2006, 366). Festival is a part of traditional “theatre of old” which inseparably forms part of man’s existence and “intent to express a need that will bind him together with the society and culture” (Ogunsuyi 2001, 26). Although festivals are seen almost in all corners of the earth where human beings are found (examples are Tasobi, agricultural festival of Japan, the Mithra festival of Iran, the Batoro festival which the Ugandans celebrate in commemoration of their goddess’ Durga, who achieved war victory over Mahisa), festivals richly embellished with masquerading, feasting, singing and dancing are

notably the most common communal activities in Africa. Festivals in Africa can be categorised as “festival of the rites of passage, festival of the feast of the farming cycle, occasional festivals, festival of deity worship and ancestor veneration” Duruaku (1997, 24). While Akporobaro (2006, 366) contends that festivals provide “education of the young towards an understanding of the cultural life and traditions of the people”, Odogbor (2004, 1-2) argues that festival remains a “major communal event that expresses the people’s general philosophy, attitudes, culture, norms, and the likes which receive general acceptability and participation by the members of that community” and non-members which include spectators who stop over or travel to watch the celebration.

Before now, celebration of festivals is communal involving everyone and demands the contributory support of every paraphernalia office. Human movement and technological development have increased interpersonal, inter-racial/ethnic and inter-national contacts thereby bringing about trans-cultural hybridity. More people have become involved in festival celebrations than ever. Today, the celebrations have gone beyond social affairs to include economic benefits. Governments, corporate bodies and individuals now invest and have various degrees of interest in festivals. One can now talk of carnivals, tourism and other terms drawing from festivals. Exploring the possible benefits derivable from festivals, Mokuolu and Lukstins in an undated online article titled “Understanding the Festival Scene in Nigeria” sponsored by British Council opine that

Festivals are perceived by the government as part of the culture and tourism agenda that addresses the government's development plans for creative industries development, social cohesion and job creation. Calabar Carnival and One Lagos Fiesta both function as state governments’ social and economic engagement with their population by bringing communities together and generating revenue for the local cottage industries through domestic and international tourism.

Rivera (2008) *et al*, and Rogerson (2015) in their articles “Economic Impact of Cultural Events: The Case of the Zora! Festival” and “A ‘Rite of Passage’ Youth Festival in South Africa: The Origins, Attendees and Organization of Matric Vac” respectively allude to the great economic benefits accruable from festival celebration. Again, these extended benefits have diversified the scope of festivals outside the traditional cultural thing.

Coming from the on-going, this paper then explores the future of festivals in Africa.

2. Festival in African Communities

Festival in this paper is seen as a shared “dramatic experience” which heightens therapeutic catharsis in the celebrating community by the fact that “the individual spectator becomes aware that others are having the same experience” (Perrine 1988, 827).

Oftentimes, some of the festivals celebrated in the African communities have to do with initiation: admission of certain people into a new group. This process involves passage rites in which initiates are introduced and taught the demands of their new status. This shows that festivals as alluded by Duruaku (1997, 25; 17) and Akorede (2006, 56), are educative and as Peters (18) posits, the “hallmark of a good school is the extent to which it kindles in its pupils a desire to go on with the things into which they have been initiated when the pressures are off and when there is no extrinsic reason for engaging in them”. Festivals in African communities therefore primarily educate community members on their customs and common heritage and further prepare the young for a better and more informed adulthood. To a great extent, festivals extract and join the positive traits in individuals to build a positive, peaceful and progressive community.

Festivals in community life can metaphorically be associated to creative dramatics and be made to share some basic objectives which according to Umukoro (2002, 13-14) include encouraging self-expression which leads to self-discovery; promoting self-awareness and diminishing negative self-consciousness; and facilitating social integration through group interaction and a sense of mutual understanding. These objectives are found in the kind of instructions passed on to new age grade initiates or some other like groups as part of ritual rites during some community festivals to ensure mutual respect, co-existence which eventually lead to communal growth and social development. This educational value is made explicit in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* when it states thus:

Festivals possess an educational and social as well as religious character. In primitive cults having no written records, seasonal recital of mythology at festival time serves the function of transmitting traditional lore within the tribe. Festivals bind a religious group into a unity that transcends family and local ties. (708)

In his concise study of *African Oral Literature*, Akporobaro (366) puts it more directly when he contends that “creatively and aesthetically” festival fulfils “the desire for education of the young towards an understanding of the cultural life and traditions of the people” involved. He further attaches “the survival of the society” as one of the “very important roles” festivals play. This implies that as successive generations imbibe, appreciate, celebrate and transmit festivals, they are not only sustaining the society, they are also preserving the society.

In most African communities, it may not be very possible to exclude ritual from festival as rituals often form an inseparable part of African festivals. This idea Clark-Bekederemo explored from the Ozidi saga to create his ritual drama, *Ozidi*. Zulu Sofola in a distinct picturesque demonstration demonstrated this ritual affiliation with festival in *King Emene* during the extant declaration of the ‘peace week’, a festival of the Olinzele people. Historically, Ogundeji (2000. 3) acquiesces that rituals “emerged from the attempts of the primitive man to grapple with the problem of his environment, nature and his very existence”. Some of those actions performed by primitive men yielded desired results and the men repeatedly performed them at similar needs. To appreciate as well as to attract blessings and seek protection from the “benevolent forces” against the “malevolent forces”, the early man instituted festivals. Ogunsuyi (2001, 27) acknowledges this notion and quickly adds that these practices “arose as a result of man’s intent to express a need that will bind him together with the society and culture”. He notes that this action “was so at the dawn of human civilization and has consistently expressed that need ever since”.

This cultural bound stems from man’s realisation of his emptiness outside his root - nature - which ritual epitomises. Ogunsuyi (27) opines that “the primitive roots of this theoretical tradition are to be sought in the festivals and religious rituals, which abound in the many Nigerian communities”.

Festivals, overtime, have served as unifying factors for people, oftentimes providing avenues for resolving community’s nagging conflicts. This is exemplified in people forgetting their differences and coming together in one festival spirit of celebration in communities where festivals are celebrated. Odogbor (2004, 1-2) sees festival beyond sustainable peace and remarks that “festival provides opportunity for the community to showcase her history and tradition through the display of the various aspects of their socio-cultural heritage”.

Ogunba (2000, 53-66) observes the ritual acts embedded in these festival celebrations and categorically calls the celebrations “ritual drama” and affirms it to be that “drama which emerges from the traditional festival”. He emphasizes ritual drama as a drama of music, masking and dance which relies on mime and symbolism staged in the open air with its sacrificial rites performed indoors to exclude a non-participating audience (non-initiates). For its essence in understanding better the ritual acts embedded in African festivals, Ogunba (54) captures it more succinctly when he writes that:

Ritual drama is a drama of music, masking and dance. It relies heavily on mime and symbolism, and the high point of performance is often the attainment of possession in dance, a state of ecstasy in which the dancer is transfigured and is in perfect union with the god, goddess, spirit or ancestor being celebrated.

Ogunba further identifies the stage locations of ritual-drama to be special locations where spirits and man may meet. These locations include “outskirts of a town or village”, “market areas”, “road junctions”, “historic places”, “particular routes” “women’s cult houses”, “houses of offenders”, and “water surfaces” (55 – 57). There are copious instances of the above locales in African communities where the scenarios are often replicated in festivals of different nature.

Appearances of masquerades are common sights in the African festivals. Often, the masquerades in their bid to entertain, whip some members of the spectators or exhibit some acts which cause section(s) of spectators to scamper for safety. When this happens, Imo (2007, 38) portents that “an aggrieved mask-bearer (masquerade) can be easily appeased when the name of his mask is echoed consistently by the generality of the participatory audience”; a situation where appellate are chorused in rhythmic crescendos. This, no doubt, is one of the highlights of African festivals.

Festivals are believed to provide explanations to sociological, demographic, cosmological and religious life in a human society. This helps to explain and re-enforce communal relations and harmony even in crisis situations with the realisation that all belong to one cosmic family regardless of demographic dichotomy.

When the festivals are not celebrated in the right spirit, the community is accused by the ancestors to have been “abused by descendants with warped ambition; the community goals forgotten! /Abandoned! /[And the community members become] strangers in [their] land; a people with no culture! No history! No identity! (Duruaku 2009, 47). It therefore implies that in community festivals, faithfulness is seen to be a must to communal course or communal ritual bond. A sacrilegious breaking of the bond or non-adherence to it attracts what has been seen to be “irrationality of ritual archetype” (Layiwola 2001, 119), a form of capital penalty when one derails from the course. Ritual archetype is a major constituent of most ritual festivals.

3. Celebration and participation in festivals

Whereas festivals are individual occasions identified with unique characteristics, their celebration animates their essence in a community life and continuously relays and refurbishes the etymological ethos in the life of a celebrating community. Participation in festivals could embody the ritual participants who are initiated members and passive participants who mainly constitute the crowd gathered to watch the festival celebration. The nature and recognition accorded a festival often determines its degree of celebration and level of participation. This in clear terms acknowledges that there are minor and major festivals in Africa.

When we talk then about the celebration of the festival, it will be noted that no single individual can make a community. While a group of individuals constitute a community, it is a peaceful community that celebrates festivals. Clark (2006, xxxiii) considers the period of festival celebration as one that occasions “general gaiety and bustle, [which] brings together in a holiday spirit men and women, relatives and friends, that for a great part of the year are in separate places”. In recent times, distance, ethnicity, religion or nationality is no longer a threat or barrier to the participation of festival celebration as tourists often troupe out to witness festivals where they often get involved or immersed in the rituals of dance, music, songs and other folk elements which are intrinsic parts of the festivals.

Shola Balogun in his article, “Theatre Aesthetics in Pre-Colonial Africa” presents a vivid picture of ritual dance and further illustrates the composition of aesthetic folk elements in African festivals thus:

It is considered that aspects of ritual dance are participatory and communal only as far as they bear the collective worldview of the people whose customs they represent. This “collective unconscious”, as Catherine Acholonu puts it, is central to the whole enactment: “The (ritual) dances of a people are group representations of their collective worldview, born out from their folklore, their memories, their fears and aspirations. The dancers demonstrate feelings that are buried in the collective unconscious, through ritual enactment the dancers and the audience partakes in an experience, which is at once mythical and real, religious and secular.” This is experienced often in the Ohafia *war dance* of Abia State which is ecstatic in movement. It is also seen in the Ese ancestral dance of Mbaise, Imo State which is believed that people whose fathers are alive or those who did not do necessary burial rites to their dead fathers cannot dance. The *Okorosha* masquerade dance of Orlu and Agu *Okonko* of Umuoparakuru, Umuakagu Nsu in Ehime Mbano also constitute images of ritual dance which can be considered mythical with secular coloration. Often, only the initiates are involved in the core dances with the audience filling the background.

4. An overview of *IRI JI* (New yam celebration) in Igbo land

IRI JI is from two root words - *iri* (a verb meaning to eat) and *ji* (a noun meaning yam). Over time because of their impact they have come to be taken as one word *iriji*, *iri-ji* or *iri ji*.

IRI JI is a popular festival in Igbo land which signifies the end of agricultural planting season and ushers in harvesting period. It offers a great opportunity for the people to give thanks to their God (god of bountiful harvest) for seeing them through the season and blessing their labour fruitfully. Anything that tries to prevent this annual festival or thanksgiving is often perceived as evil. Chinua Achebe in *Things fall Apart* (2008, 29-41) notes that “New yams could not be eaten until some had been offered to these powers (gods, goddesses and ancestors). Men and women, young and old, looked forward to the New Yam Festival because it began the season of plenty – the new year”. The festival is celebrated with a huge feast, indigenous dances from different groups and traditional wrestling by various age grades and at times with the grand by the strongest wrestlers in the community. Till date, in different parts of Igbo land, masquerades and dances are integral parts of the celebration and the period abhors any form of quarrelling and unpleasant attitude. In Igbo land, places like Arondizuogu and Mbaise are renowned for festive *IRI JI* celebrations. In other parts, the *Igue* festival of Benin Kingdom is synonymous to the *IRI JI* festival.

In different parts of Igbo land, *iri ji*, *iwa ji*, *nrim ji* among other derivatives or nomenclatures are used for *IRI JI*. The name used in any dialect does not diminish the nature or value of the festival. It is royal in nature where the king or community head in his full royal regalia and insignia welcomes a mammoth crowd which include their guests to the feast. In ancient times, the chief priest(s) offer(s) ritual sacrifices to the gods (supernatural or creative beings and ancestors) before the yam was eaten but today, thanksgiving is offered in churches or a central worship place before the cutting and eating of the yam. The king eats the yam (which is often roasted) first, an act that declares open the feast and eating of yam in the community. As a principle, the yam tubers used at the *IRI JI* festival must be ones cultivated and harvested in the community and not bought from markets outside the community. These tubers often are big. This remarks gestures of appreciation and thanks-giving to the God who gives good harvest. Often, people who harvest and keep large yam barns are given such title as *Ezeji* (king of yam).

Guests and tourists to the festival are entertained with different dances, music, wrestling, masquerade, cannon shots and other displays.

As noted earlier, the *IRI JI* festival does not discriminate: young and old, men and women, indigenes and foreigners, free born and outcast (*di ala na osu/ume*), royals and commoners take part and constitute a special guest to the event. It offers an opportunity for sons and daughters to come home and especially with their friends and relatives.

5. The future of festivals in Africa

Promotion or publicity of the celebration of African festivals in the past used to be a community affair through oral announcement of dates and programmes as decided by the King's cabinet. This oral announcement by the town crier often served as a confirmation of festival information considered now as open secret. The cabinet sits and decides the date/period of the festival which obviously has a stipulated programme of events. This practice remained a sole publicity method before radio and television came into being to complement. However, the advent of social media have helped to broadcast traditional festivals and their celebrations across shores in most diversified, popular and often personified and incarnated reportage thereby increasing participation and audience to the festivals. This has encumbered the celebrations with some social activities not originally part of the festivals and has further made the celebrations a marketing ground for individual artists and activities alien to the festival ethos. The marketing focus has attracted corporate interests and further steered the wheels of African festivals with new technologies from the core purposes of commemorating historical events, honouring ancestors and reviving as well as promoting the cultural traditions of the host communities to a vision "to develop, consolidate, build the independent sustainability of and promote African arts festivals and cultural events as key platforms to nurture, celebrate and project excellent and emerging African artists and creative work, nationally, regionally and internationally" Kapambwe (2014, 72). Festivals now wear the look of carnival.

In recent times, the introduction of social/cultural carnivals has tried to demystify the mythical nature of some of these festivals and ritual dances. This has been made possible by bringing together in a carnival form(s) different masquerade groups, dance groups, other cultural and special groups in a festive mood. Today one can talk of mass/popular culture, hybrid culture and "transculturation" which is an eclectic change that results from the osmotic fusion or permeation of (two) different cultures. These terms are wholesome signification, symbolisation and a corpus of social practices that preserve those principles not limited to the spirit of endogenous/indigenous ethos. Recently, in a popular form, football fans costumed masquerades in the colours of two English elite football clubs, Chelsea and Arsenal. The pictures were so colourful that questions of label, cultural cum sports tourism and sponsorship were raised.

Today, governments, corporate bodies, entrepreneurs and individuals now invest heavily in cultural tourism. This is because according to Rivera *et al* (2008, 4), culture has become a major economic force, and part of a nation's amenities that enable it to compete for investments and jobs. The use of cultural festivals as an instrument for tourism development has gained worldwide momentum in recent years. For this reason, many festivals are used by tourism promoters to help increase demand for tourism and at the same time recreate the image of a destination that contributes to its market position. In this regard, *egungun fishing festival*, *Osun Oshogbo festival*, *Seigbein festival*, *Okonko festival* among others have thrived.

Festivals through cultural tourism and carnival have also yielded more revenues to government and provided income to numerous individuals (especially youths) who engage in them because of marginal funding provided by government for the development and promotion of arts and cultural heritage as Hood (2004, 18) posits:

In addition to their cultural and social values, cultural events have emerged as an instrument for tourism development, tourism seasonality expansion, city image improvement and boosting regional economies. This funding has provided more than \$25 million in grants for artistic and cultural activities that generated a total of \$135 million in direct spending, \$42 million in wages, and another \$165 million in indirect spending. This strategy has turned the arts and culture into one of the region's top employers, with approximately 1900 employees.

The foregoing could actually be a pointer to the future of festivals in Africa. Festivals have gradually tilted towards commerce with investors knocking. The face of festival celebration has also changed on account of

what Cudny *et al* (2012, 705) called “cultural geography” which they argue “focuses on mutual relations between people and the natural environment. It mainly studies the impact of human activity on the geographical environment, the phenomenon of culture diffusion, as well as the creation of cultural regions and culture ecology”. This idea earlier identified in this paper to have given rise to “popular culture” is in turn giving commercial definition to festival celebrations.

Investments in cultural festivals today are not mainly to propagate them but more to yield economic dividends and this adversely is affecting the propagation of some festivals. Without strong patrons therefore, some festivals might wither or their celebrations be left in the hands and control of the very few locals who still see festivals from the traditional perspective.

Festivals like every other aspect of life should be serviced to ensure continuity.

The future of festivals in Africa can be seen to be moving from being a vehicle for man and ancestral relations to a human economic development affair and venture. In this line, an undated online British Council report titled “Understanding the Festival Scene in Nigeria”, considers the strength, weakness, opportunities and threats of festivals in Nigeria and submits thus:

Festival organisers, stakeholders and general members of the public are extremely positive about festivals, as a vehicle for social cohesion, artistic development, economic enrichment and/or as a viable business. The main opportunities identified included the abundance of high quality artistic talent in Nigeria, the size of the population available as potential festival goers and the already existing culture of celebration and ceremony in Nigeria. The main weaknesses as identified are based around the skills deficit of operational and technical events staff and a major threat is the limited understanding of the benefits of festivals by sponsors, government and local businesses.

The area of threat here explains lucidly the possible future of festivals in Africa as steered by commercial or financial motives. This is not a condemnation of investing in festivals, but commercialising the celebrations at the expense of their traditional significance poses some danger. Most African festivals exhibit the folklores of the people and their celebrations further help relay and preserve the community’s historical life. Where they are found not worth patronising, there is a danger threat.

At this point, it is pertinent to state that the future of festivals in Africa has assumed a “Y” shape. Depending on one’s interpretation, it comes from a purely traditional practice and tilts towards commercial ventures on one hand and bastardised or ambivalent social events. From another perspective, it can be said to be filtering into a purely commercial social tourism with Zero bias to the traditional nuances of the festivals. An instance is the festival of Essaouira in Morocco which has been retuned to bring about a revival of Gnawa North African music. According to Kapambwe (72), the “festival is originally an expression of worshipping rituals ... [which] sacred dimension has also given rise to small-scale tourist flows. Such enthusiasm led to the construction of multiple resorts and restaurants, whose luxury services are far from the original spirit of the festival”.

As earlier noted, commerce and economic benefits are the driving forces of the new festival-carnival and as such their marketing means have been structured to align with the prevailing and endearing technological means. To this effect, Kapambwe (72) further submits that:

With the increase of online banking and mobile money payment apps, African festivals have capitalised on attracting more festival goers by selling advance tickets online via their websites. Festivals like *Lake of Stars* in Malawi sell tickets almost a year in advance, which helps to oversee attendees plan their trips. *Sauti Za Busara*, which occurs in Zanzibar, east Africa uses mobile money payment app Mpesa to allow festival attendees to purchase tickets. *The East African festival* encourages more locals to attend by offering cheaper ticket prices

From the above, one can unequivocally submit that the future of festivals in Africa will be purely commercial venture put together to provide employment for the teaming African populace looking for business

opportunities and daily bread. This would then remove festivals from ritual and religious functions, historical and ethnographic principles as well as cultural and moral values which they hitherto provide.

6. Conclusion

This paper has explored festivals through their essence in African communities. It observed as noted by Adom (80) that traditional festivals are social events which serve as avenues for propagating the rich cultural heritage of local communities. These festivals “are primarily celebrated to advertise and reaffirm the place identities of local communities of which their cultural identities, thus, their norms, beliefs and moral values are vividly espoused during the occasion”. Festival celebrations have gradually moved from being entirely a ritual adherence to communal focus to a global experience (popular culture) with cultural tourists contributing to the purse of the investors. The paper raises an observed view of the future of festivals in Africa which tilts towards commerce (through carnivals and cultural tourism) to the sheer neglect of their social relevance and therefore recommends that festivals should not be invested in merely for economic gains but also efforts should be made to propagate them. A religious celebration of the festival greases it against rust and extinction. Since Festivals are an integral part of the people’s lives, their extinction may mean people are not in full existence (Obasanjo 1977, 6). This is because “festivals are cultural events that are used as mediums for creating and sustaining community values that are seen as indispensable in building societies. Thus, when the youth attend traditional festivals, they learn many important values which help them to develop personally while assisting them in fully participating in activities geared toward the development of societies” (Adom, 80).

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