**TOURISM AND NIGERIAN TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS**

**BY**

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**Introduction**

Traditional theatre refers to the art forms which have their origins in the people’s culture and express their belief system, worldwide view, wishes and aspirations. It serves several functions within the society. Its educational value is embedded in its nature as a repository of the mores and traditions of people. Certain modes within its confines are used to explain life, the reason for events, the people’s origin and history, as well as other philosophies of life. Traditional theatre imparts positive values through the exploration of crime and punishment using satires and straightforward criticism of deviant behaviours. Even when such presentations are couched in symbolic terms and the characters basically animals, the human idiosyncrasies under attack do not remain unidentifiable.

The social function remains in its ability to exercise some level of control on social behaviours. No member of the community wants to lend himself to be ridiculed or lampooned. As such, they consciously curtail or exercise restraints in their actions, even when they are done in secret. Once a recalcitrant behaviour is made known; the individual involved is publicly disgraced or might even be ostracized. The entertainment value of traditional theatre is predicated on its ability to hold attention, please the senses and suspend all worries of life, even beyond the period of presentation. More so, because it often employs dance and music and the audience plays a second role as participants. The potency of traditional African and Nigerian theatre as tourist attractions lie within their entertainment value. They include festivals, music, dances rituals etc.

Traditional festivals are of concern to this work.

Tourism is an industry and an endeavour which involves the movement of people, sightseeing, travelling to take time off work, searching for distractions or diversions with pleasurable natures. It equally entails the satisfaction of curiosities concerning peoples of other geographical location and acquisition of momentoes and curios for re-living the memory of events and visits. Tourism possesses the capacity for satisfying man’s inert and natural enthusiasm for new experiences and knowledge. It is an enterprise which is intricately and intimately woven with the entertainment industry.

There is a gradual realization that tourism is a potent vehicle for the preservation of our cultural and artistic heritage. This may have informed the inclusion of tourism as one of the avenues for the promotion, of conservation and dissemination of the Nigerian culture. To lend credence to the above, a Ministry was created specifically for Culture and Tourism. These facts become obvious when duly assessed the great tourism potentials lying unexploited in our culture and traditional theatre, especially festivals. Having discovered these potentials and the fraternity between tourism and culture, many countries, the world over, have explored the components of their indigenous art and cultures; culminating into popular celebrations and festivals, for economic, social and political gains. For instance, it is reported that in mid-October, a strange transformation, where shop windows are filled up with pumpkins, skeletons and spider webs is often witnessed in many cities in France. These are all part of the celebrations known as Halloween (formerly an American Holiday). In fact, the whole of Europe seem to have embraced Halloween and from the Bahamas to Hong Kong and Japan, the festival is celebrated with ecstasy.

Even in areas where Halloween is not celebrated, there are other festivals with similar contents and form. This includes Britain’s Guy Fawkes Night, Taiwan’s colourful Lantern Festival and the Mexican Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). With regards to Halloween, a representative of the cultural institute of Barcelona-Spain once said that the Halloween is a festival that is being implanted from a commercial point of view. This may not but unconnected with the fact that the previous year, the festival receipts were estimated at about $6.8 billion in United States alone. In France, a company which specializes in the production of Halloween costumes saw its business increase a hundred-fold.

If festivals can create such enormous resources with far-reaching economic importance, pertinent to explore and exploit the myriad of festivals existent in our nation towards this end. It is the concern of this work to prescribe strategies for the attainment of same in Nigeria and Africa.

**Festivals and Audiences**

Festivals and audiences have an intimate relationship, which has lasted for centuries, predominantly because of the symbiotic experience between them. Audiences first existed as participants before the emergence of conventional audience is such celebrations. Most significant traditional festivals have served the purpose of drawing crowds of visitors and tourists who are often enticed by their quest for adventure and/ or the worth of such celebrations in terms of entertainment.

From the Greek Dionysia till date, festivals have exposed people’s cultures to the outside world. They have attracted large tourists and other concerns and have placed the names of these places in international circles and the annals of history. The media of the world is constantly reverberating with messages of Pennsylvanian annual Mummer’s day Parade, the famous Rio de Janerio in New Orleans, the annual Edinburgh music festival, the Beethoven Festival in Germany, not to talk of the dazzling and colourful Brazilian carnival floats.

One important and striking issue about these festivals and carnivals is that they started as folk entertainment in the villages but have been consciously nurtured and tailored to the level of attracting crowds from within and without the countries. Their origin and roots can be traced back to initiation rites, childbearing feasts, agricultural fairs and political experiences of the people.

In Nigeria, the list is endless, of the various festivals in existence. This includes Idu festivals of the Nembe people, Osun festival in Osogbo, Ofala in Onitsha, Sharo of the Fulanis, Awon festival in Shao, Uhola festival among the Dakarkari people, Argungu fishing festival, Igue festival among the Edo, Leboku in Ugep and other new yam festivals.

The first national festival was organised in 1965 and featured various traditional dance-dramas, folk operas, folk music and other varieties within the Nigerian cultural heritage. The All-Nigerian Festival of Arts was organised to foster the truce between the warring factions in the Nigerian-Biafran Civil war. This later metamorphosed into the annual National Festival of Arts and Culture (NAFEST), which has become basically a mere jamboree with very little or no publicity and commercial attachments. No doubt, the main objective is to engender national unity but to what extent it has succeeded in this regard still leaves much to be desired.

Some state governments have borrowed a leaf by engaging also in this endeavour. For instance, the Argungu Fishing Festival has been nurtured by the state government to a somewhat national status and has incorporated traditional wrestling, archery, dance-drama, dance, horse and donkey racing, into the menu. But the underlying motifs, presently, are both commercial and political.

Nigerian traditional festivals are capable of entertaining the most diverse and critical audiences because of their inherent qualities and the total theatre outlook. This rich and vibrant folk culture we owe to the ingenuity of our forefathers who adapted and blended the best of the traditions superimposed on them, using theirs as the basic ingredient, as our nation was dominated by greater nations, each leaving its mark with no slight imprint.

From the foregoing, it can be observed, and aptly too, that the reason why Nigerian traditional festivals have not attained the heights that others in different countries have, is not in the state of their development or lack of sophistication, neither is it in the mode of presentation. Rather, it is because there has never been concerted efforts on the part of individuals, corporate bodies or the government to popularize, create patronage (within and without), organize and package these festivals on commercial basis for local and international audiences. This observation has been made by several Nigerians that: the lack of commercialization of such festivals has made it to be viewed with contempt by artists who are trying to survive through their crafts. The gains of an artiste from such festivals should be commensurate with the input. Kool jazz festivals, Cannes Film Festivals and a number of others always have a commercial perspective which is lacking in our present set-up. Surprisingly and pitifully too, the trend has continued unabated.

**Strategies for transforming Nigerian Traditional Festivals into Tourist attraction**

Presently, the various festivals prevalent in the country are either organized by local communities or the government. Based on our experiences concerning endeavours with governmental appendage and the realization that such endeavours function more effectively in private hands; it will not be out of place to allot to companies and other corporate bodies with proven track records of success in the arts, the task of organising these festivals liasing with the local communities, travel agencies and hoteliers.

In successfully organizing these festivals, such corporate bodies should consider as a matter of priority, planning and execution of the project. The nation is abundantly blessed with men of ideas. We always excel in the preliminary stages which involve feasibility study and planning but often falter at the implementation stages; bringing these dreams to manifestation. This trend should be avoided.

Another issue worthy of consideration is funding. Before plunging into the project the corporate bodies concerned should assess the magnitude of funds required and examine critically its revenue base or fund-raising potentials. It will be foolhardy for such a body to engage in a project that is beyond its capabilities. The timing of the festivals should be within the period when the weather is clement and other variables do not impede the convergence of tourists.

**Festival Villages**

It is common knowledge that certain festivals do not restrict themselves to a particular location, rather activities span the entire community. For purposes of restriction and control, and in order to attain adequate supervision, it is necessary to establish festival villages, with clearly defined entrances and exits, and perimeter fencing.

The establishing of these villages will make the confinement of activities possible and ensure that audiences pay their dues. The village can be broken up into different units and each presentation assigned a unit. This is not only to take care of the preference of the audience but for income generation also. This is equally predicated upon the fact that the preferences of members of the audience vary. Some are fascinated by masquerade displays, others may prefer the rigorous traditional wrestling contest, etc.

Just like the various stadia in the country, when the villages are not in use, they can be hired out to individuals and/or corporate bodies for other activities, at a cost. But after such events, it should be inspected to ascertain that no damage has been inflicted. Where they exist, the client should be made to bear the cost of repairs. Of course, this should be spelt out in the conditions for hiring the venue. Supervision should be jointly handled by the community and organisers.

**Fees**

Every creative endeavour is a tasking experience. It will be nonsensical, then, to offer some gratis for whatever reason that may be advanced. The ingenuity, time, energy and money invested in the production of a work of art, may defy quantification. So, from whatever perspective it is examined, it is expedient for the patron to make some monetary contributions. After all, football fans do not throng the stadia without first paying for their tickets. So it is expedient to charge fees. Our festivals should not stop at being mere jamborees.

The first question that readily comes to mind, if our festivals are confined and fees charged, is: what happens to members of the community, since festivals by their nature and operation are supposed to be communal. The fact is that not every member of the communities plays vital and active roles. Some, or a majority, are passive participants. The full participants can be accredited by the organizing body while others get a rebate on their tickets.

**Content/Audience Catering**

If fees are to be charged, there is the necessity to examine the contents of the festivals to ascertain if they will give the audience value for their money. If the answer is negative, then certain modifications and/or inclusions can be made without necessarily distorting the essence of the festivals. It will not be out of place to contract an expert in this regard, to ensure stylistic and contextual relatedness.

It has been asserted by Chris Nwamuo that there existed in pre-colonial Nigeria, traditional theatre administration. According to him, it all started when Nigerian communities began to invite fellow villagers, townsmen, countrymen or tribesmen to come, watch and share in their performances. He states further that audiences so invited were not adequately catered for as conceived in modern parlance. They only had free drinks as compensation for their long distance trek and pains.

What the above portends is that the audience at the festivals must be well catered for. Their comfort and convenience must not be compromised but given priority. Therefore, it is expedient to provide parking spaces, conveniences, security, snack bars, etc., within the festival villages and accommodation and lodging facilities outside the village. These will boost the income generating power of the festival.

**Publicity, Marketing and Promotions**

This is another important aspect which cannot be compromised, more so because they aim at informing and gingering the interest of the audience in the programme. A good cook is determined only when people savour his cooking. In the same vein, a presentation is not complete without the audience to share in the experience. It is pertinent then that heavy publicity be mounted, marketing strategies devised and promotional gimmicks evolved for our festivals. A proper combination of the afore-mentioned audience engineering devices has the capacity of capturing attention, sustaining the interest so created and propelling one to action. The communication media like radio, television, magazines, the internet, bill boards and others are quite effective in this regard. Information and guides in form of brochures, calendars, diaries, etc. should be produced and lodged at different embassies, airports, museums and other places.

**Registration of Artistes/Grading**

For purposes of effective management and control, artists earmarked for participation in the various festivals must be duly registered with the various guilds or professional bodies. It is the responsibility of these bodies to grade and rank the artistes so registered. The assessment could be based on experience in the field, educational attainment, and/or proficiency. This ranking erases conflicts in the area of remuneration, as every artist and the organizing body knows what he is worth. It makes it difficult if not impossible for the artistes to be cheated by the organizers. A labourer, it is said, is worthy of his pay. The implication here remains that the artiste realizes his importance and his remuneration reminds him that he did not labour in vain. He is thus encouraged to put in his utmost best, knowing fully well that it will not go down the drain. As such, there is motivation for him to create, and bring to bear on his work, different innovations. The end result is a refurbishment and boost to his creativity.

**Proceeds**

No single issue seems to generate so much excitement and controversy in families, businesses, communities and other concerns like financial matters. Since our goal is to run viable and hitch-free festivals, the proceeds should be shared between the organizers, the community and the artistes involved, at certain agreed percentages, while government get taxes.

The artistes are paid based on their ranking, a certain percentage is kept by the organizers, and the rest goes to the communities. By this formula, these communities will not need to wait endlessly on their local government councils to carry out development projects. Their coffers would have been enriched to enable them embark on self-help projects which can enhance their status and uplift the living standards of their members.

**Conclusion**

Tourism is a foreign exchange earner and one of the fastest growing industries in the world, and domestic tourism has always remained in the mainstay of international tourism. In places like Philadelphia in the U.S.A., Thailand and Canada, where tourism has thrived, the people began, first, by exploring the contents of their traditional milieu like folk entertainment.

Tourism development in Nigeria has not been encouraging despite the numerous frantic efforts made in this regard. This failure may not be unconnected with the regrettable fact that Nigeria’s tourism industry has been restricted to the construction of five star hotels and some parks, with less attention paid to the development of our folk entertainment including festivals.

Today, we have the opportunity of righting all wrongs of over four decades by looking inwards; to our traditional festival in a bid to develop our tourism industry, especially with the suggestions set down in this work. The benefit accruable, therefrom, to individuals, corporate concerns, the communities, the government and the nation as a whole, is far-reaching. The choice is ours. In our hands are the banners of a stillborn tourism industry. We can re-order its birth or bury it. The choice once again is ours.

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