



# Festivals, Identity and Social Stability in Africa: The Example of Calabar Carnival.

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## Abstract

Festivals are organized periodic celebrations which form the popular culture which encompass the activities and feelings as a result of interaction, across societies of the world. Festivals are signifiers of the cultural identity of spaces within which they occur, thereby becoming tourism events which relate the socio-cultural space of humanity and the contribution of our social identity. This paper explores the role festival tourism plays through identity and exchange of culture, signifying celebrations, promoting community values, ideologies, continuity and social stability. The paper explores identities through examples of performing nationalities and diversity of cultures from Calabar and Lamu carnival of Nigeria. How do festivals contribute to interpreting cultural identity? The paper answers this through discourse of the diverse characteristics of these festivals.

**Keywords:** Festival, Identity, Culture, Social Stability, Tourism.

## Introduction

African societies constitute a true value system with the belief in communal strategy for peaceful human co-existence. Post-colonial Africa has witnessed series of upheavals which include ethnic and tribal rivalries, civil wars, political instability, religious tensions, national insecurity which culminate into social crisis and instability. The quest for social stability is triggered by the resultant effects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and emerging forces of globalization.

The multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nature of Africa is such that each ethnic group or nationality has its peculiarities in terms of culture, language, belief system, and so on. These peculiarities and diversities are unique and if properly appreciated and harnessed will provide a platform for mutual respect, peaceful co-existence, national identity and social stability.

Festivals constitute an indigenous cultural institution, a form of art nurtured on the African soil over centuries expressed through dance, music, songs, mime, masquerade, ritual amongst others. Apparently, they occur as sacred ritual or secular performances expressing the religiosity and socio-political aspirations of the people. To this end, in the construction of Gregory Ogbeka:

Festivals are very important to the African people. This can be observed from the experiences of the people in traditional African societies... the function of social mobilization and cohesion. Although, on many occasions, the reasons of these festivals have been abused by some deviants in the society, it however still continues to play its role in contemporary social life. (Ogbeka 1)

Subscribing from Gregory's position, festival in the world view of Africans offers a sense of belonging and contributes to group cohesiveness. Social and moral life is organized around festive manifestations. In traditional African society, festivals are suffused and built on life as a cosmic circle.

In contemporary African society, the up surge in tensions and unrest show that the values which form the foundations of African cultural identity are seriously under attack;

from growing corruption to rising criminality, violence, celebration of individualism and triumph of money (get rich quick syndrome) as the determinant for social relations, the involuntary state less person's that can be found in refugee or IDP camps serve as evidence which define social disruption. To a large extent, it is perceived that the erosion of indigenous cultural values precipitated by unguided liberalization attitudes has occasioned those contemporary problems of socio-cultural degradation. Contemporary Africa is threatened by a colossal mismanagement of the ethnic diversity and identity that straddles her nations. It is therefore the contention of this paper that inter cultural collaboration through festivals as a hybrid form of identities and transversal factor of cultural diversity, with its socio-cultural significance can be a social impetus, mobilizer for sustainable development and social stability. How do festivals perform utilitarian functions contributing to cultural identity and societal cohesion? The paper is a focus on the thematic pre-occupation of Calabar and Lamu festivals as paradigms.

## The Concept of Festival, Identity and Social Stability

Concepts like festival, identity and social stability need clarification to allow for meaningful discussion. In doing this, we will avoid verbosity that usually characterize such theoretical discourse.

**Festival:** The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines festival as “series of performance of music, plays, films/movies, etc usually organized in the same place once a year; a series of public events connected with a particular activity or idea where bands perform often outdoors and over a period of several days” (546). Another definition is elucidated that “carnivals and festivals are rooted in the culture of the people. They are annual celebrations of African heritage and culture which serve as the perfect backdrop for family and class reunions, church, corporate or group outings. Since early times, carnivals and festivals have been accompanied by parades, masquerades, pageants and other forms of revelry with their origins in pre-Christian pagan rites, particularly fertility rites that were connected with the coming of spring festival and the rebirth of vegetation” (Ekweariri Chidiebere and Ogbonna Kelechi 128). From this view, the salient words are performance and culture

which is a reflection of a people’s world view.

**Identity:** The term identity comes from a Latin word ‘idem’ which means sameness of a person or thing. Identity is a complicated concept that sparks up debates with varied perspectives and this has attracted plethora of definitions. Although, individuals use the word properly in everyday discourse, identity may be termed in personal and social contexts. In the words of James Fearon, “An identity simply refers to a social category, a set of persons marked by a label and distinguished by rules, deciding membership and alleged characteristics features or attributes. In the second sense of personal identity, an identity is some distinguishing characteristic or characteristics that a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential but more or less unchangeable” (Fearon 2). Extrapolating from this view, identity has a double sense. It refers at the same time to social categories and to the sources of an individual’s self-respect or dignity.

In simple terms, it is not out of place to say that an individual has two aspects of identity; a public identity and private identity. Public identities are linked to social groups and are classified as social identities while

the private is the personal self-identity. The concept of identity as it applies to this paper shall be taken to mean the feeling of belonging to a group which encompasses conception and perception of self and is related to nationality. It is pertinent to note that the social norms projected by cultural identity contribute to the development of an individual's identity.

**Social Stability:** The concept of social stability like that of identity does not suffer dearth of definitions. Perspectives on social stability do not differ significantly from one another. Social stability connotes the degree to which a society and its institutions remain predictable and reliable. Danielle German and Carl Latkin see social stability as “the range of life structure and reliable routine that is protective against further situational hazards and helps maintain connections with social resources and societal expectations” (German and Latkin 2). Consistencies about issues relating to human social interaction, mutual awareness, social norm and social order are all smack of social stability. This is important because individuals and groups function without disruptions which allows freedom and growth.

Social stability is an ingredient of national sovereignty which is the mirror of national identity. This point is stressed by

Charles Nweke who maintains that “social stability creates an even society where there is a social solidarity between the people in one society and they work together to make the society better” (Nweke 147). This suggests that a stable society is fundamental to national development. One of the main prerequisites for social stability is a stable environment in which people can live together in peace. This is more so because social inclusion can only be enhanced in an ideal society. Instructively, peaceful co-existence and mutual understanding are imperatives for social development.

### **Calabar Carnival Festival in Nigeria**

The Calabar Carnival festival also known as Africa's biggest street party is the pride of Nigeria. The concept of the festival was initiated in 2004 and it is an annual festival celebrated in Calabar, Cross River State, the South-Eastern part of Nigeria. Around the creeks of Cross River, it begins from 1<sup>st</sup> to 31<sup>st</sup> December every year. Carnivalland.net reports that “the Calabar Carnival is without a doubt the biggest, best and longest tourism event in West Africa. It attracts over two million revelers and features participants from over 25 different countries. The Battle of the Bands and Street parades is even broadcasted to a television audience of

around fifty million” (“Carnivalland.net” 1). The carnival festival is a tourism magnet and a hub for boosting the local economy. It is divided into segments of activities namely; millennium week, sports week, the TINAPA family festival and carnival week.

The carnival parade features about 50,000 costumed revelers who perform in five major carnival bands namely; The Bay Side Band (Blue), Band of Freedom (Yellow), Sea Gull Band (Red), Passion 4 Band (Green), Masta Blasta Band (Orange). There is a competition among some groups and the parade covers about 12 kilometers in grand spectacle. Its viewership is huge with thousands of audience (s) and millions watch via broadcast globally. Awards are also given for best performance, costume, music, floats, choreography and Prestigious Band of the year.

The bay side band is usually led by the founder of Calabar Carnival, former Governor Donald Duke. The band allows anyone to join including foreigners. The Band of Freedom symbolizes freedom of Africa from slave trade and colonialism. The Seagull Band is a typical representation of Nigerian diversity. The projection of kingdoms like Calabar, Benin Kanuri, Fulani amongst others reflecting their cultural identity before the colonial era in this band

preach unity in diversity. Passion 4 Band is a band for children and adults, they incorporate songs, dances, humour riddles from different parts of Africa. Masta Blasta Band is the largest of all the bands that incorporates ten thousand members from all cultures of the world. This inclusiveness allows inter cultural exchange and it makes the carnival one of the most exhilarating and colorful in the world.

### **Thematic Preoccupation of Calabar Carnival**

The Calabar carnival carries a central message that communicates to the audience. There is usually a major theme from which other sub themes emerge. ‘Unity in diversity’ is the central theme for which the carnival campaigns for.

The 2007 carnival projected the youth-based band passion 4, emphasizing the social consciousness of the effects of the people’s activities on the environment. The playing of rain forest Africana signified the contribution of African rain forest in the 80s to the world which is now diminishing as a result of mass timber exploitation, agriculture, urbanization and bush burning. The band highlights the consequences of these activities on the African heritage. This is a contribution to the global issue of climate change and the social responsibility to

maintain a sustainable existence. The dances expose the cornucopia of the people of the rain forest, its rich culture and environment. The economic power of natural products of the African Rain Forest is celebrated alongside a fusion of stock characters.

In 2019 theme was aimed at projecting Africa and humanity, showcasing Africa's strength and resilience, as the bed rock of the people from precolonial and colonial time, indicating that Nigeria has been through a lot and always pounced back. Situating the theme in Riverian society, it revolved around the loss of oil wells and the crisis in Nigerias delta, fueled by environmental degradation, minority rights and the quest for youth empowerment. The preaching of humanity for peace, love and understanding in the world advocating that love, care and respect should define our humanity throughout individual and group levels. From the family as the first unit of socialization to community, nations, Africa and the world. This emphasizes the fact that social justice, equality and peaceful co-existence are important for a sustainable world. Irrespective of culture, tradition, language/dialect, religious and political affinity and social -economic and financial status among other differences. The festival is a melting pot for participants of all classes,

religions, virtues that promote the essence of mankind, and the universality of humanity.

### **Festivals as Catalyst for Social Stability in Africa**

Celebrations such as festivals provide opportunities to bring people together for a common purpose translating to social cohesion and social identity. The lived experiences of participants bound them into cohesive entities, by interpreting and re-interpreting their cultural identities, the conservation of cultural heritage practices through shared community values inspired by shared interest. Suffice to say that, cultural gap contributes to explicit or implicit social instability. Cultural values are reinforced through consistent celebration of festivals which are instrumental in inculcating inclinations and established moral standards and norms of behavior.

The FESTAC 66 and 77 the worlds Black and African Festival for Arts and Culture held in Dakar Senegal and Lagos Nigeria, an international event aimed to promote and facilitate black African arts and artist. FESTAC 77 according to Wikipedia.org was a "month-long event celebrated African culture and showcased to the world African music, fine art, literature, drama, dance and religion. About 16,000

participants, representing 56 African nations and countries of the African diaspora, performed at the event. Artists who performed at the festival included Stevie Wonder from United States of America, Gilberto Gil from Brazil, Bembeya Jazz from Guinea, Mighty Sparrow from Trinidad and Tobago, Les Ballets Africains, South African Miriam Makeba and Franco Luambo Makiadi. At that time, it was held, it was the largest Pan-African gathering to ever take place. This inspired the revival, resurgence, propagation, and promotion of black and African culture and values” (“Wikipedia.org” 1). This inspired worldwide black unity and self-determination. It was a cultural climax of the pan-African movement where artist like Fela Kuti who was known to protest against social ills, galvanized young Nigerians against their leaders perceived corruption and cultural manipulation.

Instructively, the lesson from FESTAC 77 is a pointer that more people can be better informed, united and inspired to take meaningful action. The socio-cultural conscientization of post-independent Africa and de-neo colonization and re-acculturation of the masses of African people is achievable through the phenomenon of festivals. Festivals become a utility because they project the regular features of traditional

African societies for the benefit of contemporary African society. From the many festivals in Africa like Masquerade Festival of the Yoruba, the Tiv Kwagh-hir Festival, the Igede Agba New Yam Festival in Nigeria, Mombasa Fsestival, Lake Turkana Cultural Festival in Kenya, Timket and Oromia festivals in Ethiopia, Enyi Alayi New Yam Festival in Ghana, Music Festival in Congo, Cape Town Festival in South Africa to mention a few.

As a matter of fact, these festivals are usually performed at specific periods of the year to sustain the society spiritually and regulate its moral and social life. In other words, positive subjective wellbeing is necessary for a healthy society and the wellbeing of individuals is the goal of an egalitarian society. This is the priority of festivals in Africa as they posses the ingredients for positive impact on the subjective wellbeing of participants and observers and by extension social wellbeing.

Fundamentally, the relevance of festival celebrations for social stability is not in doubt as they give impetus for socio-cultural, economic and political contributions to society which includes social and national integration, peaceful co-existence, cooperation, boosting local economy through tourism activities leading to youth

employment and business opportunities, revenue generation, strengthening community ties and friendship. The preservation of indigenous culture and stimulating urban development. However, the flourishing of cultural festivals if strongly supported by governments across Africa will appropriate cultural values that deliver a series of benefits to meet their various cultural policies and tourism objectives, encouraging social stability.

### **Conclusion**

The phenomenon of festivals and carnivals in African societies are part and parcel of the folk, popular celebrations of the indigenous people which are platforms for social issues to be expressed, interrogated and challenged. It is a prime artistic institution with the framework of collaborative art forms and community values. The aesthetics of cultural identities are projected through the expression of dance, drumming, singing, chanting, masquerade, costume, makeup, games and other components which infuse in them the sum total of communal values. An appraisal of Calabar celebrations show that the performance of nationalities in the context of Calabar Carnival is beyond the identity of Calabar society with the marriage of the

diversity of Nigerian cultures and the participation of foreigners irrespective of culture, religion, gender, race and class. It is only by harnessing the strengths of different cultures and down playing their differences that sustainable development can be achieved.

Festivals play a significant role as a mechanism for peace building, stabilizing, and sustaining African societies. The eminent projection of the well revered and unique cultural values like folktales, dances, songs, music, costume, makeup among others is an important way to preserve Africa heritage. The paradox in the festivals as social crusaders is that despite the diversity of cultures, they ignite interpersonal and international group cooperation. On this premise, the paraphernalia of festival is potent for changing every form of negativity to positivity with the emphasis on solidarity, patriotism, friendship, communalism and peaceful co-existence. In indigenous Africa, these are vital for human relationships, social cohesion in sustaining a more humane, egalitarian and stable society.



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