

**THE EVOLUTION AND GLOBALISATION OF AFRICAN FESTIVALS:
A STUDY OF THE IGUE FESTIVAL – PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE**

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Abstract

This paper is a careful examination of the dynamic nature of culture and the cultural evolution of festivals, which are the major vestige and by-product of culture. The study utilised the literary or analytical methodology which enabled the researcher to garner relevant information from critical materials and interviews. The study examined the evolution of the Igue Festival of the Benin Kingdom. Three stages of evolution were clearly discernable, namely: the ancient, the modern and the global. The study concluded by asserting that if properly managed, organised and reinvented, the Igue Festival has the potential of developing into a substantial industry and cultural Olympiad, ensuring economic wealth, development and self-reliant growth.

Key words: Culture, Festival, Dynamic, Ancient, Modern, Global.

Introduction

One distinctive feature of the homosapien race is the ability to evolve or metamorphose. The main thrust of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution in the mid 19th century is still relevant in today's matrix of human and cultural evolution. According to King and Scoff (2009), Darwin suggested that:

Life is a competitive struggle for survival often in the face of limited resources. Living things must compete for food and space. They must evade the ravages of predators and diseases while dealing with unpredictable shifts in their

environment such as changes in climate ... slowly, Darwin argued that nature tips the balance in a population towards those with the combination of traits or adaptation best suited to their environment (1).

Leveraging on Darwin's theories, Social Darwinism was invented. Social Darwinists believe that humans, like animals, must compete for existence, in which natural selection results in the survival of the perceived fittest (Bannister, 2009). They favour a political, economic and cultural system that encourage competition, that justify imbalances in power, among individuals, races and nations.

As far-fetched as these Darwinistic ideologies may seem, they are the fulcrum for survival and continuity of human existence. For anything to remain in existence and be relevant, it must adapt to present realities. It must answer to the rhythm and circle of change and dynamism. Man and the institutions that define and signal his distinction from others have continually evolved drastically across space, time and milieu. The major institution that defines man, his preferences, his essence and total existence is culture, as elaborately exhibited in festivals. And, culture, like man, is very dynamic. This study sets out to show the dynamic evolution of culture as opulently captured in the steady but gradual metamorphosis of festivals from the spiritual to the secular and to the global.

Culture and Change

Many scholars have attempted to define culture in many ways. And in all these definitions, some distinct features stand out. Unoh Solomon (1986), following Biobaku, defines culture as:

.... That complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other ability acquired by man. Culture, accordingly, encompass those conventional understandings and practices which give a people its uniqueness and these render such a people distinct from all others (3)

Uyah (1986) also defines culture as:

The total way of life of a people expressed in their technological, economic, social and political institutions and structures as well as in the values and norms ... (22)

In a related study, Femi Osofisan (1986) informs that culture means the total life and experience of a people at any given moment in history. According to him:

As Mao expressed it, 'a given reflection of the economic and politics of a given society'... this means, therefore, that the notion of culture in any given society is necessarily plural and complex because of the plural composition of society itself (43)

Peter Aihevba (2017) conceives of culture as a complex entity which:

.... distinguishes humans from animals and one society from the other. It is the total spectrum of activities and events that make a people who they really are. If it is admissible that unique habits and behaviour are considered part of culture, then society is part of culture... culture is a system that is indispensable to the thorough understanding of a peoples identify, their history, their hopes and aspirations. It is a powerful resource in the business of self realization and education. The culture of a people is a definition of who they are and can be... (2010)

From all that have been canvassed so far, it is clear that culture completely encapsulates and captures the totality of the existence of a people and their society. Culture is a very complex institution that relates to all aspects of the life of a people. Culture encompasses a society's history, experiences, architecture, technology, food, dress, religion, cult, environment, arts and, significantly, festivals (the by-product of a mode of existence). It must be noted that culture is time-bound. It is the reflection of the total life and experiences of a people at a given time and a moment of history. Culture is alive. It grows, evolves and mutates according to the trends and life expectancies of the moment. Culture always lives in the moment in time. Commenting on the flexibility and malleability of culture, Uya (1986) posits that culture:

is never static but resilient, dynamic and adaptive, often responding to the challenges it confronts, whether from within or without (22)

Extrapolating on the dynamism of culture and the active agents of change, Ciroma (1982) observed that:

contact between communities of different cultural backgrounds has always been, perhaps, the most agent of change. The change can be peaceful, gradual or upsetting, with long-term ramifications, depending largely on the nature of the contact and the reaction to it (5)

He would go on to say that:

The styles of economic growth, the technological revolution, and the new political order most African countries are still experimenting with... Those among us who have been greatly exposed to outside influences and especially to the western form of education, have also acquired new attitudes and modes of behaviour, new interpretation of life and moral codes different from those of our forefathers (6)

While it is inevitable to agree with Ciroma that the contact between communities and backgrounds has been the most active agent of change, it is important to state that such contact need not be physical. The technological advancement of the day has reduced the world to a global village, making contact and communication effortless. This trend has given birth to a coinage which is known as globalisation. Globalisation today is by far the greatest agent of cultural change, evolution and revolution. Globalisation and its effects on the systems of the world will be examined later but, first, let's pay some attention to the greatest extensions and expressions of culture.

Culture and Festivals

As it has already been established in this paper, the most significant mark of distinction and identification of a people is culture. Culture is synonymous with society and subsumes the totality of the materials, arts, spiritual, customs, laws, abilities and possibilities of man. The conventional understanding and practice which distinguishes a people and establish their uniqueness is culture. Consequently, the expressions of culture are mainly domiciled in the spiritual, the many faces of art forms, history, architecture and technology. One institution that has been able to amalgamate the various aspects of culture into one cocktail of artistic and spiritual explosion is festivals. It is the most significant and enduring element of cultural heritage that enables societies renew, recreate and fertilize themselves periodically.

Festivals propagate individual and communal harmony. It is a seminal ground for the display of the highest forms of creative impulses. The biggest, the best and the brightest forms of oratory displays, music, dances poetry, costume, theatre, drama, masquerade, culinary arts, visual arts, material performing arts and architectural excellence are all in display during festivals. In many societies, festivals are often commemorated in celebration of quintessential historical moments, outstanding personalities, triumphs, achievements, rites of passage, remembrance, coronations, reflections, appeasements, thanksgiving, propitiation, communal and universal harmony. Festivals combine the spiritual, utilitarian and secular into one complex whole for the good and regeneration of society.

Commenting on the origins and purposes of festivals in Africa, Aihevba (2016) submits that festivals in Africa:

grew out of the utilitarian purpose of Africans, in accordance with their subconscious drives to communicate, interact and liaise with the supernatural world, an attempt to appease and propitiate the deities, leading to the emergence of diverse kinds of festivals according to the needs of the people. Life is complex and so are its seasons and cycles. The complex nature of life and the impulse to seek supernatural intervention are clearly manifested in the various festivals taking place at various times of the year and in various locations of the

continent... Festivals entail events, activities and ceremonies put together collectively by a people in commemoration, acknowledgement and celebration of blessings, favour and goodwill enjoyed, and an avenue to negotiate and request for more favour, grace, protection, providence from God and the deities ... Festivals are commemorated amidst heavy cultural spectacle, ritualistic observances and lavish social entertainment and arts. (6)

From all that has been said, it is clear that festivals are designated and dedicated to the vast, complex and extravagant display of culture. In fact, festivals help to document, memorialise, display and disseminate the indispensable cultural values and heritage of a people. Culture cannot be properly described, understood and expressed without the institution of festivals and festivities. Festivals are the major vestiges, traits and by-products of culture. Like culture, festivals are dynamic and are subject to the process of change. One major factor responsible for this is the interaction of ideas and cultures across the globe as occasioned by globalisation.

Globalisation and Evolution

Globalisation is a creation which suggests a global effect. This is subject to the fact that the world, energised by digitalisation and computer revolution, is a global village. Aihievba (2017) succinctly captures the consequence and effects of globalisation, when he said:

The world like never before has been united and transformed into a single unit through electronic gadgets like the diverse computer-assisted equipment. People, the world over, can now watch the same television programmes via satellite. Business transactions are done easily through the Internet, leading to terms like e-commerce. Bonds of friendships and relationships are strengthened through what can be referred to as e-communication. Globalisation has had a significant effect on every facet of our lives. The borders between nations have reduced to thin lines, if not completely erased (2016)

Globalisation has forever changed the way we live, the way we think, the way we process information, our value system, our tastes, fashions and styles. It has redefined concepts like war, peace, crime, law, abuse, slavery and terror. The contact of cultures is not a new phenomenon. Ancient civilisations influenced and left their marks. Egypt left her mark on Greece; Greece left her mark on Rome; Rome left her mark on Europe; and Europe left hers on Africa. Globalisation has left her mark on all of human activities, on all nations, and on all races. In the past, the process of communication, interaction and education was informal and poor, therefore, the mark of cultural interaction took time to manifest. With globalisation, the situation is different. Gadgets and facilities for creating quick impact

are now readily available and accessible. It has eroded some cultures, altered others, and sent many into extinction.

The effects of globalisation are very visible on African societies, cultures, traditions and festivals. Globalisation has necessitated a paradigm shift in the understanding of cultures and the organisation and exhibition of festivals. The world has gone global, so are cultures and festivals. Human culture and festivals are now defined, executed and displayed in the light of best global practices. In the next section, we shall carefully examine the evolution of the Igue Festival of the Benin Kingdom, as a result of cultural interaction, evolution and globalisation.

The Igue Festival: Ancient, Modern and Global

As a result of the dynamic nature of culture and the inevitable process and circle of change, three stages of evolution can be discernable in the Igue Festival. They are what we have elected to christen the Igue Festival Complex: ancient, modern and global. The Igue Festival is the most significant festival of the Benin people in Edo State of Nigeria. The Binis occupy the south-south part of Nigeria, the most populated geo-political zone of Edo State in Nigeria. The Igue Festival is celebrated by all the Binis of native birth, residing in this geo-political zone and other parts of the state, Nigeria and the Diaspora. The festival, like other festivals, has its root among the Bini people, deep in the past of the race. The might and glory of the festival lies in its origin.

The Igue Festival was instituted by the Oba of Benin himself, the great Oba Ewuare, one of the greatest, fiercest and most revered monarchs in the history of the Benin Kingdom in the 13th century. Oba Ewuare, indeed, all the other Obas of Benin Kingdom are regarded as deities who are truly men and truly gods - born to be worshipped. Oba Ewuare was renowned as “Ogidigan Ebo no ye erhen khue” translated to mean *the strong deity that baths in fire*. The festival was a state event, instituted mainly in worship and reverence of the deities and the ancestors, for goodluck and victorious destinies. The Igue Festival was a conglomeration of rituals and ceremonies, full of sacrifices, prayers, propitiations and elaborate festivities. It was celebrated throughout the year, spanning several months of a generous display of cultural and artistic artifacts.

The major animal of choice to be sacrificed was the leopard. Oba Ewuare’s Igue Festival was purely sacred, its aims and intentions where purely religious. During the festival, the Oba received no visitors. Most of the rites of the festival where done within the palace walls. The glamorous and lavish palace rituals of the Igue Festival came to an end in 1897 during the popular British punitive expedition that saw the deportation of Oba Ovoramwen to be exiled in Calabar.

Igue Festival resumed in modern and contemporary times, in the 1950s, during the reign of Oba Eweka II. The glory and majesty of the festival became reduced to a miniature form, almost a parody of Oba Ewuare's Igue Festival. The myth that the Oba was invincible and the Bini Kingdom indestructible was shattered by the British invasion of 1897. The Kingdom became a shadow of its former self and a lot of the mythical elements that held the fabrics of the Bini Kingdom together and projected the Oba in awe and infallibility came under severe question and scrutiny. The invasion dealt a terrible blow on the pride and ego of the Bini essence, her cultural heritage and the glorious Igue Festival. The Igue Festival is now confined to a 10-day period, celebrated annually towards the end of the year. It is now commemorated in the yuletide season, a season regarded worldwide as holiday and vacation time well-adjusted for travels and festivities. The modern Igue festival is now a mixture of sacred and secular. Visitors from all over the world are welcome to participate. The palace rituals still take place during the festival but the major and more prominent segments of the festival are now public. The palace festival now takes place in an open space within the palace walls in the full glare of all including foreigners. The high-points of the festival are the display of the best, the brightest and the most enchanting art forms. Lavish entertainment takes over the whole atmosphere with seasoned and popular contemporary musicians taking turns to entertain the waiting and expectant crowd of audience milling all over the place.

The Igue Festival of today is a mega concert of some sort designating the proper atmosphere for the harmonious integration of the arts, proper dissemination of societal values and the space for the expression of joy, laughter and enjoyment. The festival has evolved from the total worship of the Oba, the deities and ancestors to the celebration of the harmonious atmosphere that ensures the unity of the race and the survival of the Bini cultural heritage. To ensure the continuity and relevance of the Igue Festival in this age of technological socioeconomic advancement and audacious globalisation, the festival must evolve more. To keep up with global trends and standards, to sustain the interest and participation of the modern metropolitan society, the Igue Festival must mutate into Igue Carnival: a festival-carnival sponsored by the state in conjunction with the Bini monarch. Companies, institutions and well-meaning individuals must be encouraged to co-sponsor the event. The festival must be expanded to include sports, beauty contests, film shows, street carnivals, exhibitions, rallies and other attractions that can sustain its glory and energy while providing the space for public enjoyment, revelry, laughter, joy, excitement and freedom.

The festival must be developed into a huge tourist attraction, capturing the attention of tourists all over the world. It must be carefully organised and orchestrated to produce economic wealth and opportunities for investments and the thriving of small businesses, ensuring the growth and development of the society. The festival can be aired worldwide, providing the platform for companies to acquire hosting and sponsorship rights and

creating opportunities for advertisement globally. If properly managed and reinvented, the Igue Festival has the potential for developing into a substantial industry and cultural Olympiad.

Conclusion

African festivals have experienced and will continue to experience constant and drastic revolution and evolution because the society they signpost is subject to the process of change. As a result of cultural confrontation, assimilation, adaptation and globalisation, culture is never static, and its major vestige and by-product—festivals— are also undergoing the motions of change. To underscore this fact, the Igue Festival of the Benin Kingdom was carefully examined with special reference to the dynamic nature of the festival.

The festival has evolved over time and, as at today, two stages of evolution are clearly identifiable. A third species of the festival is in the making. A close look at the Igue Festival suggests that the ancient form of the festival was purely ritual, religious and sacred. The contemporary form is an admixture of the sacred and the secular, the private and the popular. The third stage of the festival propelled by global appeal, standards and best practices will become a ubiquitous stage for the expression of public emotions, enjoyment, joy, revelry and freedom. It will be a near or total suspension/dramatic modification of the ritual and sacred purposes that gave life to the festival. It will become a global event, attracting global participation and appeal, a major tourist attraction with great potential for wealth creation.

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