TRADITIONAL FESTIVALS AS INSTRUMENTS FOR CULTURAL ADVANCEMENT: THE CASE OF ERIOKPE FESTIVAL

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Abstract

Colonialism identified Africans as 'primitive' and 'idolaters.' To civilize and christianize Africans, the colonial masters enforced on the people a form of government that went with education, Christianity and trade. This civilization laid the foundation to destroy the traditional culture which, in their opinion, made Africans 'primitive' and 'idolaters.' Even with the attainment of self-rule, society builds on it. Therefore, African heritage is fast eroding, weakened and even replaced with a new order that is foreign.

This paper, therefore, seeks to identify the problems and their causes, proffers solution and emphasizes the benefits of traditional culture.

Introduction

For some decades now, much contemporary study in Africa has focused on scientific and technological advancement. Within the context of cultural and social values, science simply put, is discovery while technology is the application of the discovery. Science and technology, as defined by the West, tilted towards supremacy in the measurement of social standards and successes. Though the living standard of any nation largely depends on science and technology the approach to them in Africa is fast eroding the traditional values, customs and belief that once held the people together. A nation bereft of traditional values is comparable to a hen on an unstable string, it must dance to the rhythm of its unstable base. In the past, the West colonized parts of Africa, making efforts to civilize Africans without respect to their institutions. Apparently, the effort of the West to civilize Africans without regard to their institutions was not only wrong but also destructive. For it is impossible to civilize a people by endowing them with productive power having the capacity for permanent growth. My opinion is that the people should be stimulated to civilize theirselves by advancing their own methods and institutions. The immediate victim of these wrong and destruction is the culture of the people. Colonialism weakened those aspects of tradition that are custodian of culture and, better still, the assemblage of many arts. Traditional festivals were badly hit. Though traditional cultural forms still exist in some communities, there are many others where such traditions are eroded, weakened, replaced by new and completely foreign usages or considered as fetish and uncivilized. Even the cultural policies have not resolved this problem. Of all the relevance of traditional festivals their role as ambience of the creative arts and a means of enhancing regional identity and pride, using Europe Festival of Ozoro as a case, is the focus of this paper. To determine the artistic aesthetics manifest in the festival in performance and what it represents are the concern of this paper.

Eriokpe and Man

Man is limited in dealing with nature. Therefore, he has been continually confronted with why and how certain things like death, earthquake and diseases occur. In his limitation, man believes that someone or forces are responsible for those and other occurrences. He also believes that he could get close to that someone or those forces to control or influence them in order to reorder his world. In this course man then sought to make what is intangible tangible, immaterial, material and superhuman, individual. So traditional religion was born. Traditional festivals then emanated from traditional religion, dogmas and rituals. Traditional festival is a time set aside for public celebration whether religious or secular, though festivals fundamentally derive from rituals. Traditional festivals are sociocultural, periodic and communal in nature.

Ekpenyong (1981:31) agrees that festivals are periodic recurring days or seasons of gaiety or merry making set aside by a community, tribe or clan, for the observance of celebration, religious solemnities or musical and traditional performances of special significance. As repertoire of the customs and an assemblage of the arts, traditional festivals constitute an important aspect of the people. Writing on African traditional festivals, Walkman (1974: 9) describes traditional festivals as assemblage of many arts. While Ayeni (1975: 3) writes that festivals give expression to a people's cultural heritage. rMeanwhile, Horn (1981: 2) affirms that 'Bori festival' is ritual magic in

performance. Eriokpe festival does not only share these attributes but also reemphasizes them in performance.

Colonialism and African Festivals

Asserted earlier was that the West made effort to civilize Africans without regards to their institutions, and that this was not only wrong but also destructive: and that those aspects of tradition that kept the people together were eroded. This act was willful. An excursion into colonial rule in Lagos will illuminate this argument. In the 19th century musical entertainment - indeed the Opera - in Europe formed a mark of status and culture. It was expected that similar musical culture would be encouraged or allowed to exist in other continents by colonial masters. But in Africa, Lagos in Nigeria, to be precise rather than encourage the musical culture the then colonial masters discouraged it almost to the point of extinction. Drama festivals, masquerades enactment, drumming and singing which constituted the musical culture faced real conflict between Lagosians and colonial government. The "Record", January 2, 1904, published a report of the meeting involving Lagos chiefs, the governor and Lagos Executive Council in December 1903. This report quoted by Echeuro (1977: 68) is here quoted in parts.

Native Grievances: the Drumming Question. The council now considered the question of the prohibition of drumming in the town.

Kasumu Giva: this is almost strange in the land. If people are drumming in connection with marriage ceremonies, they are prevented from doing so. If those who are drummers by trade go about from house to house to beat for hire, they are also prevented from doing so. A town without a sound of drum is like a city of the dead. Even those who go about in the early morning during the Rhamadan to wake up their brethren for prayer by the beating of pans are prevented from doing this religious act. We have never been dealt with either this manner, and we have therefore decided to bring the matter to the notice of the Government.

Chief Aromire: It works hardship in the town to stop drumming, and beside these, the drummers will starve. Drumming is their only trade.

In reply to a question by the Governor, the chief continued: in olden time each chief had his own drummers. The prince, however, still keeps his own drummers and singing men and women...

Commissioner of Police: At the request of the Governor I had had to extend the hour recently for the chiefs until 6 o'clock in the morning and the drumming was heard all night all over the island. Governor: In summing up, the Governor pointed out that it would be impossible to allow people to go on drumming.. It would however, be necessary to prepare Regulations governing hours and circumstances in which drumming were permitted...

From the quotation above we can see the deliberate act of the West to destroy the tradition of the people. Lagosians, like any other African, began to see their own tradition as inferior to that of the west. In this direction, system of names and dressing code became victims. Local names and dressing code gave way to those of the west. The return of some of the elites to Africa generated conflict in respect of Europeanized names and dressing code. But this was too late even as we still find these deeply rooted in our communities. Have we forgotten that hybridization of cultures means accretion rather than growth, and incrustation rather than development? In support of this in Lagos during the colonial rule, a correspondent of the then "Observer" of April 2 and 16, 1887, and quoted by Echeruo (1977:38), maintained;

> **The European system of civilization after which we are blindly groping tends very considerably to enfeeble our manhood and destroy our race...Civilization does not imply that we should lose our identity as race or people; it does not signify that we should scarify our religious creeds in preference to another without conviction of its superior claims.**

The theme of conflict is explicit in the excerpts. Remove drumming, language, system of names, dressing code, songs and musical instruments from the culture of a people thus regional identity and pride and culture will get extinct.

The Creative Arts and Ekiokpe Festival

The creative arts today fundamentally derive from two contexts of creativity - the traditional and the contemporary. In practice, however, the two contexts are indicative but not definitive; for they are interwoven. Nketial (2005), affirms that in Africa today there are two primary contexts of creativity; the traditional and the contemporary which are complementary.

The traditional context indicates the tradition, norms, myth, folklore, language, and dress code of the people in relation to cultural area and social institutions. Here each cultural area over time creates and maintains peculiar style of expression, forms and motifs that take supremacy over general principles and forms. This lent credence to European Literature, European Art (Visual and plastic), African Literature, African Arts (Visual and plastic), Ife Art, Benin Art, Nok Art and Isoko Art. Therefore, Art is historic, for the art forms, style, motifs and even the materials are passed from generation to generation though with modification influenced by new technique, science and technology. So, in spite of the fact that the traditional context is old it is not static, rather it is dynamic, and more importantly it serves as a reference material to the source of inspiration and a parameter in professional practice.

Contemporary context indicates the way of life which goes beyond cultural areas, involving topical issues in government, politics, association, economy and education. However wide the subject of contemporary art may be, art must belong to an environment and must be influenced by either the style or forms or motifs. Even .nude sculptures belong to an environment. So, traditional and contemporary forms of creativity are intertwined as evident in Eriokpe Festival or the arts that manifest in it.

To explore and extend the approaches of Eriokpe Festival in relation to traditional and contemporary contexts rather than just means of regional pride and identity, a critical attention is here given to the festival on its language, costume, dramatic features and motifs as relevant to the creative arts and, therefore, national development.

Language

It is not new that, in creative terms, language is a vehicle of expression. It is cultural or modern, local or foreign. It is also true that vastness in the local language aids general learning. It puts one in a proper shape in his own culture. A linguistic theorist, Walter Ong (2004), maintains that a cultures dominant means of communication shapes its people's consciousness and ways of knowing the world. The Eriokpe Festival preserves the original language content. And you will be amazed at the exposition done by the masters of oral aits during the festival in performances. Scholarly researches that are social-cultural will lack the piquancy they deserve if the inputs of these masters of oral arts are not sought. Indeed, the language Irotn the festival speaks straight from within the traditional, giving interpretation of the myth, folklore, norms and philosophy of the culture that has been influenced by acculturation, thereby shaping consciousness and ways of knowing the world.

Read this; ***Ereghe ho idhu***
Translation: "Wisdom is the better part of valour"
How many of our modern Isoko people still remember the above expression or its translation? Or how many literature books in Isoko can Isoko as a nation boast of? But here is a festival which offers a very rich creative exercise. The one written by Rev. Vase and that of Mr. Imonikebe vanished because the modern Isoko men did not find useful the language they expressed. This is the worst stage of hybridization.

Costume

Human experience shows that costume/drapery forms a good part of the creative continuum. The great German art historian, Wolfflin, quoted by Rogers (1969) remarked that "the real person is the clothed person and not the nude person" Today society classifies nudity in public as a mark of insanity. So if Wolfflin says that the real person is the ***clothed*** person he is right in every sense of cultural, economic, religious and social values. In the variety of human experience, traditional festivals raqk very high in the expression of culture, art, economy and religion, using costume as vehicle. Among others, costume answers questions as where, who, why, when and how in human experience. In fact, it is the costume that makes traditional African festivals colourful. To the creative

arts the cloth extends the content of costume. It makes literature and drama richer. The visual and plastics arts find the ***cloth*** in action very rewarding. Linear forms and patterns that can be found in the ***cloth*** in action will make art forms expressive and dynamic.

In Eriopke Festival, the wrapper in action has a dual character. This is in respect of its structural complexity and variety of expressiveness. Celebrants tie the cloth in two different ways. In one way, the wrapper is tied across the left shoulder. It hangs with a loop on the shoulder and enfolds the torso, running under the right armpit. It extends down to the feet with folds running from the loop. While the folds from the left shoulders are vertical and taunt at the knee area the ones under the armpit form catenary curves. The folds change as action changes. In another way, the wrapper is tied round the loin with a heavy loop, extending down to the feet. The folds assume different curves with change in action. What makes sculptures, paintings, literature and drama richer than costume?

Dramatic Features

Western anthropologists maintain that human culture embraces all that is learned and that language is a primary means for learning and transmitting ones culture. Language has two forms — oral and written. Dramatists agree that the letter (written language) is static and it is only given life by the actor. The actor and oral arts professionals do the same work (acting). In many traditional African cultures people master the complex verbal, musical and memory skills after years of specialized training. However, the training requires spiritual and classified efforts in order to have a strong control both of the word and of the audience. Eriokpe Festival epitomizes drama. The performance employs mining, voicing and action to tell a story, after undergoing spiritual training and rehearsing for a period. Even the carnival dance is a drama of sort.

Recommendations

1. Government should pursue cultural policies with seriousness they deserve
2. None government organizations should organize cultural competitions among communities
3. Traditional rulers should attach more importance to traditional festivals and organize competitions among quarters in their communities
4. Our institutions of learning should evolve cultural education
5. The media should produce documentaries on our traditional festivals
6. Individuals should participate in the celebration of traditional festivals in their communities.

Conclusion

To conclude this paper, I will lead us in an excursion to the objectives for "Stavenger (2008) - European capital of culture, Norway"

> To ensure a broad and enduring cultural experience, especially for children and the Young, to promote quality, innovation and diversity in the arts, to contribute to the establishment of enduring networks in the fields of arts and culture, to contribute to cultural identity and pride, to contribute to the development of industry and commerce; to contribute to cultural and physical infrastructure.

Let us save our traditional festivals from extinction. This is possible if our universities evolve courses to take care of traditional institutions. Government and NGOs should organize competitions to promote communal based programmes. Proper documentation should also be ensured.

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