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Traditional Theatrical Practices in a Receding Economy: A Focus on Tombiana Egbelegbe Festival of Rivers State

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Abstract

Lack of cultural reality has often led to recession in most developing societies as perceived in cultural studies. However, traditional adaptations are often deployed to cushion and possibly reverse the severity of recession across time and space. Instances of such reversals include the Chinese reversal to Confucianism, the Indian resort to Hinduism and the traditional African invocation of ancestral myths, religious observances and festivals. From the re-enactment of the procreative Tombiana Egbelegbe festival we have seen that traditional value creates order and social cohesion in African societies. A reversal to these traditional means of social reengineering will endear these creative practices that create order and social cohesion in African societies. Thus, the theoretical position of Marxist cultural inquiry will be applied as the theoretical framework for this paper. The Methodology applied in this study is research participant observation and sources of data were primary and secondary sources. The findings revealed that consistently, festivals are efforts of man to alleviate human suffering, create order and control his environment through creativity and cultural resourcefulness in performance. It was recommended that given the reality that is subsisting in most Nigerian communities, agrarian festivals, innovative, resourceful and masked designs, costumes, make-up, craftsmanship, dance, and music, drum communication should be encouraged. It was thus concluded that continuous performance will lead to preservation, packaging, promotion and transmission of cultural values from one generation to another which will in turn lead to cultural tourism. Cultural tourism can lead nations out of recession and economic dependence as was experienced in the Indian and Chinese cultural revolutionary experience.

Key Words: Traditional theatrical practices, recession, human capacity development, Tombiana Egbelegbe Festival

Introduction

Nigeria has experienced stagnation in growth after independence because of the neglect of her culture by government immediately after independence. The country Nigeria thrived before independence as one of the major players in human capacity agrarian production in the world. At this time the rural area was the focus of emphasis, where human capacity generated the production of palm produce, cocoa, groundnuts, rubber and 'hides and skin' which in medieval times were recognized as Moroccan leather. With the attainment of independence and the emergence of 'oil' as a major player in the international market, performance-based agriculture was neglected and the leadership of the country neglected the rural area and concentrated on the concept of one product urbanization. Lagos, Port Harcourt, Warri, Kano, and Kaduna, etc. became the major centres of focus in terms of development. The pre-independent and early post-independent posture of Nigeria's economic stability necessitated by rural agricultural products was neglected disregarding the fact that investing in agriculture would have developed the rural areas, which will in turn lead the country to mass production, industrialization, and eventual cultural and economic stability.

The country rather concentrated on the international communities International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) for her economic programmes, neglecting cultural diversity, for cultural domination and imperialism. Cultural diversity will promote economic activities in the rural areas and encourage cultural self-reliance and development of the Nigerian nation. It should be noted that most agricultural activities end with theatrical based performances such as new yam festivals, masquerade festivals, etc. Eagleton(2008), commenting on Marxist cultural enquiry stated: "Marxist cultural enquiry ... represents a materialism of a somewhat fundamentalist but nonetheless interesting kind –an attempt to demystify idealist notions of art by situating it in the context of natural history" (p. 8). Thus, situating art in the course of natural history, these festivals which often last for weeks or months filled with cultural activities of the people should be encouraged, promoted and transmitted to the up-coming generation. These economic/cultural activities create social order, cohesion, and stability which if encouraged will in turn lead to economic self-reliance. Also, to be strengthened is the agro-based activities that herald these festivals.

The cohesive nature of festival performance is experienced in the Egbelegbe masquerade festival. Warring youths come together to participate in the festival. At that point, areas and points of discord are forgotten as they sing, dance and eat together. The festival thus becomes a cohesive culture performance culture that creates social order and re-engineers the youths into creative arts and crafts and becoming youths free from cultural imperialism and domination.

This paper posited that Nigeria's delving to recession is as a result of misplacement of priorities, forfeiture the agro-based economy for acquisition of technology outside the people's way of life. All that is needed is a synergy between Western ideas and the traditional ideas which in turn will lead to mass production, preservation the traditional heritage while new technologies are also learnt. Nigeria should learn from the Chinese and Indian experience. These countries received aid from Nigeria the United Nations in the early 70's during the monsoon rainy season, but today, they are economically self-reliant.

Traditional Theatre

Traditional theatre is the way of life of the people and it embraces the totality of the African way of life. Theatre as a reflection of life embraces in a microcosm all aspects of the people's way of life from its earliest beginnings in the Osirian passion plays in Egypt, the Dionysian

scripted plays to the modern times. In furtherance of this view of the reflective universality of dramatic/performance narratives in the world, Turner (1993), observed vividly while describing cultural narration in relation to dramatic performance of 'traditional societies especially in Asia and Africa thus:

Some societies may have no equivalent to the novel, but all societies tell stories. Story telling can take many forms- myths, legends, ballads, folk-tales, rituals ,dance, histories, novels, jokes, drama- and can be seen to have many apparently difficult social functions- from entertainment to religious construction it seems that story telling is part of our cultural experience, inseparable from and intrinsic to it (p. 67).

The Egbelegbe festival clearly depicts the cultural history of the Tombia people in their sojourn in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria from the Eleventh Century to the present age. The Egbelegbe festival embraces all aspects of Tombia communal life as every culture/society tells stories about the past exploits of their ancestors to their forebears of the Tombia people. The story is narrated by the chief drummer in the course of Egbelegbe festival drama. All the names of the founding fathers of Tombia community, deities, gods are all called to come and participate in this festival. It is the highest performance in Tombia culture as the best in costume, make-up, dress sense, acting, dance movement, drummed communication, food sense, maidenhood are all showcased in the course of this festival. These communal scripts contain the reenacted story of the ancestors which is dramatized as a representation of their heroic deeds in society reenacted by actors in a festival dramatic performance, especially how they overcome enemies. These dramatic performances which most times are in Ekine dramatic convention in form of stories are embedded in drum lore tones and are ushered in by the chief drummer.

Theatre is collaborative in the sense that the concept of western theatre is bereft of the synergic nature of theatre which embraces all the art forms as experienced in Egbelegbe festival. In this guise Horton (1963) in his work on Kalabari, explained that Ekine serves dual functions in Kalabari society: religious and social functions as they feed the various gods and entertain the people with their recreational masquerade performance. Adedeji (1986), Okafor (1991) attested to the impactful nature of traditional festival performances on the cohesive development of African societies and on the African mind. In support of this view of the functionality of traditional African masked drama as fulfilling the core of drama in a modern sense in terms of context and content, the erudite scholar Okafor (1999), opined that:

The Japanese Noh performer uses mime, music, and stylized movements as techniques of representation... Indian Kathakali drama uses esoteric gestures and surrealistic costumes and make-up to stimulate action that is being narrated in song, ... Chinese shadow players imitate action by the use of "moving figures made of animal skins and cardboard ... different traditions obviously utilize different techniques to imitate action (p.40).

It is reflective and subject to synergic change; thus, for a country to regain its economic potentials and impact on the international community, it must refine and reflect the totality of the arts music, dance, plastic and performing arts to suit modern times. This can be done by encouraging research and learning, opening up intellectual space for further studies on cultural integration.

Essentially, integrative change in this sense does not mean a reversal to the past but a synergy between the past and the present to improve the standard of living of the citizenry.

Culture reflects social reality and that reality is what is prevalent in the immediate environment that creates meaning to life.



Plate 1: A section of the audience and dramatic characters in their beautiful costumes, sourced from field work

In respect to the reinvigorating nature of cultural symbiosis, Schechner, (1985, pp. 4-6), on his study of the development and opportunities of the performing arts in various parts of the world explained in this perspective of creative change that:

I've been travelling a lot these past few months ... India, china, Ann Arbor, Texas, and Chicago. And I have seen a lot of performances ranging from jinju (Beijing opera) to performance art, from classic dramas to rehearsals of new works of students... the impression I get is that colleagues in India and china are searching through their alternatives concerning training, scholaring, and producing both classic and new works.

The teeming graduates produced by theatre institutions in the country need to graduate into employment opportunities in the face of competition from the media and film industry. For theatre to accommodate its teeming graduates in Nigeria, traditional art form must be inculcated to the educational curriculum from the primary, secondary and tertiary level, devising new methods and ways of synergising its present form where it is learnt as a discipline in the tertiary level and not from the primary level. The large variety of performances in our communities need to be inculcated into our children as they compete for prizes in riddles and jokes, songs, music, dances, folklore, drama, playwriting, directing, choreography. Every school must need teachers of the dramatic art to prepare them for these competitions. This will create a large vista of employment opportunities for our teeming theatre graduates. Adedeji (1986,), explained that

Since the theatre is a work of art, the theatre as an aesthetic product, the creation a collective endeavor ... Its essence lies not in what is performed or how it is performed. It lies in the resultant functional quality that is gained by the performer and the audience (p.103).

The theatre as a work of art thrives on imitation of action and its functional quality lie on what is gained by the performer and the audience in the sense of the audience being educated and entertained while the performer in return gets his economic reward which is profit from his meaningful endeavour. But there are some hindrances to this endeavour in a sense that we know the Islamic religion not being too friendly to theatrical activities in the Nigeria multicultural society. Instead of been fed with products from foreign cultures, Nigerian societies where dramatic activities form part of their culture should be encouraged to develop and practice same as it is the sure means of creating social harmony, cohesion and socio-economic development. From aeon of time, even the tyrant Pisistratus, when he found the Athenian society bereft of social activities instituted the Dionysian festival of plays with prizes awarded to the best, where western theatre took its root from.

Recession

Recession can be classified as an economic situation whereby a country's gross domestic product runs into a decline for more than six months especially in a mono economy where one product "oil" serves as the major means of national income like Nigeria, leading to a down turn in employment, decline in industrial production, inflation and prior in real estate development and capital flight.

The Egbelegbe Masquerade Performance



Plate 2: The chief drummer calling Egbelegbe's mother Sibinume to come and perform, sourced from field work.

Amabratuoku	by the right hand a child
Erebarayetuoku	by the left hand a child
TombianaEgbelegbewenipakaboTombianaEgbelegbe now come out.	

The Egbelegbe masquerade is swift in movement knife wielding comes in a flash and disappears when the crowd is stirred into frenzy. He is accompanied by his doctor (Igwangi), mother (SibiInume), police (SibiNangolo) and spy (Afuru) in the course of the performance. Egbelegbe is performed once in a century later it was reduced to two decades. Sometimes when it is performed, very few elders remained who had participated from the last performance. The performance of Egbelegbe Alali benefits Tombia in so many ways.



Plate 3. A panoramic view of actors and audience sourced from field work.

The people of Tombia learn their culture through festival and dramatic performances. Especially in festivals like the Egbelegbe Alali (festival). Boys are taught the role of men while women are taught the role of women in society. It brings peaceful coexistence, bringing together people from all ages and all works of life, people who have not seen one another for long now see at home because of the Egbelegbe festival. All cadres of women, girls, maidens, children come home to partake in the festival.



Plate 4. Choral groups dancing in celebration of Egbelegbe festival sourced from field work.

Different families come together; the various groups, even enemies come together to eat and drink from the same table. It brings brotherly love to Tombia community. There is also the

tendency of charity and receiving visitors and strangers in the course of this festival. People come from far and near to witness and be part of this great Egbelegbefestival. It is kind of a must for every Tombia citizen to participate in the festival at least, once in a life time. Virgins have opportunity of getting married. Wealth comes into the town. Egbelegbe festival exhumes beauty in style of dressing, costume, make up, and delineates the chemistry of the female anatomy in its most aesthetic state. The fineness in food, drink and hospitality from the Tombia people is experienced by all at this great Egbelegbe Alali (festival).

Series of ceremonies are performed before the performance proper which is not part of this study, like the ritual aspects.



Plate 5: Sibinume and her retinue of virgins moving majestically to the arena having being called by the drummer to come and perform

Human Capacity Development

Human capacity development is the ability of a country to create an internal process of development which embraces job creation, housing, capital market development to engaging a majority of the people at every given point in time in viable economic activity. In the modern times this feat has been achieved by countries that have created a synergy between traditional and western thought in terms of arts and science. A good example is the Asian tiger's (China, Japan, India, Malaysia etc.), by reversal to their traditional ideological production systems of Confucianism and Buddhism. All forms of Dance songs and folk lore where improved on to suit modern times which is clearly reflected in their film industries. In classical Greece scientific innovations were first experimented on in the theatre before they were mass produced for industrial use like the eckyclyma, which was used for the appearance and disappearance of a god to save a tragic situation on stage, before it was transferred to ships to sling in and sling down goods from the hatch of ships. This trend has led western scholars to learn these arts and science of the orient to improve on their technology as experienced in Steve Jobs creativity in Apple and Richard Branson's creativity in Virgin Atlantic and Virgin galactic through their reversal to studying Buddhists and Hinduism introspection.

The making of these costumes, head gears, instruments of production require artistic creativity. Such a rich harvest of artists and craftsmen cannot be thrown away. Nigeria can only develop human capacity to overcome modern economic trends by reverting to a rural based agrarian driven industrial revolution. By this I mean that our traditional value system embedded in African cultural festivals and observances is needed to drive creativity in modern times. Majority of Nigerians live in the rural area. Encouraging agriculture will require creating the enabling environment in the rural area that will on the long run address the issue of rural urban drift of the viable population, curb unemployment and enhance creativity amongst the youths thus eradicating youth restiveness the epidemic of modern Nigeria.

Findings

From our findings, we have seen that competition is what drives creativity in agriculture, sports, recreation, festivity, and even in education. Where a society encourages competition with reasonable prizes and awards, the youths in that society will be engaged meaningfully in creative endeavours. This is experienced in China now competing well in football/athletics and gymnastics in the Olympics. This study had broadened our knowledge to the fact that dramatic festivals as a systematic study of society gives us two types of information about society. In the descriptive way, it gives us facts about the material culture, customs, laws, and the organizational methods that make up a society. The study on Egbelegbe festival has given us two types of information; the descriptive one about the material culture, customs, laws, technology and the special institutions that make up Kalabari/Tombia society are embedded in Ekine masquerade culture, the people's cosmology and their belief systems, etc.

The masks, head gear, costumes, make –up are all developed by special crafts men; encouraging same in competition will create ample job opportunities for the teeming youths as they will excel, one way or the other. From our findings, as analyzed from video recordings, interviews, discussions and observations, Ekine members constitute the core of Kalabari society as they serve as the embodiment of cultural values and transmitting same through masquerade drama. Furthermore, from this study we have seen in a sense that the masquerade festival creates order in African societies as it serves as a means of education, entertainments, communication, conflict resolution and conviviality amongst members of society. This phenomenon was experienced in Tombia Egbelegbe festival as warring families came together to perform in the same group.



Plate 6. Chiefs and Ekine members from neighboring communities as part of the audience

The control that cultural practices have on an individual in Africa is unquantifiable. Even the restless youths humble themselves; Tombia people and neighboring communities who have heard of the festival and have not witnessed it come to watch. From our findings, Tombia people have not seen such a crowd since after the crisis, even in church crusades. Warring factions are all involved in the performance. One has also noticed the recent decline in primary and secondary school sports, leading to idleness among energetic Nigerian youths. Their vulnerability has made people/politicians channel the energy of the youth towards negativity and ruthlessness. Also experienced is the decline in the quality of education high unemployment rate, youth restiveness leading to destructions of goods, and infrastructures thus generating recession in the country. Even in the arts, there are no viable competitions among schools where rewards are given to creativity. This has led to our teeming graduates of theatre arts not having equivalent job opportunities.

There is high rate of rural-urban migratory by viable/productive members of the population hence, a reduction in agricultural activities which is the bane of these cultural festivals. There is need for these cultural festivals to be encouraged and developed to international standards. This will indeed enhance human capacity development and boost cultural activities/eco-tourism. No society develops outside its culture.

Recommendations

For Nigeria to be free of cultural domination and recession, theatre needs to reverse to internalization, which is an integrative reversal to our traditional means of human endeavour embedded in performative agriculture and animal husbandry.

In competitive economics, what is called comparative advantage is one engaging effectively on what one has comparative advantage in. Nigeria has comparative advantage in good arable land which can be harnessed for meaningful agriculture with positive effects on people who live mostly in the rural areas. Encouraging cultural festivals will inculcate traditional values, songs, folklore, music, dances, and dramatic re-enactments as aspects of the educational curriculum. This brings relevance to rural elders in every community who transmit these cultural activities.

Creating competitive sporting and artistic environment in all communities will make the teeming youths engage in one sporting or cultural activity throughout the year. Then, there will be no room for economic stagnation, youth restiveness and the aftermath recession.

Each rural community requires accessibility. Government should construct good roads, good schools, provide electricity, water, etc. The schools should also be given good teachers who can be made to stay by building good teachers' quarters for them and giving them other necessary incentives to remain in the rural setting. These will greatly prevent rural-urban migration.

Conclusion

This study has shown that no society develops by neglecting its past as reflected by the Asian Tigers China, Japan, India, Korea, Malaysia etc. for Nigeria too to develop traditional arts, crafts, performances, philosophy and scientific practices should be encouraged as they create orderliness and cohesion among the people. Cultural practices distinct one society from another as we see the proliferation of Asian films in modern film market. We have also seen "Western" society embracing meditation and teaching same which yesterday was forbidden in

western institutions, because they have been well preserved, packaged and promoted. Africa has series of viable and imbibe-able arts, crafts and performance modes of communication which can serve as means of wealth creation, etc., especially ‘possessive acting and synchronized dances.’ Most importantly, integrating our vibrant cultural practices into the educational curriculum will create ample job opportunities for our teeming graduates in the creative arts industry, helping to reverse the rural-urban migration to urban-rural migration as our communities will receive new lease of life. Order will be restored; schools will be functional and agricultural activities will come back to the fore, reducing poverty and unemployment to the barest minimum in African communities.

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