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The Fanti carnival in Lagos and its message of morality

Ònádípè-Shalom, Títíláyò

Abstract

Cultural festivals are integral parts of the people of Nigeria, especially Lagosians. These festivals provide spiritual, emotional and psychological fulfillment to the people. One of the very few carnivals which exist in Lagos Fanti. It is celebrated not only within the main Brazilian quaters in Campus, Olowogbowo and Lafiqji but over the years have spread to other areas on the Island such as Okoo Faji and Epetedo among others. Earlier studies on the Fanti Carnival have largely focused on the aesthetics of the costume and fanfare while little attention has been paid to its didactic impacts. Five interview sessions were held with past and present Fanti carnival participants, non-participant observations of performances and collection of seven selected Fanti songs for data analysis. The theoretical framework for this study is the theory of sociology of literature which explains the relationship that exists between members of the society and the impacts of literature on the society. The paper revealed that unlike cultural festivals which are gradually going into extinction the Fanti Carnival has gained more popularity and acceptance from people of diverse ages and religions. It is also observed that the festival has great potentials that will guarantee its survival in the years ahead, in spite of the numerous challenges facing the society. In addition, the annual celebration of this cultural festival is of great economic advantage to the community. Finally, the study is a way of documenting the rich cultural festivals of the Afro-Brazilians in Lagos State. The study, therefore, recommends more participation of private and government agencies.

Keywords: culture, festivals, Lagosians, Brazilians, sociology of literature

Introduction

CULTURAL FESTIVALS AND CARNIVALS ARE INTEGRAL PARTS OF THE PEOPLE of Nigeria. States across the nation celebrate their cultural and historical backgrounds through these festivals and carnivals which also reflect the traditional beliefs and religion of the people. Notable festivals and carnivals

include the Lagos, Abuja, Rivers, Calabar carnivals and the Ojude Oba festival in Ijebu Ode, Ogun State. These celebrations are carried out for several purposes, some of which is to celebrate an important personality who could be alive or deceased and also to cleanse the community of all evils such as sicknesses and diseases. Festivals also serve as sources of healing to their adherents as exemplified by the Osun Osogbo festival. Traditional festivals portray religious ceremonies which are performed mainly in a group of the family, by relatives, by the whole population of one area, or by those engaged in a common occupation. It is an essential part of the way of life of each distinct group of people and its influence covers all of life, from the birth of a person to long after the person's death. At the same time they influence natural occurrences such as rains and disasters such as famine, drought, and epidemics.

Each of the five divisions of Lagos state is identified with unique festivals which provide spiritual, emotional and psychological fulfillment to the people. Major festivals on Lagos Island include the Adámú Òrìṣà Festival, popularly known as Ẹ̀yò and Egúngún. The negative impact of modern religions such as Christianity and Islam on traditional festival is decried at the press conference by the Akran of Badagry, His Royal Majesty, De Wheno Aholu Mon-Toyi (OFR). He regretted that

Civilization and religion had greatly affected our culture, and has led to the decadence in our moral and cultural values that has grossly affected our youth. This festival is in remembrance of our ancestral inheritance. We must not let it die. We don't know the value of what we have."¹¹

In their efforts to classify carnivals and festivals, Mokuolu and Aukstins (nd) note that carnivals fall under the performing arts festivals. Andrew (2010:1) indicates that while some carnivals are nationally oriented, some serve only to showcase local or indigenous festivals of the people. In this instance, he notes that The Abuja Carnival was initiated by the Federal Ministry of Culture, Tourism and National Orientation in 2005 as an annual event. In addition, it was believed that the carnival would serve as "a catalyst for the cultural renaissance of the country; to bring together the vast and diverse cultural resources of the country, encourage interface and interaction among the people, as well as promote creativity in the cultural sector."

Larrino (2000) presents several arguments by scholars on what they believe to the carnival. These include Frazer (1913) who avers that carnivals constitute survivals of ancient religious rituals. Bhaktins (1969) sees carnival as a critique of social order. Larrino (2000:21) remarks that other anthropologists have stated that, instead of either expressing social order or contesting it, carnival festivities display the capability of social groups to manipulate ritual symbols in order to display an alternative view of society (Backcock, 1978; Cohen 1974, 1982) in Larrino (2000).

It is important to note that each of the five divisions in Lagos pride themselves

in the unique festivals identified within the area. For instance, following the divisions of Lagos into ÌBÍLẸ, we can associate certain festivals with the different divisions. Ikeja - Egúngún, Badagry-Zangbeto, Ikorodu-Èlúkú, Lagos-Èyò, Èpé-Èbì and Zangbeto. Such festivals are celebrated in honour of the late forebears. Cultural festivals are also celebrated in honour of traditional deities in recognition of the people's believe in their potency and as a way of performing a spiritual cleansing for the community. The Brazilians are the returnees from Brazil who came home after the Civil War in United State of America and Cuba. They came with the Brazilian culture, food and lifestyle. Moreover, the returnees retained their Brazilian names, for example, Gomez, Da-Silva, Abozos, and Pinheiros among others. The returnees at that time created a niche for themselves as belonging more to the Europeans than to the local people. In fact, they considered themselves as whites while others are regarded as Negroes and were identified with a different kind of costume, food and architectural designs. This made the king of Lagos at the time to give them a place referred to as Pópó Àgùdà. Although the place was a desolate place, they were able to cope and survive because of the food they had with them. The returnees were skilled in diverse professions such as tailoring, carpentry and the locals who needed them had to call for their services. The returnees were given the nomenclature 'Àgùdà' due to their usual costume which were like that of Catholic priests. The Catholic Church is referred to as *ìjọ àgùdà*.

Historical background

The Fanti carnival was brought by the returnees from Brazil. It was a source of entertainment to the Africans while in Brazil. It was used to ease their tension after the day's work. The first Fanti carnival was done in 1890 to celebrate the church and the arrival of the returnees. Fanti is not a religious festival neither is it fetish. It is basically a carnival which is enjoyed by both the young and the old. Members comprised of different professionals bodies. Fanti is also referred to as the *careeta* by the Campos Brazilians, and Fanti by the Lafiaji. These are the major Brazilian Descendant communities, followed by Olówógbowó. However, the carnival has extended to other areas such as Oko-Fáji. Each community has their colors of identification: Campus wears green and yellow while white and red is for Láfiàji. These colors are symbolic. The red color stands for strength while the white represents peace. The costume all reflect their Brazilian's background and efforts are made to retain these peculiarities despite the economic regression the country is currently experiencing. Spencer Rhoma, in Amanda (2017:1), writing on Mas Canadian carnival remarks that a "carnival is not just street-party. It is an emancipation tradition where revelers take to the streets to play mas in which you pay to play". In the case of Fanti, the carnival is a reminiscence of their social life in Brazil. Andrew (2010), writing on the use of foreign materials in Calabar and Abuja carnivals noted that foreign influences are inevitable products of globalization as they tend to build cultural boundaries. This is important because

of its symbolic representation and the foreign spectators. Moreover, Andrew (2010:1) observes that in “every carnival outing, there is an attempt to not only satisfy the sensibilities of a critical local audience, but also to satisfy the aesthetic urge of international spectators who converge to share in the artistic experience”. Festivals and carnivals in Nigeria are usually funded by wealthy individuals, corporate organizations and government. This is why the Association of Brazilian Descendants in Lagos give financial and institutional support towards the success of the carnival every year. The participants are usually with masks, elaborate costumes and music. They organized beautiful parades round the cities. The carnival is celebrated every Christmas day, New Year and Easter Monday. It is always an elaborate event and one that draws people from different walks of life. Spectators are seen adoring the beautiful costume and melodious songs in Fanti carnival either in front of their houses, on their balconies and even on the streets while entertaining themselves. This reveals the fact that carnivals enhance social cohesion. Values such as respect for other's opinion and teamwork are inculcated in the participants as they plan for the programme. It is also a period of commercial/business opportunities for many people on the island. According to Mokuolu and Lukstins (nd) “Festivals are universally important for their social and cultural roles, and increasingly have been recognized for their economic impact.” Although the usual practice in Lagos is designating specific color codes for areas celebrating Fanti carnival, it is not so in some other states. For example, in Calabar carnival, the practice is to have a theme for the carnival around which each group develops a subtheme. This subtheme determines the colors for the group.

Statement of the problem

Much attention has been given to other cultural festivals in Lagos. In fact, there are several studies on cultural and religious festivals in Lagos. However, earlier works on the Fanti carnival have largely focused on the colorful costume, fun and excitement while little attention has been paid to its study as a social/ cultural festival among the Brazilian returnees.

Aim and objective of the study

The aim of the study is to investigate Fanti carnival celebrated among the Afro-Brazilians on Lagos Island. This is with a view of ascertaining its social and didactic impacts. The study also serves as a documentation of the carnival in order to prevent it from extinction.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study is sociology of literature. The sociology of literature is very essential for the analysis and interpretation of literature. It explains the relationship that exists between members of the society and the impacts of literature on the society. The theory is important to this study as it

relates to both the didactic and entertaining aspects of Fanti carnival on members of the society. Finally, the theory elaborates the various changes that have taken place in the society.

Methodology

The methodology employed in this study included five interview sessions which were held with past and present Fanti carnival participants, non-participant observations of performances and collection of seven (7) selected Fanti songs for data analysis.

Sampled Fanti songs

The Fanti plays a kind of music referred to as 'Agídigbo. Fanti has its peculiar drumming and dancing steps. The dancing steps differ from one song to the other and that is why preparations for the carnival always about two months before the day.

Themes in Fanti songs

The Fanti songs convey several themes that portray both entertainment and moral lessons. This confirms Andrew (2010:1) reports in Nigerian carnivals “an attempt is always made to communicate a message that is apt to the socioeconomic and political circumstances of the people, a message that could facilitate social change”. Moreover as noted by Bhaktins (1969) that carnivals serve to correct social anomalies, we proceed to present samples of Fanti carnival songs and the messages they tend to convey.

1. The belief in predestination. The song below portrays the notion that there is little man can do to influence his status in life as this has been concluded before birth. Hence, if you have been predestined to be wealthy in life, you will surely be. This song captures the Yoruba belief in predestination. Awolalu and Dopamu (2005:184) in Dopamu (2008:28) notes the traditional Yoruba belief that “God is the determiner of destiny and so everything that happens to a person on earth has been predestined by the deity ever before man comes into the world.”

1. Lead: *Níní owó kàdàrà ní.* [Wealth is predestined.]

Refrain: *Yabomisaá, sàwàlè.*

Refrain: *Àinù owó kàdàrà ní, sàwàlè.* [Poverty is predestined]

Refrain: *Yabomisaá, sàwàlè.*

The Fanti song also carries with it a serious warning for the audience. Lagos being the commercial hub and former capital of the country is a multilingual, multicultural city. The song is a narration of the “no dull moment” in Lagos and the fact that one must be active to make a living in Lagos.

2. Pride in Lagos

Èkó ilé, ilé ogbón / Èkó àkéte dùn, ó gbogbón / Omo ò mi má gbàgbé ilé / Àjò kì í dùn kódíderé gbàgbé ilé

3. Call: *Yēyē mí pè mí sọ funmi télè* [Mother forewarned me]

Response: *Èkó Àkéte, ilú ogbón* [Èkó Àkéte, the land of wisdom]

Call: *To bá dúró kò sọrà fónyànjí nítorí* [While standing, be conscious of evil-doers because]

Response: *Èkó ò gba gbèrẹ́* [Èkó brooks no laxity]

Èkó ò gba gbèrẹ́, [Èkó brooks no laxity]

Èkó ò gba gbèrẹ́, rárá o [Èkó brooks no laxity, not at all]

4. *Onífàntí ko rọra / Ko rọra o*

Lagos means different things to different people. While it welcomes new people everyday, the song is a call for caution and vigilance in Lagos.

5. Call: *Iwin igbó / Iwin ilé / Ẹ paramó. / Olówógbowó, ẹ paramó.*

[House daemons / Begone! / Olówógbowó, begone!]

Iwin ilé ẹ n gbóhùn ẹnu wa / Ko ko si Kékeré Ẹkùn, kò ẹ é dójú lé / A ẹ ẹ ẹ ẹ / Ẹ má dùbíúu wa / Eni dùbíúu wa yóò jálàìsí / Ayé oo / Fungbà diẹ nì.

[Fanti song is employed to / Ghosts in the house, can you hear my voice / There is never a kid tiger that can be confronted / Do not intercept us / Whoever intercepts us will be no more / This life / It's only for a short spell.]

Here the Fanti song admonishes the audience on the fact that life is transient. Everyone is bound to die at some point. This is a warning signal that people should understand that nothing in life is permanent.

Ayé oo / Fungbà diẹ ní oo / Ẹdá wayé máyà won a bàlújẹ / Ayé oo / Fungbà diẹ ní oo.

[This life is only for a short spell / Man grips the Earth so tightly / And corrupts the Earth.]

When a man runs after wealth for self-aggrandizement, such people are usually reckless in their behavior. They tend to be self-centered with weird attitudes that can jeopardize the peace and well-being of others. Today, there is ritual killings everywhere, robbery, disappointment, betrayal and others. The song is a reflection of the society we are today.

Conclusion

Fanti is a very friendly and all encompassing festival which has no discriminatory tendencies. It is obvious that the society needs more of the carnival in order to ease the tension in the land and to build harmonious relationship among the indigenes and peoples of Lagos State. Moreover, the economic potentials of the carnival makes it one of the favorites carnivals on the Island. Amalu and Ajake (2012) and Omitola (2017) noted the challenges posed by lack of infrastructure

to the economic potentials of carnivals. They observed that carnivals thrive in cities where there is availability of infrastructure. Omitola (2017:130) however, suggested that “the government should provide adequate infrastructure to such to support the voracious quest of tourists visiting Nigeria. By so doing, the country will reap benefits accruable from her tourism potentials to the fullest”. It is also important to note that Lagos State Government’s efforts at improving the security of lives and properties in the state have encouraged the continued celebration of Fanti carnival as a major tourist attraction in Nigeria. Finally, this study serves as a documentation of the cultural festivals of the Afro-Brazilians on Lagos Island.

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