



Issues and Themes in Traditional Festivals as Agents of Social Mobilization

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Abstract

This study explains the role of traditional festivals as social mobilization agents, encouraging moral rebirth, social mobilization, development communication and change for the better in the attitude of the people towards contributing to the development of the society. The paper adopts Behavior theory and Attitude change theory as theoretical framework. The two theories emphasize the importance of value change, which can lead to the development of the community. The paper recognizes the challenges facing traditional festivals in meeting up with its roles of social mobilization. Egungun festival in South West Nigeria is prone to hijack by the political elites who use them to cause havoc in the society. Some masquerades have turned themselves into political thugs carrying dangerous weapons to victimize members of the society. The study therefore recommends total overhauling of the entire traditional African festivals so as to meet the desired goal it intends to achieve where miscreants and hoodlums will not play prominent roles during the festival. Involvement of corporate organizations in financing traditional festivals could bring some sanity and attraction into it, thereby turning it into cultural and tourist attraction.

Key words: Social mobilization; African communication system; Community; Traditional festivals; Community development

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INTRODUCTION

In African society, traditional festivals provide opportunity for the elders to pass on folk and tribal love to younger generations. Traditional festivals of many ethnic group anchor the preservation of unique customs, folktales, costumes, occupations and religious life of the people (Adeoye, 1979). Egungun and Oro festivals among the Yoruba speaking tribe of South West Nigeria will be explored and their social mobilization process will be reviewed. The Egungun (Masquerade) festival is a yearly festival observed for several days to appease the spirits of the ancestors. It is believed that during the festival of the dead members of the community will come back to make prayers for the living ones.

Ogwu (2013) notes that masquerades play important roles in the traditional African setting, they serve as the link between the living and their dead relatives, it is believed that the dead visits the living from time to time through this medium. It is on this premise that the African traditional society was built upon and thus has helped a lot in safeguarding the society to a large extent.

The Egungun festivals/Oro are filled with fanfare wining and dining with every member of the community coming together to grace the occasion. The Ifa priest has a significant role to play in the appeasement of the dead heroes and presentation of sacrificial objects to the deities. The Oro masquerade is regarded as the law enforcement agent of the community. It is used to check bad behaviors and as well drive away evil doers in the community. Oro masquerade is used to enforce compliance to the rules and regulations guiding members of the community. During Oro festival bad occurrences thought to have been kept secret are revealed so as to change the behavior and character of those that are involved for better.

There are similarities in the organizational structures of the two festivals (Egungun/Oro) as both of them are meant to mobilize members of the community towards revitalization of their cultural heritage and social norms.

The two festivals which are normally anchored by the Ifa priests must have the blessing of the Obas and chiefs in the community before dates are picked for the occasion. Various traditional prayers, sacrifices and incantations are made by the masquerades to appease the deads who will be visiting the livings during the festivals. These festivals are normally regarded as communal celebrations which may involve careful planning, pouring of libations, drumming, dancing, eating and merry making as approved by the customs and the Ifa priests.

In the past, traditional festivals were held in high esteem by every member of the community because of the significant roles they play in social mobilization. Western education and activities of various religious organizations have diminished the impact of Egungun and Oro festivals in the social and political lives of the Yorubas. There is clamour in certain quarters that the festivals should be discontinued with government legislations due to the activities of hoodlums who have hijacked the festivals and turned it into weapon of oppression.

The political class is also found guilty of using the masquerades to unleash terror on the society. There are instances where masquerades carry dangerous weapons like guns, cutlasses, and some other life threatening weapons during Egungun festival. To the traditional rulers and the Ifa priests, the Egungun and Oro festivals could be used for development and encourage moral uprightness. The fact still remains that traditional festivals could bring about interaction and this could have a profound effect on people's thoughts, feelings and behavior and may be used for development because it brings about synergy between history, traditions and development communications.

1. CONCEPTS IN AFRICAN COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

In order to put the paper in proper perspective it is necessary to understand some vital concepts in African communication system. The concepts are as stated below.

1.1 Egungun/Oro Festival

These festivals are celebrated yearly with elaborate fun fare, drumming, singing, dancing with major aims of appeasing the deities and ancestral spirits that give good health, bountiful harvests, protection from enemies, victory at wars, breakthrough in business and general well being of the community (Awolalu, 1979).

1.2 African Traditional Religion

It is the indigenous religious beliefs and practices of the African people, and its existence dated back to the creation of African race as its faith is held by the forefathers and it is being practiced today in various forms by large numbers of Africans including those who claimed to be Muslims and the Christians. African traditional religion is based on

oral tradition, history, rituals, incantations and fetishism (Ikime, 1984).

1.3 Communication

This is the process of sharing ideas, information and messages with someone who shares the same field of experience with the source. Communication can be in writing, talking as well as non-verbal such as facial expression, body language, and visual communications, such as photographs, films and videos. Communication is *sine qua non* to human existence (Goldhaber, 1993).

1.4 Community

Community is a group of people who live in the same vicinity with similarities in culture, religion, and social values. At times, they may be members of the same family and share common interest.

1.5 Community Development

Community Development is a process designed to create conditions of economic and social transformation for members of the community which may involve their active participation and initiative (Sanda, 1992).

2. COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION

Community mobilization is a process through which members of a given community are conscientized for a developmental action stimulated by the community itself or a change agent. The community itself can evaluate this action and in most cases, it is geared towards improvement in health, agriculture, hygiene and education levels so as to improve the overall standard of living of the members of the community (Moemeka, 2012).

2.1 Culture

Culture can be defined as the people's ways of life that is influenced by the environment and correlate with behavior and values (Nwegbu et al., 2011).

2.2 Deity

A deity is a small god which people refer to for solution to their problems. It is worshipped through incantations and sacrifices offered by the priest on behalf of the worshippers. Deity can evolve from the spirits of the ancestors, god of river, thunder and iron (Adeniran, 1992).

2.3 Development

This can be referred to as remarkable change in the quality of life of members of a community. Sanda (1992) defines development as multi-dimensional referring to positive change which affect the majority and which lies in the social, economic, political and cultural spheres of societal life. Development entails change in attitude, better ways of doing things, ability to tolerate one another and knowing that government cannot do everything for us are all part of development (Moemeka, 1989).

2.4 Development Communication

This refers to the use of principles and practices of communication strategies for developmental purposes. Development communication plays transformational and socialization roles. In the area of transformational role, it addresses the issue of social change in the direction of enhanced quality of life and social justice. Its socialization role refers to the prevention of the established societal values, which are related to development and well being of the society (Moemeka, 2012).

2.5 Egungun (Masquerade)

This refers to the spirit of the reincarnation of the ancestors among the Yorubas in the South West region of Nigeria. The Egungun is usually dressed with marks and costumes covering every part of the body and it is difficult for people to know the person wearing the masquerade garment. However, it is forbidden for womenfolk to see or catch a glimpse of some specialized masquerades in Yorubaland. In most cases, it is not everybody that can wear the masquerade garments except those that come from families where they have family masquerade (Adeoye, 1979).

3. FESTIVALS

Festivals can be referred to as communal celebration which is carefully planned by the traditional institution in the community. It is the Obas (king) and his chiefs that approve traditional festivals, which involve outpouring of libations, rejoicing, winning and dinning, general funfare, and merry making. In some cases cultural groups, corporate organizations and non-governmental organizations sponsor traditional festivals.

3.1 Ifa Diviner

An Ifa diviner is a man or woman who possesses the skill of consulting Ifa Oracle for solving human, spiritual or natural problems. Ifa Oracle tells the diviner or priest what will happen or has happened and causes of problems in society and their spiritual solutions. Ifa Priest normally dresses in white apparel and they are known to live above corruption lies and manipulations. Ifa Oracle has the power to foretell future events and discover hidden knowledge by supernatural means (Ogwu, 2010).

3.2 Oba

An Oba in Yoruba speaking region of South West Nigeria is the traditional head of a town, village or city, and he is usually assisted by his Council of Chiefs. Various tiers of government in Nigeria recognize this institution, as they are known as the custodian of traditional culture, norms, values, religions and peaceful co-existence among the people (Oso, 2004).

3.3 Oro

Oro is another form of masquerade in the South West Nigeria. It is a traditional deity used for the cleansing of

the society and it is forbidden for womenfolk to see or have any contact with Oro Masquerade because it is a deity of secrecy among the Yorubas (Osiwele, 2007).

3.4 Religion

Religion is a collection of belief and cultural systems and worldviews that relate humanity to spirituality and sometimes to moral values. The practice of religion may include rituals, incantations, libations, festivals, dance, art and music (Awolalu, 1979).

3.5 Sacrifice

This refers to the practice of offering hens, goats, dogs, fruits, and plants to a deity as appeasement to seek supernatural assistance from the goddess (Ogwu 2010).

3.6 Social Mobilization

It is referred to as pooling together of potential human resources for the purpose of development (Moemeka, 2012).

3.7 Supreme Being

The Yorubas in South West Nigeria refer to God as Supreme Being to whom all deities report. He has the highest authority to answer or reject prayers.

3.8 Talking Drum

This refers to a type of drum having two faces to be used by the drummer to talk to the audience and for adding color to the music. It is also used to praise or condemn individuals in the society (Ojebode, 2006).

3.9 Traditional Communication

This is a form of indigenous communication system which has been interpreted into the people's culture, values and attributes (Wilson, 1998). Traditional communication makes use of this media for dissemination of information. Ndolo (2006) refers to traditional media as credible, indigenous and acceptable channels of communication utilized by rural dwellers to various societal functions.

3.10 Traditional Folk Music

This is referred to as music transmitted by words of mouth and it evolves by process of oral transmission or performed by custom over a long period of time.

3.11 Dominant African Cultural Values

According to Ndolo (2006), the following come closer to the core value and boundaries of African culture.

- (a) The role of the Supreme God/Allah and lesser gods in the daily lives of the Africans.
- (b) The African concept of time and its influence on him/her.
- (c) The African concept of work and its relationship to how he/she perceives his/her own relationship to nature.
- (d) An extended family system that encompasses many degrees of life beyond the nuclear family.

- (e) Reverence for ancestors.
- (f) Strong sense of communication as opposed to individualism.
- (g) Loyalty to chieftainships assumed to be possessed of spiritual temporal power.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Behavior Theory

Anaeto et al. (2008) posit that Ivan Pavlov and B.F. Skinner propounded this theory in 1957 under the following assumptions.

- (a) Changes in behavior are the result of an individual's response to events (stimuli) that occur in the environment.
- (b) That the internal state can influence behavior as external stimuli.
- (c) We develop responses to certain stimuli that are not naturally occurring.
- (d) People mould their behavior after that of the *dramatis personae*.

This theory is based upon the idea that learning is a function of change in overt behavior; changes in behavior are the result of an individual's response to events (stimuli) that occur in the environment. Reinforcement is the key element in behavior theory. (Source: viking.coe.uh.edu)

Behaviorism is thus seen to be relevant mainly to habit development. This theory draws its relevance to this paper as it emphasizes change in behavior which could be as a result of an individual's response to events (stimuli) that occur in the environment. Traditional festivals encourage value change which could lead to the development of the community.

4.2 Attitude Change Theory

Anaeto et al. (2008) argue that Daniel Katz Irving Sarnoff and Charles Mc Clintock propounded this theory in 1960. According to the theorists an attitude is seen as a positive or negative evaluation of people's objects, events, activities and ideas or just about happening in the environment.

According to Katz et al., the assumptions of the theory is that human beings are both irrational depending on the situation, the motivations operating at the time, and that there is tendency for people to operate with different ways of thinking which has significant implications for understanding attitude change. Katz et al. (1960) argue that attitude can serve four major functions in human personality.

The functions are:

- (a) The Instrument, Adjustive or Utilitarian Function
- (b) According to Katz et al., some attitudes are held because people are striving to maximize the rewards in their external environments and minimize penalties.

(c) The Ego-Defensive Function

Some attitudes are held because people are protecting their egos from their own unacceptable impulses.

(d) The Value Expression Function

Some attitudes are held because they allow a person to give positive expression to central values and to the kind of person one feels he or she is.

The Knowledge Function

Some attitudes are held because they satisfy a desire for knowledge or provide structure and meaning in what would otherwise be a chaotic world.

The relevance of the theory to this discourse can be seen on how rational and emotional arguments are used to serve motivational or persuasive communication functions in attitudinal change. Change in attitude can come through reception of messages delivered during Egungun/Oro festival. Political or economic issues are also discussed during the festive period. It is expected that messages that affects individual or community either positively or negatively are passed during traditional festivals.

5. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Egungun is otherwise known as masked ancestors of the Yorubas which assures the people that dead are among the living. Amongst the Yorubas, this annual ceremony in honour of the dead serves as a means of assuring their ancestors a place among the living. In family situations, a family elder known either formally or informally as *Alagba* presides over ancestral rites.

The Egungun is one of the pillars of the Yoruba tradition and it is one of the festivals that unite Yoruba people from different communities. Most people regardless of their religious affiliation participate in the festival for exciting atmosphere, comprising the songs, dancing and the colorful costumes of the ancestors (<http://jujufilms.tv1/.../yorubaland-egungun>).

Egungun speaks in strange voices people especially children believe Egungun comes from "Heaven" purposely for the festival. During Egungun festival public service announcements are made by the government for people to plan their routes because of traffic jam it may cause. The festival is celebrated between the months of November and April when there are no rains, with the believe that the ancestors should not suffer in the rain. The Egungun masquerade is dressed in colorful regalia with a whip which is used to flog anyone in the way of the spirits. The festival is believed to help foster unity in the community and it is also economically beneficial (www.facts.ng/culture).

6. SOCIAL MOBILIZATION

Oso (2004) says social mobilization entails:

the commitment of people to certain collective goals and objectives, and to value and behavior patterns conducive to the

timely attainment of those goals and objectives. As a corollary, it entails also minimizing the commitment of people of such goals, objectives, values and adopted by society.

This assertion sees social mobilization as an act of getting people to participate, support and or partake in a particular course of action. Thus mobilization efforts are successful when majority of the people for whom action is intended participate in the action after due mobilization.

Babalola (2004) posits that the essence of mobilization is to put together the talents in a particular community for developmental programme. To Babalola op cit, it is the human resource of a nation not its material resources that determine the nature, direction and speed of its socio-economic development.

At the centre of social mobilization is the development of man, as man is the agent, the target and the beneficiary of social mobilization. Development comes in through the creative energy of man. Therefore, mobilization should be concerned with the provision of those condition which will facilitate the realization of man's creative potentials.

Development however does not start with provision of infrastructure nor goods and services but start with people through conscientization, orientation, organization and appreciation of cultural values, norms and acceptable ways of living. Development that focuses on things at the expense of human resources is no development because a society can be poor amidst opulent material resources. Proper orientation, organization, mobilization of human resources engenders sustainable development.

7. TRADITIONAL FESTIVAL AS AGENTS OF SOCIAL MOBILIZATION

Gregory (2008) remarks that traditional festivals have many uses and values beyond the public enjoyment orchestrated in societal celebration. Gregory (op. cit) notes that in the pre-historic societies, festivals are known to have provided an opportunity for the elders to pass on folk knowledge and the meaning of tribal love to younger generations. The festivals of many ethnic groups are credited with the presentation of unique customs, folktales, costumes and culinary skills.

It is part of the customs and traditions of the Yorubas to celebrate Egungun or other festival yearly for merriment, prayers and social interactions. Festivals are regarded as communal celebrations involving carefully planned programmes, power of libations, sacrifices, incantations, prayers, rejoicing, established by custom and usually sponsored by the traditional institutions of the community.

Depending on the central purpose of a festival, the celebration may be solemn or joyful.

In Yoruba speaking South West Nigeria, traditional festivals are observed to serve the need of the various communities to honour their dead heroes. It may also be in the form of offering sacrifices to the deities to thank

the god for bumper harvest, Egungun / Oro festivals are celebrated to honour the founders of communities in Yorubaland that have become deities.

Thus, the Yorubas see festivals as agent of social mobilization. That explains why Oloyede (2004) remarks that mobilization is the act of organizing somebody ready for service or action and that mobilization denotes that act of getting people ready to participate that is, to support and or partake in a particular course of action. Mobilizing people at the community or grassroots level is always a very difficult task particularly when one proposes to use strategies or tactics used in the city where the elites reside. The level of illiteracy and poverty is high in some part of the South West, Nigeria that explain why festivals, the use of traditional rulers and chiefs, age-grade societies, local churches, market days and other African communication channels are used for passing information to the people in the community.

8. STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL MOBILIZATION

According to Oso (2004), "strategies" is referred to as a well planned series of actions set out for achieving an aim or set of objective, and for effective grassroot mobilization to be achieved he highlighted the following points.

- (a) Identifying the real people to be mobilized.
This involves not just knowing their names and addresses but their histories, locations within the social structure, power and hierarchical structure, economic and social base.
- (b) Understanding of goals and objective of these people and groups and their methods of operations. This will help in approaching them at all times.
- (c) Identification and recognition of the local authority structure as embodied in the traditional institution of the Obas and Baales in many of our towns and villages.
- (d) Reaching out to the elites' social clubs and age grades that are abroad and come home occasionally to celebrate festivals.
If properly mobilized, they could be veritable instruments in the development process at the grassroots level.
- (e) Identification of special days of many towns and communities whereby people are expected to come together, celebrate their achievements, launch development programmes, raise funds etc. Such special days provide a good opportunity for development agents to interact with different groups, be able to influence their programmes and agenda.
- (f) Identification of traditional festival days whereby youth, women and the old come home to celebrate such festivals e.g. Egungun festival.

- (g) Attitude of social mobilization agents also matters. They are not to be arrogant towards the people or thought them all to be illiterates.
- (h) Every effort at social mobilization must involve a well-articulated communication strategy. Effective success-oriented efforts at social mobilization must incorporate the modalities for the proper dissemination and exchange of ideas and the ideals for development.

8.1 Market Square Meeting

Virtually all villages in Nigeria have market where members of the community do their shopping. People visit the village market from within and outside the village and this gives an opportunity for interaction whereby information is disseminated and received with immediate feedback in some cases (Akpabio, 2003).

8.2 Village Viewing Centre

Onabanjo (2002) defines village viewing centre as a controlled theatre for impacting knowledge as well as a rallying point for people in the rural areas to be adequately informed about government programmes and aspiration. It is a place where public service information, like poverty alleviation programme, civic responsibility, agricultural and health information can be disseminated to people.

8.3 Folklore/Drama/Music

This is used to express the tradition and culture of the people, and they constitute age long practice among the people as the villagers believe in the messages learnt from it. Oziwele in Soola (2007) argue that it can be used to condemn some traditional practices like female genital mutilation, child abuse, women trafficking and it is believed that the messages learnt from it can go a long way in reaching the people at the grass root levels (Wilson, 1998).

8.4 House to House Visitation

This involves social visit among the grass root people for various social reasons and it could provide a platform for the exchange of ideas, so also burning issues affecting the community could be discussed. Through house to house visitation interpersonal communication is enhanced with immediate feedback.

8.5 Village or Town Crier

This is the process whereby the town crier goes around the village on the instruction of the traditional ruler to disseminate information to residents in the neighborhood with his metal or wooden gong. This concept of information dissemination gives room for interpersonal communication where immediate feedback is of essence (Onabajo, 2002).

8.6 Motorized Campaign

This involves using a motor vehicle affixed with microphone to move around the community using the loudspeaker of the microphone to pass information to

the people. Information on immunization, birth control, hygiene and civic responsibilities are usually passed across to the people using motorized campaign strategies (Agbo et al., 2010).

8.7 Local Church/Mosques

Places of worship are veritable and effective forum for exchange of ideas and information while the role of religious leaders cannot be over emphasized in dissemination of information that is development based. Governments at all levels including the Non Governmental Organization engage the services of religious leaders to preach peace and harmony in the community (Agbo et al., 2010).

8.8 Issues in Egungun Festival

A lot of socio-political issues are coming to the fore which have implication for the future realization of the objectives which traditional festivals are meant to serve among the Yorubas. If these threats are not quickly mitigated the value of African traditional festivals may continue to fade away which may lead to total abandonment of this important culture of the people. The issues are:

(a) Hijacking of traditional festival (Egungun/Oro) by hoodlums thereby turning the festival into a weapon of oppression, terror, looting and social disorder.

There are instances where masquerades carry firearms and some of their followers lost their lives in gunshots while some are maimed or wounded making the public to call for total disbandment of Egungun festivals by the government.

(b) In similar vein there is lack of proper orientation among the younger generation of what traditional festival is all about. The concepts of using traditional festival to make prayers have gone among the youth. Their own understanding of it is synonymous with thuggery, looting, and agent of political oppression, where there is no respect for traditional institution.

Some unemployed youths take to begging for alms under the guise of carrying masquerades.

(c) Problem of continuity is a major challenge among families having masquerade. There are complaints that when the older people carrying the masquerade dies, the younger members of the family are always reluctant to step into their shoes. This is not unconnected with various religious beliefs which have negative coloration for African traditional religions. In addition to this, the influence of western education has been relegated to the background the practice of African traditional religions. People see traditional religion as being fetish, crude and anti social.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For Egungun/Oro festivals not to go into extinction, the study recommends that there should be properly re-orientation of people so that they can understand the

concept of Egungun festival and by extension African communication system. The belief that the traditional festival is fetish should be erased, while government at all levels should accord necessary recognition to African traditional festivals either by restructuring its processes to fit into modern tourist attraction which could serve as promoting our cultural values and traditional to the western world.

Notable Corporate organizations can also be involved in sponsoring traditional festivals where government will ensure orderliness and peaceful mobilization of the people. There is need for government legislation against using masquerade as agent of political oppression or social disorder while emphasizing religious harmony among citizenry where no religion can claim supremacy over the other. The traditional institution like the Obas and Chiefs should be involved in maintaining peace and tranquility during festive periods with age grades well involved in the planning processes.

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