

# Festivals in Africa and Social Mobilization

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**Abstract:** - Festivals are very important to the African people. This can be observed from the experiences of the people in Traditional African Societies and this is still very much prevalent in Traditional African societies. They are not only important for the observation of time which can be seen in reality through the seasons of the year, but can also serve the function of social mobilization and cohesion. Although, on many occasions, the reasons for these festivals have been abused by some social deviants in the society, it however, still continues to play its role in contemporary societal life. The aim of this paper therefore, is to reiterate the importance of festivals to present day African people and also showcase its relevance to the world at large. In other words, the people of a particular society should set aside moments, seasons, periods or epochs to celebrate their life, experiences, culture and heritage. This can help in promoting unity and sense of purpose among the people. We shall utilize critical, analytical and hermeneutical method in examining this paper.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In traditional African society there are many concepts that have been examined philosophically. one of these is the concept of festival. Every aspect of the traditional African societies marked with one festival or the other. Festivals in Traditional African Society are in form of rituals, sacrifices and ceremonies. There are countless numbers of festivals celebrated in Traditional African Societies; this paper tends to give a general analysis about festival in the above mentioned context. In this paper some basic terminologies shall clarified and the focal point of this paper which is the concept of festival in Traditional African Societies is briefly elucidated with the citations of some ethnic groups within the traditional African societies.

### *Philosophy*

The term philosophy has been defined differently by various philosophers over the years, since the establishment of the discipline, there has not been a consensus among philosophers about the universal definition of the discipline.

Tracing the word back to its origin the word philosophy coined from Greek words *Philos* and *Sophie* the former which means “to love” or “to befriend” and the later which means “wisdom”, these two words put together means love of wisdom.<sup>1</sup> Philosophers right from ancient days to the present era have their own take on the term. Pythagoras who was the first person to use the word, called himself a wise man. According to Aristotle, philosophy is rightly called the search for truth. Epicurus describes philosophy as an activity which secures the happy life by means of discussion and argument,<sup>2</sup>Williams James says philosophy in the full sense is

only man thinking, thinking about generalities rather than particulars; John Dewey on his part defined philosophy as “thinking which has become conscious of itself”; Wittgenstein say it is “the logical clarification of thought”; Martin Heidegger sees philosophy as “the correspondence to the being of being”<sup>3</sup>

### *Festival*

The word “festival” according to the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, means a series of performance of music, plays, films/movies, etc. usually organized in the same place once a year; a series of public events connected with a particular activity or idea. In the general sense, a festival is an event ordinarily celebrated by a community and centering on some characteristic aspects of that community and its religion or tradition which often serve to fulfill specific communal purposes, especially with regard to commemoration or thanksgiving.<sup>4</sup> The celebrations offer a sense of belonging to religious, social, or geographical groups, contributing to group cohesiveness. Festivals also provide entertainment, which was particularly for local communities before the advent of mass produced entertainment. Festivals that focus on cultural or ethnic topics also seeks to inform community member of their traditions, the involvement of elders sharing stories and experience provide a means for unity among families.<sup>5</sup>

### *Tradition*

A tradition is a belief or behaviour passed down within a group or society with symbolic or special significance that have their origins in the past. The word tradition is derived from the Latin word “trader” which means “to transmit, to hand over, to give for safe keeping”. The word tradition is understood to mean a belief, custom, a way of doing something peculiar to a group of a people, that is, the culture and customary practices of a people: their own conception of reality and what reality is all about.”<sup>6</sup> It is that which comes out of people’s life experiences. Tradition is a people’s experience born out of their environment which influences their structure of life and how they describe reality.<sup>7</sup>

### *African*

There are many hypothesis that have been postulated for the ancient name” Africa” many scholars have given their own take on the origin of the word, Africa, some scholars say the word Africa is derived from the Latin word *Africae* which is the name used to refer to the inhabitants of Africa, which in its widest sense referred to all lands South of the

Mediterranean (Ancient Libya).<sup>8</sup> For some scholars, the word Africa is usually connected with the Hebrew word *Afar* which means dust. However, in 1981, a hypothesis was raised which asserted that the word Africa stems from the Berber word *Afri* (Plural *Afran*) which means “cave” this is used in reference to cave dwellers.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, for scholars like Flavius Josephus (the 1st-century Jewish Historian) he asserted that the word Africa was named after Ephraim, grandson of Abraham whose descendant, he claimed, had invaded Libya. For scholars like Isidore of Seville in (*Etymologiae* xiv, 5.2) he suggests that the word “Africa” comes from the Latin word *Africae* meaning sunny. However, history has it that the name “Africa”, has been traced by some people to barbers origin, others have traced it to Greco-Roman and Century.<sup>10</sup>

Geographically, Africa is said to be the second largest and most populous continent in the world. It is referred to as “the black continent” which is located in the eastern Hemisphere, south of Europe and joined to Asia by the Sinai Peninsula; it is a continent with the highest number of black people. A native or inhabitant of Africa is an African.<sup>11</sup>

### *Society*

Society is a group involved in persistent social interaction, as geographical or a large social grouping sharing the same geographical or social territory, typically subject to the same political authority and dominant cultural expectation. Human societies are characterized by patterns of relationships, between individuals who share distinctive culture and institutions, a given society may be described as the sum total of such relationships among its constituent members. A society can also consist of likeminded people, governed by their own norms and values with dominant, larger societies.

The term society came from the Latin word *Societas*, which in turn was derived from the noun *Socius* which means comrade, friend or ally. This word when used in the Latin adjectival form “societis” means a bond or interactions that exist between parties that are friendly or at least civil.

## II. GENERAL VIEW OF FESTIVALS IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETY

The life experiences of African people are multidimensional and multi-faceted, revealing and manifesting the nature of reality to African people in their own peculiar way.<sup>12</sup> The life experience of people in traditional society is marked with many festive celebrations and ceremonies. Houtoundji said that one of the things that strike the ethnographers about African traditional societies is the sheer numerical importance of ritual festivals and ceremonies. Indeed it has been said that the earliest Europeans who come to Africa were so struck by the number and frequency of such ceremonies that they thought Africans had nothing else to do.<sup>13</sup>

The truth is that every human society has peculiar norms which not only characterize it but also determine the life of its members. In traditional African societies, this role is played by festivals and ritual ceremonies.<sup>14</sup> In traditional African societies, social and moral life is organized around festive manifestations which fulfill the function of social and moral control as well as provide entertainment and diversion.<sup>15</sup> These festivals are therefore important as indicators of group interest and values and various aspects of social life. It is also pertinent to know that African traditional societies, as distinct from modern or civilized societies, is a religious society that strongly believes in the existence of Being or beings whose wishes he must conform with and whose experiences he must emulate.<sup>16</sup> In other words, an African in traditional African society accepts that his existence in the world has a spiritual dimension, that there are some kinds of forces which determine, as it were, the sense of his life and that he cannot afford to ignore this force. While he lives there are certainly some of his actions that involve only his superficial physical persons, such as eating, conversing and quarrelling. But there are other actions of his which are more metaphysical; there are situations in which he does not feel an obligation to please, in which he feels an obligation to conform. This is the realm of taboos and moral restraints.<sup>17</sup> In the above, he can very easily err and commit what the Igbo people call “Alu” or “Ememe”. This sphere of his existence is associated with the sacred realm and the gods. Our interest is in the second sphere: the metaphysical aspects in traditional African societal life and the world as a whole are visualized in relationship with the sacred realm more precisely. In African traditional society the essence and continuation of social life are guaranteed through well determined and periodical contacts with the deities during which the society reiterates the essential factors of life and death.<sup>18</sup>

Festivals in African traditional society are built on the concept of life as a cosmic cycle or what Mircea Eliade calls “myth of eternal return”. Myth in this sense is simply a constituted human beliefs and behaviour that is sometimes accompanied by rituals, which tend to emphasize the spiritual rather than the material aspect of man.<sup>19</sup> Festivals in African traditional society are not just for fun and entertainment, but are forms of spiritual commutation built around the myth of eternal return or the motion of cosmic cycle. The myth of eternal return according to Eliade’s thesis is developed along the line in the beginning; there were supernatural beings that created the world and all that lives in it- cosmogony and anthroponomy. Since this act of creation which took place at a primordial time, other significant events have taken place which has had extremely deterministic effects on the world and its creatures.<sup>20</sup> For example, there were event which has led to man becoming mortal as well as those which led to his survival and livelihood. These events are therefore of vital importance to contemporary man. They took place at a time that man could not recall, so they are mythical events. Due to all those events, man, as he is today, is a direct product of these conjugated mythical events. Also, for instance, that man is mortal means

that something happened at some recorded time in history to make that possible. In the same vein, if the people of a tribe live on fishing today, it is because of the existence of a mythical time in the course of history, a supernatural being to perform this act. We are therefore provided with an explanation to why the tribe should make their living in this way. The same kind of mythical explanation can apply to farming in a predominantly agricultural society and palm wine tapping producing area. What all this means is that traditional African feels that, in performing these essential activities that determine his existence such as farming, fishing, wine tapping, he is repeating acts performed by supernatural beings at different mythical time and since these acts were all part of creation, he feels that by repeating them, he is participating in creation. In other words, he sees in the performance of these acts a way integrating himself in the cosmogony pattern.<sup>21</sup>

Further along this line, the world enquires of him a cosmic unity and he perceives himself a part and parcel of it so that whenever he does farming or fishing, we see it as performing a sacred act of re-creation. His existence is, therefore, marked by a series of such recreations. As a farmer he knows quite well that after each planting season, the long harvesting season commences which, in turn is followed by another planting season and this goes on *adinfinitum*.<sup>22</sup>

In the same vein if he is a fisherman, he knows that there are seasons when the tide will favour his catches and others when it is less favourable and that these seasons succeed each other indefinitely. If he is a palm wine tapper, he does not ignore that fact that the qualities of palm wine is better in some seasons than in others or that there are times when he will find his guord full and time when it remains dry. This means that season succeed each other indefinitely and each season comes and goes only to come again. This is the meaning of eternal return. The life of a traditional African is ordered around the cyclical view of the world; there are seasons for clearing the ground, for planting, for harvesting, for eating, for merry-making and the whole cycle begins again.<sup>23</sup>

For the traditional African, the cyclical conception of life, and the need for man to participate in the mythical acts of creation are symbolized by agricultural or seasonal cycle. Among the majority of the Igbos and Yorubas, for example, the New Yam festival is considered the most important event of the seasonal cycle. This is a certainty because of the elaborate myth built around the origin of the yam crop among these people. Sociologically, this means that all other festivals of the agricultural cycle are seen as of minor ceremonies of initiation or recreation which serve the important purpose of keeping the people busy while they wait for the yam harvest and the period of abundance.<sup>24</sup> Festivals in traditional African society are used to re-enact the precept of recreation and regeneration of the cosmos. In traditional African societies, the concept of God is functional; it is the needs, pre-occupations and aspirations of the society that determine the gods it creates for itself. For example in the same pattern of ceremony is performed not to the yam gods but to the other water maids.<sup>25</sup> This functional

concept also explains the proliferation of gods among traditional African society in general.

In general, traditional African festivals are characterized by music and dance. Music is provided with such traditional instruments as the drums, native flute, gong, balafen, kora and native guitar. Dancing is performed by men or women or in cases by both sexes depending on the festival and the society. Cult priests and griots play a leading role with incantations and consultations of oracles.<sup>26</sup> They serve as a link between man and the deities. During festivals in tradition African society there is general euphoria and collective paroxysm as man invites the gods as his guests. The main actors in the mythic festivals are divine human from the crowd and where they have to participate as actors, they must become superhuman.<sup>27</sup>

### III. THE CONCEPT OF FESTIVALS AMONG THE YORUBA PEOPLE

Among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, festivals serve as a connector of the social world of the Yoruba with the unseen world. The Yoruba pantheon consists of hundreds of gods, worshiped for an immense variety of purpose, each representative of some natural or spiritual element or human emotion. In Yoruba land some gods are said to be in existence before the creation of the earth and others are heroes or heroines from the past that were deified after their deaths. Other gods are natural objects in their environments such as mountains, hills and rivers that have influenced people's lives and cultural history.<sup>28</sup>

These gods are honoured, revered and worshiped particularly during festivals, which often begins with the telling of a Yoruba myth. This is evident in their festivals; for example *Oranmiyan* festival which explores Oyo history in order to explain its foundation and the ultimate destiny of ancient Oyo Empire. Many traditional festivals are celebrated among the Yorubas in different ways and during specified periods of the year. Festivals among the Yoruba can be grouped into three categories. First are festivals used to celebrate agricultural products such as the New Yam festival. Second are festivals celebrated in memory of some powerful and historical figures in a particular community who had achieved and fought for that community and made history. Festivals are thereby organized annually to celebrate them.<sup>29</sup> Examples of such festivals include *Ogun* festival, *Sango* festival, *Oya* festival, *Oranmiyan* festival, to mention but a few. The third category falls under historical festivals which are organized in remembrance of a particular incident that happened in a community; be it good or bad. Thus, rituals are carried out to honour those who have passed on to the world of the ancestors and provide a space where people may explore the profound and experience phenomena. Among the Yorubas of Western Nigeria are festivals that are rich, which can well influence the world both artistically and morally and at the same time earn foreign exchange for the Nigerian nation as a whole. One of such festivals is the *Oranmiyan* festival.

The festival has its inherent aesthetic structures, such as dances and songs which are linked with ancestors worship, historical figures and notable events either in the lives of its adherents or in Oyo town.

Generally, festival among the Yoruba people of Nigeria is structured around ritual ceremonies and worship but it also serves as a source of entertainment and cultural display. Every festival among the Yoruba has its own dos and don'ts, which its adherents or participators must take heed of. For example the *Agemo* festival among the Ijebu people forbids females from looking at the masquerades called *Agemo*. Songs, prayers, sacrifices, incantation, sacred chants and dance play crucial roles in festival celebration among the Yorubas. Festivals are also used to strengthen the bond of unity among different communities in Yoruba land, one of such festivals is *Egungun* festival. Most people, regardless of their religious affiliation participate due to the interesting atmosphere.

#### IV. FESTIVALS AMONG THE ASHANTI OF GHANA

Festivals among the Ashanti of Ghana just like the Yoruba people of Nigeria are centered on ancestor worship. Festivals among them mark the seasons and the timing for various agricultural activities. During festive periods, the Ashanti are gathered together from all walks of life to celebrate and their festivals are usually held in the large open space of Kumasi. Their festivals are colourful and are vibrant parts of their culture. They believe that festivals help them forge close bonds with their ancestors and ask for their protection. Festivals are also held in order to purify the people so that they can enter the New Year with confidence and hope.<sup>30</sup> During their festivals the people ask forgiveness of offences committed, petition the supernatural powers for material prosperity, peace and long life. Their festivals show that there is continuity between the dead and the living. Their festivals serve as a means of reunion of family members, relatives and loved ones. At times, quarrels and misunderstandings are settled. Among the Ashanti is what is called *AdaeKese* festival (big resting place). This celebration glorifies the achievements of the Asante Kingdom. It is also the occasion when the purification ceremony of *Odwira* is performed at the burial shrine of ancestral spirits.<sup>31</sup>

Generally, this coincides with the harvest season of yam. This festival is an annual culmination of the Akan calendar, the ninth *Adae* festival which occurs every six weeks. *AdaeKese* ushers in the New Year, with dates ranging between July and October. Rituals, sacrifices, songs, musical instruments, prayers, worship form the bases of Ashanti festivals. They also seek to entertain themselves through this means. The Ashanti people also celebrate yam festival. During this festival they offer sacrifice to thank the gods and the ancestors for a good harvest. The season is equally used to outdoor the new yam.<sup>32</sup>

#### V. EVALUATION

Considering all that have been written about festivals in traditional African societies one will discover that it is not possible to critically study the life of traditional Africa without paying attention to their festivals. Festivals hold an important place in the African traditional society's culture. When one critically consider the traditional Africans notions of festivals, one cannot but wonder and ponder if truly there is life after death, because traditional Africans emphasize the influence of the ancestral world on the social world. If we are to ask the Neo-positivist about this matter they will simply say Africans are pre-logical because festivals in African traditional societies suggests that there are realities beyond this empirical world. Are the traditional Africans who offer sacrifice to thank and appease the gods senseless? Are there no reasons for all their ritual? Or is it true all their rituals and sacrifices are meaningless?

Despite the fetish aspects in traditional African festivals one cannot but appreciate the economic, social, political and historical contributions of these festivals to African societies. For example, *Eyo* festival in Lagos state and *Osun Oshogbo* festival in Osun state have contributed a great deal to the generation of internal revenue for the States. Socially, it brings dynamism and vibrancy to the level of social interaction among those who will participate actively in the festival, apart from the solidarity and unity that it will enhance among people from all walks of life. It could be an avenue for political maneuvering for would be leaders and enlightenment for the Masses of the people. Historically, It brings back the reminiscences of history thereby enhancing the communion between the ancestral world and the living.

Festivals in Traditional Africans society also have its own limitations and shortcomings owing to the fact that some festivals like *Agemo* and *Oro* festivals in Yoruba land tend to create marginalizing barriers between males and females because they forbid the females from taking active participation in them. Also, some people in the Traditional African society tend to seize festive periods as an opportunity to constitute nuisance and cause strife and hatred among themselves. This may involve the use of charms and weapons to test each other's power. Some seize it as an avenue to steal and commit all kinds of atrocities. Generally, festivals are good and their contribution to the social wellbeing of the community, especially in terms of promoting fraternal bond and social cohesion are enormous, if the fetish aspects can be abolished. There is also the aspect of festivals being catalysts to the facilitation of the idea of time in traditional African communities because they are celebrated seasonally. In addition, there is a way in which the celebrations of certain festivals encourages hard work and motivate certain individuals or groups within the community to put in their best in view of the forthcoming event. At times, these festivals go with special rewards or recognition for well performing individuals or groups. For example, the celebration of New Yam festival or Hunters festival in some African communities

often spur those in such professions to work hard and put in their best in view of such celebrations. On another negative side, there are certain festivals that may subtly promote immorality among the young of the society without necessarily intending such. As an illustration, the festival called *Esi* among the Anegbette people of South Uneme in Edo State allows for a situation whereby adult male and female members of the society are permitted to utter vulgar words in public to one another. Though the rationale is basically to create some conception of freedom, this may in a way, influence the psyche of the younger members of the society who witness such events. It may make them feel it is the norm and there is nothing absurd about it after all. This may be counter-productive in the long run if the common good of the community is considered holistically. On the other hand, the same *Esi* festival can be said to instill morality and also serve as a deterrent to the committing of immoral acts. This is the case because there is an aspect of the same festival which involves masquerades visiting the homes of morally questionable individuals of society in the night in order to insult them publicly with the aim of discouraging them from future acts of immorality.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This paper has been able to clarify some basic concepts; Philosophy, African Society and Tradition. In this paper a general view of festivals in traditional African society was explicitly given which identify the significance of festivals and the various times in which they are celebrated. During the course of this work, it was noted that festivals serve as entertainment, identification of times and season, celebration of religious ceremonies and rituals and also promote social cohesion among members of the society. It also radiates joy and merriment among the people of African Traditional Societies. Two contexts in Traditional African society were mentioned to further buttress the concept of festival in traditional African society in which the Yorubas and the Asantis of Western Africa were specifically examined. Furthermore, we attempted an evaluation of the positive and negative implications of Festivals in African culture and tradition with the aim of sieving out the chaff from the wheat and provide a framework for the analysis of festivals in our African communities.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that festivals help to stabilize African traditional societies and ensure the preservation of our well revered and unique cultural values, wise sayings, proverbs, folk tales among others.

## END NOTES

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