

## **INNOVATIVE CULTURAL FESTIVALS IN THE PROMOTION OF COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: THE OJUDE-ObA FESTIVAL IN IJEBULAND**

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**T**he major purpose of community development is to bring positive changes in the living conditions of the people. The full cooperation of a people in inducing change is the pivot around which progress revolves (Anyanwu, 1981). Christenson and Robinson (1989) describe community development as the initiating of a social action towards improving the people's economic, cultural and environmental conditions. Furthermore, organising a community involves the process of bringing the members together and providing them with the tools to help themselves (Mattessieh and Monsey, 1997). In Nigeria, in spite of government efforts at the local, state and national levels, limited development has been achieved. Some of the problems militating against development are inadequacy of funds, mismanagement of the limited funds available, corruption, lack of adequate data and trained community development officers, and illiteracy (Obadan, 2002). The people in a community are expected to identify their needs, set their goals and work towards achieving them through proper planning and implementation, followed by monitoring and evaluation of their projects. Cultural festivals are moments of joy and celebration done through drama sketches, wrestling and religious sacrifices. Hence, most communities in South-Western Nigeria now employ festival theatre, embodying drama, music and dances, to mobilize their people for development programmes. This essentially involves community organisation and the full participation of the citizens at every stage of the project, from planning to implementation. Community organisation involves the integration of religious, social, political, business and cultural factors to achieve development.

### **Cultural Dimensions in Development**

What is culture? Culture is the totality of the way of life evolved by a people in their attempts to meet the challenges of living in their environment, thus giving order and meaning to their social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and organisational systems.

This provides them the hallmark of distinction from their neighbours (Federal Government of Nigeria printer, 1988:5). The term 'culture' therefore embraces all facets of the human endeavour and various aspects of development (Ike, 1995). So significant is the place of culture in development that the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the ten-year period, 1988-1997, as the World Decade for Cultural Development (WDCD), with the following four main objectives and plan of action: (i) acknowledging the cultural dimension in development; (ii) affirming and enriching cultural identities; (iii) broadening participation in culture; and (iv) promoting international cultural cooperation. This was to correct the tendency of viewing development in terms of replacing the traditional ways of life of the people with imported values from Europe and America. It is not unusual for foreign agencies to impose ready-made development packages on a needy country and expect the packages to work either because they had worked elsewhere or they are considered to have sound theoretical bases. It should be emphasised that the success or failure of a development project depends, among other things, on such key factors as compatibility with, and relevance to, the culture of the community. The Cultural Policy for Nigeria (Section 9.5) states as follows:

The State shall ensure that economic development serves the cultural needs of the people by involving cultural experts, promoting the exploration of internal resources and the necessary manpower capacity for developing them.

This is in line with the Declaration of the UN General Assembly highlighted above.

### **The role of Traditional Festivals in Community Development**

From time immemorial, traditional festivals have been seen as rallying points for community members, bringing them together to discuss communal problems and offer prayers to the deities for the peace and progress of the land. A good example of such festivity can be found in Chinua Achebe's classic, *Things Fall Apart*, (1958) where a man is reported to have called his kith and kin together to celebrate with him. In the process, the guests feasted on a mountain of pounded yam described in hyperbolic terms as being so huge that those on either side could not see each other until the mountain

of pounded yam was ultimately brought low. This was followed by a drink of palm wine, after which, the members deliberated on the main business of the day. This is a creative illustration, spiced with humour, of a typical 'Yam Festival' in the traditional Igbo community.

In South-Western Nigeria, many religious festivals have assumed the dimensions of cultural festivals geared towards community development, and usually fixed for convenient times of the year. It is now a common practice to place advertisements in the mass media, send out invitation cards, or display posters, inviting all sons and daughters based elsewhere to come home for the cultural festival. Many of them are professionals earning their living outside their home community, while others are individuals who retired to their hometowns after working elsewhere (Trager, 2001). Examples of such festivals are "Owu Day", "Oluyole Day", "Iloko Day", and, of course, "Ojude Oba Day", the real focus of this study. Although of sacred origins, many of these festivals have become secular in nature, and are now designed to facilitate community development. As Dasylyva (1997) notes, traditional activities like dancing, drumming, singing, chanting and even masquerading, which, hitherto had been exclusively devoted to traditional rites and religious worship, have since been employed in secular festivals and at general social functions largely for entertainment. The Yoruba people conceive the hometown as a source of social identity, while contemporary social and economic imperatives have contributed to its continuing centrality in their lives. Individuals participate in community development either through financial contributions towards specific projects, or through the pursuit of economic enterprises, or through other philanthropic gestures. Apart from helping with cultural preservation and propagation, the festivals also serve to purify the community, in addition to contributing to the psychological well being of members who are made to rest and relax on that work-free day from their daily routines.

### **The Ojude Oba Festival**

*Ojude Oba* is a popular festival in Ijebuland, Ogun State, Nigeria. It is celebrated annually in Ijebu-Ode township which is regarded by all Ijebu people as a rallying point. Apart from Ijebu-Ode, other towns in Ijebuland include Ijebu-Igbo, Ijebu-Isiwo, Ijebu-Ikenne,

Ijebu-Remo, Ijebu-Epe, and so on. Although each town has its own king, all Ijebu people still defer to the Awujale of Ijebuland as the supreme authority in the land. Hence, *Ojude Oba* (which literally translates into 'the king's front yard') is a festival with the king at its centre and the palace grounds as the main point of attraction.

There are two parallel explanations for the origin of the festival. One source claimed that the festival started when a Muslim clergy led his family and friends to the Awujale's palace in 1888/1889 to thank him for giving the Muslims in the community the first praying ground (known as *yidi*) and also the land on which the first mosque in Ijebuland was built. Thus, it became an annual event celebrated during the Muslim feast of the *Eid-El-Kabir*. The second source believed that the festival originated as an annual traditional festival for the payment of homage to the Awujale by all Ijebu people, which then became part of the Islamic celebrations after the conversion of the king to the Islamic faith. Whichever of the two sources is authentic, the fact remains that the festival is now celebrated by all citizens, including Muslims, Christians and the traditional worshippers, although usually held on the third day of the Muslim festival. It accommodates all-comers, indigenes and non-indigenes alike, and has gradually developed into a tourist attraction. Aspects of the people's culture reflected in the process include traditional food, music and dance, including traditional dresses and other cultural values. It is often celebrated with pomp and pageantry, the venue being festooned with balloons and banners of different colours, shapes and sizes, while the celebrants are resplendently dressed for the occasion.

The festival usually runs for three days. On the first day, the Awujale sets the ball rolling by providing the first ram, which is normally slaughtered at the praying ground by the Chief Imam. This is followed by a lot of merriment, fun, folksongs, poetry recitation and dancing in all parts of the town from morning till evening, when it is rounded off with a candle procession by the youth round the town, accompanied by drummers. On the second day, youth carnival takes place in the evening, while different age grades compete in their costume, singing and dancing. The third day is the grand finale, marked by a colourful procession of dancers, with artistic displays, round the ancient city of Ijebu-Ode. People in the procession move in cohorts, carrying banners that reveal their age grades and families,

and usually accompanied by praise-singers, drummers, dancers and jesters. The king sits majestically at the centre, while the age grades pay homage to him. The age grades are referred to in local parlance as *regberegbe*, an age long institution, comprising male and female, which was established during the colonial era for the purpose of development and progress in Ijebuland. The healthy rivalry among the age grades contributes towards the development of the society. The *Elesin* (Royal Horsemen) and the *Balogun* (Warriors), also display their dexterity in horse riding and warfare respectively, by presenting mock battles and horse rides to thrill the spectators.

### **The role of Corporate Organisations**

An important landmark of the *Ojude Oba* Festival is that corporate organisations now jostle to sponsor it, using the occasion to promote their own identities and business concerns. The festival has exposed the potentials of Ijebuland for tourism and investment, attracting thousands of people to the city, and specifically to the palace grounds where the events usually climax.

New dimensions are being introduced on a regular basis. One such dimension is that a guest of honour for each festival is chosen from among the friends of Ijebuland for each year. For example, in 2005, the guest of honour was Chief Maan Lababidi (OON), an American citizen of Syrian Lebanese extraction. In 2006, the guest of honour was Chief (Dr.) Rasak Okoya, a Lagos business mogul, while in 2007, we had Mr and Mrs Lewis Turg, Chinese British citizens, as joint guests of honour. The guests of honour, who are usually men and women of substantial means, are expected to make generous donations towards community development programmes.

### **Conclusion: Implications of the Festival for Community Development**

Apart from the transmission of traditional values and the promotion of a much more cohesive society, the festival has great implications for community development, attracting the attention and funding of all the three tiers of government: local, state and federal, in addition to non-governmental organisations. Furthermore, age groups (earlier identified as *regberegbe*) make substantial contributions towards the development of their communities. *Ojude Oba* also enhances

community organisation and leadership role in the society, ensuring that leaders give an account of their stewardship. Invited guests, some of whom are conferred with honorary chieftaincy titles, also contribute to the development of the community, through either project sponsorship or substantial donations. Corporate bodies also seize the opportunity to advertise their business concerns while contributing to the development of the community. More and more corporate organisations are developing the interest in siting their businesses in the community, thus generating employment opportunities for the local populace.

Local traders also enjoy a boom in their businesses, particularly vendors of food, drinks and souvenirs. This empowers them, in turn, to contribute meaningfully to development projects in their different localities. In general, the festival mobilises the community for full participation in the identification of social needs, as well as in the planning, execution and evaluation of development projects, thus increasing the citizens' sense of belonging and awareness of their corporate responsibilities. Furthermore, good leadership inspires committed followership, which consists of all associations and age groups, indigenes and non-indigenes alike, whose awareness is reinforced by effective publicity and communication, thus ensuring that all hands are on deck for various ongoing projects within the community.

Going by the example of the *Ojude Oba* Festival just described, it can invariably be concluded that, among the Yoruba people of the South Western Nigeria, traditional festivals provide a good rallying point for massive involvement in the physical progress, social and economic development of their respective communities.

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