



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

Dance Costumes in Abuja Carnival: The Contradictions of Socio-Political Integration

Lilian E. Bakare

Department of Theatre and Media Arts, Federal University, Oye-Ekiti, Nigeria

Abstract:

Abuja carnival is the flagship tourism activity in Nigeria. Beyond being a tourism event meant to lure fun seekers to Nigeria and specifically Abuja, it is also meant to be a festival of unity among Nigerians. It is conceived and designed to be one of those mechanisms constructed by Government to keep strengthen the fragile bonding of the over four hundred ethnic groups that make the country. This is where the contradictions set in. A carnival that is meant to be a celebration of unity turns out to be a constant reminder of the peoples differences as the ethnic groups stick to their different costume identities annually. This paper attempts to proffer a solution to this contradiction.

1. Introduction

Nigeria is a culturally diverse nation. This has always been a source of trouble for the country. She challenges that have been faced in the country have been mostly as associated with cultural diversity. Nigeria alone boasts of over five hundred ethnic languages. Differences in political ideologies, religion and traditional festivals are also derivatives of differences in culture. As a mechanism to bridge socio-cultural differences many “Unity Projects” have been created with a view to working on the Unity of the Country. Some of these projects are National Arts Festival (NAFEST), National Sports Festival and Abuja National Carnival.

However, a keen observation of the National Carnival has revealed that one of its very visible elements – The Dance Costume has a paradoxical effect on the carnival. The paradox consists in the argument that; while the carnival is expected to make Nigerians celebrate together as a people those things that bring them together, instead they celebrate those things that highlight their differences and tend to tear them apart. For instance the participating states bring to the carnival dance costumes with motifs that are peculiar to their cultural environment. The details of this paradox and its implication on the aesthetic value and effectiveness of the carnival, as a true unity-building mechanism, form the focus of this paper, using the social Identification Theory as an instrument.

2. The Social Identification Theory

This theory emanates from the view point that man as a member of society connects and disconnects with one group and the other at different intervals. The theory tends to suggest in its basic assumption that a, b, and c may belong to one group together while ‘a’ may share another group with ‘d’ and ‘e’ and ‘b’ and ‘c’ with ‘f’. The model illustrating this assumption was developed by John Turner and Henry Tajfel (1982): anaeto, Onabajo and Osife maintain that

Group membership is seen as cognitive process, often resulting from attempts of the person to answer the question “”who am I?” This question can be answered in terms of the groups that a person identifies with. Thus, a person gets a sense of identity from the groups that are admired and identified with. Furthermore, this sensed of social identity does not appear to be operating all the time but seems to be switched on and off by certain situation. (40)

The social implication of this on Nigeria is that while Nigerians exist at the level of their respective tribes as diverse people, as suggested by the differences in culture, epitomised by the diversity of dance costumes displayed at the Carnival, this should be accepted as reality while other unifying forces of the carnival can still be explored simultaneously without conflict.

3. Abuja National Carnival

A carnival is a street dance of loud or noisy celebration of colours and styles which would not be possible without costume designs. Russel states that “Costumes include all the body garments worn ... a costume tells us many things about a character... (9)” In the same vein Abuja Carnival is a street dance and a loud and boisterous parade of colours. The Abuja National Carnival which premiered in the year 2005, was an initiative of the administration of the then of former president, Olusegun Obasanjo as an annual event aimed at

showcasing the rich and diverse cultural heritage of Nigeria and its people as well as promoting Nigeria as a safe, warm and hospitable tourism destination.

Abuja Carnival is a celebration of unity irrespective of the diversities in the Nigerian nation. Through the adhesive power of the arts of dance and colour with particular reference to dance costumes. Different people come together because of a common knowledge, shared symbols, pass codes, styles and conceptual languages. According to the organizers of the event; Federal Ministry of Culture and Tourism,¹ the design of Abuja Carnival clearly marks it as one of the most diversified carnival in the world. It is said to be Africa's largest parade of glorious cultural extravaganza that offers the following:

- Street procession of motorized floats;
- Carnival Durbar;
- Masquerade fiesta;
- Children fiesta;
- Boat regatta;
- Traditional music and dance;
- Poetry reading and performances with beautiful and elaborate costumes, food fair, crafts and fashion exhibitions (8).

In this process, terms and ideas that are related to the carnival are commonly shared by making all Nigerians entirely one community. Local participants at the carnival are not always in a hurry after the show to return home because they are proudly Nigerians as their different significant state symbols and styles are displayed to the world.

4. The Performance of Content: Dance

A carnival performance occurs mainly in dance and music. The dances reflect the deep differences in the composition of the country. However, this may not be too visible to non-Nigerians watching the carnival since the differences in dance movements may not be noticed by the "uninitiated" it is in the multiplicity and diversity of the dance costumes that the differences in the composition of the nation becomes visibly noticeable.

The place of dance in a performance in our society cannot be overemphasized. Africans, especially Nigerians have been tagged by non-Africans as dancers; because dance pervades every aspect of Africans. Primus states that "African dance is not a separate art but part of the whole complex of living. Dance is only a part of the whole or the complex" (4). In other words there is usually dance in every African activities ranging from farming, working, religion and many other activities that Nigerians are involved in. Basically dances are very important to every African especially Nigerian in particular in that they contribute to the social adjustment as well as the physical, religious and cultural values.

Socially, some of the dances featured in the Abuja carnival were consciously choreographed to foster peace and unity amongst Nigerians. During the carnival performances where these dances are featured; people from different parts of the country come together to take part and watch the dances. This brings about friendship, sportsmanship and exchange of views with other people. Aside these, the dances also serve the purpose of communication and entertainment in the course of the carnival. Thus, it has been observed that;

... though music and dance are closely related to religion and social activities, Africans do frequently sing to amuse each other (or themselves) or pass away quiet hour (Robert, 5).

The physical and emotional values of the dances featured at the carnival affect mostly the dancers and perhaps the spectators. The participants of the dances are physically warm up, fit, refreshed and ready for the other activities of the day. The muscles, joints and other parts of the body used are strengthened and loosened, thus a healthy body is developed.

Money (2007) highlighting the place of dance in a nation's life posits that:

The relevance of dance in the life of a nation is not disputable taking into cognizance that a healthy body is a tool for growth and development of the individual – a panacea for the growth and development of a nation in the areas of infrastructural development prepares the individual for a good and healthy living as you prepare a nation for progress is a truism.

The above position implies that just as physical exercise is good for the human health; dance which is a form of human exercise is good for the body as well. On the other hand too it is only healthy individuals that can contribute to the development of a nation. To put it succinctly; dance seems to be a medium through which the human being, which is the nation's most essential resources, could be developed. Politically, the organization of these dances helps to portray the physical strength and might of Nigerians. There are usually political and social reunions amongst participants and spectators alike during the celebration.

Culturally, the dances featured in the carnival are some of the surest avenues of exhibiting the Nigeria's rich cultural heritage to the world. In the course of the carnival performances, various ethnic nationalities showcase their traditional dances and in so doing, display their rich traditional costumes and culture. The gorgeous colours displayed during performances make the dancers very attractive and appealing to the spectators. It also helps to enhance the carnival performances generally.

Aside all the aforementioned essences, dance is widely acknowledge as the most popular socio-aesthetic institution in our predominant oral societies. The messages that dance articulate may serve to promote or critique existing values or order. Judith Hanna (3-4) asserts that dance is so basic to human life that it, "interweaves with other aspects of human life, such as communication and learning, belief systems, social interactions and political." Against this backdrop therefore, dance plays a key role in the Abuja carnival.

5. Dance Costumes in Carnival

The dance costumes of the Abuja carnival often showcase the ingenuity and creative capabilities of the various and dynamic ethnic groups in Nigeria. The interplay of the different colours, fabrics and styles as displayed in the performances and scenic arena in the form of durbar horses and the motorised float procession as well as the motorised boat regatta brings out the hidden beauty inherent within the various cultures; a sight to behold. Indeed “the street carnival is a... The street carnival:

Which is a street party portrays extreme creativity in costume, floats portrays extreme creativity in costumes, floats and dance steps complimented by contemporary music! (Abuja Carnival; 12).

The costuming of Abuja carnival also reveals an interplay of colour and creativity of the art world boldly displayed in beautiful fabrics of Aso Oke, Ofi, Akwete, Anger (black and white woollen fabric) George wrappers, adire (tie and dye) Arabian silks and raffia palm leaves for masquerades of the various ethnic groups in Nigeria. Assorted jewelleries and accessories which include traditional ornaments such as cowries, ivory, gourds and plant seedlings contribute to accentuating a bold, rich and complimentary effect on the participants.

6. Colour

This is an element that makes a bold statement in the carnival, in fact any carnival the world over. Its effect cannot be ignored. Theoretically, colour is a transparent medium, therefore, it needs to be pigmented against a background that is: it should have a base or a support platform in order to express a meaningful vitality. The idea of costumes has provided a valid basis for the expression of colour in the Abuja National Carnival. As the various states costume their participants for the carnival, it is not just the fabrics, colours and designs that are at play, but the unity in diversity that has eluded the Nigerian people after the politics of the first republic and the Nigerian civil war. This is so because great care is taken by the various states to showcase their rich traditional heritage.

Their fabrics, cosmetics and designs are chosen with great care to portray, represent and display the infusion of their cultural orientation and values. Take for instance, the south Western states at the Abuja carnival. For them it is nothing other than advocating the unity of Nigeria with their peculiar costumes and dance styles while the South Easterners and their Northerner counterparts are also at it. At this point in the carnival, it is no longer Igbo, Yoruba or Hausa dichotomy as usual but an integration brought about by creativity and art as everyone competes to achieve a common goal i.e. to showcase Nigeria.

7. The Politics of Dance

Dance has been identified as a symbol of unity within our cultural environment. This is because of the communicative tendencies of the art of dance. According to Bakare, “dance is the rhythmic movement of the human body in space and time to make statements (3)” Traditional cultural dances in the carnival carry the name of the state presenting them or the community that own them. Each of these states strives to have their names written in gold through the celebration of their dances. States would always ensure successful participation in order to identify with the national interest and avoid unnecessary separation from the committee of states:

The carnival is designed to give opportunity to participants to compete for awards in the various activities with a view to developing their creative potentials for social-economic benefits to our country (Carnival 2013:9).

The Abuja carnival does not serve as entertainment only but a platform for uniting politics and art as well as showcasing Nigeria’s economic potentials.

8. The Contradiction

The idea of unity in diversity presupposes that Nigeria is a combination of diverse cultural elements with a mandate to live as one. In line with the objectives of the carnival as contained in the maiden sensitization workshop organised for the states contingents for the Abuja carnival at the six (6) geo-political zones of the country, the objectives of the carnival include celebrating “... the individuality and unity of the state governments and people”

For more than fifty years, the search for a common forum for the expression of unity has been a thing of concern for Nigerians until the inception of the carnival in 2005. The conceptual contradiction is in the diversity of the traditional cultures inherent in the different Nigerian tribes which ordinarily are supposed to be the factor of convergence. This is because the nature and process of carnival requires that differences must also converge.

During the carnival procession the various participant states display their respective rich and colourful dance costumes which are peculiar to them. The Tiv has (black and white) *anger* wrapper. The Idoma has black and red. The Efik and Ibibio share a multiplicity of colours in their dance costumes. The Kalabari and Ijaw will showcase dark long flowing gown made like Western shirts for the men, while the women will be clad in richly beaded lace blouses to go with their George wrappers. Theirs have same similarities with the Uhrobos and Ishekiris because they are all from the coastal area so share similar cultures in dressing.

The Edo clothe in red flamboyant royal colours of velvet with coral beads on their necks. The Yorubas among others use the *aso-oke* made of various colours which are made into *Gbariye* (free baggy top) for the men in order for them to be able to dance bata as most of their dances are brisk and action packed whilst the women have *Iro* and *Bubas*. The Igbos come with bright colours for acrobatic *Atilogu* dances; short skirts and half blouses to go with accessories of different colours. The Hausas have their made into Arabian style costume with beautiful bright colours of white, gold, silver and green and these are shown in their costume and accessories of the durbar horses.

These colours are also replicated in the masquerade dances, cultural dances as well as in the boat regatta. These activities especially the procession with various groups represented in their bands with accompanying music, all climaxing into a celebration of discordant

tunes, but at the same time it is this confusion and contradicting state emanating from the various cultures and its people that have served as the central force unifying these ethnic groups.

9. Conclusion

The opium approach to building of unity in Nigeria will not work. Contrary to the thinking of the government that Nigerians would always forget their difference under the euphoria of dance, the costumes always remind us of the diversities. Yet in these garments of different styles and colours, the carnival participants dance in unity. This shows that with substantial reliance on the assumption of Social Identification Theory, we can open our eyes, conscious of our differences and yet decide to live together united in peace.

Therefore, this study avers that; inspite of our differences, Nigerians can co-habit through the emerging culture of the Abuja Carnival. The fact that we are different does not suggest disunity. Rather through effective application of the social identification theory, we could belong to many groups at different times and environment simultaneously without one inhibiting the other. The need to function as Nigerians would not ordinarily stop us from functioning as Isan, Uhrobo, Igbo, Yoruba, Ijaw, Ibira, Hausa, Kalabari e.t.c. Therefore the continuous commitment of the states towards the sustenance of the Abuja carnival will go a long way to further unite the different diversities in this beautiful and great country and foster a common position for economic and tourism potentials to the world.

10. APPENDIX (Some pictures of Abuja Carnival showing different states participants in their colourful and fascinating costumes)



Participants from the western states showing dance costumes



Tiv dancers from Benue in anger fabric costumes



Participants from Plateau State



Fulani dancers from North West



Atilogun dance costume from South East



Additional dance costume from South East showing Female Title Holders



Ibibio dance costume from the South South

11. References

1. Lindersey
2. Monye P. M. (2007): "Dance and National Development" in Ugolo C.E. Ed) perspective in Nigeria Dance Studies, Ibadan; Caltop publications.
3. Primus, P (1996): "African Dance" African Dance: An Artistic Historical and Philosophical Enquiry. Asante K. W. (Ed) Asmara: Africa World Press Inc.
4. Roberts, J. S. (1972): Black Music of Two Words, London; pager publisher Inc.
5. Russel, A. D. (1973): Stage costume. Design Theory, Technique and Style; New Jersey prentice Hall.
6. Abuja Carnival 2012 and 2013 (programme of events) Abuja F. M. T. C. & National Orientation