

7-31-2021

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### Recommended Citation

ODUNZE, Josephine Awele (2021) "DANCE AND ITS POTENTIALS: IMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF THE CALABAR CARNIVAL OF SOUTHERN NIGERIA," *International Review of Humanities Studies*: Vol. 6:

No. 2, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/irhs/vol6/iss2/6>

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**DANCE AND ITS POTENTIALS:  
IMPLICATIONS AND CHALLENGES OF  
THE CALABAR CARNIVAL OF SOUTHERN NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

Carnivals situate a state or nation in the global cultural map, for their especial merit of fostering for the host community, economic advancement and a healthier international profile in the diplomatic comity. The present study engages the relevance of the Calabar Carnival beyond the realms of entertainment and tourism, but as a politico-cultural agent in the global environment where diplomacy conditions the reputation, acceptability, and sometimes fortunes of nations. In a multicultural nation like Nigeria, where autonomous ethnic identity is an intense superstructure of indigenous beliefs, dressing, cuisine, and native performance; cultural diplomacy can play a significant role in regulating intercultural relations. Culture therefore, can play a nationalistic function as a unifier of divergent interests and orientations, especially within the thematic and logistical organisation of festivals and carnivals, and the touristic benefits they have for diplomatic intentions. The Calabar Carnival represents that nationalistic intent to explore and promote the objective of cultural diplomacy, both on the national and international frontier. The objective of the present study consequently, is two-fold. Firstly, to analyse the sociocultural implications of the Calabar carnival on the national polity, such that it validates the carnival's potentials in economic and touristic development. Secondly, to discuss the logistical and ideational challenges of hosting the Carnival, as well as possible ways of ameliorating them. The study takes its foundation in the theory of diplomacy, which submits that the more we meet people through trade and other platforms the more we outsource and propagate our native culture, values and ideas. The study employs the participant-observation, interview method, and content analysis of relevant literature, to pursue its objectives.

**KEYWORDS:** Dance, Potentials, Implications, Challenges, Calabar, Carnival, Nigeria

**INTRODUCTION**

The term 'cultural diplomacy' has gradually gained traction in our cultural lexicon and evidence of its practice can be seen throughout history. For instance, explorers, travellers, teachers and artists can be considered as examples of informal ambassadors or early cultural diplomats. The establishment of regular trade routes in the colonial days enabled frequent exchange of information and cultural gifts between traders and government representatives.

Two broad approaches to conduct and assess international relations can be distinguished; these are hard power and soft power. The political scientist, Joseph S. Nye, writing in the *The International Herald Tribune* in January 2003, made the distinction between

both, describing soft power as, “the ability to persuade through culture, values and ideas, as opposed to hard power, which conquers or coerces through military might”.

While the hard power approach has historically been a favoured policy of governments in conducting international and regional relations, the increasingly interconnected world stage highlights the need for co-operation on a new level. This is where soft power, as a form of cultural diplomacy, becomes significant; and it is on this theory of diplomacy or soft power that this research is based, since it has the ability to persuade through culture, values and ideas. On this basis, cultural diplomacy is not secondary to political diplomacy, but rather functions as an intrinsic aspect of it. Cultural diplomacy can therefore be seen as a vital foundation of all political activity. Carnivals on the other hand are celebrations and street processions of both indigenes and non-indigenes alike as they all indulge in one way or the other, either as a participant or a spectator. It is characterized by music and a rich display of colourful costumes, sometimes to competitive proportions. Participation is subject to the nature of the festival as it could be religious, secular or even cultural. Bearing this in mind, carnivals are touristic attractions that experienced principally for the cultural motivation behind them, especially the religion or heritage of the people through the display of costumes, dance patterns, food, language and clothing amongst others.

### **The Concept of Dance**

Dance, according to Bakare, is “the rhythmic movement of the human body in time and space to make a statement” (3). Dance thrives on living experiences. Thus, it paves ways for its transmission from generation to generation which reflects the changes in social conditions. Dance therefore is regarded as a major art and an essential element in the celebration of events connected with every aspect of human life. It plays a prominent role in entertainment. Historically, according to Ojuade,

dance is one of the first human activities which did not directly serve the mere survival of man. The experience of dance came as man's effort of expressing individual and collective feelings. Such existence of dance in the early periods of man may be witnessed only by pictorial representations, carved images of primitive people on the walls of the caves. The pictures were created in phases, showing the developmental stages of man within his developmental environment. The developmental processes of human societies have shown that their survival is predicated on a functional association in which men became a part of the broad communities and their activities were regulated by their social needs (16).

Dance and movement are done for a particular need. Man does not just move for the sake of moving; the motivation comes from an identifiable source that could be external or internal. Laban articulates this sentiment:

man moves in order to satisfy a need. He aims at something of value by his movement. It is easy to perceive the aim of a person's movement if it is directed at some tangible object. Yet there also exists some intangible value that inspires movements (38).

The important point here is that movement is something of value to man. Thus we have two aims of movement, which are the tangible and intangible value of dance. As Laban puts it “movement has always been used for two distinct aims, the attainment of tangible values in all kinds of work and the approach to intangible value in prayer and worship” (104). Sachs, however, takes a narrow view when defining dance as “rhythmic motion” (7). What is lacking in his initial definition is that it does not exclude other rhythmic movements like running, rowing and turning a handle. He later submitted a more comprehensive definition when he considered dance as all “rhythmic motion not related to the work motif” (21). Thus, dance is motion that arises from emotions. This view has also been expressed by exponents of expressionism. American philosopher and critic, John Martin submits that, “every emotional state tend to express itself in movement” (30).

Early man danced to express his feelings about the most important event in his life. He believed that through dance, he could communicate with the metaphysical, and lobby the divinities for control of the mysteries that surround him. So many definitions have been adduced to dance. These definitions are based principally on three factors: dance as an expression of feelings, dance as imitation, and dance as pure movement of the human body in space and time. Whichever way one looks at the definitions, the key words which use imitation, expression and pure movement connote some ideas of an attempt to communicate. For instance, in the view of Ossie Enekwe dance can be used to “communicate, entertain, inform, educate and mobilise a society towards achieving social cohesion or togetherness” (2). The purpose is to use dance as a medium of communication as characters were portrayed using human events to entertain the audience. The art of dance may be considered as artistic expression predicated on movement. This means that such expression involves the rhythmic movements of the body to music, especially with a view of

expressing an emotion or an idea, or to narrate a story. In whatever way it is considered, it has a function or utility, which cannot be altogether expressed in words but through the act of dancing itself (Ojuade 60).

Cultural exchange has been intertwined with the pursuit of foreign relations throughout history and it has become more important for us to pay attention to cultural diplomacy. It would appear we are moving away from a world where ‘cultural exchange’ was primarily concerned with relations between elites – where static traditional cultural settings provided the opportunity and backdrop for relaxed ambassadorial and political contact. And the succeeding paradigm is one where cultural exchange is fast-moving and capable of such effect that cultural diplomacy now directly affects, and may even direct the more traditional forms of public diplomacy. It is so since everyone has got the right to freely participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits. Dance and other cultural activities, therefore, have proved a better mode to express and concretise such national and international relations and ties.

### **Cultural Diplomacy Objective**

The increased emphasis of cultural diplomacy on the national image it portrays, particularly by showing a country's modern economic face, reflects the impact of globalisation on the manner in which countries are engaged internationally. Countries must compete – or at least feel as though they must – for foreign investment and for attracting skilled migrants, high-worth individuals, tourists, students and others. Countries have come to believe that their chances of competing successfully are enhanced by showing their national image to those investing, or moving, or studying, and this presentation abroad of a national image is now frequently managed by governments within a framework of a nation's brand (Melissen 23). Cultural diplomacy is a relational index of correspondence and fraternity among countries in an international comity of mutually shared national interests. Obafemi and Ayakoroma offer an interesting insight into the cultural politics of international association:

Cultural exchange gives us the chance to appreciate points of commonality and, where there are differences, to understand the motivations and humanity that underlines them. As identity politics exert an increasing influence on domestic and international exchanges, these attributes make culture critical forum for negotiation and a medium of exchange in finding shared solutions. Cultural contact provides a forum for unofficial political relationship-building: it keeps open negotiating channels with countries where political connections are in jeopardy, and helps to

recalibrate relationships for changing times with emerging powers such as India and China. In the future, alliances are just as likely to be forged along lines of cultural understanding as they are on economic or geographic ones (106).

Despite increased attention on using nation-branding to raise a country's profile and present its reputation internationally, the relationship between cultural diplomacy and branding remains weak. In the opinion of Melissen, this is partly because nation-branding is a very new concept, and lacks cultural diplomacy's antecedence.

### **The Origin of the Calabar Carnival**

The Calabar Carnival otherwise known as the Calabar festival is a thirty-two day festival filled with a lot of activities ranging from dramatic performances, musical concerts, dance competitions, Christmas village activities amongst others. The festival started in 2004 when the then governor Mr. Donald Duke had a vision of making the state a choice hospitality destination in Nigeria as well as across Africa. Since then the festival has grown bigger and better. Cross River State Carnival Commission (CRCC) is responsible for the planning, organizing and marketing of the festival. The Commission was established by the Cross River

State Law, Number 4 of 2006 ([www.visitcrossriverstate.com](http://www.visitcrossriverstate.com)). The major sponsor of the cultural carnival is the State Government and the theme for the festival changes every year. These themes inform both the competitive and non-competitive events and how they would be judged and scored. The theme for the year 2017 was “Climate Change” while the one for 2018 was “Africanism”. Over the years the theme keeps changing thereby tasking the mental ability of both the participants and the audience in its interpretation of what the various carnival bands are presenting.

### Performances at the Calabar Carnival: A Case-Study of 2018

The events at the carnival are not the same every year; however there are statutory ones replicated each year. Calabar Carnival is a unique display of African heritage showcased through music, dance, drama and visual creativity which is reflected in the design of floats, costumes and make-up. This event is the high point of the festival. It is held from the 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> of December every year. The carnival is characterized by transient movement of spectators from one point to the other during the float. It is a non-ticketing event where participating groups are subjected to a strict adjudication process. The Carnival is referred to as the largest cultural festival in Africa with an estimated 50,000 costumed revelers, 2 million spectators and a television audience of over 50 million viewers on national and continental television stations – NTA Network, NTA International, AIT, CRBC, African Magic, Channel O and MTV Base.

There are various carnival bands ranging from those sponsored by corporate bodies such as banks and telecom companies, as well as carnival bands focusing on different themes. The regular competing bands in the carnival through the years are five in number. Below are the bands and their thematic obligations for the 2018 edition:

*Masta Blasta Band (Orange)*: In 2018, the Band’s theme was centered on the promotion of man’s sociability irrespective of race, religion and nationality.



*Figure 1:*  
Masta Blasta Band Revel (Credit: Sodiq Adhlakun, [www.naija.com](http://www.naija.com))

*Bayside Band (Blue)*: The Band's theme was centered on the origin of man, nature, values and attributes of the culture and heritage of the people. They won the award for 'Best King and Queen' in the 2018 carnival.



*Figure 2:*  
Bayside Band Revelers Procession at the Carnival (Credit: [www.dwphotography.com](http://www.dwphotography.com))

*Seagull Band (Red)*: The theme of the band for the 2018 carnival, was "Proudly African".



*Figure 3:*  
Revelers from the Seagull Band (Credit: Sodiq Adhlakun, [www.naija.com](http://www.naija.com))

*Freedom Band (Yellow)*: The Band's theme was centered on man's freedom in its entire facet. The Exodus of the Biblical Israelites, freedom from colonialism, freedom from slavery, democratic freedom and the fundamental human rights.



*Figure 4:*

Carnival revelers from Freedom Band (Credit: [www.dwphotography.com](http://www.dwphotography.com))

*Passion Four Band (Green):* in 2018, the band centered its theme on Genesis, the Biblical book of creation, showing the beginning of things, the origin of man, and the splendour of his environment. It decried the destructive forces in nature as always over-riding the constructive ones. The band advocated that man's natural environment be given adequate protection to save it from destruction. The band is the most successful of the bands, as they have won the prize for best band overall, eight consecutive times. They were adjudged the best yet again for the ninth time in 2018.



*Figure 5:*

The Passion Four Band (Credit: [www.dwphotography.com](http://www.dwphotography.com))

These bands are expected to follow the theme of each carnival with illustrative costumes, as well as a float that capture at first glance the central theme. Each band is expected to perform for judges who are positioned at various points along the carnival route where the adjudication process takes place. They are expected to have their carnival kings and queens that would lead the procession through a 12-kilometre route that begins from the U.J. Esuene Stadium through the Mary Slessor Road, Ndidem Usang Iso, and MCC Road, and then back to



the Stadium. The Carnival parade terminates at the U.J. Esuene Stadium which is the final adjudication and end point of the competition for 'Band of the Year' in various categories. The competition attracts an estimated additional 15,000 seated spectators and 10,000 others in and around the stadium, as well as 50 million TV viewers ([www.visitcrossriverstate.com](http://www.visitcrossriverstate.com)).

Each band has unique features and concepts. The membership of the bands is open to all Nigerians and non-Nigerians alike. At the end of the carnival the bands are ranked and rewarded according to their performances by the Government. Government responsibility is to create the infrastructure and enabling environment for the festival. The major bands are comprised of approximately 10,000 revelers each, including up to five kings and queens wearing large-scale costumes that interpret the annual theme and set the tone for the other outfits. Sections of these costumed revelers create a riot of colours and sparkle, along a 12-kilometre route accompanied by live music, DJs, well-decorated floats and steel bands.

The Calabar Carnival has three products; the Kings and Queens, the Children Carnival and the Adult and main Carnival. A team of adjudicators composed of 34 experts are charged with the responsibility of adjudication and to produce the best bands. The bands are observed at four points. There is also a roving team which brings the total to five points. Each adjudicator scores a specific item on a score sheet. The domains scored are float, band on the move, costumes and make up, interpretation of theme, and best reflection of carnival spirit. The Carnival Parade is the climax in the array of events offered by the Cross River State Carnival Commission which normally includes events like essay competition for secondary and tertiary institutions, Carnival Calabar football competition (The Carni-Cal Cup), traditional drumming, arts, crafts and food festival, adults' and children's dry runs (the dress rehearsal for Carnival), J'ouvert Band fetes (Mbre Mbre), and senior and junior Kings and Queens Competition. Others are the Carnival Calabar Queen Pageant grand finale incorporating the Mary Slessor Golf Charity Dinner, Children's Carnival and Christmas party, Cultural Carnival, Carnival Calabar Adults Costume Parade.



*Figure 6: Foreign Participants*



*Figure 7:*

Tourists at the Calabar Carnival (Credit: Sodiq Adhlakun, [www.naija.com](http://www.naija.com))

### **The Dramatic Elements**

This aspect is critical to the festival as dramatists are billed to perform plays at different points in time as the festival commences. The beauty of these events is that the youths who are talented get to be able to show their skills in the area of acting, scriptwriting as well as directing. This gives them a platform to take a leap at future careers in acting and other areas as the festival gathers together the best of the best in the creative industry. Plays performed include plays by James Ene Henshaw (a dramatist of Calabar origin) such as *This is Our Chance*, amongst others. Plays that are unpublished also are performed at the festival thereby giving an equal playing field for the known and the unknown.

### **Scintillating Sounds**

The city is awakened by the melodious sounds of various forms of music as this is a major ingredient at the Calabar Christmas Festival. The rhythms cut across genres and styles as they are displayed in their rich forms. From the traditional drumbeats to the jazz and highlife, no one is left out in this rich array of musical displays. Popular artistes within and outside the country are stationed at different points in time within the 32-day event to perform to their teeming fans who may or may not have seen them perform on stage. In 2018 the Calabar Christmas Festival had the likes of 2Face Idibia, Tiwa Savage, amongst other popular Nigerian musical artists.

### **The Economic/Tourism Potentials of the Carnival**

Eja opines that the Calabar Christmas festival is a catalyst for the subsectors of the tourism industry. He stressed that this is not without the negative side effects which include traffic jams, congestion, increase in the price of commodities, etc. He also states that a total of over 761 foreign tourists visit Calabar during the festival period as compared to non-festive period that has a little over 160 foreign tourists in 2010. Therefore the stakeholders in the tourism industry should strive to make it more tourism friendly (1-9).

F.M. Attah et al, reporting on the research conducted on Carnival fiesta and socioeconomic development of the Calabar metropolis, states that the festival contributes immensely in poverty reduction, infrastructural development as well as creating the enabling environment for businesses to thrive (34-41). The goal of the carnival organizers according to the state governor Senator Ben Ayade during the unveiling of the 2018 carnival theme stated that the carnival ranked 15<sup>th</sup> in the world Carnival index before now, but has gradually and steadily moved up to number two. The Governor further stated that there is no reason for the carnival not to be in the number one position as it can compete with other international carnivals and festivals around the world such as that of Brazil and even claim the first position. Mr. Gabe Onah (Chairman, Cross River State Carnival Commission) when interviewed in 2019, stated that there is a steady growth in the carnival as the themes of the festival has been centered on continental Africa. This is to ensure that we Africans tell our story in our own way. He further stated that the plan is for this yearly event to be one of the greatest events in Africa and beyond. There is a need for proper analysis of the Calabar Christmas Festival and its economic and social effect on the people both on the level of tourism development and cultural growth. The carnival encapsulates all the activities in the entertainment industry and brings both people far and near to the city of Calabar, involving so much personnel and manpower thereby reducing the number of jobless people in the streets of Calabar, as it creates avenues for businesses to thrive.

### **Implications and Challenges of the Calabar Carnival**

This paper has brought to fore the nature of the Calabar Carnival and Christmas festival, and its achievements. It is important to note that there is still room for improvement, as there are a lot of lapses but so much can be said to have been achieved since its inception. A good number of the implications of the Carnival on the socioeconomic and cultural fabric of the state are here enumerated:

1. The Calabar Carnival brings about infrastructural growth and development.
2. The Carnival promotes cultural interaction and exchange.
3. The Calabar Carnival gives rise to a commendable economic growth and expansion.
4. The Calabar Carnival creates the platform for huge cultural and tourism products that are economically viable for export.
5. The Calabar Carnival has led to a boost in the cultural and tourism sector both at the national and state levels.

From the interview sessions held during the field work exercise, the following summations were made:

- i. Inadequate funding was seen as one of the biggest obstacle of development of the tourism industry in the area. External funding for tourism is crucial in local communities with local government and private sources such as banks also often have limited resources to invest in tourism. The need for community infrastructure, provision of money/funds for creation of tourist attractions and tourism promotion were observed to be very important.

- ii. The respondents also emphasized on lack of good tourism planning and incorporation of local people in tourism planning as an important challenge of the tourism industry.
- iii. The respondents also emphasized lack of coordination between community residents and government in terms of tourism development in the area as one of the challenge in the area.
- iv. On the overall, lack of good planning, tourism knowledge funding, advertisements, marketing and sensitization are among major challenges that affect the economy of cross river state and the successful hosting and continuation of the Calabar carnival.

## CONCLUSION

The Calabar Christmas festival has stood out in terms of the packaging and presentation and has captured the minds of both national and international community and has become one to watch out for every year thereby making Calabar a must see destination. Though not without its short comings, it has set a pace for others to follow not just in Nigeria but the whole of Africa. Apart from dancing and displaying the rich culture of the African people, the Carnival Calabar serves as an opportunity to address the world's problems, in which inhumanity is a part. The culture of the Nigerian people is highly exhibited as well as other invited counties thereby promoting cultural interaction and tourism growth and since local communities often support tourism events which they believe would contribute to their livelihood. It is expected that the locals should be incorporated especially in planning for better and more robust results.

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