THE DRAMATIC MEMORIALIZATION OF SIGNIFICANT HISTORICAL LAND MARKS IN AFRICAN FESTIVALS.  
A CLOSE EXAMINATION OF THE CORONATION OF THE 40TH OBA OF BENIN.  

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ABSTRACT  

This paper is a critical examination of the major significance of the cultural institution called festival. African festivals provide a document that aesthetically, skilfully and ostentatiously preserves a peoples shared beliefs, custom, values and historical heritage. This study utilized the analytical methodology which furnished the researchers with useful information from books, journals and other printed and electronic materials. Several interviews were also conducted to garner information from historians and cultural icons. The active involvement of the researchers as observers and participants in Benin festivals also aided the researchers in this endeavour. The focus of the paper was a careful study of the memorialization practice artistically employed in the preservation of historical and cultural heritage of the Benin Nation for centuries as expressed in the 40th coronation of the Oba of Benin, Oba Ewuare, Ogidigan II. In this festival, the Binis were able to historize document and express the history of their greatness, survival wealth and stability in an electrifying atmosphere of pomp, celebration and pageantry.  

KEYWORDS: Festivals, History, memorabilia, African, Coronation.  

INTRODUCTION  

African festivals are as old as the African himself. If festivals entail man’s desire to adapt to his immediate environment and control situations and circumstances by establishing communion with the spiritual or extraterrestrial realm, and questing for individual and communal Harmony, man has always been and will always be an avid participant in festivals.  

As a result of the expressive and interactive nature of the African, the continent is always teeming with all kinds of festivals. With about 1,700 living languages in Africa and a huge diversity of culture and historical experiences, several festive events take place each year or season within the continent and in the African Diaspora. Aihevba 2016 opines that:
The African is a very expressive and religious person, who believes in the interference of the gods in the daily affairs of the people. This is a controlling impulse that gives impetus to celebration of many kinds and a ritualistic and devotional lifestyle to appease the gods of the land. Public performance was the usual medium of expression and communication in indigenous African cultures. (2)

Even though African festivals have evolved into several forms and species in contemporary times, the major essence of the institution has remained consistent. African festivals grew out of the utilitarian purpose of the African to commune, interact and interrogate the supernatural worlds and the social atmosphere discussing the essence of the African festivals Darah (2014) avers that:

Festivals constitute one of the most ancient cultural institutions in human history. By whatever name they are called – carnivals, celebrations, durbars, ritual events, memorabilia, or spectacle – festivals are the repositories of a people’s cultural heritage over the ages. Festivals mark moments of triumph, travails, achievement, rites of passage, convocation of achievers and warriors’ guild, agricultural, fishing, hunting expeditions, adventures, inventions relations, and projections of future aspirations. Festival designates seasons when groups congregate to express and exalt themselves in prayers, sacrifices, song, music, dance, drama, comedy, laughing, masquerades, costume, ritual cleansing, feasting, sharing, stock taking and planning for security and harmonious co-existence. The festival is where all the philosophies, religious, world news, ideologies, art forms, sciences, technologies, and organizational skills converge. The festival is an economy of its own; as African descendants in Jamaica and other Caribbean nations have demonstrated, cultural festivals are a treasure base of national economies. There is the adage that a community where there is no festival is like a journey undertaken without a travel guide or map (4).
From the assertions made so far, it is clear that festivals are much more complex than the pedestrian meaning suggested by the Latin Origin ‘Festivus’ which simply implies a feast, joyous or mirthful. Festival is an indispensable part of man’s existence. It reflects the African identity and diversity. It reveals in an ostentatious manner the peoples values, taboo, religion, sacred, beliefs, food, art forms, history, material, culture, religious, beliefs and disbeliefs, moments of joy and sadness, sociocultural and political organizational structure as well as the geographical space. Festivals reveal the social, religious, economic and political realities perceived, conceived or believed that distinguish one people from the other.

The most important events in the individual and community life have special festivals to enhance their significance, essence and meaning. From sun up to sun down, from birth to death, the African leaves indelible traces and marks of his existence in festivals. The seasons of our lives, the phases of our lives, our interactions of love and hate, peace and war, our interactions with men and spirits are all recorded in our festivals.

Festivals are used to mark passage from life to death, and the process of the growth from childhood to adult hood. thus the rites of birth, the rites of initiation, the rites of marriage, the rites of coronation, the rites of transition, the rites of death etc are all celebrated and commemorated in various ceremonies amidst music dance and other art forms. Commenting on the circle of life and the attendant rites and ceremonies accompanying the stages, Ebigho (2005) explains that:

Music plays an important role in the life of a child. His birth is announced with singing and dancing the child’s naming ceremony is marked by singing and dancing. The initiation ceremony of a child into manhood or womanhood is marked with music. When a person changes his social status by marriage or title taking, music is used. Music is used for funeral/burial rites… (129)

In explicating on the uses of music and dance in ceremonies, Olomu (2007) underscores the rites and ceremonies accompanying the various stages and circles of life.

In Africa, rites, ceremonies and rituals also help to designate the hierarchical, the social, political, leadership and organizational structure of society. In ceremonies, the roles of the sexes are clearly defined, and the music and dance fabric and structure define age, authority and status. According to Olumu (2007) music, dance and rituals:

…Differentiates and defines the roles of individuals, the sexes and groups within the society; social unit, such as age groups express their identity and cohesions of social significance and celebration. In some communities there are specific dances for marriages, funerals and similar occasions. (30)
Aligning closely with Olomu, Aihevba (2010) avers that:

The chiefs, leaders and elders of a community state their authority in music and dance and their subjects are obliged to show their loyalty in turn. During the Igue festival of the Bini Kingdom, the Oba sits on his throne and various categories of dancers came before him to pay allegiance in their dance and music. The Oba at some certain points also perform a stately and majestic dance that only he is fit to perform. These gestures...stress political purpose, hierarchy in leadership and internal order within the society (46).

**THE PRESERVATION OF HISTORY IN ARTS/ FESTIVALS**

One major function of African festivals is the preservation of tradition, cultural identity, customs and historical experiences. Festivals and the arts they foster function significantly as the medium for sustaining, preserving and transmitting sacred values, cultural essence and significant historical land marks that helps in identify formation. African rites and ceremonies are modes of expression which address themselves to the mind, through the soul using relevant artistic artifacts. An African festival not only ensures spiritual and social integrations but promotes a sense of history, forges cognitive points of references. Through festivals the collective spirits and distinctive history of a people trickles down from one generation the another. Festivals help to historize and recollect adventures, strange encounters, reflections, expeditions, transitions, conventions and convocations, rites of passage, coronation and initiations.

A good number of African folk music, poetry, masquerades, theatre, folk tales myths, arts, rites ceremonies, song, costume, drama, dances, chants which are the hall mark of festivals have embedded in them manifold life affirmed values, elements, and cultural heritage aimed at documenting, preserving and recollecting historical consciousness. Through these artistic artifacts, society renews, recreates and revitalizes itself periodically. In the electrifying moments and atmosphere of festivity, accepted modes of behavior, celebrated norms, values, ethics, universal laws, equity and justice are consciously and aesthetically transmitted to the next generation. The African believes in and upholds the link in present time, future, the tangible and invisible planes of spiritual mysterious realities. This link he symbolizes in his arts. Exhausting this link further, Aihevba (2010) submits that:
In places where they worked as slaves, North, America, South America and the Caribbean islands starting in the 1500s, Africans maintained a connection with their home land and kept their cultural traditions alive by singing and dancing and festivities (44).

Attempts at documenting and preserving history in arts dates back to Ancient civilization. Before the advent of the written mode of communication, thoughts, ideas, ideologies and remarkable historical events were documented and preserved in arts, cave, paintings, carvings, bronze castings, sculptures and many forms of creative arts where all platforms used in memorializing significant historical experiences. Recognizing the indispensability of arts in cultural and historical precision, the Great Oba Ewuare as early as the 13th century gave a succinct administrative style to royal arts of Benin Kingdom by creating several artistic guilds all managed by the state. Remarkings on the unique and remarkable nature the arts of the Great Benin Kingdom, Kate Ezra (1992) assertively opines that:

That art of Benin is unique in African art. Primarily made of cast brass and caved ivory, it provides an unbroken record of the artistic heritage of one of West Africa’s greatest kingdoms. It is a royal art, made to glorify the divine king, or Oba, and to honour the great kings of the past. In addition to the powers and prerogatives of kingship, the art of Benin expresses the roles and ranks of myriad chiefs, title holders, priests, court officials and attendants who constitute the kingdoms complex administrative and ritual hierarchy. The kingdom of Benin and its art have flourished over half a millennium, and perhaps more than any other art in Africa, that of Benin consciously invokes its history. It portrays past people and aludes to past events that have contributed to the kingdoms power, wealth, and conceptual or spiritual greatness. The themes of history, politics, and, most importantly divine kingship are inextricably woven into the fabric of Benin art (1).

In spite of the destructive effects of the British expedition on the arts and cultural identity of the Benin Kingdom, the cultural heritage, artistic impulse and arts have survived and continue to thrive. Paying glowing tribute to the survival of the Benin Kingdom in the face of daunting opposition Professor Yemi Osibanjor (2016), the Vice President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria remarks that:
The great history of the Benin Kingdom is a source of pride to the Edos and the Nigerian people and indeed the African people. It is a tradition of resistance to colonial oppression, of egalitarianism and of imperial Administration.

On her part, Ezra (1992) celebrates the survival of Benin arts even in great opposition. According to her:

The art of Benin first became known to Western viewers in 1897 as a result of British military expedition. Thousands of art works once housed in the royal palace and used in the service of diving kingship were confiscated and eventually dispensed to museums and private collections throughout the world. Despite the devastating destruction and loss caused by these events, the art of Benin is not extinct. The Kingdom exists today, incorporated into the modern state of Nigeria. A divine king…sits on the throne of Benin and presides over a bustling court, vivid and solemn palace rituals, and active guilds of artists (1)

To ensure the continuity and survival of the Benin national heritage, the aesthetic values and powers of arts have been skill fully invoked in the conscious programme of indoctrination in which the mind, the soul and imagination are fed relentlessly with positive images both of the glorious past and the pregnant future. In the Benin Kingdom today, there are dozens of artistic and occupational specialists, including the various artistic guilds that work for and are directly under the supervision, of the Oba. Periodically in the Benin Kingdom, the artistic ingenuity and talents are synthesized into rites, ceremonies and rituals aimed at the exhibition, display and brandishing of the kingdoms rich cultural heritage. In their festivals, the process of socialization, the teaching of morals, the teaching of history and of rudimentary technology are wittily manipulated and ensured through the beauty and aesthetic of the arts, because as Osofisan (1986) observes:

The cultural officers of traditional society have always known and exploited this fact that man learns best when he is at play (46)

Thus the annual and seasonal festival of the kingdom becomes a monumental memorabilia and mementos of the historical events that have contributed to the kingdoms power, wealth and greatness. Two of the most outstanding examples of these kinds of festivals in the kingdom are the rites of passage of the Oba and the rites of coronation of the Oba. In this paper, we shall focus on the coronation of the 40th Oba, the current Oba of the great Benin kingdom.
THE CORONATION OF THE GOD KING

One of the most remarkable and outstanding verity in the rites and process that culminated in the coronation of the 40th Oba of Benin is that the rites and tradition of coronation has been sacredly preserved till date with all relevant arms of its traditional administration functioning as they did centuries ago. The coronation rites and ceremony of the Oba of Benin are the most flagrant and extravagant display of the best and the brightest of Kingdom’s artistry, masquerade, costume drama, theatre and insidious memorialization art technique. From the beginning to the end of the coronation ceremony, the kingdom’s significant historical realities are in full display in the public glare of the whole world. The events we intend to explicate and examine in this section of the paper where gleaned from several interviews and most especially active observation and participation in the whole process.

The Oba of Benin is the god king at the top of the hierarchy of the Benin nation. The Oba’s journey to the coronation begins at birth. Kingship in the Benin kingdom is hereditary. The first male child is heir apparent to the throne. Consequently he is born a king, raised an Oba, ordained by the almighty, confirmed by his ancestors several cults and spirits and accepted joyfully by his subjects.

The journey to the coronation of the Oba in waiting began on the 30th of April, 2016. The passing of Oba Erediauwa, the 39th Oba of the great Benin kingdom was made public on this day by the Iyase of Benin, when he announced publicly that Usorhueburun (the native chalk has broken). As custom demands, every male child of the kingdom is required to have his hair shaved. Major markets are ordered closed for a period and all other burial ceremonies in the kingdom are forbidden within the period. At the same period, the crown prince is initiated and conferred with the title of Edaiken ne Uselu. He moves to his palace at Uselu Lagos Road in Benin City until the next journey to his throne is announced. The Edaiken ne Uselu plays a most significant role in all the funeral activities of the late Oba’s journey into the great beyond. Most of the burial rites and rituals are executed behind closed doors.

The coronation rites of the Oba of Benin usually spans about ten days. The journey begins from Egua-Edaiken, the traditional palace of the Edaiken. On the 8th of October, 2016 (a day fixed by the Edaiken) the crown prince, Ambassador Eheneden, Edaiken ne Uselu began his journey from Egua-Edaiken to ascend his destined throne in Benin, the Oba’s palace. He is escorted in a procession by a colourful assemblage of people etc. The city stood still as the march continues. On his journey to Benin City, he makes a stop at the historical palm tree “Udinamamionesaimiuwa (no pain, no gain) which he climbs symbolically. This rite was originated by Oba Ewuare in the 13th century. His life as heir apparent was characterized by great suffering, struggle and ordeal. He had to Often climb palm trees on that same spot to harvest palm fruits for a living. This act of suffering is reenacted by successive Edaikens on their way to the coronation.

From the palm tree the Edaiken continues his journey to Benin City but at the first moat called Iya Akpan, the Uselu chiefs in the procession hand over the Edaiken to the Oredo Chiefs and they return to Uselu while the Edaiken thereafter is escorted by Oredo chiefs into Benin City. The procession moves to Eko-ohae (bachelor’s camp) where he stays for three days. Before he gets to the camp, he makes another stop at the Emotan shrine where another brief ritual is
performed. The stop is significant in history because Emotan helped Ewuare regain the throne from usurpers. At Ekohae, he goes through the bachelor’s rituals. Most rites at this camp are private.

After three day of purification at the Ekohae, the Edaiken continues his journey to the Usama palace, the venue was the site of the first palace built by Oroumiyan. Subsequently all succeeding Oba from Eweka 1 were crowned and lived there, until Oba Ewedo in the 13th century moved the palace to the current site at the city centre near Ring Road. The Edaiken remains in Usama for 7 days performing all forms of rites, rituals and spiritual observances. While at Usama for the seven days, Edaiken made a very important and significant trips outside the Usama palace as part of the coronation rituals.

To choose his coronation name, Ediaken must sojourn to Uselu a community outside Benin to take part in a divine activity. He chooses his name while playing the ‘Akhue’ game at Uselu. The name he chooses is to be kept secret only to be revealed at Uro-Okpota on the appointed day. This tradition dates back to the time of Oba Eweka 1. When prince Oroumiyan left Benin, he left behind his pregnant wife who gave birth to a male child dumb from birth. He grew up dump. After repeated attempts to revive his speech without success, his father was informed at Uhe. He sent 7 magical pebbles with which the prince participated in the popular village game – Akhue. With the help of the last magical seed, the young prince won the game. Excited at his success at the game he spoke for the first time exclaiming “Owomika” (I have struck it). On assumption to the throne, he corrupted the name to Eweka, the name he answered as the Oba.

Having picked the name at Useh the Ediaken must return to Usama where the coronation ceremony is performed early hours of the next day by chief Oliha the leader of the Uzama Chiefs. The crowning ceremony is very private spiritual and ritual experienced by only few chiefs. After the private growing rites, he emerges from within an Oba with all the rituals concluded. He emerges simply to notify the public of his new status as godking. The Usamas and other members of the palace chiefs all accord him all respects and regards as the Oba. The godking from the point translates from humanity to divinity. He is from that hour accorded all attributes of a superior being.

The final odyssey is his journey from the Usama palace to Uro-Okpota now as the crowned Oba. He marches to Uro-Okpota mainly to espouse his new status and to be proclaimed and presented to Benin people and to reveal the name with which he shall reign as the godking. On his way to the city, he stops at Isekhere street, to perform the ceremonial crossing of a bridge, a historical recollection of the day Oba Ewedo on a similar journey erected a bridge to enable him pass through the Isekhere territory without touching the ground. After crossing the bridge, the Oba and his entourage engage in a mock battle with chief Ogiamien and his followers, crushing the resistance, and moving on to Urho-Okpota. In history, chief Ogiamien prevented Oba Ewedo from crossing through the Ama bridge at Isekhere to the palace. Chief Edogun, a war lord led the Oba’s resistance party to crush and dismember Ogiamien and his accolades. So till date, Edogun’s biological children play a part in the mock battle of resistance that leads the Oba to Urho-Okpota.

Urho-Okpota (the gate of Okpata) is very significant in Benin history as a meeting place. Urho-Okpata dates back to the era of Oba Ozolua in the 15th century. Okpata was a powerful
native doctor that assisted the Oba in a successful reign. It is said that his charms brought prosperity to the kingdom. The Oba lodged Okpota in a house near the palace, the place where the popular Urho-Okpota hall is sitting today at Ring Road in Benin. The house became a meeting place for elders and even for the Oba. Urho-Okpota since then and even till date has remained a centre for meeting and useful deliberations. This is the final point of the coronation ceremony.

The final coronation rite of the Oba of Benin is a social one. The events mark the end of activities prescribed by customs and tradition for his ascension to the revered throne of the ancient kingdom. The event is attended by dignitaries from all over the world. In attendance were members of the diplomatic core, priests, bishops, imams, kings, monarchs. Presidents, ministers, governor’s and government functionaries worldwide. They all journey to the ancient city to witness the account of the greatest event of the Benin Nation and African history. They all assemble to be a part of something new, something sublime something that happens for many only once in a lifetime. The climax of the ceremony of several months was the Oba’s acceptance of his destiny to be the embodiment and expression of the culture, aspirations and history of the Benin people and the revelation of his new royal name – Oba Ewuare Ogidigan II which was received by all in wild jubilation and frenzy.

CONCLUSION

African festivals are the embodiment and expression of the culture, aspirations, history, accepted norms, values, custom of a distinct people. It is the most expressive and enduring by-product of cultural heritage by which societies renew, reinvents, revitalizes and recreates themselves intermittently. Festivals provide the avenue for the celebration of the phases, circles and seasons of life. Birth, adulthood and death are all signified by festivals. Important and monumental events like rites of passage, marriage, naming ceremony coronation, convocation, initiation, conventions, are all marked by festivals. Festivals provide the space for spiritual and ancestral worship, ensuring personal and spiritual harmony.

One of the most significant elements of the cultural institution called festival is its ability to document, preserve and recollect history. Festivals are the greatest forms of memorabilia and mementos, providing unbroken records of artistic heritage and significant historical landmarks. Festival has ensured the survival and continuity of the Benin history and divine kingship for centuries. The most significant festival of the Benin Nation is one that occurs once in a lifetime – The coronation of the Oba. The 40th coronation of the Oba of Benin, Oba Ewuare Ogidigan II was a consummate expression of the preservation and documentation of several centuries of history. Artistically and aesthetically woven into this ceremony was a record of the survival, the greatness, the political tussle, the wealth and prosperity of the Benin Nation. The festival represents the greatest of African arts, memorialization practice and the total preservation of cultural heritage of the Benin people.
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