



Diaspora reconnection with homeland religion, cultural and heritage festival celebration

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Abstract

This study was undertaken to examine and gain better understanding of the impact that “modernization” or “urbanization” has on members of the diaspora community. Using the Osun Osogbo festival in Nigeria as a case study, the study examined the perception of these members of the Nigerian diaspora community to the festival, their notion of cultural tourism celebration and their desire to participate. The study explored these migrants’ reservations with celebration activities at the Sacred Grove during the festival. This exploratory study employed a qualitative research design based on in-depth interviews to elicit data. The target population were first-generation Nigerian migrants of Yoruba descent who live in South Africa. Findings from the migrants’ experiences revealed that their reluctance was due to their reservation on the spiritual or religious undertones attached to these spiritual festivals. Many of these returning migrants no longer desire to be identified with local religious or spiritual celebrations. By tapping into tourism and heritage, the study thus submits that, enhancing the relevance of the grove and the festival, as a tool to improve cultural and heritage tourism will best be achieved if religion can be separated from cultural celebrations.

Keywords: Religion, spirituality, migration, modernization, cultural tourism

Introduction

The Osun Osogbo festival in Nigeria is an annual celebration of the Osun goddess of fertility, prosperity and healing (Oparanti, 2004). The festival is regarded as a religious and spiritual festival. For many of the locals, the festival holds an important place in their spiritual life, and its significance can also be linked to the formation of their town. In the last few years, the Osun Osogbo festival, which takes place at the Osun sacred grove, has become one of the most widely celebrated indigenous festivals in Nigeria. In many African societies, especially in Nigeria, cultural festivals are often conceptualized as a medium through which humans communicate with deities. Oral history records that, in the early days, during the celebration of the festival, participants were mainly members of the locality. In recent times, however, attendance and participation at the festival has become a mixture of local residents, domestic and international tourists.

The Osun-Osogbo Festival last for two-weeks (Probst, 2011). A traditional cleansing of Osogbo is called *Iwopopo*, which is followed three days later by the lighting of a 500-year-old sixteen-point lamp called *Ina Olojumerindinlogun*. The sixteen lamps signify the sixteen major Orisa who organised the world as it is now.

The lamps are lighted at about 7.00 p.m. on Thursday and kept burning till day break on Friday-a week to the grand finale of the Osun festival.



On this day, the Ataoja, his wives and attendants, the Osun priestess and other Osun devotees dance round the lighted Lamp three times at three intervals of prayers and invocations inside the Osun shrine at the Ataoja's palace. The Ataoja, accompanied by his relatives and traditional chiefs, is also expected to dance round the market square before he finally returns to the palace (Oyeweso, 2013).

This is followed by the *Iboriade*, which is an collection of the crowns of the past rulers known as the the Ataojas of Osogbo, which are presented for blessings. Ataoja, means "the one who drinks water from the fish's mouth" and this is the title of the traditional ruler of Osogbo who is the guardian of the city, and also the ceremonial head of Osun, and thus, the principal host of the Osun festival. On the day the festival begins, monarchs attend to honour Osun. Some may even send representatives as symbols of their presence. Laroye, was the first Ataoja of Osogbo, and the founder of the city in 1670 CE. Oba Jimoh Olanipekun Oyetunji, Laroye II is the current Ataoja of Osogboland and has been the monarch since 2010 and he leads the proceedings along with Arugba (calabash carrier) and priestesses. Together they re-enact the first meeting between Oluwatimilehin and Yeye Osun (Fasan, 2016). The role of Arugba is played by a woman of a royal lineage and she offers the sacrifice to the deity. The Osun festival then culminates in a procession to the shrine in the sacred grove. There are inter alia musical performances, reciting of praise poetry, traditional garb and the language dominating is Yoruba (Falola, 1981).

During her lifetime, Osun was believed to be the youngest of the three wives of a 17th century king in Old Oyo called Sango. She transformed herself into a river after Sango hanged himself. Her friends were Oba and Oya. While Oba turned into a river which is today called the Oba river in Osun state, Oya turned into the present day River Niger in the north. A town known as Igede is believed to be the origin of the river but its shrine is located in Osogbo (McManlipz, 2020). Osun is generally called the river Orisha, or goddess, in the Yoruba religion. She is characteristically connected with water, purity, fertility, love, and also sensuality. She is considered to be one of the most influential of all orishas, and, like other gods, she holds human attributes such as narcissism, jealousy, and malice. Osun is normally portrayed as the protector, saviour, or even as the nurturer of humanity. She is also viewed as the upholder of spiritual balance or is the 'mother of sweet things'. Osun is also considered to be a dominant figure in the creation of humans. Olodumare, the Supreme God, sent the orishas to Earth. Osun, is only one of the seventeen sent and was the only female divinity. The other deities, are all male, and they all failed at their efforts to resuscitate and populate the Earth.

Osun is just one of the wives of Shango, who is the god of thunder. She is frequently described as the favourite of all orishas by Olodumare, because of her attractiveness and sensualism. In a Yoruba story, Osun is portrayed as the goddess who gives life but also takes it (Jeffries, n.d.). According to a myth, when she is infuriated, Osun may opt to flood the Earth or destroy crops by withholding water, triggering massive droughts. In another myth, Osun is enraged by her devotees and sends down huge amounts of rain, causing flooding. Despite this, once she has been mollified, Osun saves the Earth from destruction by 'calling back' the waters (Jeffries, n.d.). Osun to the people and gave them directives that they needed to continue, i.e. to offer the sacrifice to her annually and she would continue to sustain and protect them. She also gave directions as to how the annual sacrifices to her should be carried out and promised that her *Iko* i.e. messenger or representative would be sent every year to pour out healing water into the calabash held by the reigning Ataoja. This water may then be used for treatment of any illness.

The festival has been described as a strong motivation for many members of the Nigerian diaspora, irrespective of their ethnic group, religion, or social status, to embark on a return visit



back home (Oyeweso, 2012). For some members of the Nigerian diaspora who make these return journeys to their homeland, motivation to attend and participate at the festival is just to experience the fun and merriment. However, there is a sect who are motivated for spiritual reasons and thus regard these journeys as a form of pilgrimage. In today's secular world, "the relationship between tourists and their beliefs plays a major role in influencing individuals' pilgrimages to sacred sites. Indeed, religious pilgrimage tourism is crafted to meet the need for spirituality arising out of a highly secular international society and is full of great personal spiritual and also figurative meanings (Nicolaidis, 2016; Nicolaidis and Grobler, 2017). The visitation patterns of pilgrimage tourists all depend on the strength of religious beliefs (Norman, 2011). Although a number of pilgrims have wandered continuously, with no defined destination, many seek specific places that have been purified, by association, with divinity or other forms of holy grandee (Singh, 2006). They seek a sacred place of worship through which they can communicate the present with the past (Di Giovine & Garcia-Fuentes, 2016; Taha, 2016).

In the 1970s, renowned anthropologist, Nelson Graburn, one of the pioneers of tourism studies, conceptualized tourism as a "sacred journey", a kind of ritual that stands in opposition to the routine of everyday life, in which the tourist experiences a passage from the Profane (the ordinary mundane) to the Sacred (the holiday or precious time away) in search of leisure, self-discovery or a quest for fulfilment (Graburn, 1977). His conceptualization was derived from the traditional phenomenon of religious pilgrimage. While tourism and pilgrimage are different social phenomena, they share the same desire for personal satisfaction, which pilgrims find in the sacred and tourists in the secular (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Turnbull, 1992). The current study blends elements of both phenomena and examines them in the context of migration.

The Osun people and the general populace of Nigeria associate different connotation and beliefs with the Osun Osogbo festival (Woosnam & Aleshinloye, 2015). Despite professing either Christianity or Islam, many Nigerians still practise traditional religions, such as ancestral worship and the belief in deities (Okonkwo & Nzeh, 2009). However, there are concerns that modernization and urbanization might begin to have profound impacts on some of these African traditional religions (Obasola, 2014). This has long been identified and has stoked fears among adherents about the sustainability of their traditional spiritual practices (Awolaluand Dopamu, 2005).

According to early scholar, Robert Bates (1974), modernization can be defined as the process of attaining modernity. Thus modernization can be conceptualized a process of transmission that creates a gap between traditional and modern societies, in which it is believed that the former is inferior to the latter (Eze-Uzoamaka & Oloidi, 2017). The impact of these influences, which Nigerians in the diaspora have, in relation to cultural festivals like the Osun Osogbo festival, has not been fully explored. This study was therefore undertaken to examine and gain a better understanding of the impact that "modernization" has on Nigerians in the diaspora and its consequent influence on their desire to participate or be associated with the festival.

The focus is on the Nigerian diaspora in South Africa. The study explored the perceived significance of this tangible site and the intangible beliefs and values attached to it, thus gaining insights on how the unique features of the festival can be translated to improving cultural tourism in the country. The remainder of this paper is divided into five main sections. The first section presents a review of literature relating to the topic, which is followed by a discussion of the methodology that is applied to the study. The third section presents findings from the data gathered followed by the discussion and analysis the data findings. A conclusion about the study is drawn in the last section.



Literature Review

Nigerians constitute a large number of African immigrants globally, and according to the Nigeria Diaspora Commission Bulletin (2013), they can be found in practically every part of the world. The largest population lives in Canada, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and various European countries, with many also migrating to South Africa (Adepoju, 2004). Most of these Nigerians are Yorubas who travel in pursuit of educational accomplishments, unlike the Ibos, who are more commercially inclined, or the Hausas, who travel for religious/cultural reasons (Yesufu, 2016). The Yoruba speaking community, located mostly in the South Western region of Nigeria, is one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa (World Fact Book, 2012).

The Osun Osogbo festival is a renewal of the mystic bond between the Osun goddess and her people (Yusuf, 2012). It is often being regarded as a symbol of identity for the Yoruba community and devotees of the Ifa divination (Oyeweso, 2013). One of the main attractions of the Osun goddess is premised on the belief that she possesses the potency to make barren women fruitful (Badejo et al., 1996), and provides healing and wealth. Many Nigerians in the diaspora use the festival as a pilgrimage to seek blessings and reconnect with the spiritual roots of their identity (Taha, 2016). This annual festival revolves around the Osun goddess, her people and the votary maid (a virgin girl who acts as an intermediary between the people and the goddess). This community-based event can be conceptualized as a being a rallying point for many sons and daughters of the Yoruba land, both at home and in the diaspora (Oyeweso, 2013).

The festival takes place at the Sacred Grove in Osogbo town, in Osun State, South Western Region in Nigeria. The Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove is a big cultural landscape of undisturbed forest. It is dedicated to Osun, the Yoruba goddess of fertility, The area was established more than four centuries ago and is the largest of the sacred groves that have survived. The grove is thus a sacred sanctuary, covering approximately 75 hectares of primary rain forest vegetation (Badejo et al., 1996). There, a statue of the goddess spreading her arms out as if to welcome visitors to the large 185 acres' dense forest which is dedicated to her as one of the principal Ifa deities, The Grove attained a national monument status in 1965 (National Commission for Museums and Monuments, 2005), and in recognition of its global significance and cultural value, it was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in July 2005. The festival is held in August each year to appease the Osun goddess and renew the bonds of spiritualism between her and the people of the land (Oparanti, 2004). The Osogbo Cultural Heritage Council (OCHC) estimates that over 50,000 people attend the festival annually, the majority being culture enthusiasts and tourists from many parts of the world (Oparanti, 2004), including non-Nigerians and Nigerians in the diaspora. Many come to look for their roots and to define their heritage,

One day, the story goes, one of the early settlers was cutting down a tree when a voice came from the river, instructing him to move away. "It was the voice of Osun, who turned out to live in this river," Ms. Faniyi said, pointing to the calmly flowing water. The settlers left the site for higher ground, establishing what would become the city of Osogbo, and dedicated the forest to the goddess. Every August, thousands come to the city for the Osun Festival and to celebrate the special pact between the Osogbo people and the Yoruba goddess. (Van Zeijl, 2016)

In the last 10 years, this community event has developed into an international tourism attraction. While many members of the diaspora might not necessarily believe in the spiritual aspect of the grove or the festival, it serves as an opportunity to reconnect with family and the familiar. The temporary return visits home to visit friends and relatives (VFR) are important events, especially for first-generation migrants internationally; the motive being both for maintenance and



enhancement of kinship networks (Duval, 2003). Broadly, these activities are underpinned by memory, nostalgia and longing for home as a “specific localized place of belonging and an environment of cultural familiarity” (Marschall, 2017: 215).

Religion, from the Nigerian perspective, can be regarded as a notion that was passed from the past to the present. It encompasses overt and covert votaries passed down by continuous pedigrees, mainly through oral traditions that usually include myths and folktales, songs and dances, liturgies, festivals and rituals (Gbenda, 2006). Traditionally, spirituality was used to describe people who were deeply religious, but it has now expanded to include the superficially religious person, the religious seeker, the seeker of well-being and happiness, and the completely secular person (Koenig, 2008). Bourne (2005) argues that individuals are usually prompted to address issues of their spirituality because they have a motivation to do so. Certain triggers awaken people’s spirituality and motivate them to begin or continue with their personal “spiritual quest” for meaning and life purpose. According to Wilson et al., (2013), many people are said to become spiritually aware when they have an illness, suffer a painful loss of a loved one, experience a prominent life event or are faced with an overwhelming life challenge.

To understand existing religious heritage, there needs to be a recognition of the intangible importance of the tangible religious object, structure and/or place. According to Stovel (2005: 9), “understanding living religious heritage requires recognizing the intangible significance of the tangible”. In the European or Western context, the term “culture” often refers to “high art” or more sophisticated forms of cultural production. However, in the African context, the terms tend to be described in an anthropological sense. Sibani (2014: 107) defines culture as “the entity that incorporates the totality, and it is synonymous with the people's way of life, transmitted from age to age, generation to generation”. History records that cultural tourism has been in existence since the days of Herodotus in ancient Greece who, in about 440 BCE, listed the seven “Miracles of the Ancient World”. During the 19th century, exploring culture in Europe was a major motivation to travel, as it was considered a fundamental part of education for the wealthy classes. Cultural tourism worldwide began to experience a boom in the latter half of the 20th century, due in part to returning soldiers who took their families back to the countries where they had been based during WWII (Kumar, 2017: 57).

Culture and heritage tourists usually visit buildings with historic significance, archaeological locations, state/local/national parks, art galleries or museums as they want to understand more about the cultures they are visiting, and do not simply visit popular sites (Rosenfeld, 2008: 3). This, however, differs from cultural and heritage tourism in the African context, which is more strongly focused on natural heritage and the indigenous “living culture” of the African people (Ruhanen & Whitford, 2019). Much of this type of tourism is based on art performances and dance, attending and participating at traditional or cultural festivals, and experiencing traditional and contemporary ways of living.

Religion is an important component of culture and linked to different traits in human lives’ (Nyaupane et al., 2015). African has never been irreligious and ignorant of the existence of a Supreme being or the spirit realm. However, with the invasion of missionaries from Christianity and Islam, these foreign religions values successfully made African religions practices to become a subject of ridicule; condemning and labelling the indigenous beliefs and practices of the African people as “fetish, backward and primitive” (Asiedu 2020:2). The basic structure of the religious belief system of the Yoruba people in Nigeria has the “Supreme Being” or “Olodumare” as the head of all things. They believe him to be the creator and controller of the universe, who is ever active and in charge. Religion, therefore, can be regarded a fundamental fabric in many African societies, as it is interwoven with the over-all existence of its people (Agbiji & Swart, 2015). While



it may be accepted that the African traditional religious heritage remains a potent force that still influences the values, identity and outlook of Africans, it should be noted that Christianity and Islam are also rapidly becoming major sources of influence in many African societies (Ikenga-Metuh, 2002).

Methodology

This socio-cultural study employed an exploratory research design to obtain qualitative data and uncover what is unknown about the Osun Osogbo festivals through the prism of Nigerian migrants in South Africa, more specifically, those of the Yoruba descent. The study population were first-generation Nigerian migrants of Yoruba descent who had relocated from Nigeria to live in South Africa. These migrants only make return journeys to their birth country either as cultural enthusiasts, or as visiting friends and relatives (VFR tourists), or as pilgrims. Their visits are often due to a combination of reasons, specifically their ties with the Osun Osogbo festival and the Yoruba ethnic traditions and beliefs.

Two sites were selected to interview participants, these being Durban in KwaZulu-Natal Province, South Africa and Osogbo in Osun State, Nigeria. The city of Durban was chosen as it hosts a large majority of Nigerian migrants in South Africa. The other study location was Osogbo; this location had to be included because it is where the grove is located, and also where the annual festival takes place. The sampling methods for this study were purposive and snowballing. The researcher decided to use these methods because the study approach comprises of pinpointing and choosing personalities or groups of people that are principally conversant about or have some experience with the phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Clark, 2011).

The researcher was able to contact the president of the Yoruba speaking association in South Africa, that is the Association of Yorubas in the Diaspora (AYIDSA) South Africa Chapter. The presidents of organizations of this nature are highly knowledgeable in the field under investigation. After approaching the president, the researcher was then introduced to participants who were considered credible, trustworthy and relevant enough to give the needed data for the study. In line with the Code of Ethics, pseudonyms were given to all the participants to protect their identity. For example, the pseudonym RM001 represents participant male 001, while RF001 represents participant female 001. Essentially, the anonymity of all participants were strictly protected such that their names or any information that could reveal their identity were discouraged, both in the conduct of the interviews and the reports of the findings respectively. Furthermore, before the commencement of the interviews, participants were well briefed on the aim of the study, after which a consent form was issued to them to indicate their willingness to participate in the study. They were also free to withdraw at any stage of the study and were not in any way remunerated for participating.

The sample size for this study was twenty-five participants. The justification for that number was that, at that point, the researcher had reached the saturation level. The age range of participants falls within 35 to 60 years. This age range was most suitable for the study because migrants within this age range are expected to have attained some level of stability in their host countries. Furthermore, they were also identified to be knowledgeable enough about the significance of the festival to provide the data needed for the study. Both males and females were interviewed. However, it was quite challenging to achieve a balance in gender representation as many of the women approached were reluctant to share their experiences. The data was collected by individual in-depth interviews.



The interviews were semi structured and guided by a list of pre-determined questions. Responses to some of these questions gave birth to further follow-up inquiries. The questions were related to their understanding of the festival, their beliefs and perceptions relating to its annual celebration. The data was thematically analysed to address the areas of interest; these being their migration history, spirituality, religious affiliation, their perception on “modernization”, and belief in the goddess. In addition, the researcher attended the festival to observe the proceedings. The information gathered is presented in the findings section below.

Findings

This study was undertaken to gain better understanding of the impact that “modernization” has on Nigerians in the diaspora, their perception of the festival and their notion of homecoming as festival participants. It explored participants’ beliefs about the spiritual aspects of the festival, the sacred grove, and the goddess. A common trend noticed among all participants was the constant reference and acknowledgment being given to God. The snowball sampling method employed in this study, generated a sample overwhelmingly dominated by participants who identified themselves as “Christians”. Though many of these participants have been away from their homeland for some time, they all still expressed their deep religious sentiments in their responses. Many ascribed their success to the “God” factor in their life and not to their dedication, hard work or the positive economic enabling opportunities in their host country, South Africa. This confirms that their migration status had little or no alteration in their sense of belief or acknowledgement of the presence of a Supreme Being. While their levels of belief varied, a common trend showed that they all believed in the existence of a greater power albeit acknowledged with different names.

Beliefs about the festival and the goddess

Despite admitting to being affiliated to the Christian religion, two participants, RM007 and RM008, explicitly considered themselves devotees of the Osun goddess. According to the tradition, being a devotee means that they have been possessed by the goddess manifestation. Eight participants shared personal experiences of the goodness of the Osun goddess. These ranged from being able to have a child after years of trying to conceive, to overcoming financial challenges in life. Twenty out of the twenty-five participants interviewed believed strongly in the power of the goddess although their strengths of belief varied. Some based their beliefs on personal encounters, others based them on information or the testimonies from others.

Modernization, which was earlier defined, seemed not to have majorly affected the perceived significance of the festival among devotees. Except for three (male) participants who considered themselves “born-again” Christians, every participant was a strong supporter of the promotion and sustainability of the culture and traditions of their forefathers. One participant, RM004, did not necessarily believe in the potency of the Osun water as prescribed by believers, but said that, as much as “modernization” has actually changed the perception of people, it has not been able to take the culture away from the people of Osun. This sentiment was echoed by participant RF002. In her remarks, she stated that: “I am happy the Osun people are still ... staying [true] to their culture and traditions” (RF002: Durban, Feb. 2019).

Another participant, RM008, a devotee, said that he could not understand why or how anyone would want to tamper with anyone's culture; the festival has been able to survive because of support from people who have been taught not to joke about or tamper with any aspect of their tradition. This doctrine was passed down to him by his own father. He said that he would also pass the same on to his children and grandchildren, hence ensuring the continuity. Another participant, RM001, strongly believed that modernization, globalization, and civilization all clearly



have almost eroded certain cultures. He opined that the Osun goddess and the grove have been able to survive because of people's beliefs.

RM015 admitted that, before he became a Christian, he used to dabble in the worship of traditional Yoruba gods, but in recent times, he would no longer like to be associated with things of that nature. He stated that "As a Christian, we have this idea of idol worship. So, my Christian nature in me questions everything that happens there" (RM015: Durban, Feb. 2019). Two other participants admitted to having attended the festival but stated that they do not worship the goddess because of their Christian belief. One of the participants, RM012, said that his religious beliefs will not allow him to participate in such a traditional celebration as that will be demeaning considering his level of exposure and enlightenment. He stated that, "you know light and darkness cannot stay in the same place" (RM012: Durban, Sept. 2018).

Culture and religion

Many Nigerians have different perceptions and relationships with the grove, the goddess, and the festival as a whole. However, very few will deny the intangible cultural qualities of the grove, the goddess, and the festival. Consistent with the responses from the different participants is that the festival is perceived as a cultural celebration, a sacred ceremony, and a pilgrimage for those with spiritual allegiance to its cultural practices. The differences are in terms of the perceived significance of the tangible site, the intangible beliefs, and values attached to it by these members of the diaspora. RF008 admitted to have been very skeptical about the festival initially. She claimed to have heard a lot of "spooky" stories about the place, but when she got there, it was not as she had anticipated. She said, "it was scary though, but it was nice; it was cultural" (RF008: Durban, Feb. 2019).

RM005, one of the participants interviewed, said that while attending the festival, he chose to be objective about the whole process. According to him, he chose to look beyond the spiritual meaning of the events and focus more on the cultural celebrations. He said he was studying what the priests and the devotees were doing, "the way they dressed and why they were dressed, their dance steps and stuff like that, I decided to see them all from the cultural angle" (RM005: Durban, Feb. 2019). All participants that visited the grove acknowledged that it can be classified as a tourist attraction. When asked to describe their experiences at the festival, all the participants opined that it was fun-filled, exciting, and entertaining. According to one of the participants:

It is always fun. I don't think anybody who attends the festival can say anything else. There is music, singing, dancing; for those who like to drink, there is always a lot of free alcohol. Different companies with their brands come and offer free drinks. A lot of people get drunk, but that is all part of the fun. (RM012: Durban, Sept. 2018)

Another participant said that, "I think it has huge tourism potential, but sadly, I'm not sure if it is being fully tapped" (RM001: Durban, Feb. 2019). However, the significance of the attraction varied, and the variance was based on their individual beliefs. There was some inconsistency on the proper label that should be accorded to the grove. As one of the participants, RM013, asked, "is it really a tourist center or a shrine?", He went further to say:

"It is not about enjoying the festival; it is about the spiritual implication of dancing and eating in an idol worship. You cannot serve God and Idol. So, you have to choose which is better for you and I have chosen Jesus. (RM013: Durban, Feb. 2019)



RF008 described the festival as a celebration of something different. As the quotation below suggests:

“It’s not modern. It’s not a modernized event as we have now where you have the carnivals, you know people dancing in different feathers and all those things. No, this is a cultural thing. Where we showcase the talking drum which is peculiar to the Yoruba tribe, where we showcase our language. You know, proverbs, and citations, and ... stories and history that people aren’t familiar with because... [In] the Nigerian system, we are not used to learning about history and all those indigenous things. So, it’s nice to have that avenue to be more exposed to educating people about ... what was in the past and what is now” (RF008: Durban, Feb. 2019).

Cultural and heritage tourism

In the culture and heritage tourism context, the grove serves as a model of African heritage that preserves the tangible and intangible values of the Osogbo people, the Yoruba community, and Nigerians in general. While all the participants acknowledged the importance of cultural sustainability which the festival represents, some people shy away from partaking in local cultural practices because of their religious beliefs. One of the participants said, “... as a Christian, I see those things as fetish. So, we do not take part in it, but I went [there] because I was home at that time, and it was just mainly for singing and dancing (RF006: Durban, Sept. 2018).

However, RM003, who is also a Christian, disagreed with the views raised by RF006. He claims to be a concrete believer of his culture and tradition, and thinks that Africans should do all they can to preserve indigenous traditional religion. In this regard, he had the following remarks:

From my name, you can tell that I’m more of [a] Christian, but we must not forget that before we embrace Christianity, these are things that we are used to. As a matter of fact, when you go back [to] decoloniality, decolonialization, and stuff like that, you realize that the religions that we are practicing are foreign religions such that we forget our own religion. (RM003: Durban, Feb. 2019)

The grove and the festival enable the community to play host to a large number of visitors and tourists, not only for festival participants, but also for those who may want to visit as pilgrims or cultural and heritage tourists at other times in the year. According to one of the participants, festivities experienced during this annual festival can be likened to the festivities experienced around the world in the month of December:

During the time of the festival, that is around August, the worshippers also put their own decorations as we do the Christmas decorations. They have white powder, and white lappers they tie around town. They have their own attire; they always wear white on white, the white beads on their neck, on their legs, on their ankles, and on their wrists. It’s just like any celebration; they even share flyers, so it’s a big celebration. (RF002: Durban, Feb. 2019)

This has had a great impact on the economic activities in the town as traders, hoteliers, transporters, and other vendors experienced a boost in their respective businesses. One of the participants, RM005, attended the festival because he had to take some foreign delegates who came to Nigeria for the purpose of research. To him, the festival was simply a celebration of their culture. He understood that a couple of people may see it as a worship of minor gods or mini gods



because of exposure to Western ideologies. However, he chose to see it mainly as a beautiful cultural celebration.

Analysis and discussion

In recent years, the connection between religion and tourism has increasingly become a topic of interest for many tourism scholars (Stausberg, 2011; Wright, 2008) although many of these studies are not explored from an African perspective. In many instances, tourists and religious adherents often occupy the same space. This means that they both have a role to play in giving meaning to the site and the subsequent sustainability of the space, for both the casual visitors and those who are spiritually dedicated. Many religious tourists usually ascribe some level of spiritual importance to certain sites they visit. Some of these sites may be venerated with shrines or temples that devotees are encouraged to visit for their own spiritual benefit. Furthermore, it is believed that at these sacred sites, healing and other issues of concern can be resolved. The Osun grove, is an example of such sacred sites where daily, weekly, and monthly worship takes place. It also serves as a motivation for many to embark on a return journey back home.

Traditionally, migrants who make return visits back to their homelands are usually classified as visiting friends and relatives (VFR) tourists as their major motive is to visit friends and relatives (Asiedu, 2008). However, further studies have shown that the desire to embark on homeland visits has gone beyond this. Return journeys to homeland do not only help the African diaspora reconnect with their roots, but they also lead to their identity transformation and self-realization (Haller et al., 2013). For some members of the Nigerian diaspora who make the return journey back to their homeland, they use the opportunity of the annual festival not just to maintain ties with “home”, but also as an opportunity to reconnect with their indigenous spiritual roots. While it has been acknowledged that tourism and pilgrimage are different social phenomena, those who engage in it share the same desire for personal fulfilment.

“Modernisation” impact on the diaspora community

As earlier stated, the Osun Osogbo festival cuts across the entire Yoruba race, both for those at home and those in the diaspora (Aleshinloye, 2015). Findings from this research are in line with Oyeweso’s (2013) assertion that the festival can be described as a strong motivation for many members of the Nigerian diaspora, irrespective of their ethnic group, religion or social status, to embark on a return visit back home. The yearly festival at the grove, beyond the festivities and merriment, is an opportunity for all to access the sacred grove, a sanctuary where people consult and communicate with their deities (Amusa, 2009). The sacred grove in Osun is a tourist destination, a pilgrimage, and a heritage site, thus making the festival to be at the intersection of pilgrimage, heritage, and tourism. The importance of Osun Osogbo festival lies in its power to remind locals of their roots in Nigeria, and in strengthening their ethnic and historical identity (Probst, 2016).

Despite its strong local character, this cultural festival has gained popularity even amongst international travellers. Furthermore, for some of these members of the diaspora, participation at the festival gives them an opportunity to seek blessing from the Osun goddess to heal their infertility and provide solutions to their other life challenges. As tourists, the general perception of these migrants, though, was that the festival, and the grove, provides an enriching cultural experience. As visitors to their homeland, many found the festival and the grove to be a good cultural attraction that they could engage in. Many members of this diaspora community have different perceptions and relations to the grove, the goddess, and the festival as a whole.



However, very few will deny the intangible cultural qualities of the grove, the goddess, and the festival.

While Christianity can be argued as not being a modern-day religion, its influence and introduction in Africa can be associated with modernity. Some of the participants struggled with their religious beliefs as attendance at the festival is assumed as being “sinful”, and is reportedly frowned upon by their modern day doctrine. The change of attitude to religion made many people undermine the worship of some of these deities for the new religion (Omisore et al., 2009). Some who had participated in the festival before claimed that they no longer do so because of their “rebirth”. The phrase rebirth can be described as their acceptance of modern-day religion. Some participants expressed that they would not have a problem participating in the festival if some aspects of the festival could be scrapped out. According to one of the participants, “... if the idol worship and stuff like that can be taken out, then maybe all other aspects can be appealing...” (RM013: Durban, Feb. 2019). To this set of people, the festival is regarded as a religious celebration that is idolatrous; however, for others, the festival is regarded as a cultural celebration. Beyers (2017) opined that culture and religion must be viewed as relatives when religion is seen as a segment of culture. This is particularly true for a site like the Osun Sacred grove, which is a culture and heritage site that has some level of religious connotation. Therefore, as stated above, many of the participants looked beyond the religious aspect to appreciate the rich cultural and heritage aspect of the grove.

Enhancing cultural tourism

Tourists and religious adherents often occupy the same space which makes it imperative that they both play a role in attributing meaning to the space. Bremer (2005: 9260) posits that “tourism and its associated practices interact with religious life and the institutions of religion in virtually every corner of the world”. For some, the grove, which is the location for the annual festival, was a place of comfort for them, where they could commune with their gods and seek solutions to their life challenges. To these sects, undertaking these trips is a form of pilgrimage to visit the sacred space. One of the participants attested to this and said that “...I must travel to the Osun festival and the Egungun festival. It is necessary for my spiritual fortification” (RM008: Durban, Sept. 2018).

The yearly festival at the grove, beyond the festivities and merriment, gives many members of the Nigerian diasporic community an opportunity to access the sacred grove, a sanctuary where people consult and communicate with their deities (Amusa, 2009). Many participants stated that the grove can be described as sacred. Their level of reverence, however, ranged from being spooky, diabolatry to sacred. The search for this sacred aspect can be described as a pilgrimage of sort for these travellers as their journeys are motivated, either in part or exclusively, by the need to satisfy some personal or spiritual needs through tourism. For most regular tourists at the grove, the sculptures and shrines scattered around the grove are quite captivating, especially for those who appreciate artwork. However, for those who embark on these trips as a form of pilgrimage or as a devotee, their gaze is quite different from merely looking. There is a particular comfort and peace that they derive just by gazing at the sculptures and shrines at the grove. The statues at the grove are approached with respect and worshiped.

It is believed that there is a divine aura around the grove posited beyond the order of ordinary things. Urry’s concept of tourist gaze (1990) captures people’s inspiration and willingness to leave either their place of work or home in a bid to embark on a tourist journey for the purpose of gazing and experiencing that which explains the extraordinary. The drive is to seek what is not part of their normal daily routine, socially, religiously or culturally. For these members of the diaspora,



the social, religious, and cultural extraordinary can be found at the sacred grove. In the culture and heritage tourism context, the grove which serves as a model of African heritage that preserves the tangible and intangible values of the Osogbo people, the Yoruba community, and Nigerians in general can be an attraction for both religious and secular tourists, if well harnessed.

Conclusion

Rooted in the anthropology of tourism, the study contributes new knowledge to extant scholarship in the field of tourism and migration, as well as the field of heritage tourism with particular emphasis on intangible cultural heritage. This research explored the relationship between religion, spirituality and tourism that goes beyond just the provision of religious tourist attractions. Data presented shows that although the grove and the festival celebration still have values and significance to the local community and international tourists, some members of the Nigerian Diasporic community are not keen to be identified with the spirituality and “idolatry” associated with it. All participants in the study agree that the impact of the grove and the festival celebration has made the community to enjoy some spotlight, especially during the festival month when people troop in and out of the town from all around the world. Many are however of the opinion that the festival celebration will be better appreciated if certain features and all the “ritual” aspects can be taken out. The Osun Osogbo festival is an event of public enjoyment. It takes on the form of religious festivity and sacrifices are offered to the diverse gods who yield power over rain, sunshine, harvest and even marriages among the Yoruba, the indigenous religion has largely made way to Christianity and also Islam. Nonetheless the festival is still followed.

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