

The Socio-Cultural Context of Yuletide Tragedies in Nigeria

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Abstract

The fear that looms in the air and the calamity that lucks in the corner during each yuletide in Nigeria has called for attention. Nigerians start and spend a year hopefully and in relaxation of mind, but when the yuletide draws close, they become uneasy, frightened, extremely conscious and unusually religious for fear of the unknown. This is because the yuletide is always characterized with tragedies like countless road crashes/accidents, increased crime rate in form of armed robbery, kidnapping for ransom and so on. Many reasons might have been given to explain these recurrent tragedies during the yuletide in Nigeria, but there seems to be a different view to this. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze the socio-cultural context of these yuletide tragedies in Nigeria. Extended family system, culture of merry-making, social materialism, social comparison and competitions etc were identified as the background causes of these yuletide tragedies in the country. However, a Redefinition of Social Value and Relevance, Review of the Extended Family System, the Creation of Job opportunities as well as the Alleviation of Poverty in the Nigerian society, were recommended as Way Out.

Keywords: *Yuletide, Social Relevance, Tragedies, Family, Nigeria.*

1. Introduction

The yuletide is a period of celebrations and festivities. It is a period of love and peace. It is a period in which people socialize through the exchange of gifts and good wishes amongst themselves. It is a season of reunion and meetings amongst friends and well-wishers. It is a period of visitations and varieties in every sense of the word. It is a period of joy and happiness. Nevertheless, however, it is a period of tragedies and sadness. This is due to the rush and haste that characterize the season. In Nigeria for instance, the most common tragedies during the yuletide include the rise in crime and road accident cases. The recurrent nature of these tragedies in higher magnitude in the country each yuletide, has made the yuletide, a dreaded period. Nigerians tend to designate this period, especially the last four months of the year, as "Ember" months. Wole (2012) has observed that accidents, during these "Ember" months represent a grim reality that evokes fear in many Nigerians who have now come to label them the "notorious months". In the recently concluded yuletide, for instance, there were seemingly countless reported cases of kidnapping for ransom, armed robbery and road accidents in the country.

Therefore, following the peculiarity of these "Ember" months, (i.e. the periods around the Christmas day), in respect to the spate of crime and road clashes/accidents, many persons have given reasons for it. While reckless driving and bad roads are held as major reasons for the increased cases of road accidents during this period in Nigeria; poverty, unemployment and crave for riches account for the spate of crime. However, there is a socio-cultural context to these tragedies that are characteristics of the yuletide in the country. This is the thrust of this paper, which is to analyze the socio-cultural context of the yuletide tragedies in Nigeria.

2. The Notion of the Yuletide in Nigeria

The yuletide refers to the period around the Christmas day. It means so much to a great number of people around the world. However, there are some differences in the notion of the yuletide among people across the globe. To some, it is a period to be sober and reflect on the divine birth of Jesus, whereas, to some, it is a period of great celebration and festivities. Yet, to some other people, it is merely a period that marks the end of the year. Again, there are always some peculiarities in the lists of activities that characterize this period, which differ from place to place. Of course, this is in line with differences in cultures.

In Nigeria context, for instance, the yuletide is often welcomed with a great cloud of activities and festivities. This period is indigenously known as “Ember Months” (which is coined from the last five letters of the months of September, October, November and December). It is a period of rush and haste as well as a period of terror and tragedies. Yet, it is a period of happiness and celebrations. During this period, Nigerians engage in a lot of activities to wrap-up the year. Several social organizations and groups organize what is fondly called “End of the Year Parties” to conclude the year. Also, there are often a lot of marriage ceremonies, as a great number of Nigerians prefer organizing wedding ceremonies during this period. These ceremonies attract friends and well-wishers from far and near, who often come with gifts. This obviously warrants more shopping and travelling.

Additionally, because of this increase in demand, there is always a significant increase in the prices of goods and services. Yet, it does not deter people from wanting to buy so much in a bid to renew virtually everything around them. Transportation fee often doubles as commercial drivers become more reckless and lawless in pursuit of more money. This accounts for the increase in road crashes during the yuletide in the country. The ex-commander of the Federal Road Safety Commission, Mr. Tumes Dalop rightly observed that, “even without statistics, common sense will tell one that accidents and deaths are higher during these “Ember” (i.e. the yuletide) months because of the various festivities lined up during this period and which warrant much more travelling; it’s a period when commercial drivers cash in to make more money through over loading, excessive speeding, among others (Wole 2012).

Interestingly, there is this socio-cultural belief of Nigerians, which has it that Christmas is best celebrated in one’s village. Hence, people travel from all corners of the world to their respective villages to celebrate Christmas. This cultural belief is so common that it becomes abnormal and almost culturally forbidden for one to remain in the city during Christmas celebration. Omeayo (2012:14) called it “Annual Christmas homecoming”. Also, there is another strong belief that accompanies the above, which is that it is only the financially buoyant ones that travel home during Christmas. This is because it is only these ones that can meet the high social expectations of families and relatives at home. In most cases, one is expected in the first place to travel home with bag(s) of rice, goat(s) or chicken(s) and other necessary ingredients to spice up the celebration, or to have sent these items home to herald ones coming. More interestingly, it is often expected that when one leaves the village for the city to seek greener pastures, one should compulsorily come home better than one left. Preferably, one receives a warm welcome from families and relatives, when one comes back with a car (s) or something to show for the months one has been away. This is so prevalent that it is common to see people refusing to go home (i.e. village) for Christmas just for the sole reason that they do not have enough finance not necessarily to fend for themselves, but for families and relatives at home.

Also, there is this social competition and comparison that is inherent during this period. This is evidenced in situations in which people tend to compare and compete with fellow neighbours or residents, for instance, as to whose son/daughter’s car is finer, or who buys a cow, goat, bag(s) of rice etc. for the Christmas celebration. More so, families and relatives often compare and compete as to whose sons/daughters are more successful and richer in monetary terms. More interestingly, it is only the richer and wealthiest gets more respect and value. And for those, who could not at

least make their families proud by acquiring riches, either refuse coming home or receive bunch of insults, disappointments and disrespect from families and relatives at home. No wonder, every one passionately desires this social relevance.

The climax is set on the Christmas and New Year day in which people become extremely prodigious and extravagant in celebrations. Money is expended almost to the last kobo. Hence, it is always common to see people rushing "back to their areas of domicile to resume work and recoup their finances after Christmas and New year festivities" (Odogwe 2013:9). It seems however, more common to see or hear people borrowing money to travel back to their city after these celebrations.

3. Timeline of Yuletide Tragedies in the Year 2012

The unfortunate and sad events like increased cases of road accidents, armed robbery and kidnapping for ransom during the yuletide, are what make up the yuletide tragedies in this Paper. These tragedies are recurrent and always inflict pains and sorrow on families and relatives of victims who were in the state of euphoria in connection with the yuletide. These have made the yuletide, a dreaded period in Nigeria. In the just concluded yuletide season, some of these tragedies were recorded:

3.1 Accidents

According to the official report of the Federal Road Safety Corps (FRSC), while road accidents killed average 11 Nigerians each day of 2012, the highest number of accidents and deaths occurred in December 2012. The Report titled "Dashboard Records for the Months of 2012" has it that an average of 15 people died daily from accidents in December leading to total deaths of 473 people involving 1,115 vehicles. (Ibeh 2013). For instance, on 13th December 2012, a horrible accident was reported in which eight pupils of Comprehensive High School, Itori, were crushed to death by a Lorry, on their way back from school at the Lagos-Abeokuta Express way. Also, on the same day, another multiple accident reportedly occurred near Ogere on the Lagos-Ibadan Express way and claimed five lives and others injured.(Nwokolo 2012:3). In fact, Ibeh (2012) reported that at least 88 people died in various accidents across Nigeria during the festive period between December 22 and December 31, 2012. On December 22, the Commission reported that one life was lost while three people sustained injuries in a crash involving a truck and a lorry along Toro- Jos road. On December 23, it was also reported that 18 people including two children lost their lives while 19 persons were injured in accidents that occurred in different locations across the country. Also, 19 deaths were recorded while 51 people sustained various kinds of injury on Christmas Eve, December 24. Among the Christmas eve deaths were three soldiers in an accident in which seven soldiers were also injured. Crashes on Christmas day recorded 6 deaths and 47 injured persons who were all rushed to various hospitals by officers of the FRSC. Three deaths and 29 injuries were recorded on December 26. A major crash which involved nine deaths and 11 injuries was recorded on December 27 when a truck crashed into a Toyota Hiace bus. Also on the same day four other people died while 14 others were injured in separate crashes. The FRSC also reported that it recorded 10 deaths and 10 injuries on December 28 in different locations across the country. On December 29, 80 injured persons were recorded in different road crashes while 11 people lost their lives. Five deaths and 41 injuries were recorded on December 30. The dead included an FRSC official who was brushed into Ososa River along Ore- Sagamu way when a luxury bus driver on high speed defiled a diverted direction following a previous crash on same spot. The FRSC officer, Olusoji Olaleye, an Assistant Route Commander was said to be clearing the obstruction and diverting traffic to the other carriageway to protect the crash scene, alongside other officers, when the incident happened. Monday, New Year Eve, recorded the death of two children at Kungbani along Lokoja – Abuja road. Fifteen people were injured in the accident. The driver was said to have

lost control of the vehicle which crashed at about 14:20 hrs. Two people were also injured in a car crash at Kwanar Fararwai on Kaduna – Zaria road. The car, a Peugeot 406, crashed, causing injuries to its two occupants who were rushed to Barau Dikko Hospital for medical attention.

3.2 Crime

The rate of crime was expectedly intensified during the 2012 yuletide season in the country. For instance, on 29th October 2012, Olaniyi (2012:11) reported a case of a policeman in Port Harcourt who was killed by armed robbers, who raided a phone shop and made away with a three “Ghana-must-go” bags of money. Whereas on 8th November, Kingsley Eni was reportedly remanded in Lagos Prison for allegedly robbing Daniel Onuoha of N1.33 million (Owolabi 2012:53). Also in the same month, six unidentified gunmen reportedly attacked a Motorist at Iyana Isashi, Badagry Express way and went away with a bag containing some money. (Isiguzo 2012:53). Again, in same month, Odogwu (2012:54) reported a case of arrested three fake Revenue collectors in Onitsha South, Anambra state. Furthermore, on 9th November 2012, a case of two killed armed bank robbers by the Kogi policemen, was reported. (Bashir 2012:54). And on December 20, 2012, two policemen were reportedly short dead by unidentified robbery gang who attacked a bank in Ikirun, Ifelodun Local Government of Osun state. (Adeniyi 2012:53).

The crime of kidnapping for ransom had its own share of attention in the country. Odogwu (2012:56) reported a case of a businessman and Chief Executive of Foge Oil Limited who was abducted on 5th December, in front of his house at Obiofia Nnewichi in Nnewi, Anambra state, while another businessman and Chief Executive officer of Iroko Group of Companies, Dozie Akudolu, was reportedly released after an alleged payment of N20 million to the abductors. Also, a case was reported in Benin involving a businessman, Omoruyi Oloton, who was kidnapped in his office, for a N200 million ransom. (Otabor 2012:9). Onu (2012:56) on 6th December 2012, reported the abduction of Raph Azolo, a businessman resident in Awka, Anambra state. And on 9th December 2012, Professor Kwamene Okonjo, mother of the Finance Minister, Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala was reportedly kidnapped for an initial One Billion Naira ransom (Osuji 2012:6). While on 10th December 2012, Mrs. Titilayo Rotimi, wife of the former Military Governor of the Western state, Gen. Oluwole Rotimi (rtd) was reportedly abducted on Ibadan-Ife Express way and N200 million ransom was demanded. (Oladele 2012:12). Also, on 17th December 2012, four South Koreans working for Hyundai Fabrication Company were reportedly kidnapped by gunmen on Okpoama Island, Brass Local Government Area of Bayelsa state. (The Nation 2012:63). And on 20th December, Miss Nkiruka Sylvanus, Nollywood actress and Special Assistant to the Imo state Governor on Public Affairs, was reportedly abducted in Owerri, Imo state. (Ndidi 2012:62). In summary, these are obviously a few out of the numerous tragedies that occurred during the 2012 yuletide in the country.

4. The Socio-Cultural Context of Yuletide Tragedies in Nigeria

The following are some socio-cultural factors that fuel the tragedies that are characteristic of yuletide in Nigeria:

4.1 The Culture of Celebration and Merry Making

There is this culture of celebration and merry making inherent in Nigerian cultural system. Everything calls for celebration in Nigeria even the death of loved ones. As Chukwu (1999:43) rightly observed “births, deaths, outings, house warming, arrival of friends, sons or daughters from abroad, success at business deals each and every one of these calls for celebration”. In fact, in most cases, it is culturally forbidden for one to avoid a celebration of something or event which culturally ought to be celebrated. Some people are in some cases compelled to borrow large

amount of money in order to fulfill this cultural obligation. Hence, Chukwu(1999:43) termed it "cultural obligation of sheer waste". This, for him, is because the culture does not even exonerate one on the basis of choice-that is whether to celebrate or not. It was this undue merriness of Nigerians that annoyed a columnist in The Nation's Daily News Paper, who wrote in his article titled "The Unbearable Lightness of the Nigerian Being" thus "everywhere you turn you encounter this sunny and rosy disposition, this remarkable capacity to refine and redefine pain and turn tragedy into a ridiculous farce. There are parties everywhere and every week. The dead are sent off with rousing pomp and panache. The newborn are welcomed with equal pageantry and cynical aplomb (Alamu 2012:3). And the more elaborate, lavishing and prodigious a celebration or party is, the better in social terms. This is the cultural life-style that is often carried to Christmas celebration in the country. No wonder, in preparation for the Christmas celebration in the country, some people tend to go extra mile to make illegitimate money that shall be lavished in celebrations and parties.

4.2 *Extended Family Relationship*

Unlike the Western cultures, a distinguishing characteristic of African /Nigerian culture is the practice of extended family relationship. It is a pattern of relationship, in which the characteristic interdependence of members of a nuclear family is extended to non-members, including relatives. In other words, it is a relationship in which a man is expected to take care of his immediate family (i.e. wife and children) as well as his father, mother, siblings and even in-laws. This care, of course, includes the provision of food, shelter and clothes. According to Chukwu (1999:43) "although there is some obvious beauty in everyone being his brother's or sister's keeper, such a burden makes budgeting impossible for the average Nigerian family". This burden however becomes heavier during the yuletide, in which one is expected to buy and cater for a long list of extended family members, in the face of the usual astronomic rise in prices of goods and services. This, to a great extent, explains why some Nigerians get involved in things that inflict pains on their fellow Nigerians , just to make more money to meet up with the financial demands, especially during the yuletide.

4.3 *Social Materialism*

Before now, it was not uncommon, to hear people say that good values rule the African and particularly Nigerian world as against the popular belief that money rules the world. At that time, people were respected, not because of their wealth and riches, but simply because of the good principles and values they upheld. The community was then, built on good social values like honesty, transparency, and hard work. It was believed that for one to succeed alongside the community, one must be upright, hardworking and honest in all his/her dealings. People were respected for bravery, the number of farm lands, yam bans, wives and children one has. And it was through hard work that all these could be acquired. A hardworking and honest man was held on a very high esteem unlike the rich, wealthy and dishonest man. Also, families were proud of their sons and daughters, not necessarily because of how rich they are, but because they have imbibed good values like respect for elders, hard work and truthfulness. In short, social relevance as of then was viewed through the lens of good value acquisition.

However, the reverse has become the case as material acquisitions have become the order of the day in Nigeria. Now, social relevance is viewed through the lens of material acquisition in the country. And, it is more pronounced during the yuletide seasons. As it has been noted, Nigerians prefer travelling to their respective homes to celebrate Christmas with families and relatives. But one cannot possibly travel home for Christmas without having made some money for oneself, families and relatives who always wait with high expectations. If not, one would be regarded as nonentity and socially irrelevant by families at home. No wonder, the yuletide always record tragedies in form of accidents, for divers (especially commercial drivers) who get involved in

reckless rush to make more money as well as kidnapping for ransom and armed robbery for those who take to crime in order to make quick money for Christmas celebrations. No doubt, these are done to meet the high social materialistic expectations in the country.

4.4 *Social Competition and Comparison*

Also, there is a social comparison and competition among Nigerians. It might be engaged consciously or unconsciously, but it seems everything is connected to the gregarious nature of man, who while in a social group or setting, would wish to be accorded due or equal social respect and relevance. In Nigeria, especially among the Eastern part of the country, it is often said "eme nyata ka emere ibia, obi adiya nma" (i.e. "if a child is favourably treated in the same way his fellow child was treated, he becomes happily satisfied). This is the understanding that is carried to social setting or relations, in which Mr. "A" would always want to be treated or get the same or more attention like Mr. "B". Likewise, in a situation where Mr. "A" gets, for instance, a big car, which has fetched him more social respect and relevance, Mr. "B" would try as much as possible to get the same or bigger car to get more social attention. This social competition, however, seems to be more pronounced during the yuletide in the country. During the yuletide, people work so hard or go extra mile, just to get the best cars, organized the best parties or wedding ceremonies, kill the fattest cow, wear the finest dress and so on. This is done just for the sake of social importance and relevance. Therefore, without doubt, this fuels crime, corruption, anti-social behaviours, traffic lawlessness and in fact, more tragedies during the yuletide in the country.

4.5 *Get Rich Quick Syndrome*

This is a social phenomenon that is common in Nigeria, especially among the youths. The Get-Rich-Quick syndrome implies a mental-disposition in which people consciously seek riches and wealth without readiness for hard work. It discourages hard work and industry as well as subverts financial principles, protocols and standards of life. Hence, it encourages fraudulence and criminality. This is where the problem lies, as this attitudinal orientation is against societal norms and values. This has particularly contributed to the high rate of corruption and other social vices in the country. Virtually everyone keeps looking for ways to "make it quick and fast". In fact, this syndrome seems to have become part and parcel of Nigerian social construction of reality. However, it seems to be more active among the youths, as many of them have taken to social vices like armed robbery, kidnapping for ransom, etc, in order to make quick money. This is because the crime of kidnapping for ransom, for instance, currently seems to be one, if not the most lucrative way of making quick huge money in the country. No wonder, there has always been astronomic increase in the rate of these crimes during each yuletide in Nigeria. This was evidenced in the immediate past year's yuletide, which was flooded with more cases of kidnapping for ransom and armed robbery compared to the first half of the year.

Some authors are of the view that this attitudinal orientation is alien to the core traditional Nigerian value system. They argue that it was a fall-out of the asymmetric western/African/Nigerian interaction and hegemonic influence. Specifically, they blame the introduction of monetized economy in Nigeria during the colonial era which replaced the "distributive and less competitive African (Nigerian traditional) economy. Hence, the quest for personal enrichment at all costs is now the order of the day"(Madukwe and Madukwe 2010:281). However it should be noted that a monetized economy is obviously an inevitable characteristic of a modern society and Nigeria is not an exception.

Be that as it may, the consequences of this social phenomenon are more pronounced during the yuletide in the country, as people prepare for Christmas celebration. Hence, some get involved in some fraudulent acts and criminality during this period in order to make quick money for Christmas celebration.

5. Recommendations

Therefore the following have been recommended to reduce the recurrent rate of these yuletide tragedies to the barest minimum in the country.

1. There should be a redefinition of social value and relevance in Nigerian society. That is, social relevance should cease to be viewed from the angle of material acquisition, but through the acquisition of good moral values and social principles.
2. There should be a review of the Extended Family Patterns of Relationship in Nigerian society. This should be done to give room, for a proper development of the individual nuclear Nigerian families. And to this effect, the government should take up the responsibility of funding the welfare of the Old and the Aging in the society, through an established Agency.
3. Finally, and very importantly, creation of job opportunities for the young members of the society should be prioritized. This will go a long way in reducing the rate of poverty in the country.

6. Conclusion

From the foregoing, the following could be deduced, one: that celebrations and festivities are indispensable part of Nigerian culture, and it seems the more elaborate a celebration is, the better in social terms. Secondly, the Nigerian society seems to have become a highly materialistic society with highly materialistic social expectations from its members. To be sure, there is no doubt that a society sets goals for its members and at the same time, set a legitimate path to achieving these goals. But, when these goals are lofty and out of proportion, it becomes a problem. Yet, when these legitimate paths of achieving these goals are not accessible by a larger number of the society, the problem becomes greater. This is because it has been observed that when people cannot access a legitimate means to their goals (which is also the societal goals) they become frustrated and would always resort to illegitimate means. This, according to a Sociological theory (Strain Theory) explains crime in the society. To say that this is true of Nigerian situation would be the same as stating the obvious. If not, why should a society have such lofty goals and expectations from its members, as have been seen in previous pages, yet there are no enough jobs for its youths and even the remuneration scheme of the few employed ones are nothing to write home about?

Therefore, considering these highly placed social expectations that always become more pronounced during the yuletide in the country, it will not be out of order, if it is said that it is the Nigerian society that inflict pains on themselves. They are the ones that push the commercial drivers into recklessness on the road and the youths into crime, all to make money in order to meet up with their outrageous expectations. However, if the few recommendations listed above, can be implemented, the rate of crime and accidents especially during the yuletide in the country, will be significantly reduced.

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