

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF CHRISTIAN FESTIVALS IN THE REDEEMED CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF GOD, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The Redeemed Christian church of God observes Christian festivals like most other churches, but the religious and socio-economic implications of these festivals for RCCG members differ from other denominations. This study, therefore, investigates Christian festivals observed by RCCG with a view to determining the social impact on their members in Nigeria. The researcher employed the historical method that systematically and objectively located, evaluated and synthesised to establish facts and draw conclusions concerning past events. Focus group, survey method, participant observation, interview method and questionnaire were deployed to get desired responses from the members of RCCG. The secondary sources included relevant books, journals, encyclopedias, tapes, magazines, and the internet. Quantitative data were obtained through structured interviews of church members, while three hundred copies of the questionnaire were administered in the camp. Data were subjected to qualitative analysis and percentages. The Redeemed Christian church of God observed the Annual Convention, Holy Ghost service and Holy Ghost Congress. All these festivals take place at the church redemption camp. These festivals have a social impact on the members of RCCG. On the social impact, 75% of the respondents said they are always looking forward to the time of the festivals as their social lives changed for the better. Furthermore, 87.7% of respondents confirmed that members came to meet new people to boost their businesses. 62.3% of respondents said members came for business ideas that would improve their lives.

Keywords: Christian festivals, socio-economic, impact, congress

Introduction

A festival is an event ordinarily celebrated by a community and centred on some characteristic aspect of that community and its religion or culture. Oxford Dictionary defines a festival as a series of performances of music, plays, films, etc... usually organised in the same place once a year.¹ Festivals are an expressive way to celebrate glorious heritage, culture, and tradition. They play a vital role in adding structure to our lives and connecting us without families and backgrounds². Christian festivals help people remember the story of Jesus's life. They are also times to thank God for His blessings and celebrate the saints. Christian festivals could be traced to the feasts and festivals of Israel in the Old Testament.

Leviticus 23:2 – Speak unto the children of Israel and say unto them, concerning the feast of the Lord, which ye shall proclaim to be holy convocations, ever these are my feast.

The Bible reveals that God appointed certain days of the year to be remembered and celebrated by the congregation of Israel. The word 'feast' comes from two Hebrew words that mean (Heb. Moaid) divinely appointed times, and the other (Heb. Weg) means festival from the rare, which means "to dance". There

were seven feasts that were observed annually in ancient Israel, and they were celebrated in this order: Passover, unleavened Bread, First Fruits, Pentecost, Trumpets, Atonement and Tabernacles. Only three were actual feasts: unleavened Bread, Pentecost and Tabernacles. The other four were appointed times. During the special times, they should remember great events with God. Three times per year, all male Israelites were to gather together during the feast of Pentecost and Tabernacles. This is referred to as the 'gathering on' convocation. After the exile, the Israelites began meeting together on the Sabbath day.

It is commonly believed among Christians that the first four feasts in the spring speak of the first coming of Jesus Christ (the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the beginning of the church), and the last three feasts in the fall speak of the second coming of Jesus. (The rapture, Israel receiving her messiah and the kingdom is set up on the earth). However, some Christian denominations and individuals do not attach grave importance to Christian festivals and, as such, do not observe them for various reasons. This disenchantment disposition about Christian festivals replete some scholars' works; for instance, David Pack asserts that the true origin of Christians could be traced to Pagan Culture and that all the various customs associated with it, such as craft giving, Father Christmas, Christmas gifts, Christmas tree, music and carol took their root from Roman customs that have no bearing with the Christian faith³. He opines that Christ is never present in the celebration tagged 'Christmas' as assumed by its celebrants. Therefore, he concludes that in 245 A.D, Origen of Alexandria drew reference from Leviticus 12:1-8 to discourage Christians from designating a day to commemorate the birth of Jesus⁴. According to him, going by the Bible records, it is only sinners who celebrated their birthdays and that such occasions resulted in the loss of lives. These were Pharaoh, who hanged Chief Baker (Gen. 40:20-22), and Herod, who beheaded John the Baptist (Mark 6:21-27). To further strengthen their position of non-observance of Christmas, they indicated that in 303 A.D, Arnobius intercepted the idea of celebrating the birthday of gods as ridiculous⁵. In addition to the above, Christmas is said to be commercialised and secularised in the contemporary time, making it lose its real significance. Therefore, it is regarded as a strategy employed by businessmen and women who promote it vigorously to increase their sales and maximise profit.

Coming from the same angle, Bede indicated that Easter derives its name from Easter, an Anglo-Saxon name of a Teutonic goddess of spring and fertility, which by implication means that it is by nature a pagan per cent to which Christians should distance themselves. Equally, the Easter tradition is regarded as a traditional catholic celebration beset with a drive for materialism, not sanctioned in the Bible for Christian participation and, therefore, becomes the tradition of men⁶. Regarding Harvest Thanksgiving, the God's Kingdom Society (GKS) argues that the festival is not a Christian institution, and as such, Christians are not commanded to celebrate it⁷. The Church said Christians should concern themselves not with material things but with things that have to do with the salvation of the righteous in the last days of the present evil world that is now running with terrific speed to its destruction.

Among the Nigeria Pentecostal churches, reference could be made to the redeemed Christian church, whose position of non-observance of Harvest Thanksgiving is clearly indicated in its policy statement. It states, "The Redeemed Christian church of God must not copy other churches worldwide, especially in their fundraising method through harvest,⁸ etc. This statement does not mean the church disregards all festivals in Christendom. Holy Communion, Baptism, and New Year services are highly esteemed.

Unlike the above disenchanted pontificated view, which attaches no serious importance to Christian festivals and opposes their observation in a way that seems to suggest that those observing them are neither spiritual nor have a sound understanding of the Bible teachings but are derailing from genuine Christianity, the Redeemed Christian Church of God, a Pentecostal Church, attaches great importance to

them and approves moral observance. Thus, ethically speaking, the debate of whether or not it is morally appropriate to observe Christian festivals polarises the Christian church.

The interest of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Christian festivals is not by nature esoteric but all-embracing in which all its ministers and members participate actively and enthusiastically. Every year, all Pastors, ministers, workers and members participate in three of such festivals (National convention, Holy Ghost Congress and Holy Ghost service) with great interest and enthusiasm and suggestions that they are being impacted through them, which we believe would not have been the case, if otherwise. This intense, enthusiastic interest of the congregation in the Christian festivals forms the basis of this work. It aims to assess how those festivals affect the social and spiritual lives of the ministers and members in Nigeria.

The common assumption among writers is that congregations benefit economically and religiously during Christian festivals, thereby giving the issue within the matrix of the priestly profession. Regardless of prevailing circumstances, is it true that congregations benefit socially during Christian festival(s)? Is it true that the Redeemed Christian Church of God does not celebrate Christmas and Easter festivals? How have the festivals in the church impacted the lives of the members and environs? Are there any adverse effects of such festivals?

Our determination to verify the truthfulness or otherwise of the above claim and the discovery of many factor(s) that could invalidate it, where possible, prompted this empirical study so as to determine the economic and religious effects of Christian festivals on members in Nigeria. The research investigates the Christian festivals observed by the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Nigeria, with the primary aim of discovering the interface between their observance and the social well-being of congregations in Nigeria. To facilitate the above primary objective, the following sub-objectives were also pursued.

1. To determine the social effect of these festivals on RCCG members.
2. To investigate if there are likely identified adverse social effects of these festivals on the above congregations who formed our research target, including factors that may be responsible for such.
3. To discover and suggest ways such adverse social effects could likely be cured to increase and sustain the positive benefits of the festivals on the affected Redeemed Christian Church of God.

Research Method

The work employed the historical method, which systematically and objectively locates, evaluates and synthesises evidence to establish facts and draw conclusions concerning past events. This method proves relevant because Christian festivals have historical roots, some of which we traced to the Old Testament days. The etymological knowledge of this becomes indispensable as one analyses issues generated in contemporary Christian festivals. In this bid, the researcher used documents that included a wide range of written and print materials recorded to transmit historical information on the origin, nature, and significance of Christian festivals. In the same vein, through this method, the research will look into historical documentation on the Redeemed Christian Church of God, particularly its work in Nigeria.

The employed focus group method, in which a small group of people were brought together in the Redemption Camp for in-depth discussions on the impact of Christian festivals on the congregation and a set of questions relevant as to how the selected Christian festivals affect the congregation was used. A set of questions relevant to the work, especially how the selected Christian festivals affect the social dispositions of congregations in Nigeria, was designed with a moderator taking notes and guiding the discussion process. This afforded us a vantage point whereby we had panoramic contributions, unlike what

we obtained in one-to-one interviews. Also, we will be able to see things from different points based on the discussants' various perspectives.

In the research work method, we will be involved in a deliberate search for truth. Participation observation is a data collection system whereby the researcher joins the everyday routine of those he wishes to study. We use the method to avoid limitations that could come through self-report. Securest, for example, has argued that social attitudes are often based on the set given socially desirable response⁹.

The researcher used in-depth interviews to gather relevant information from the respondents. We will ask specific and carefully worded questions to elicit information aimed at knowing how familiar each interviewee is with the impact of the selected festivals on the members and the bearing of this on the social well-being of ministers, members and neighbours. Coley suggests that in order to get the best from the interview, we need a conducive environment, coupled with the construction of our questions in a way that will induce ease in the respondents and give room for conversational flow¹

Religious Festivals

Religious festivals are those celebrated to God or the deities in a religion. It is also a time of particular importance marked by the adherents of a religion. It is not possible to separate the religion of people and their culture as the two are interwoven. Each culture and religion has festivals which showcase its history and culture. Religious festivals are important in Nigeria. It is known to renew the life of a community; it brings the people together and strengthens their unity and cohesion. Religious and social values are repeated and renewed activities such as the display of arts, music, dance, drama, and oral communication. A religious festival is seen as a way to communicate with the spirit world, keep the human and spiritual world healthy, and receive specific instruction from the spirit world to keep the human world safe. Prayer, music, and dancing enhance the effectiveness of the festival. Celebration, offerings, and specific programs to ascertain the relationship between the Supreme Being, superhumanity, and humanity. Religious activities during the festival play an important part and give the participants insight about themselves and their connection to the festival.

Most Christians follow a cycle of annual festivals linked to the life of Jesus: Advent prepares for the coming of Jesus; Christmas celebrates his birth; Epiphany celebrates his manifestation as God incarnate; Lent, which begins on Ash Wednesday, is a time for preparation and repentance; Palm Sunday recalls Jesus' entry into Jerusalem just before his death, Maundy Thursday his last meal with his followers, and Good Friday his crucifixion; Easter celebrates Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Social Economic Impact of the selected Christian festivals on the members of RCCG

This attempt was made to discuss how the selected Christian festivals impact RCCG members in Nigeria. Our approach to this has not undermined how such impact symbiotically relates to their pastors, because of the interconnectivity between what affects the former and the latter, especially during such festivals.

Christian festivals significantly impact individual Christians, families, and the community. This underscores their importance to the pastors since the clergy are also individual Christians with their own families and constituting a part of the community where they are. This, therefore, explains a reason for the continuous relevance of Christian festivals, especially in RCCG. Among the areas in which their impacts are felt on members in our research setting as we gathered in our research, the following are worth mentioning:

Christian festivals generate spiritual formation and growth of the Christians, especially the RCCG members. This spiritual function means they have incorporeal and sacred effects on the Christian community, particularly the pastors. This spiritual enrichment is a necessary part of festivals, whereby the needs of man that are not terrestrial, physical or corporeal are met. A human being is a creature that consists not only of the corporeal or physical entity but also of the spiritual entity, whose need, if not met, would hinder his complete fulfilment.

Every human being, including each pastor, possesses a spiritual need that is as fundamental as the need for food. True spiritual fulfilment is an aspect of our spiritual need that is as vital as our physical need for food. Therefore, living by God's standard elevates one's life and contributes to real peace of mind since it spares us from the plague of a guilty conscience. Jesus says, "Man must not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4).

It is a fact that there is a craving in man, a longing, whose need could only be met spiritually. This issue is also related to the intellectual and higher endowment of man's mind, making him highly formed and reformed, as the case may be, in thought or feeling. The proper understanding of this tendency in man-made Robertson says: ... the connection between Christ and us is not of the body that passes, but of the spirit which endures. It is spiritual and, in such a connection, it may be seriously perverted by the interference of sense and bodily sensation, and on the whole, it is well that our spirit should be allowed to choose its eternal friendship and alliance by what is specially and exclusively its own so that the choice cannot be mistaken as the choice sometimes is when there is a mixture of physical and spiritual attractiveness which grants assurance of a blessed festival.

Prayers, supplication, and prophecies made throughout the festivals centred on protection from death and evil occurrences guarantee that the divine has spoken. It is sealed, and the people look forward to the year with this confidence. The blessings, precautions, and instructions given during the festival also create a belief in the presence of the divine, which calls for a spiritual uplifting of the people.

There is always a shift from the profane to the sacred, including the festival's timing. The main Levite involved in the festival is consecrated to make the spiritual connection to the divine easy. The constant fasting and prayer, the no sex, no lies telling, and confession of sins committed (upright living) that preceded the festival reflect the moral impact of the festival and as well prepare the people for an experience with the divine, which in turn is fully manifested on the festival grand finale.

Christian festivals assist in boosting the morale of the Christians, especially the RCCG members in Nigeria. The presence of stress, distress, anguish, depression, fear and the like, such that characterised some pastors' lives before the occurrence of Christmas, explicates the expediency of this role.

One of the ways in which Christian festivals boost members' morale, according to the contributions of our focus group's discussants, is the interaction that occurs among people who participate in the festivals. At such times, according to our respondents, the scenario of tranquillity and companionship becomes enhanced in place of loneliness and individualistic tendencies. Such interactions heal the pains people, especially the pastors, had before the time of each festival.

According to members interviewed, the sermons delivered by the General Overseer and invited ministers during festivals imbue in them psychological stability. For instance, sermons that address the reality of

God's love, which is the focal point of the convention message, make members know that they are in God's caring hands amid their life's problems, frustrations and challenging confrontations. Some of the pastors who constituted a part of our respondents disclosed that this positive disposition of the membership directly aids their pastoral duty because the commitment and dedication it kindles in the members affect the psychological well-being of each member concerned.

Added to the above, before the coming of each festival, our investigation revealed that some pastors and their members were facing depression, stress, and so on, about their survival as a result of insecurity arising from their poverty or social crisis in the community. However, at this festival, people gather and relate together. Those with whom they have not been relating before come to celebrate with them, and so they gain courage and confidence and develop positive thinking and rapport among neighbours. The atmosphere of friendliness generated in this process helps in instilling cordiality. This gives rise to peaceful co-existence.

Annual convention, Holy Ghost congress and Holy Ghost service assist in reuniting Christian families of RCCG members in Nigeria. People from different states in Nigeria and abroad will travel to the camp. The festivals bring the reunion of friends and brethren they have not seen for a year or so together.

Apart from aiding the reunion of the immediate family members, Christian festivals also assist RCCG members in integrating better into their larger community. By this, we mean such festivals assist in combining and coordinating separate and diverse elements or units of society into a unified whole. In other words, their conduct brings about the unification and mutual adjustment of diverse groups of society into a relatively coordinated and harmonious culture.

This role of Christian festivals is obviously indispensable, considering the complexity of our contemporary society, whose trend tends to disintegrate rather than integrate people into unified and harmonious relationships. According to those who participated in the FGD, the interaction process is an active means whereby each of our festivals of interest articulates social integration.

An undeniable fact, attested to by our respondents, whereby the articulation of social integration occurs during Christian festivals is the coming together of people of different tribes and cultures for celebration. For instance, Christmas brings people of different cultures together as a unified whole for a harmonious and peaceful relationship. On such occasions, interaction occurs with people who see themselves as members of the same community, regardless of their cultural and status differences.

The research design and techniques adopted to achieve the study objectives were enunciated in this chapter. Specifically, our methodology was designed primarily to improve the reliability and validity of the data generated.

The specific research methods used in this design are inferences drawn from empirical information gathered through In-depth interviews, personal observations, questionnaires, and Focus Group Discussions. Adopting this research design has significantly helped generate quantitative and qualitative data.

Findings

The researcher found out through the respondents that the Christian festivals in the Redeemed Christian Church of God have a socio-economic impact on the lives of the members. When asked whether they had

come to make a connection during the festival, 75% of respondents answered affirmatively, while 20% said they were there for social activities, and 5% were undecided. This shows they will be a part of it if people get what can fetch them money during the festivals. 62.3% of respondents agreed that members come to Christian festivals to look for jobs.

The respondents also said people come for the festivals to get jobs. During the festivals, there are temporary jobs for members to do.

Conclusion

The Redeemed Christian of God and, of course, Churches in Nigeria as a whole have the opportunity to increase the impact generated by Christian festivals on its members where the above-proffered suggestions are implemented. This will boost the church's expansion.

Recommendations

Since there is no perfect system anywhere in the world, the researcher recommends these solutions to challenges observed while carrying out this research.

1. The installation of the mast can overcome the poor network that always occurs during the festivals to improve the network.
2. Also, the mission should increase the security personnel and installation of more CCTV cameras to curb the menace of theft in the camp.
3. Furthermore, The Redeemed Christian of God should make provisions for more accommodations as the number of hostels is insufficient for members during the festivals.

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