

## **Durbar Festival in Ilorin Emirate: A Metaphor for Peaceful Co-Existence**

**Rotimi Gbenga (Ph. D)**

*Assistant Director, Curatorial*

*National Commission for Museums and Monuments*

*Phone Number: 08060060668*

*Email: rotimiegbenga@gmail.com*

### **Abstract**

*This study examines intrinsic cultural heritage in Ilorin Durbar festival. The study descriptively analyses the festival with focus on the subsisting people's patrimonies that includes music, dances, costumes and the horses as show-cased in the durbar. The aim of the study is to examine how Durbar festival in Ilorin promotes peaceful co-existence. Among others, the objective of the study is to assess the impact of Ilorin Durbar festival on fostering peaceful co-existence among different ethnic groups in Ilorin. The modern Ilorin was constituted in 1807 by Shehu Alimi and reconstituted into an Emirate by Oba Abdulsalami who eventually got the territory integrated into the Sokoto Caliphate in 1828 ( Jimoh 1994, p.). The Emirate is a medley of many cultures which show-case different cultural heritages. The study noted that Durbar festival is characterised with social-economic, religious and political activities. The findings of research revealed that: Indigenes and few non-indigenes participated in the festival. Also, Women actively participated in the festival as Islam allowed. The people in the Emirate exhibited love and understanding for one another. The Emir is being regarded and revered as the traditional and spiritual head of Ilorin Emirate. The study concluded that for any society to develop meaningfully in a diverse cultural environment there must be a collective effort at promoting people's cultural heritage.*

**217 Words**

**Keywords:** Durbar, Festival, Peaceful-co-existence

### **Introduction**

This study examines intrinsic cultural heritage in Durbar with particular attention on the restructured Ilorin Durbar festival. The aim of the study is to examine how Durbar festival in Ilorin promotes peaceful co-existence. The objectives of the study are: (i) to examine the impact of Ilorin Durbar festival on fostering peaceful co-existence among different ethnic groups in Ilorin. (ii). To assess the level of participation by the people in Ilorin Emirate and (iii) to examine the prospect of the festival and draw the conclusion. The study employs descriptive analysis method in examining the festival with focus on the subsisting people's patrimonies that includes music, dances, costumes and the horses as show-cased in the durbar.

The modern Ilorin was constituted in 1807 by Shehu Alimi. Consequently, the town was reconstituted into an Emirate by Oba Abdulsalami who eventually got the territory integrated into the Sokoto Caliphate in 1828 (Jimoh, 1994). Presently, the Emirate is geographically constituted by five Local Government Areas that comprises: Ilorin West; Ilorin South; Ilorin East; Asa and Moro Local Government Areas. The Emirate is a medley of many cultures which show-case different cultural heritages that are being nurtured by the people and traditional institution leadership. However, the strength and weakness of Ilorin people lies in their diverse descent. This was attested to by Jimoh (1994.) when he stated that: “It was a massive influx of people of assorted cultural background, after Islamic governance had been firmly established, that conditioned the demographic size, composition and texture of Ilorin” which according to him, resulted to ethnic and cultural heterogeneity that is subsisting under “Islamic influence that could be considered to be the common denominator and the only unifying factor which further facilitated inter-mingling, socialization and integration among the various peoples.” Jimoh’s submission find credence in the earlier work by Johnson (1921, p.) who also stated that people’s movement into Ilorin was “increasing in number and in rapacity.” Despite the heterogeneity nature of Ilorin Township and political, social and economical challenges in Nigeria; Ilorin remains one of the most peaceful State capitals in Nigeria.

Every individuals, groups and societies from primordial do have a special medium through which they commune with the creator and this medium is commonly referred to as religion. Instinctively, “religion as a belief can be subjectively and objectively regarded”. (Arinze1978, p.8). Therefore, subjectively, religion could be “the consciousness of one’s dependence on a transcendent being and the tendency to worship him.” And objectively, “religion is the body of truths, laws and rites by which man is subordinated to the transcendent being.”(Arinze 1978, p. 11). This notion of religion encapsulates the Ilorin people’s conception of religion and beliefs which is highly influenced by Islam. Shedding light on his people’s worldview, the Emir of Ilorin, Alhaji Dr. Ibrahim Zulu Gambari often states that, his people worships Supreme Being (Allah) through prophet Mohammed (S.A.W.) who serves as the intercessor between the purity (God) and the impious (people). For the record, as been recorded in 1990 census, 98 percent of Ilorin indigenes are Muslims.

There are many festivals across Nigeria, ranging from social to religious and political embedded ones. However, as much as different scholars from different academic fields such as Gregory, R. (2008), Ogunba, O. (1978), Buratai, U. (1999) and Cole, H. M. (2000) did try to classify festival, they only succeeded in identifying the point of divergence and convergence because a parallel classification is a difficult one to do. Anthropologically, festival can be described as an act of showcasing the intrinsic value of cultural heritage of a given people

through the media of creative arts such as crafts and performances which its exhibits take the on-lookers to the state of catharsis; religion, that includes beliefs and ritual; folklore and language with which people communicate and socialise. As credence to this, at different period of human developments, festival has been described differently by various scholars. For instance, Cole (2000, p.339) holistically described festival as he stated that:

A festival is a relatively rare climatic event in the life of any community. It is bounded by a definite beginning and end, and is unified thereby, as well as in being set apart from and above daily life. Its structure is built up on a core or armature of ritual. The festival brings about a suspension of ordinary time, a transformation of ordinary space, a formalization of ordinary behaviour. It is as if a community becomes a stage set and its people actors with a battery of seldom-seen props and costumes—the festival is an elaborated and stylized phenomenon which far surpasses ritual necessity. It often becomes the social, ritual and political apotheosis of community life in a year. At festival time one level of reality—the common and everyday—gives way to another, a more intense, symbolic and expressive level of reality.

Also, King (2008, p.8) opined that this cultural heritage “comprises a big, complex, intricate mosaic of things and institutions and values, beliefs and perceptions, customs and traditions, symbols and social structures.” Apart from general overview, another scholar, Ogunba (1978, p.13) broadly describes festival within the purview of his cultural environment when he posited that: “A festival is an indigenous cultural institution, an art form culturally nurtured on the African soil with distinct features, and a framework for coordinating virtually all art forms of the community.” Speaking further, Ogunba emphasises that: Festival “expresses a relish of life and preference for this life rather than the life to come, and this is expressed in the stories and myths performed which each has a particular dramatic style.” We therefore infer that, these scholars’ position succinctly described what Durbar festival in Ilorin Emirate represents. That is, the festival exhibits religion belief and all other cultural heritage of the people. Therefore, the story of Durbar is the story of human kind because in its essential form, it belongs to a given people, age or culture. In view of the above exposition on festival from different scholars, there is a need to categorise festivals. However, a clear-cut categorisation may not be possible because all share common features. For this exercise, we may categorise them into three types (i) Religious festival (ii) Social festival and (iii) Political festival.

### **Religious Festival**

Religious festivals are the festivals put in place by a given people to celebrate a superior power that controls affairs of man spiritually. This superior power was

accurately described by Frazer (1983, p.65) as “appropriation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the courses of nature and human life.” Religious festivals are not distinctively religious but most times display traits of social or political festivals. However, religious activities dominate the event. Examples are the Sango festival among the Ede people of Osun state in the Western part of Nigeria. The festival is in honour of Sango the god of thunder. The festival takes place every year towards the end of rainy season. It spans a period of seven days. It is characterised with ritual worships, musical and dance performances by the worshippers, with the community and tourists as spectators. There is also Egungun Ofiro festival among Obo people of Kwara state. Ofiro comes out after ritual worships. Ofiro ushers in the beginning of Egungun festival that involves other smaller egungun that entertains the spectators. The festival lasted for seven days in every month of December.

### **Social Festival**

Social festivals can be described as festive activities, either formal or informal, put together by a group of people, associations, communities or government in order to bring together people of common or diverse cultures in celebration of humanity (life). Sometimes, these festivals may display or exhibit the traits or elements of either religious or political festival, and in some cases it depends on what the observer can see. Importantly, social festivals entertain and educate the audience. Examples are Argungun festival of Argungun people of Kebbi state, National Festival of Arts and Culture (NAFEST) of Nigeria and Aribidara festival of Ogbomosho in Oyo state.

Argungun festival is celebrated either yearly or when it is appropriate, but certainly not during the rainy season. It is a social festival among the Argungun people of Kebbi State of Northern Nigeria. It is a celebration of people’s cultural aesthetics and values, climaxed with a fishing competition that usually attracts prizes for winners. It is a big festival that always attracts tourists.

NAFEST is a national festival in Nigeria where people’s cultural heritages and traditions are celebrated. According to Jahman Anikulapo in *The Guardian Newspaper* of 16<sup>th</sup> August, 2002: “The festival had begun in 1970 as an initiative of a group of young Nigerian culture workers and intelligentsia who, moved by a patriotic zeal, thought that the pains, sorrow and tensions unleashed on the national psyche by the 30 months (1967 - 70) civil war could be assuaged through the balm of artistic expression steeped in the divergent peoples of the country.” From the reasons given for the birth of the festival, we can infer that NAFEST is a socio- political event put in place by the Federal Government of Nigeria to re-integrate Nigerians after the sordid civil war to

promote peaceful co-existence and harmony among the different ethnic nationalities that constitutes Nigeria.

### **Political Festivals**

Political festivals are festivals that celebrate the political prowess, exploits or wellbeing of a group of people in a given community. These festivals are usually put in place to appraise the social, economic and political prevailing situation of a given people in comparison to the past experience in order to make adjustments where necessary and plan for the future. These festivals are politically inclined, but we cannot rule out the elements of social and religious under tones that are visible in uniting the participants as a people with common destiny. Government usually takes part in the organisation of these festivals. A good example is “Durbar” festival in the Northern part of Nigeria.

Durbar festival, “is a performance of power in the Northern Nigeria.” (Umar, Buratai. 1999, p.89). Durbar is the celebration of history, with the re-enactment of the pre-colonial military power of the Northern region of Nigeria before the advent of the colonial masters that amalgamated the Northern with the Southern parts of Nigeria in 1914. As political as Durbar is, it is also referred to by Buratai (1999, p. 104) as, “a social organisation of the emirate society”. However, it is said to have religious connotations as well from its origin, which is characterized with ritual court arts especially the martial art displays associated with the “Bilad Al-Sudan”. In Bornu of former Bornu empire, for example, ritual display in Durbar went by the twin names “Bata and Fawur” and “Barga and Askar”. (Umar, Buratai 1999, p. 109).

We can deduce from the efforts to classify festivals into different types that festivals are not easily classified into distinctive types. This summation is applicable to all traditional festivals. This is so because they are activities or performances that celebrate the totality of human experiences that connotes social, economical, religious and political well-being, with one of these playing a prominent role and the others complementing interchangeably at a given occasion. Therefore, traditional festivals are celebration of people’s cultural heritages.

### **Historical Overview of Durbar**

Historically, Apter (2000, p.214) stated that “British colonial officers invented the tradition of Durbar first in Victorian India and later deploy in West Africa, particularly in Northern Nigeria.” In line with Apter’s assertion, Sanusi (2016, p.16) also claimed that Durbar was “introduced to Kano about 500 years ago by Sarki Muhammed Rumfa of Kano in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century as a demonstration of military might—it can be said that Sarki Muhammed Rumfa formalized it as part

of the readiness of his forces before going into battle. However, Labadibi (2016, p.24) has different date as he also observed that: “In Nigeria the Durbar dates back to the late 200years when horses were used in warfare to protect the Emirate. Each noble household was expected to defend the Emirate by forming a regiment.” In spite of different account of dating, “the fear of expansionist tendencies by neighbours and other groups necessitated the maintenance of a strong standing army for both defensive and offensive purposes. (Ododo 2016, p.24). Speaking further, Ododo (2016, p.24) emphasised that: “Every Northern Emirate used to have a standing military formation to defend towns, districts and wage wars against weaker States. A common component of such military formations was the Calvary which was suitable for warfare in the Savannah. To ascertain the war readiness of the standing army, the Emir used to invite the war lords with their regiments once or twice in a year for assessment. This military parade for assessment is referred to today as the Durbar”.

Consequently, as a result of Fulani conquest of Kano and introduction of Islam as a State religion, the Durbar apart from its initial martial use metamorphosed to become important event in Eids’ (Fitr and Kabir) celebrations. It also came to reflect the singular sense of unity between the community, Emir and his representatives in the districts. Eventually, the introduction of colonial administration in Nigeria greatly undermined the authority of the Emirs and Durbar was reduced to a mere socio-cultural event staged during the Sallah, the installation of a new Sarki, other court official, at the visit of dignitaries. (Sanusi 2016, p. 20) Consequent upon this, Durbar has developed to become a carnival as people from all parts of the country and abroad come to watch the performances.

As much as horses are major ridding animal for the Durbar, camels too could be used as it was attested to by the Emir of Kano, Alhaji Sanusi Muhammad when he stated that: “Last year, during a special Durbar, after my return to Nigeria from Hajj, I rode on a camel called “tagwa” in Hausa language. He also recalled that, Sanusi (1), who happened to be his grandfather in 1956, rode a “tagwa” for a Durbar when Queen Elizabeth (11) visited Nigeria. Today, Durbar has transformed from a martial art to assume a status of an international carnival which boosts cultural diplomacy. (Sanusi 2016, p.21).

Durbar festival is strictly men affairs. This chauvinistic tendency was underscored by Buratai (2000, p.16) when he described Durbar as “a performance of power in the Northern region.” Apart from this sentiment, Durbar is the celebration of history, characterised with the re-enactment of great events in the life of the people, especially, the military prowess and crusades. However, as political as Durbar is, Buratai (2000, p.16) also refers to it as a “social organisation of the Emirate society” which also accommodates women to play a limited role as religiously allowed.

### **Durbar in Ilorin**

Registration of principal participants and invitation of different personalities by the organisers began long before the durbar day. Durbar in Ilorin is held every second day of Eid-ul-Adha. The organising committee for the first reformed durbar in 2018 tagged the festival as: "Ilorin 2018 Grand Durbar." The appearance of the Emir immediately signaled official opening of the festival. The venue of the festival is the frontage of Emir's palace and by extension, Ilorin Township as performance arena where participants have fun-fare, characterised with pulsating drumming and trumpeting from the royal bard and other traditional musical ensembles. It is one day event that involve thousand of participants that includes the indigenes and non indigenes. At the festival arena and Ilorin township horse riders are seen gallivanting on elegantly costumed stallion-like horses. The horse racers are clad in traditional costumes such as: Lawani, fila Aburo, Alikimba, fila tajia, sanyan clothe and body adornments that reveal their social, economic and political status in the society. They entertained the spectators with their performances as they exhibit their skills and people appreciated them with encomiums and different gifts.



Ilorin Durbar, 2023 - Photo Source: The Researcher



*The Durbar Procession moves around Ilorin Metropolis in 2022  
Photo Source: The Researcher:*



Emir of Ilorin in Durbar's Procession, 2022

Photo Source: The researcher.

As part of the festival, Emir led a procession through Ilorin Township with his retinues that included: Balogun Fulani, Balogun Gambari, Balogun Ajikobi, Balogun Alanamun, Magaji Are, other chiefs and the people. The tour of Ilorin Township by the Emir was regarded by some people as a test of popularity and acceptance for the Emir. Accordingly, the tour afforded the Emir yet another opportunity to renew the bond between him and his people. He was not disappointed as people in thousands trooped out, lined the streets in different traditional attires to exhibits and affirm their unflinching love and loyalty to the Emir.



Ilorin Women at the Durbar 2022

Photo Source: The Researcher -



Performers re-enacting Jihad War at the Durbar, 2023

Photo Source: The Researcher

This synergy becomes necessary if Ilorin must continue to witness meaningful social, economic and political development towards well being of the people that resides in Ilorin and Kwara State as a whole. The procession was of great festivities which include royal trumpeting and drumming to entertain the teeming crowd that lined the streets to pay homage to their King who was clad in royal costume and rode in his Russian-like Troika-chariot. It was a spectacle to behold as people have their fun. Music in Ilorin durbar festival is a metaphor for historical, religious, sociological and political repository of Ilorin people. It treads the line of thought of Blacking (1973, p.60) who posits that: “Music is a product of the behaviour of human groups whether formal or informal.” In content and context, Ilorin music is didactic; it helps in highlighting the intrinsic value of the festival to the people because it embodies imagery, symbolism and metaphors that evoke catharsis.

#### **Importance of Durbar to Ilorin People**

- i. The Durbar gives the people of the Emirate the opportunity to see the Emir physically as he rejoices with them at this period. Importantly, people witnessed unity of purpose as Kwara State Governor and other political, religion and traditional Chiefs rode horse with the Emir of Ilorin at the 2023 Durbar festival.
- ii. The Durbar is the window through which the on-lookers experience the social, religion and political apotheosis of Ilorin Emirate.

- iii. The Durbar also represents the intrinsic values of Ilorin people's cultural heritage.
- iv. The Durbar contains the repertoire of people's customs and traditions.
- v. The Durbar embodies all forms of creative arts to entertain the whole community.
- vi. The Durbar helps in promoting and preserving people's cultural heritage
- vii. The Durbar boost economic activities at this period
- viii. The Durbar period affords the Emir the opportunity to assess the state of relationship between him and his subjects and when necessary make amendments.

### **Findings**

- i. Most indigenes and few non-indigenes participated in the festival
- ii. Indigenes and other sponsors were financially responsible for the organisation and management of the festival
- iii. Neighbouring communities as guests participated in the festival
- iv. Women actively participated in the festival as Islam allowed
- v. Federal, State, Local governments and Vigilante groups provided security at the venues of the festival.
- vi. The people in the Emirate exhibited love and understanding for one another.
- vii. The Emir is being regarded and revered as the traditional and spiritual head of Ilorin Emirate.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, for any society to witness meaningful human development there must be concerted efforts towards promoting people's cultural heritage. Notably, since the bells of newly invigorated durbar started in Ilorin in 2018, the good cause has prospered and advanced as witnessed in 2019, 2022, 2023 and 2024 episodes. We commend the Ilorin durbar organising committee members for the administration and management of the festival. What remains now is for the Emirate to keep one another strong and focused on peaceful co-existence of the people and the communities that constitute the Emirate. There is also dire need to renew our commitments to our collective future. Love, care and tolerance must not be compromised in our communities. All these become necessary if we as a people must experience meaningful human developments.

### **Recommendations**

- i. The venue should be moved to a more spacious arena to accommodate more participants.
- ii. The Durbar should be made more attractive to bring more tourists to the state

- iii. The study also recommends that the Durbar should be given more publicity to attract the public participation.
- iv. People should be allowed to construct make-shift shops to display different items to sell to the participants as this will boost economic activities in the state
- v. The two tiers of government, State and Local government should participate logistically and financially in the organisation of the Durbar for its credibility and sustainability
- vi. Simultaneous transmission of the durbar on television stations should be carried out to reach more people

## References

- Anikulapo, Jahman. Cultural diversity: Tool for development in *The Guardian Newspaper* of 16<sup>th</sup> August, 2002 p.34
- Apter, D.. (2016). Durbar performances. In Adeniyi, T. O; Safiya, I. Y. Sule, S. Abdullah, D. A. M. and Denja, A.; Igbazua, M. N. Eds. *Durbar in Northern Nigeria*. Lagos: Art Heritage Limited.
- Arinze, F. (1970). Sacrifice in Ibo religion. Ibadan: University press
- Blacking, J. (1973). *How musical is man?* London: Faber and Faber
- Buratai, U. (2000). Arts Administration and Cultural Diplomacy in Nigeria: Reflection on cultural, political and national image in the global process. In *Nigeria Theatre Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 2. Lagos: Dat and Partners Logistic Limited.
- Cole, H. M. (2002). The art of festival in Ghana. In Frances H. Ed. *Performance arts in Africa*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Frazer, G. (1983). *The golden bough: A study in magic and religion*. London: Macmillan.
- Ilorin Emirate 2018/2019 Grand Durbar Committee Members
- Jimoh, L.A.K. (1994). *Ilorin: The journey so far*. Ilorin: L.A.K. Jimoh, publisher
- Johnson, S. (2009). *The history of Yoruba*. Lagos: CSS Bookshop Limited
- King, F. T. (2008). *Cultural resource and law practice*. New York: Altamira Press.
- Mohammad, R. I. (2016). Political, social and functional relevance of Durbar. In Adeniyi, T. O; Safiya, I. Y. Sule, S. Abdullah, D. A. M. and Denja, A.; Igbazua, M. N. Eds. *Durbar in Northern Nigeria*. Lagos: Art Heritage Limited
- National Population Commission of Nigeria. Retrieved from [www.onlinigeria.com](http://www.onlinigeria.com)
- Ododo, E. S. (2016). Performance structure and the theatrical action of Durbar. In Adeniyi, T. O; Safiya, I. Y. Sule, S. Abdullah, D. A. M. and Denja, A.; Igbazua, M. N. Eds. *Durbar in Northern Nigeria*. Lagos: Art Heritage Limited.
- Ogunba, O. (1978). Theatre in Nigeria. In *presence Africaine*, No.58.