

AN APPRAISAL OF THE 2017 ART AND CRAFT EXHIBITION IN ABUJA, NIGERIA

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Abstract

It lies in the power of arts and crafts to honour the elusive but real value of ordinary life. Art teaches us to be more just towards ourselves and the world around us as we endeavor to make the best of our circumstances. Giving a voice to the politically and socially downtrodden, arts and crafts play the vital role of creating social change by exposing propaganda and censorship of the ruling power-base. Through its creative imagination and ingenious rebirth, arts and crafts tell a story that has the power to alter and positively influence people's perspectives and opinions while also instilling values and change that benefit all, no matter how our backgrounds or beliefs may differ. This paper addresses the theme of arts and crafts for change which was seen from the appraisal of the arts and crafts Expo in Abuja, Nigeria.

Key Words: Appraisal, Art, Craft, Expo, Benefit, Exhibition

Introduction

The greatest contribution Africa has made to world civilization is perhaps in the area of the arts and crafts. Yet not much is known of this till the turn of this century, (Egonwa, 2005). The major concern of this paper is to provide the reader with the knowledge of the place of arts and crafts in the 21st century.

Janetta and Robert (2002) state that, "art works open doors to the past especially to the values and belief system from which those art works sprang. They also tell us about human attitude, feelings, about ideas and ideals that continue to have value today".

Ekechukwu and Onyeabo (2007) opine that, local craft industries abound in Nigeria, and these industries, which are the outward and visible symbol of the people's cultural heritage, can be found in every nook and cranny of the country.

The local crafts industries in Nigeria include pottery, wood and ivory carvings, leather works, blacksmithing, cloth, mat and grass cane, weaving, brass and glass works, calabash design and dyeing.

A new lease of life was brought by the staging of the African Arts and Craft Exhibition (AFAC) under the auspices of the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC) under the theme 'Nigerian Crafts: The untapped treasure'. The 10th edition of the African Arts and Craft Exhibition (AFAC) 2017 held at the Art and Craft Village in the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. It turned out to be apt judging by the mission of the organisers of the event. The National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC), according to the Director General, Otunba Olusegun Runsewe, is poised to give new impetus to the country's art and craft, thereby giving a lift to cultural tourism. For three weeks, the yearly arts and crafts fiesta opened a window to Nigeria's highly publicised diverse and rich art troves with a total of 18 states and organisations across the country exhibiting some of the unique arts, crafts and culture of their people.

The international community was not left out, with a total number of nine countries from Africa partaking in the festival, which drew the attention of the public to the village square to feast on the savoury meals and objects by the exhibitors. Historically, AFAC, which Runsewe said has now been renamed International Arts and Crafts (INAC) Expo, to reflect the international angle to the content of the repackaged exhibition, set up in 2008, was influenced by "the desire to recapture the essence of this industry and re-enact its wealth creation potential with a set of objectives, which primarily was the promotion of Nigeria cultural tourism through its arts and crafts. Determined to beat a path away from the usual pattern of staging the festival, which

many then made it less attractive and fascinating for the public, Runsewe introduced new elements to the event, which many said led to its successful end in 2017.

The entertainment segment also received a boost with a number of musical acts and cultural troupes entertaining the people while culinary tourism was also enhanced with a wide variety of delicacies on offer for the people. A carnival-like atmosphere prevailed through the duration of the festival especially on the closing day September 17, 2017 which saw a lot of visitors and important personalities in attendance. The chairperson was the Head of Service of the Federation (HOSF), Mrs. Winifred Ekanem Oyo-Ita and the Governor of Kogi State, Yahaya Bello, who was represented by the Secretary to the State Government, Mrs. Folashade Arike Ayoade, as well as a host of other important personalities. The list range from Senator Smart Adeyemi, former Chief Justice of Nigeria, Alfa Belgore, former Director General of NCAC, Madugu to Tom Adaba, all of whom applauded the NCAC Director General for the creative manner he packaged the festival, and the appreciable number of countries and states, including the general public that attended the event. In his closing remarks, Runsewe commented over the success of the event, insisting that “this year’s AFAC stands out as clearly surpassing all the previous editions in that we have recorded tremendous improvement in infrastructure development and in content. He further remarked thus,

“Undoubtedly, AFAC 2017 with the theme: ‘Nigeria Craft: Untapped treasure’, has achieved its objectives. We appreciate the various commendations that we have received in confirmation of this. We would however, not rest on our oars, until we realise our vision of making the expo the best in Africa and one of the best in the world”

There were commendations by a number of the exhibitors and visitors to the fair, who all scored the DG of NCAC highly for the new spirit and uplift given to the festival and his personal involvement in seeing to the seamless package and success of the event.

According to Mrs. Grace Wunmi Adekunle, one of the exhibitors and trainers for the skill acquisition section,

“The arrangement was very good because a lot of people benefitted from it. I am very satisfied and really appreciate what they did because the free skill acquisition added colours to the programme and a lot of people appreciated it.”

While on her part, Mary Akor of the Women/Youth Empowerment and Creativity Initiative of Nigeria (WECON TALENT), an NGO focused on training and skills acquisition as well, said,

“It is so wonderful and I can see the trainees performing wonderfully and the effort put in was not wasted at all because I didn’t think that they (the trainees) will perform so wonderfully like this at all. We are also ready to enroll them and to perfect their packaging and marketing and with the help of NCAC we are hoping to continue with them”.

Efe Okurare of Link Art Concepts, who taught children and youths, including some adults, creative art, expressed great delight at the opportunity to impart skills. He disclosed that it was a fulfilling moment as a lot of creativity was displayed by the participants. “The creativity has been wonderful,” he said, adding that “it is unbelievable for them to acquire this amount of skill under three weeks and it was a wonderful opportunity for them to express their creativity.” Chidi Emmanuel, a graduate of Sociology, who few weeks ago resigned his formal employment, was one of those who benefitted from the creative art training. He has just moved into Abuja from Kaduna to seek a greener pasture and he admitted that he has landed himself a new manor that he hopes to plough and nurture to greater height as there is no going back on what he has learnt.

To demonstrate his resolve, he has already formed a company of his own (Awesome Investment Limited) and even sold a number of the art works (shoes, T-shirts and paintings) created by him in the course of the fiesta. According to him, “I know that now I don’t need to depend on a paid job. The things I picked from the streets (Waste to wealth) I can now use them to make money.”

Mr. Ben Amodu, who is also a trained lawyer turned specialist in alternative medicine, who owns and runs Halamin Herbals, was elated by the success of the fiesta stating that, “AFAC is a success by any standard because of the overwhelming reception and it is a good platform that

we have used to let people know what we do. 'There is no comparison with that of last year and the year before.

Ogun State contingent was headed by the state Commissioner for Culture and Tourism, Muiyiwa Oladipo, who described the expo as well organised, even as he appreciated the effort of NCAC, saying that "I am in sync with the DG of NCAC." "The expo is a melting point for all the states and some Africa countries that have been participating." According to him, it has become a veritable platform for his state to exhibit some of its unique arts and crafts, particularly the Adire textile culture, which has given it international identity. A number of the products on display at the stand were of Adire extraction with special reference to the window blinds created from Adire and this caught the attention and interest of many visitors to the stand. According to the commissioner, the state government is committed to developing and promoting the state's creative industry as it has put in place a number of policies and incentives.

Bayelsa State was another state that attracted a lot of interest from visitors following its unique exhibits with a number of its products ranging from household utensils to body accessories, all uniquely and colourfully created, made from raffia, cane, and bamboo materials. The Director, Bayelsa State Council for Arts and Culture, Mrs. Payeboye Festus-Lukoh, disclosed that the state exhibits were to show to the world that Bayelsa is endowed with a lot of natural attractions and materials that could boost the local economy if well utilised as they have done. "That is why we have come to expose all these to the public and ignite their interest in the products," she said. She however, expressed displeasure over Nigerians' penchant for foreign products even as she called for a change of attitude and patronage of local products. 'But if we do more promotion I think we will get there" she concluded. She further observed thus,

"This is Bayelsa State first outing and people say that we have done fantastically well. Definitely, we hope to keep coming if we get the approval of the ministry and our governor is a culture friendly governor and I believe he would continue to encourage and support our productivity and participation." Professor Onder M. Aytac, a Turkish and Political Science and International Relations lecturer at Nile University of Nigeria was one of the visitors at the expo. He was highly impressed by it, saying that: "it is far better if I am to compare it to that of last year and there are a lot of foreign countries and states from Nigeria in attendance".

"There wasn't this number of exhibitors before," he added, even as he revealed his enchantment with a number of the traditional dresses, arts and crafts on display, explaining that they are important symbolism of the people as they communicate about the people's way of life and belief system. The university lecturer who bought himself some of the traditional materials at very good prices said further that: "I am happy and satisfied with everything".

As plans for the hosting of the 2017 edition of African Arts and Crafts (AFAC) Exhibition gathered momentum, the Director General of the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC), which is hosting the annual event, Otunba Segun Runsewe, disclosed that over 24 countries and 150 exhibitors signed up for the event. Runsewe said the participating countries and exhibitors at the event, which was the 10th edition was expected to exhibit their cultural products and uniqueness of their destinations and other activities lined up for the event.

He also disclosed that the event would be part of the new drive by NCAC to use culture tourism as a tool for promoting Nigeria and creating wealth for the people. "The expo would be a market place for showcasing arts and crafts products such as fabrics, leather and souvenirs from Nigeria and other African countries. The expo was also apt as Nigeria needed to record remarkable achievements in developing the culture industry to enviable height through festivals like AFAC to create wealth," he said.

Runsewe said that the expo, would be geared toward harnessing and developing arts and crafts and other creative industries in the country. "It will be a unique opportunity for artists, craft dealers, manufacturers and other stakeholders to buy and sell their brands" he observed.

According to him, the expo would play a key role toward job creation and economic empowerment.

The Abuja Arts and Craft Village was established as a one stop-shop for artists and lovers of arts and crafts to showcase their products. It is also a business spot for artists and provides a source of economic empowerment for Small and Medium Scale Enterprises. It is strategically located

near the Abuja Sheraton Hotels and Towers in the Central Business District of Abuja. The Yar'adua Centre, which hosts many high profile events, is also within the same vicinity.

As it is with most public places, the Arts village is said to have derailed from its purpose. Instead of serving as a perfect model, it allegedly became home to robbers and drug peddlers, who may have taken advantage of the government's neglect of the area. Though, different artists and craftsmen are found there displaying their products in their various huts built to provide shelter to the entrepreneurs, no one ever suspects that there are other nefarious activities going on there. The other side of this one stop shop for lovers of arts and crafts, was however, revealed when the Director General, National Council of Arts and Culture (NCAC) Otunba Olusegun Runsewe, visited the place. Runsewe, who expressed shock from what he saw there, said the place had turned to a den of robbers and drug peddlers.

Having reportedly declared that the cultural industry is capable of becoming "Nigeria's next oil", he decided to carry out a necessary sanitation on the place. Like the biblical start where Jesus entering the temple and finding that money changers had taken over the supposed house of prayer and feeling aghast that such practices was condoned Jesus used the cane to chase the intruders away from the temple.

In the case of the arts and crafts village, Runsewe used the Police to chase the unwanted elements away from the place which he intends to present as a model to the world during the forthcoming AFAC Expo.

Pictures of Some of the Exhibited Art and Craft Works



Fig 1:



Fig 2:



Fig 3:



Fig 4:

Benefits Accruing from the Expo

First, it gave a new look to the art and craft village, which formerly was a den for social miscreants. Workers cleared out all unwanted elements and erected portraits around the arena, all reflecting the richness of Nigeria's arts and crafts and also introduced the use of beautiful tents and canopies for exhibitors. Besides elevating the mode and manner of the exhibition by ensuring that the exhibits were of standard and well-packaged to reflect its international flavour, it also enriched the contents of the three weeks' festival through such additions as the

investment round table, celebration of states and countries special days, free skill acquisition training, with 2, 135 persons, including children, youth and adults, benefiting from it. There was also free medical test; and treatments for the public with a number of healthcare providers in attendance.

The statistics revealed that over 2, 000 people benefited from the medical offers as 512 persons had clinical eyes test, with 200 medical eye glasses offered, 620 people receiving dental care and 1, 120 undergoing various medical tests such as blood sugar level and body mass index. Over 1, 000 visitors were recorded daily during the 21-day affair.

Conclusion

The AFAC 2017 has set a new benchmark. The event has increased both domestic and international traffic in Abuja in the number of days that it lasted. The delegates from the states, the local governments, NGOs and higher institutions of learning are significant domestic arrival to Abuja while foreign countries and their over 250 exhibitors and officials contributed greatly to the international tourist flow. There can be no glossing over the diplomatic impact of AFAC. The international citizens who AFAC drew into Nigeria, the platform it provided for both professional and social networking and the mutual understanding it generated across national borders and intercontinental divides are all quite an important input into creating a positive image for Nigeria on the world stage.

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