



Nigeria: Between Halloween and our culture

The last day of October, every year, to the people of Canada, Ireland, the United States and the United Kingdom, is the Halloween Day. This has its roots in the Celtic festival of Samhain. Halloween activities commonly include wearing scary costumes, attending costume parties, ghost tours, bonfires, playing pranks, telling ghost stories or other frightening tales, watching horror movies among other things.

According to historians such as Nicholas Rogers, “some folklorists detected its origins in the Roman feast of Pomona, the goddess of fruits and seeds, or in the festival of the dead called Parentalia. It is more typically linked to the Celtic festival of Samhain, derived from old Irish and means summer’s end. A similar festival was held by the ancient Britons and known as Calan Gaeaf. This festival of Samhain celebrates the end of the ‘lighter half’ of the year and beginning of the “darker half”, and is sometimes regarded as the ‘Celtic New Year’”.

The ancient Celts believed that the border between this world and the otherworld became thin on Samhain, allowing spirits (both harmless and harmful) to pass through. The family’s ancestors were honored and invited home while harmful spirits were warded off. It is believed that the need to ward off harmful spirits led to the wearing of costumes and masks. Their purpose was to disguise oneself as a harmful spirit and thus avoid harm. In a nutshell, Halloween is the celebration of ‘horror’, the dead, witches and wizards.

In Scotland the spirits were impersonated by young men dressed in white with masked, veiled or blackened faces. Samhain was also a time to take stock of food supplies and slaughter livestock for winter stores. Bonfires played a large part in the festivities. All other fires were doused and each home lit their hearth from the bonfire. The bones of slaughtered livestock were cast into its flames. Sometimes two bonfires would be built side-by-side, and people and their livestock would walk between them as a cleansing ritual. Another common practice was divination, which often involved the use of food and drink.

The interesting part is that this festival is generally accepted in the above mentioned developed world as a way of life. Even in churches, scary objects depicting spirits are hung in the windows and door in celebration of Halloween. They do not see anything wrong with the festival and whatever connotation would be drawn by other countries with regard to their beloved festival.

In Nigeria, we have lots of festivals that depict our cultures and traditions. We have festivals like “Mmanwu festivals like “Onwa Agwu” “Imo Oka”, Onwa Asato or Iri Ji (New Yam festivals), “ekpe” and “okonko”. During those festivals, activities include for instance masquerades which in most cases are used to drive away evil spirits. It is a festival that helps in enforcing laws,



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collecting levies, celebrating war victories and entertainment of people.

However, when Christianity came to our lands, everything was lumped together as evil. Masquerades were seen mostly as connoting evil, voodoo, and pagan (or unclean). Our people do not help matters. They forget that each nation have their own tradition that connotes their history as people. Even to cook and eat pounded yam in your house during those yam festivals, or to prepare a maize meal during the 'okonko' festivals people second-guess themselves. Even some people do not even celebrate it for fear of being labeled anti-Christ or pagan

Even it is only recently that beating of drums (igba) and other traditional musical instruments like 'ekwe' (wooden gong), 'ogene' (iron gong), 'oja' (wooden flute) were allowed in the church during services. They were seen as evil and as "iso ndi obodo wee mee otu ife afu"-to celebrate paganism with the heathens.

It is wrong for us to put down our own culture and tradition that define us as people. The fact that we accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and savior does not mean that we should jettison our way of life provided it does not run contrary to our beliefs. The Jews celebrate Passover and do not apologize to anyone for that to this day. Even Christ fully participated in Jewish festivals and saw himself as a Passover lamb prior to the ultimate sacrifice in the cross of Calvary. He always broke bread in line with the Jews' way of life. On the Last Supper with his apostles and even after he rose from the dead, he broke bread. The Jews also celebrate Pentecost (Shavout) and Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot). During these pilgrimage festivals or "Shalosh Regalim", the entire Jewish populace historically made a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem. Samaritans make theirs to the Mount Gerizim.

All these people up till now are very proud of their tradition and do not apologize for them, why should we be afraid to identify ourselves with our traditions? In one of the pictures I took during my initiation into manhood (age grade), I was wearing "mbe n'ukwu"-traditional skirt for the ceremony, and I posted the picture on my face book. Someone wrote me asking me whether I belong to 'mmanwu' society. When I told him that I thought he was of Igbo stock, he replied by saying that he is Igbo "but shy away from their culture because of Christianity".

The above statement captures the ignorance, stupidity and the conflict we face about practicing our Christian belief and observing our tradition. I do not owe anyone any apology for identifying with my roots. When you ask people where the breaking of breads during mass comes from, they would not know that it was derived from the Jewish culture. People go to Olympic Games, without knowing that the Olympic was derived from Greek festival. The Olympics were of



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fundamental religious importance, featuring sporting events alongside ritual sacrifices honoring both Zeus whose famous statue by Phidias stood in his temple at Olympia and Pelops, divine hero and mythical king of Olympia.

Breaking of kola nuts to some depicts idol worships. Why can't we break kola nut without thinking that we are doing anything wrong? Even why can't we break kolanuts in masses instead of breaking bread or hosts? If Christ was to be an Igbo man, don't you think that breaking of Kola nuts with his apostles would have been what he did on the Last Supper? What other significant was the bread over kola nuts? Our people living in foreign lands celebrate Halloween and Thanksgiving which are foreign to us. But when it is time for our own festival, not a lot of people even remember the time of the year we celebrate our festivals that define our way of life. Every culture is relative to the people that practice it (cultural relativism).

Our people should have a serious re-think about the way we jettison our own and swallow hook, line and sinker other foreign festivals. We should identify our rich cultural heritage and modernize some of them to attract tourists. Of everything the colonial masters did to our lands (and they are many), colonialism of the mind is the worst! It is mind-boggling. Tufiakwa!

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