

RELIGIOUS ECONOMY AND CHRISTMAS CULTURE IN SOUTHWESTERN NIGERIA: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Christmas celebration in major cities in Southwestern Nigeria over the years has had attached to it various nuances by which it has attained a cultural status. It is a Christian religious traditional festival but admired by the populace in majority. The Season begins in late November and does not end in practice until perhaps the last day of December. The beautiful colours of green, red and gold take over the environment in markets and public places, coupled with economic activities engaged and benefits derived by business minded individuals, groups, institutions and agencies. This paper, therefore, investigates the religious economy involved in the culture of Christmas celebration in selected major cities in Southwestern Nigeria, using historical and qualitative methods. Rational Choice Theory and Symbolic Interactionism are adopted for the purpose of the study. Preliminary study reveals that Christmas celebration in Southwestern Nigeria, like many other countries of the world, is a culture which has in many ways accommodated religious economy in public places. What is the Origin of Christmas celebration? Christmas Celebration in global perspective; Celebration of Christmas in Southwestern Nigeria public places and religious economic activities attached; all these are the concerns of this paper with a view to bringing to the fore the focus of the study.

Keywords: *Religious Economy, Christmas Culture, Southwestern Nigeria*

Introduction

Christmas period is one of the unique seasons of the year celebrated around the globe by Christians and non-Christians with green and red emblems; dazzled with gold. The season is quite different from others, due to the occurrence of winter and harmattan in Polar regions and non-polar regions respectively. Christmas is historically a perfect time to celebrate the love of God, the essence of family and to create memories that last forever. The 'spirit' of Christmas is usually the 'spirit' of love and generosity; a time to share and receive.¹ In the explanation of Thomas Monson, Christmas essentially lights up the picture window of our souls and helps us to look away from the world's busy life and become more interested in people rather than mundane things². Paradoxically, some believe that Christmas which is celebrated in December and being the last month of the year is a time for sober reflection over the preceding months in the year and to plan strategically for the New Year³. For Christians, Christmas is a time to celebrate the birth of the Messiah; who was born to die on the cross for the remission of sins and to epitomize love, holiness and perfection. However, despite the various reasons for its celebration, Christmas has

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over time become a cultural event with various highlights in countries in Europe and in Nigeria⁴. In Finland families gather and listen to the national peace of Christmas broadcast with the custom of visiting the graveside of the departed family members.⁵ In England greeting cards are sent to loved ones and during the Victorian era they would hang mistletoe from ceilings and in doorways, plum pudding will be served and then carols began to hold all around England. Also, in France some people burn woods from Christmas day to New Year's Day and the farmers sometimes see it as a good luck charm⁶.

It important to state that, to many traders around the world, the economic definition of Christmas outweighs the other social and religious definitions because Christmas has become an integral part of the economies⁷. In this wise, Christmas is usually a major stimulant in the economy of many nations as aforementioned in almost all retail areas receive an upward trend in sales. For instance, in the US according to the statistical survey conducted in 2016, a vast majority of the respondents declared their interest in partaking in the festivities while only 5% declared their dis-interest⁸. According to statistical survey in 2016 the US retail industry generated over 3 million US dollars which reflected about 19.2% of the annual retail industries total sales. Also, as a repel effect over 768 thousand employees were hired throughout the US since there is usually a massive increase in spending, therefore resulting in a massive increase in manufacturing since sales increase drastically during the Christmas period⁹. The story is not probably different in Nigeria, from the experiences in the US as the thrust activity in markets increase as the date draws near. Therefore, this paper investigates the religious economy involved in the culture of Christmas celebration in selected major cities in Southwestern Nigeria; using historical and qualitative methods.

The Origin of Christmas

The origin of Christmas has various accounts to various people. Therefore, to give a vivid picture of the Christmas origin's story, the various accounts will be stated. Very important is the birth of historical Jesus in Bethlehem through the Virgin Mary pledged to Joseph; but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. She gave birth to her firstborn son whom she wrapped in a band of cloths and laid in the manger because they had no room for them in the inn. Then, God revealed his birth to the wise men who brought gold, myrrh and frankincense. He is seen in our contemporary society as the reason for Christmas which is celebrated yearly by Christians around the globe. To early Christians, 'Advent' marked the time of Christ's first coming to the earth as man, second coming of Jesus into adherent's hearts through their salvation, and the future coming of Jesus as King and judge¹⁰. Paradoxically, the December 25th celebrations perhaps originated with the ancient "birthday" of the son-god, Mithra, a pagan deity whose religious influence had widely spread in the Roman Empire during the first few centuries. The god was related to the Semitic sun-god, Shamash, and his worship at the time cut across Asia to Europe where he was worshipped and called Deus Sol Invictus Mithras. Since the Roman Empire was well known for engrossing the pagan religions and rituals,

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they converted this pagan legacy to a celebration of the god, Saturn, and the rebirth of the sun-god during the winter solstice period¹¹. The festival was characterized by gift-giving, feasting, singing and downright debauchery, as the priests of Saturn carried wreaths of evergreen boughs in procession throughout the Roman temples. However, in 336 A.D, that Emperor Constantine officially converted this pagan tradition into the "Christian" holiday of Christmas. History has it that in the fourth century efforts were made by church officials to establish the birth of Jesus as a holiday. Pope Julius chose December 25; the precise date of Christ's birth was not stated in the bible. Although some evidence suggests Christ's birth may have occurred in the spring; that was the major time shepherds' herd¹². But in a bid to replace the pagan saturnalia the 25th December was chosen by the church subsequently in most parts of the world to replace the pagan tradition. The Christmas celebrations was first called the Feast of the Nativity, the practice spread to Egypt by 432A.D, England by the end of the sixth century and to the Scandinavia parts by the end of the eighth century.¹³

Symbolic Interactionism

The theory considers how the society is preserved through repeated interactions. Basically, individuals interact with one another in the society to create symbolic worlds, Thus, interaction and behavior is framed through the shared meaning that objects and concepts have attached to them.¹⁴ Three distinctive elements can be seen as important and as the basis of this theory; they are meaning, symbols/language and thought. Human beings attach meanings to people, words, events, things and situation. The meaning that people attach to events allows them to interpret their own actions and those of the others. Deducing from the theory, it can be explained that Christmas decorations, colours, food, dressing, etc. serve as symbols and the shared values placed on Christmas festivity have helped to sustain it among citizens¹⁵.

Rational Choice Theory

The theory is used to explain the social and economic behaviour. The major idea there is that the social behaviour of individual is determined by the individual's choices. This simply implies that individuals have preferences among the available choices. The premise of rational choice theory explains that the behavior of individuals in the society echoes the entirety of the choices made by individuals. Thus, each individual makes choices based on personal predilections and the constrictions. Generally, rational decision-making requires choosing by the individuals, most preferred among all available substitutes. The "substitutes" can be a set of actions or a set of objects. For actions, the expected outcomes most times determine the preceding choice¹⁶. During Christmas celebration individuals who participate in the festivity choose to do so; due to personal prejudice for the celebrations. According to Karl Marx the economic structure of the society is the foundation for the super structure of all other structures¹⁷. These definitely do not elude Christmas since its celebrations is grounded in spending and buying. Therefore, both the sellers

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and the buyers anticipate the Christmas season. Again, the theory can be seen as a theory of cost and benefit whereby individuals tend to choose the option that will be highly beneficial to them.

Christmas Celebration in Global History

Christmas celebration globally is characterized by trees, gifts, cake, decorations, carols, cards among others. Initially, in America and England Christmas was a time to sing bawdy songs, drink rum and riot in the streets. Christmas was a day set aside to ignore the laws, parade excesses and even terrorize citizens. The Christian aspect to the festivity was mostly overshadowed by the wild's costumes, gambling and also a time for a mendicant or student to be crowned the "lord of misrule" who will lead the poor to the houses of the rich and demand their best food and drink. If owners failed to comply, their visitors would probably terrify them with mischief. Hence, Christmas became the time of the year when the upper classes could repay their real or imagined "debt" to society by entertaining less fortunate citizens¹⁸. Many Christians in the olden days even loathed the festival; they saw it as an instrument of sin and evil. It took the church over three hundred years to decide on a day to honour Christ's birth. The particular date of Christ's birth is not close to December, since the shepherds who would have been with the flock at the coldest time of the year were not in the manger when Christ was born. However, as the world has evolved over the years Jesus became the reason for the season. Also, integral to the celebrations is the evergreen tree (Christmas tree) due to its thriving nature even in bleak weather conditions. It emerged from Northern Europe where the harsh weather conditions in winter made all other trees to wither but the evergreen tree remained green despite this occurrence. Hence, the tree warmed its way into the hearts of Christians as a symbol of faith and a source of strength which could be brought into people's homes.¹⁹ During the season of advent, the tree was used and is still being used as a decoration which is usually adorned with candles, signifying the illumination that Christ brought to the world. The festival is not complete in England and Germany without the baking of cake which made most children anticipate the festival. The cake was usually white and red representing the purity and the blood shed on the cross respectively.

In addition, caroling and Christmas cards are central to the global practice of Christmas historically. The emergence of carols can be traced to the Angel's hymns sung at a Christmas carol in Rome. As the societies evolved the content and context of carols also advanced, they began to tend towards canticles and the simple plays which often started resembling parade. The huge popularity of carols made Christmas music a big venture which cut across borders. During the Second World War carols were used to boost the morale of the troops in Korea and Vietnam. While Christmas cards became a part of the festival after December 1843 when Sir Henry Cole due to his busy schedules found it difficult to respond to Christmas greetings in the space of two years the Christmas card became the new way to extend Christmas greetings to loved ones during the festivity. It turns out that his invention was a unique one which is another important facet of the festival. Moreover, colours like red, gold, green and white paint the atmosphere with an outlook of Christmas. The red signifies the blood of Jesus; the gold signifies wealth and royalty, green stands for new life and white for purification. The combination of these colours in public places announces Christmas to everyone. Likewise, gifts have been a part of the celebrations. This is trace-able to the happening at birth of Jesus when three wise men brought

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myrrh, gold and frankincense. However, this exchange of gifts during this season has restructured the retail industry worldwide as the gifts serve as a symbol of love.

Celebration of Christmas in Southwestern Nigeria and Religious Economic Activities

Generally, Christmas is a time to get new clothes to appear best with exotic fabrics and styles in Nigeria. The citizens tend to embark on long travels particularly by road during this period in order to spend the holidays with their relatives, and most Nigerians would not trade this for anything, even Nigerians in the diaspora are not left out of the celebrations as some of them either return home or send money home for the celebrations.²⁰ In most homes on the day of Christmas, particularly in Southwestern Nigeria, various forms of meal are prepared, most times accompanied with chicken. Although, some people see it as an avenue to prepare their indigenous delicacies; the Christmas celebrations is never complete without the staging of carols and concerts by churches and other organizations who lump it up with their end of the year party. Besides, various relaxation or site seeing centres such as gardens, parks, malls, hotels, cinemas among others are usual relaxation spots for individuals and families on Christmas day and owners of these venues generate lots of revenue from the celebrations.

The increase in price of commodities is another major finding in this study; food stuffs like rice, beans, yam flour (*elubo*), *gaari* (cassava flour) are noted to be more costly during the festive. As a matter of fact some of these items at times are sold at 100% and 150% increase such that it becomes difficult for many people to execute purchases within their budget. Adebajo (Business Tycoon/ Ibadan/2018) explains that the prices of commodities just become skyrocket, what happens every year, what we bought about two weeks, one month ago, we buy it now twice the amount, and because this are necessary commodities like food stuffs that one cannot do without. Yet another (Mrs. Bala / Civil Servant/ Ibadan/2018) explains “Both food stuffs and house hold commodities are more costly during Christmas season, one needs no wonder why, everybody wants to take advantage of the festive to amass wealth. You, look at a bag of rice now sold for eighteen or nineteen thousand Naira per bag. Early in the year it was around thirteen or fourteen thousand Naira. Look at those other essential commodities. If we compare the current price of each of them to what it was about three four months ago, there is a great difference”. All these explain the upsurge in prices of commodities in the market which perhaps is a resultant effect of the high demand in the market or human nature of amassing wealth. It is a general principle in economics that when the demand is high, the price also goes up. Hence, it cannot be disputed that the human attitude of wanting to accumulate affluence is not being demonstrated during Christmas festive.

Although, this is true to every festive, our concern here is that this is a religious festive and Christianity for that matter. Christmas is the ‘celebration of God with us’ calling for an expression of the highest level of morality. If the market men and women were religious people, the general expectation would be of piety, but reverse is the case. It can then be explained that in the celebration of sacredness are manifestations of profane. However, it is observed that not all who engage in business activities during the festive are adherents of Christianity; people of other faiths are involved. Hence, money making during Christmas is a major concern of many

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adherence of Christianity as well as those who are not Christians. This suggests religious expression and desire for wealth creation among the people.

This same phenomenon is also expressed in the increase in the cost of transportation. In fact, there is a common slogan; “owo odun” (festive money). In other words, special tariff must be collected in respect of Christmas festive. An interviewee (Mrs. Ajisafe/ Lagos/2018) explains “*Ti oduun bati de bayi, awa naa ti mo pe gbobo nkan lo maa ngbe owo lori ... Abi, won sa maa gba owo odun, tawon onimoto yen tie po ju, e o maa gbo ti won a maa so pe hundred naira ni drop o*”- meaning ‘Whenever there is any festival, we do know that the price of every commodity increases, in fact that of transporters is even too much, you will hear them, saying ‘any drop is hundred naira o’ This is a clear indication of high cost of transportation during any festive, which does not exclude Christmas period.

Another finding is that of the Seasonal Business and Opportunities for entrepreneurial activities such as Printing and Sales of Christmas Cards, Christmas decorations i.e. Christmas trees, sales of hampers, Wine, etc, purposely because of the festival, sales of fowls, and turkeys, shoes, cloths and jewelries. It is worthy of note that many individuals engage in such businesses, only because of the festival. In this wise such items in the market are not always common, unless during the Christmas season, especially assorted wine, Christmas cards, hampers and Christmas decoration etc. This is explained by a trader (Mr. Agbaje/ Business Tycoon/ Ibadan/2018) in terms of business risk when she said “some of these items are just for this season, whatever is not sold now can either be kept till next year, if they are imperishable, and if they are, that means it is already a loss. That is why some of the items are very costly... You know, one must have thought of all those things, it is in view of any like gambling; so, it a risk, at times it pays, at times it doesn't”. This supports the Yoruba social thought of business enterprise, “*eni ba moja owo lo moja iku*” meaning - whoever is able to predict the time that business will boom should be able to predict the time for death. In this wise, as it is difficult to predict when death comes, so it is to predict sales of certain commodities during Christmas festive.

Another important discovery is the fact that during Christmas, there are usually a lot of goods like house hold materials, shoes and wears of various kinds from various sources to meet the need of various status and classes of people in the Society. As explained by an interviewee; “The truth of the matter is that we try to look for money by all means to travel to the East to bring these items so that we can meet the needs of all our customers; it is not everybody who can afford the real imported newly produced goods, that is why we also have ‘Okirika’ (imported fairly used materials) in grades; A, B, C, depending on how good they are while some may have been at the Sea-Port for long and have entered demurrage because the owners could not get money to clear them’ (Ojo Gbadero/ Business Tycoon/Ibadan/ 2018). Hence, during Christmas festive, all these materials are brought to the market to meet the need of all and sundry in the society. In this wise, goods made in Nigeria, especially, Ibo made goods are brought to the market in South West, from Eastern part of the country. The economic implication of this cannot be dismissed with a wave of hands as it is evident that patronizing Nigerian made goods will certainly improve the country’s economy. In the words of Ojewale, “The need to patronize made-in-Nigeria goods cannot be overemphasized as it is one major way to economic growth and development. The economy of any nation grows rapidly when locally made goods are promoted through patronage, first by its people then through export”²¹ Although, Southwestern

Nigerian business men and women display Nigerian made goods to meet the needs of certain social class of the society, they consciously or unconsciously promote local economy especially during Christmas season.

It was discovered that many families, during the Christmas festive throw parties, tagged 'Christmas party' and for the claim that it is just once in a year, they spend so much on eating and drinking with families and relations who care to come. Some even have fixed date in December of every year, either 25th or 26th and make it obligatory to hold the party when families and friends gather for felicitation. Majority of the Churches if not all, and many establishments; both government and private also organize Christmas Party. While some refer to it as Christmas party, some others call it 'End of the year party. Christmas Carols are organized alongside end of the year party; always with singing of Christian songs and religious drama. An interviewee (Mrs. Benson/ Teacher/ Lagos/2018) explains that "It is end of the year and it is Christmas; the two go together, and it has always been a time of relaxation and refreshing for us in this organization. We always look forward to it; singing, dancing, eating and drinking, after a relatively long period of stress on the job" Another (Mr. Gbadero/An Entrepreneur/ Ilesa/2018) said; It is usually a time of reflection into the past events, or may I say a time of review of activities for the year... and if it is done effectively well, there is more tendencies that the subsequent year would witness a better success". It can therefore be asserted that Christmas season is not only observed or celebrated on the job by Christians alone, but what an average civil servant would look forward to; as it is always a joyous occasion of the year and a time for appraisal of the year's activities.

Institutions of learning, especially primary and secondary schools are not left out in organizing Christmas carols. As a matter of fact, it is a major and usually the last event for every academic session. In the words of a proprietor (Mr. Adeoti/ Proprietor/ Ilesa/2018) "Christmas holiday among others, is what students always look forward to. It is part of the school program of activities to organize Christmas carol before the school goes on holiday. Some schools do it along with end of the year party. There, students are rewarded for being exemplary, either in academics or behaviour in the course of the year." This explains the influence of Christianity on Western education and establishment of Schools. It is historical that Christianity was brought with western education and the two cannot be separated.

Traffic in all the banks is also observed. This is not unconnected to the fact that many people would want to transact with the Banks to enable them have cash to spend during the period. However, the money transfer department of every bank is always clumsier during this time than any other period of the year. There is a lot of transfer of money especially from Nigerians in the Diaspora, in form of remittances to the families at home. The study reveals that most defer their remittance in terms of financial and material gifts for their relations at home to December period which is perhaps because it is end of the year or Christmas season. People who have relations in diaspora also look forward to receiving gifts from abroad either material or cash gifts. An interviewee (Miss. Adio /University Graduate and Applicant/ Ibadan/2018) states: "I know that my Brother will surely remember to send us something at every Christmas, even when we make requests during the year he would always say 'Don't worry, by December' and it has always come before shortly before Christmas day." Another interviewee (Mrs. Adedeji/Teacher/ Ibadan/2018) explains: "Our site project receives attention during December period. When my husband sends something from the United States, he also sends to us for Christmas." The season

is thus a more suitable time for remittance from Diaspora Nigerians. The reason is not far-fetched, as revealed by this study; they find it most convenient to save perhaps from the beginning of the year and remit for various reasons at the end of the year.

Santa Claus, popularly called Father Christmas is another in Christmas culture. Children are always thrilled to see Father Christmas, and this is not free. It is always seen in many private and public primary schools, Broadcasting corporations and some other public places, mainly to interact with Children and give them gifts, with a view to celebrating Christmas with them. It is important to state that the idea of Christmas in the recent times is money making and it involves telling lies, especially as children are made to believe that Father Christmas comes from Rome, whereas, there is probably little or no difference between “Egungun” masquerade of African Traditional Religion and Father Christmas of Christianity. In the explanation of an interviewee, It is for children and mainly to collect money from their parents. Personally, to me, it constitutes a culture of telling lies to those children” (Mr. Ade Williams/ Primary School teacher/Ibadan/2018). This is not different to the views of John von Radowitz, when he urged parents to “stop pretending Father Christmas is real in case the ‘lie’ damages relations with their children” There is no doubt about it that “...telling stories about Santa or Father Christmas risks undermining a child’s trust and is morally suspect.”²² However, it serves as a source of income for those who are creative enough to engage the “business” idea of Father Christmas.

It is however a time of expectation for many, especially people of low status. In this wise, many who are of low status in the society look forward to Christmas as they would in the name of the season make requests from people of higher status, especially those that are close to them in some ways. In the words of an interviewee “There is no way; my boss during the Christmas would always give all of us something for the festive. In fact, it is near to a tradition that if he does not, some us would go and meet him for our Christmas gift”. Another said: “... You see, this life is ‘give and take’ if you give, you shall be given. I do it and I know some other people also do it, that we give out gifts to our bosses, it could be just a bottle of groundnut, or one pair of socks, even a simple Christmas card and we know that what we would get in return will be much more than what we have given. That is the power of give and take during the Christmas festive” It is thus a time to give and receive gifts from one another.

The study also uncovers Christmas period as a time of stock taking, accountability and new beginning. This is true of many families, groups, societies, private and public firms. As a matter of fact, it is a period for Annual Assessment and reward, perhaps because it is also the end of the year. Another character discovered is Indebtedness during the festive. Many consider every economic activities and expenditure during the Christmas as very important if not compulsory, such that they borrow money from friends or the cooperative of their work places with a view to paying it back in the following year. This explains the so much importance attached to Christmas in Southwest Nigeria.

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendation

In Southwestern Nigeria, Christmas is noted with people moving from urban areas to their villages (rural areas) to be with family and bless those who are less privileged. Selling and buying of items such as chickens, goats, yam, rice, alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks are noted activities; fabric, shoes, and bags market is overfilled by sellers and buyers. Christmas is a time

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to share and love, yet its economic implication is a dynamic part of the festive. Therefore, to many traders in southwestern Nigeria, the economic characterization of Christmas overshadows other social and religious explanations.²³ In fact, Christmas has globally developed to an integral part of the economies, and Southwestern Nigeria is not excluded. It is a major stimulant in the economy of the selected cities and almost every retail area obtains a rising tendency in transactions. Since there is usually a huge escalation in expenditure during the Christmas period, there is also a massive increase in production activities. It is evident that Christmas festive in global perspective has attained a cultural status not only admired but also accepted by the populace in majority. However, the festive has had attached to it, a lot of economic activities, such that beyond religion, the economic value of Christmas has given it a non-ignorable status in major cities in South west Nigeria, as a matter of fact the its religious significance does not gain attention like commercial impact among the general populace. It is evident that in Southwestern Nigeria, particularly in Lagos, Ibadan and Ilesa, the economic value attached to Christmas festive has superseded the religious implication and socio-religious impact of the same, on the people (supposed adherents and non-adherents of Christianity). Within the context of the Christmas celebration in South west Nigeria, there seems to be a connection between the sacrosanct in term of Christian religious festival, and the sacrilegious in term of commerce, which is a departure from Durkheim's distinction between sacred and profane. In the interest of piety, to avoid placing the commercial interest above the spirituality tangled in its practice. More attention should be given to religious features.

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