Understanding Cultural Tourism Hospitality in Rivers State

By

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Abstract

The term hospitality in tourism discourse, has its meaning based on the tourist experience in a destination. The experiences points to the image of the host destinations of tourism activities. Most tourism destinations in Rivers State have witnessed weak representation of their hospitality by non tourist(s) as a result of poor handling and management of some communal differences in Rivers State. It becomes imperative for tourists to be well informed and understand the hospitable nature of communities in Rivers State cultural tourism heritage that has the potentials to boost the tourism industry in the state and nation Nigeria. The qualitative approach is been adopted in bringing to fore some selected cultural tourism heritage like festival celebration of some communities in Rivers State. Also, a brief history of the host cultural tourism destination and their hospitable attributes will be show cased in this study. Thus, tourists will be well acquainted with the rich cultural heritage of communities in Rivers State in Nigeria. Consequently, the paper advocates for the development of the various communal cultural heritage sites across the ethnic groups in Rivers State by the State and stakeholders in tourism industry.

Keywords: Rivers State, Cultural Heritage, Hospitality, Tourism, Development.

Introduction

The experience of tourists in any tourism destination, impacts immensely to the viability of tourism in that destination. As Gilbert (1990) observed that "a dissatisfied tourist or visitor is the worse publicity for a tourist destination or attraction? He averred that "a word of mouth dissemination of the experience can damage the credibility and image of the attraction and tourist destination". It then behoves cultural tourism host to comprehend satisfaction of tourists and project good image of the communities in Rivers State.

For tourism is viewed as the 'temporary movement of people to destination outside their normal place of work and residence and the activities undertaken during their stay in those destinations and the facilities created to carter to their needs (Rayan 1997:184). This further explains Rayan's (1997:184) view that cultural tourism is "an escape to a more natural surrounding – an environment where it is possible for the tourist to have both adventure and peace". The natural surroundings entails sight seeing scenery of an area, crafts, historical sites and special events like festivals, cultural dance/music etc that are held for the public.

It becomes imperative to explore some communal heritage of some ethnic groups in Rivers State. Cultural heritage are here refers to those festivals, celebrations, rites of passage etc being observed and celebrated. Celebrating/observed them confirms their existence. The heritage celebration, determines cultural tourism as a taxonomy in tourism industry. Rives State is endowed with rich cultural heritages for cultural tourism activities viability. However, a framework on hospitality will be adopted in this paper to buttress tourism hospitality.

Framework on Hospitality

The concept of cultural tourism hospitality, underpins much of what the tourist experiences as a traveller – consumption of food, drink, and how they were accommodated. Such tourist experiences creates conceptualizing framework on hospitality which ranges individual/private, communal and commercial hospitalities that are related but differs in setting (Lashley 2000:56).

Individual/Private Hospitality: The individual/private hospitality in cultural tourism is a relationship experienced in an individual/private homes of people where a guest(s) is provided food, drinks and accommodation in various communities depicting how hospitable the individual/family are to the guest(s) in their homes. It is believed that the gesture extended by the host to the guest suggest that the hosted will someday be hosted by the guest. This explains why George Tasie (2013:40) remarked that individual hospitality in African concept is "considered more or less sacred". He opined that in African hospitality, individual hospitality to a guest is highly esteemed and specially treated. For Africans are ever ready to welcome visitors or strangers whether the visitors are invited or uninvited. It is believed in the indigenous religion of Africans that the ancestors and other patron deities pay visit in the person of a stranger who may appear as a tourist and therefore a stranger is given a very kind and warm treatment during cultural tourism celebration or festivals.

Communal Hospitality: Another aspect of cultural tourism hospitality is communal hospitality. Lashley (2000) explained that "communal hospitality is an act of being charitable to stranger especially travellers to the communities and those have come to witness and celebrate with them their cultural heritage with the aim of bestowing good status on the community. Strangers and tourists are being cared for, protected and are made to be comfortable in the community all through their stay which leaves a lasting impression of the cultural tourism heritage during and after festival or any cultural heritage activities. This typology of hospitality shows the collective efforts of the entire people in a community to ensure that the tourist(s) is well cared for, nourished and retain a good memory of the destination towards larger visit of tourist in subsequent celebration of the community heritage.

Commercial Hospitality: The third concept of hospitality is the commercial hospitality. Page and Connell (2006:201) opined that "commercial hospitality is a situation that is void of charitableness or communal reciprocating". They further stated that is a "purely commercial relationship where the tourists or guests pays the host for services and products consumed while being hosted". In other words as Walton (2000:57) further observed that commercial hospitality, has it roots in supplying to the tourists or travellers through tourism market, the basic human needs of food, drink, shelter and rest.

This concept of hospitality (Hotel) developed in the mid seventeenth century Paris of 1820. Hotels are built in all nooks and cranny of Rivers State as a commercial accommodation (hospitality) to guests in the various communities of the State. This explains why Little John (2000) reasoned that a "hotel is a culturally bound phenomenon, given that cultural rules and customs affect hospitality provision and certain behaviours and communal codes prevail (certain codes of conduct are encouraged/discouraged). Although, the national codes of regulation also affects hospitality establishments impacting upon what they provide and the roles they fulfil in cultural tourism.

In Jones (2002) analysis of the scope of the commercial hospitality, he opined that it cut across the hotels, guest houses, inns, restaurants, public houses, clubs and bars and catering companies where cultural impacts are felt in the cuisines that are served to guests in any of the area mentioned.

Thus, commercial hospitality (hotel accommodation and restaurants etc) provides the basis from which tourists can engage in the process of staying in a tourist destination (Medlik and Ingrams 2000). This is why Jones (2001) reasoned that a commercial hospitality (hotels) is an "Operation that provides accommodation and ancillary services

to people away from home and the elements of what a hotel provides can be classified into tangible components, such as rooms and more tangible elements such as room ambience which is assessed by visitors as part of their experience of staying at a property".

The three perspectives of hospitality aforementioned shares relationship of caring for visitors/tourist in a destination. However, the concept of communal hospitality is been adopted as a framework for comprehending cultural tourism hospitality in this study. For communal hospitality boost the status of the community to tourists who are good image publicity of the people. Again, the heritage that determines cultural tourism is a collective owned heritage celebrated and not an individual heritage and would be vivid in some selected cultural tourism heritage of some communities/ethnic groups in Rivers State. The communal hospitality, expresses the cultural identities of the ethnic groups in Rivers State which in turn depict the hospitable attribute of the state towards a viable tourism, operations.

Rivers State as a People

Rivers State is one of the twelve states created by the enactment of Decree No. 19 of 1967. The State was created out of the then Eastern Region of Nigeria. The territory was referred to as "Oil Rivers Protectorate", a name derived from its abundant wealth in palm oil.

The State is bounded to the North by Anambra, Imo and Abia States. In the Eastern boarder, it is bounded to Akwa-Ibom State and to the Western border to Bayelsa and Delta States. At the South, Rivers State is bounded by the Atlantic Ocean.

The people of Rivers State are known to be hospitable and friendly. The State has various ethnic nationalities: Abua, Andoni, Ekpeye, Engeni, Etche, Ibani, Ikwerre, Kalabari, Ndoni, Ogba, Okrika, Oyigbo and Odual. These ethnic groups, have rich and unique cultural heritages and have existed together for centuries before the creation of Rivers State and are currently distributed in the twenty-three (23) Local Government Areas of the State. The Local Government Areas are: Abua/Odual, Ahoada East, Ahoada West, Akuku-Toru, Andoni, Asari-Toru, Bonny, Degema, Emohua, Eleme, Etche, Gokana, Obio/Akpor, Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni, Ogu/Bolo, Okrika, Opobo/Nkoro and Tai.

Rivers State as a people is better understood in the religious context. The indigenous African Religion exists in the ethnic nationalities that make up the State. For religion and its practices point to significant interest in many respects especially the cultural heritages that exist amongst the ethnic groups. Although, variations exist in the indigenous religious beliefs of the ethnic groups. For example, there is the belief in the existence of the Supreme

Being, deities, divinities, spirits, ancestors/ancestress, sacred specialists, charm/magic etc. These beliefs are associated with the ancestors, culture, customs and traditions of the people. Thus, the indigenous religion has always been with the people of Rivers State.

This is vivid in the numerous cultural heritages of the ethnic groups in Rives State that informs us on this study on how the gods interacted with the people and how these persons interacted with the gods venerated during the festivals buttressing the people worship of the gods and ancestors in cultural tourism celebration.

Similarly, the religious beliefs and practices emanating from the festivals and their cultural heritages shapes the peoples world view, cultural norms and socio life of the host communities towards visitors/tourists during cultural tourism celebration. Thus, cultural tourism point to the facts that the indigenous religion of the ethnic groups plays a tremendous role in cultural tourism development as well tourism potentials of Rivers State.

Some Selected Cultural Tourism Heritages in Rivers State

(a) Egelege Cultural Tourism Festival of the Ikwerre Ethnic Group in Rivers State.

The Ikwerres are group of people that inhabit a substantial part of the northern half of Rivers State. The territory is bounded by those of other ethnic groups in the north and west by the Ogba, Ekpeye and Abua ethnic groups in the south by the Ijaw, to the south-west and east by the Eleme and Etche group and to the north-east by the Igbo of Imo State and Abia State. They are spread in four (4) Local Government Areas of Rivers State namely: Emohua, Ikwerre, Obio/Akpor and Port Harcourt Local Government Areas.

According to Amadi (1993:34), seven major communities constitute the Ikwerre ethnic group. They comprise the Elele group, Isiokpo group, Rumuiji group, Emohua Ggbakiri group, Aluu-Igwuruta group and the Akpor and Obio group. The seven major communities have evolved into more than thirty to forty clans and numerous villages.

That not withstanding, the thrust of this paper is on Egelege as cultural tourism heritage amongst the Ikwerres. However, the paper will be dealing specifically with Aluu-Ikwerre Egelege (wrestling) festival as one of the cultural tourism heritage in Rivers State.

Aluu clan is one of the seven groups that constitute Ikwerre ethnic group and is made up of five (5) major communities: Omuike, Omuoda, Omueko, Mbodo and Omuchiorlu. These communities address themselves as Aluu Mbam-ise (Aluu five communities). Changes occurred in the social, moral, political and spiritual life of Aluu people. As

Awolalu and Doparmu (1979:279) stated that "Societies cannot be static, even though a change may not come in a perceptible form of a long time". What may not be clear to state in this discuss is the catalyst that led to the five communities of Aluu clan becoming nine (9): Omuike, Omuoda, Mbodo, Omueko, Omuchiorlu, Omuigwe, Omuokiri, Omunhechi and Omuawhnuwo.

Thus, the Aluu clan is now addressed as Aluu Mba Itolu (Aluu of nine communities). The name Aluu-gbu-lem-nwhe" which is shortened as "Aluu" means we fought and conquered them. They are warriors. It is from one of the communities, Omuike-Aluu that the Egelege-Aluu emanated from.

The community Omuike commences the Egelege (Wrestling) festival in first week of the month of October every year. Other Aluu communities take turns in celebrating the wrestling festival. In other words, the Aluu-Egelege last for nine (9) weeks (two months, one week) covering the month of October to the first week of December each year.

The wrestling festival of Aluu people, affords them the opportunity to appease first the Ogbagorogoro (the divinity in charge of wrestling), the earth deity of Aluu and other divinities. The significance of the sacrifice indicates a new year for the Aluu people. The festival is important for its spiritual value which is primarily to thank the divinity connected with the festival for his past blessings and protections. Also, it is a period to ask for blessings on their trade and other activities and to propitiate them that all may be well with them through out the year. Families bonds are strengthen during the wrestling festival.

The wrestling songs are highly philosophical. The songs explain what has happened in the past: Success, achievement, mistakes and future of some persons in the community/clan as to teach the present generation goods morals.

Thus, crowd of visitors/tourists visit and participate in each community wrestling week. The community cooks and entertain visitors in their domain; visitors/ tourists goes to individual houses for entertainment without invitation. The tourists moves freely in all nooks and cranny of the community without been harassed. Friendship and relationship are been established.

As a result of the crowd and participation of other neighbouring Ikwerre clans and communities, one may say that wrestling may have spread to all nooks and crannies of Ikwerre ethnic group in Rivers State through the experiences the men in Omuike-Aluu

have had on the commencement of wrestling. Egelege celebration has become a cultural heritage that boost cultural tourism hospitality in Rivers State.

B. **Nchaka Cultural Tourism Festival of Ogba Ethnic Groups in Rivers State.**

Ellah (1995:14) averred that Ekpaffia (Ekpeye and Okoba (Ogba) were sons of a person called Aklaka. The Ogba people call themselves "Okoba" (children of Ogba) who share common ancestor Aklaka that migrated from Benin between 14th and 17th centuries at different locations before setting in their present location.

Within a few generations after Ogba arrived and settled of Obigwe, many of his off springs were dispersed to other parts, to north, east, and north. East and north west of the present geographical area of Ogba land. The disperse was mainly attributed to the frequency of Aboh slave raids which attacked Obigwe settlement. It was during this period in Ellas view (1995:36) that two sons of Ezeali (Agbru, Okprome), left Obigwe and founded Omoku. They were great hunters that discovered the place (Omoku) and decided to settle with their families.

The elder brother settled at Obieti (middle quarter), subsequently other Onuobodos settled at Omoku that serves as the capital of Ogba ethnic group in Rivers State. The ethnic group falls into three major clans: Usomini, Igburu and Egi. The Ogba ethnic group are found in Ogba/Egbema/Ndoni Local Government Area of Rivers State with forty-one (41) communities.

The ethnic group have major festivals: Nkwukwu Ikpochi Ali (looking up the land), Ebiam (when every one eats pounded yam) and Engwuji Onube (Nchaka or Ejanka). The greatest of those festivals is the Nchaka festival celebrated towards the end of the year (November when all evil forces, sickness, poverty, witchcraft must be swept away and a peaceful life ensure. The celebration also marks the end of the farming season and serve as a new yam festival of the Ogba people.

The Nchaka festival, has both female and male Nchaka. However, the festival commences with varieties of dances, plays and songs like Orikiri and Ikwrikwe dances by different age groups male and female in the community, with their ceremonial attires singing, dancing and moving around from one house of an elder to another althrough the right in merriment and jubilation praising Chukwu (the Supreme Being) and their ancestors for good health and unity. After, the merriment at the play ground, the age groups are led by various Onuobodos, elders and many other celebrants carrying weapons, fans and walking sticks in their hands heading to their eastern bank of the Omoku river.

This explains why Ellah (1995) opined that Nchaka cultural festival is an anniversary in commemoration of their victory at the time Ogba and his sons migrated to their present settlement. The festival, affords them also an opportunity to celebrate their heroes and victories in wars during their migrations/settlement periods.

Visitors/ tourists during the Nchaka festival that runs in weeks are not speared of entertainment and accommodation by the community and individuals in various communities in Ogba land. The caring given to visitors depict cultural tourism hospitality in Rivers State.

C. **Owu-Aru-Sun Cultural Tourism Festival of Kalabari Ethnic Group of Rives State.**
Among the Kalabari ethnic group, the Owu-Aru-Sun festival is celebrated. The festival is celebrated in Buguma the traditional headquarters of the Kalabari people. The festival was first celebrated in 1927. Subsequent ones were in 1973, 1980 and 1991 by the Ekine Sekiapu under the leadership of the Opu Edi.

The historical origin of the Owu-Aru-Sun is traced to a beautiful woman whose name was "Ekineba" been adopted by the water spirits. On her return to the human world, she taught people how to perform the Alagba masquerade that she learnt from the water spirit world. Ekineba is the patroness of the masquerade society named "Alagba" after her. But only men belonging to the Ekine performs the masquerade dance and wears the masks.

Thus, Ekine Sekiapu is the custodian of the Kalabari customs traditions right form old shipping (Elem Ama) till date. It also forms the central part of traditional government of the Kalabari people and the organizers of the Owu-Aru-Sun of the Kalabari ethnic group of Rivers State. The Kalabari ethnic group are found in Akuku-Toru, Asari-Toru and part of Degema Local Government Areas of Rivers State with 33 communities.

Series of masquerades are owned by Chiefs and some compounds are the Abbi group of houses, the Perigbo masquerade owned by George compound, the Bekimaru Sibi masquerade owned by Wokoma compound, Gbasa masquerade owned by Owubo group of houses. The Owu-Aru-Sun cultural tourism festival of the Kalabari ethnic group is a clear veneration of the peoples national deity (Owumeso) and other divinities who they believe provides for the material needs of the people.

This provides meaningful explanation to the political, economic, religious and social needs and control of every situation in the material world of the Kalabari people. The festival

also affords the people opportunity to celebrate the founding fathers of Kalabari ethnic group and their ancestors who they believe impacted so much on the well being of the people. Thus, their continuous benevolence is sought especially during the Owu-Aru-Sun festival.

The celebration brings all the communities in Kalabari ethnic group, their friends, tourists, visitors and well wishers to participate in the festival with a large crowd of people. Visitors/ tourists are well cared for via feasting, tolerance of some excesses from visitors, protection and their well being of the number of days the celebration may last. Thus, the hospitality attributes of the Kalabari is been displayed to tourists leaving a lasting impression of hospitable on the people.

Cuisines: Cultural impacts of cuisines of the ethnic groups in cultural tourism heritage aforementioned and others not brought to fore are felt on the hospitality nature of communities in Rivers State where such heritage is celebrated. The table below shows some cuisines tourists/visitors are being hosted with across the ethnic groups.

S/N	FOOD	INGREDIENT	ETHNIC GROUP
1	Native fresh fish pepper soup	Fresh fish, fresh pepper, onions, palm-oil, salt, native spices	All the ethnic groups in Rivers State
2	Odu fulo (native soup)	Fresh fish, oyster (mgbe), periwinkle (Isam), seallop (Ofingo), clam (Ngolo), fresh prawn (Oporo), native species	Kalabari ethnic group
3	Funate (Ikili) (mud fish)	Mud fish (Ikili), scent leave, native species, salt, pepper, mixed vegetable (Pumpkin and bitter leaf)	Kalabari ethnic group
4	Igbewa-Iji (Palm oil yam)	Yam, dry pepper, palm oil, salt and dry fish	Ikwerre ethnic group
5	Mininwiri Okazi eaten with otarch-iji (pounded yam)	Dry fish, stockfish, periwinkle, cocoa yam (edeh), Okazi leave, pepper, salt, native species	Ikwerre ethnic group
6	Eja (unripe plantain porridge)	Unripe plantain, dry fish, fresh prawn (oporo) pepper palm-oil onions salt.	Andoni ethnic group
7	Kpoyaaee	Cow head or cow leg, dry fish, clam (ngolo), cut periwinkle, sealp	Ogoni ethnic group

		(ofingo), fresh pepper, onions salt, palm oil	
8	Garri feni	Raw garri, ripe plantain, fresh pepper, salt, palm oil, fresh fish	Okrika ethnic group
9	Cut periwinkle (poi poi)	Periwinkle with shell, onions, pepper, native spices, palm oil, salt	All the ethnic group
10	Ofeh nsala (white soup	Fresh fish, yam (for thickening) utazi, fresh prawn	Ndoni ethnic group
11	Melech-edeh eat on with ogbolo (Cassava)	Fresh fish, dry fish, periwinkle, ukpaoge (prawn), palm oil nut, salt, pepper, cocoa yam leave etc.	Ekpeye ethnic group
12	Ukazi native soup with sea foods	Periwinkle, prawn, ngolo, ukazi leave, melon, ofororukpo (for thickening) pepper, Cray fish, salt, oil dry fish, stock fish, meat etc.	Ndoki ethnic group

In Anegbeti community in Edo State, the people accord hospitality to visitors by treating every visitor as a native (Onu and Ogwunka, 2021:104). This was influenced as a result of Agumi in a mythological narration was rescued by unknown hunter from sea wave. The care accorded him and him narrating his experience made the community to resolve to be hospitable. A similar hospitality act is found among the Etinan people of Akwa Ibom State. The people of Etinan believe that by welcoming guests/tourists and caring for them, their children will be taken care of whenever they are in need, and their daughters will be well cared for by their husbands.

The Tiv people of Benue State are not left out on the act of hospitality. The people are very cheerful, hospitality disposition and unique in cultural hospitality. They regard visitors/strangers as gods and in most cases protect them with their lives. The native live community life, eat outside on the middle of their compound, to encourage passer-by to share even without invitations to meals.

Recommendations

Scholars have made frantic efforts in conceptualizing hospitality and its type on academic discourse. This paper is just to deepen the understanding on cultural tourism hospitality towards strengthen the tourism potentials of Rivers State and Nigeria. Thus, the following recommendations are made:-

1. Communities and stakeholders in tourism industry should see cultural tourism hospitality as the base from which tourists can engage in the process of staying at a cultural tourism destination.

2. Cultural tourism hospitality sector in tourism has the potential to generate additional revenue especially the one gotten from food, and beverages services within the destination. Special care should be made in preparing the cuisines of the people.

3. The destination image of the cultural tourism is the visible act that forms the tourist trip and experiences. Conscious efforts should be made by the communities and stakeholders to sustain, after or develop cultural images of the host community and the state in order to attract or influence subsequent visit. For destination image is the key motivator on travel and tourism participation by tourists.

4. Conscious efforts should be made by the communities, states, nation and tourism stakeholders to develop the various cultural heritages found in the ethnic groups that are viable of establishing tourism industry in Rivers State and Nigeria.

Conclusion

An attempt has been made on this paper to conceptualize cultural tourism and cultural tourism hospitality in tourism operations. Crystal discussion on the various perspectives of hospitality and adoption of a frame work on cultural tourism hospitality were explored. It was observed from the selected cultural tourism festivals that Rivers State and the nation is endowed with rich cultural heritages that can boost and sustain cultural tourism from the various communities and ethnic groups stream lined. Comprehension of the hospitality expressed by the cultural tourism destinations implies that Rivers State is indeed a hospitable state in Nigeria for tourists to visit and be cared for by the communities in the state. And their hospitability can not be overemphasized. Thus, cultural tourism heritages has the potentials that can boost and sustain cultural tourism towards a viable tourism industry if the communities, stakeholders and operators harness the heritages and are encouraged.

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