

CULTURAL TOURISM AND SOCIAL COHESION IN NIGERIA: EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL FOR INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

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Abstract

Nigeria's diverse culture, with over 250 ethnic groups and a history of religious tensions, provides a vibrant environment for exploring the intersection of cultural tourism and social cohesion. This article explores the potential of cultural tourism to promote intercultural dialogue in Nigeria. The study emphasizes the importance of traditional festivals, heritage sites, and community-based tourism in fostering mutual understanding, unity, and shared identity among diverse groups. The researcher used the Osun-Osogbo Festival, the Argungu Fishing Festival, and the Calabar Festival and Carnival as case studies to explore cultural commodification, representation, and inclusivity challenges in the tourism sector. The article highlights the potential of cultural tourism to bridge divides, preserve Nigeria's heritage, and strengthen national unity through sustainable and inclusive tourism practices. The researcher employed secondary documents such as books, journals, and other written materials in writing this article, and a descriptive method of analysis has been adopted. The study contributes to the growing understanding of cultural tourism's role in fostering peace and cohesion in diverse multiethnic societies.

Key words: Cultural tourism, social cohesion, Nigeria, intercultural dialogue.

Introduction

Nigeria is home to over 250 ethnic groups and more than 500 languages, making it one of the most culturally diverse nations in the world. According to National Population Commission [NPC] (2006) the estimated population of Nigeria was 140 million people who are divided into over 250 ethnic clusters with each entity having its own norms, values, beliefs and even languages (Attama et al., 2022). This is likely to influence the ways of living and relationship with people as goals and aspirations in life are often a product of culturally held values. Thus, we must also note that the personal and cultural values, which we

hold, may affect rendering, acceptance, and utilization of sustainable development Inglis (2019). This diversity is expressed through its vibrant festivals, music, colorful attire, dance, indigenous art forms, unique cuisines, and spiritual practices, each unique to different ethnic communities. The three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria are the Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Igbo in the southeast, and the Yoruba in the southwest. Nigeria hosts various cultural festivals with touristic appeal, including the Durbar Festival and Argungu Fishing Festival in the north, Atilogwu Dancers and New Yam Festival in the east, boat regattas in Lagos and Yenagoa, Olofin Festival in Idanre, Olojo Festival at Ile-Ife, Oshun Festival in Osogbo, and the Abuja, Calabar, and River's carnivals. In Nigeria, the Sukur Cultural Landscape and the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove have been designated as World Heritage Sites, while additional sites are on the tentative list for potential nomination. Nigeria is a destination for tourists seeking to experience remarkable cultures. Cultural diversity and participation promote democracy, tolerance, and social cohesion, fostering sustainable development and enhancing people's choices and responsibilities, which are vital for human development. Tourism could help to bring understanding among people from different background.

Intercultural understanding is crucial to prevent conflict and promote social cohesion in tourism, which not only builds national pride but also preserves culture. Transitioning to green societies requires dialogue, tolerance, and cultural diversity to foster understanding, bridge nations, and promote sustainable development, utilizing the world's cultural diversity. Culture encompasses various aspects of life, including daily attire, traditions, beliefs, values, language, worship, emotional experiences, and sources of meaning, beyond just arts and literature (Attama et al., 2022). Attama et al., (2022) emphasize the significance of cultural diversity in sustainable development, highlighting its role in economic growth, promoting adaptability, and enhancing social-ecological resilience. Tourism is a multidisciplinary field involving various human and societal aspects, defined as the temporary act of traveling away from home. Tourism involves the movement of individuals to locations outside their regular residence for at least 24 hours, primarily for leisure or business, excluding employment related activities (World Tourism Organization, 1985). Tourism involves distinct features: a tourist typically stays away from their residence for more than one day, spends money that originates from their home country, and undertakes a journey. Travel and tourism open up individuals or groups to a wide range of cultural principles, each showing its own peculiar

cultural attributes. Tourists have their cultural differences using different means such as; physical visits to sites, videos, and other social media (Oyedele & Akwen, 2025).

Cultural tourism involves traveling to explore a destination's cultural heritage, traditions, art, festivals, and lifestyles. Nigeria's rich heritage is a significant factor in this sector, showcasing ethnic groups' unique traditions and fostering national pride. Cultural tourism, beyond its entertainment value, preserves intangible cultural heritage and facilitates intercultural exchange by allowing tourists to immerse themselves in a particular people's culture (Ejikeme, 2024, p. 56). For Emakunu (2022), cultural tourism involves arts, festivals, rituals, and dance performances that engage participants and tourists, influencing community prosperity and resilience, and promoting shared experiences and identity recognition. Cultural tourism promotes intercultural understanding and heritage conservation, attracting both domestic and international visitors for harmonious experiences. It facilitates interactions during purchases, shared recreational spaces, and information exchange. Cultural heritage enthusiasts who seek to explore and learn about cultural heritages outside their locality are willing to spend their fortunes to satisfy their tourism curiosity (Lawrence, 2014).

In Nigeria, cultural understanding is promoted through cultural tourism events like festivals, fostering appreciation among diverse groups. Festivals, religious or secular, unite people of all social standings by offering an outlet, fostering social cohesion, and reinforcing ties within communities (Lawrence-Hart, 2014). Cultural tourism help reduce cultural misunderstandings by fostering interactions between tourists and local communities, allowing information exchange, and fostering connections during visits to various destinations (Mathabathe, 2019). Cultural festivals foster social unity and understanding by recognizing local traditions and customs, but their impact on diverse cultural contexts is not well understood. This research aims to bridge this knowledge gap by assessing the Osun-Osogbo Festival, the Argungu Fishing Festival, and the Calabar Festival and Carnival as case studies.

Significance of the Study

With over 250 ethnic groups, Nigeria's cultural diversity is one of its greatest strengths but also presents challenges to achieving national harmony. By exploring the role of cultural tourism in fostering social cohesion, the study provides fresh perspectives on how shared cultural experiences can bridge

ethnic and religious divides, promote mutual understanding, and build a stronger, unified nation. At the academic level, this research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on the intersection of tourism, culture, and social cohesion. While much of the existing literature emphasizes the economic benefits of cultural tourism, this study shifts the focus to its sociocultural impact, particularly in multi-ethnic societies like Nigeria. It offers a deeper understanding of how cultural tourism initiatives such as traditional festivals, heritage site preservation, and community-based tourism can act as platforms for dialogue and reconciliation. The insights generated by this study will serve as a foundation for future research in related fields, including peacebuilding, cultural preservation, and sustainable tourism development.

Practically, the findings of this study have significant implications for policymakers and stakeholders in the tourism sector. By identifying successful cultural tourism initiatives and analysing their impact, the study provides actionable recommendations for designing sustainable and inclusive tourism practices. Conclusively, the importance of this study cut across Nigeria to other places of the world, projecting Nigeria into global map and showcasing cultural heritage as a worldwide catalyst for promoting understanding and cooperation.

Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the relationship between cultural tourism and social cohesion in Nigeria. This approach emphasizes understanding the lived experiences of individuals and communities involved in cultural tourism and how these experiences contribute to fostering intercultural dialogue. **Case Studies of the** selection of key cultural tourism events in Nigeria, such as the Osun-Osogbo Festival, Argungu Fishing Festival, and Calabar Carnival. Community-based tourism projects that showcase Nigeria's cultural diversity. Detailed analysis of these events was used to assess the impact of cultural tourism on intercultural dialogue and social cohesion. Secondary data was used by reviewing of the academic literature on cultural tourism and social cohesion in Nigeria. **Purposive Sampling was used in** selection of cultural tourism events and sites that reflect Nigeria's ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity. Inclusion of participants from different regions (e.g., North, South, East, and West) to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Literature Review

Cultural Tourism and Social Cohesion in Nigeria

Cultural tourism is rapidly growing, with many regions developing cultural villages, music, social events, and hospitality to enhance cross-cultural understanding. People are increasingly proud of their cultures and eager to share them, even those who previously lacked pride now seek to promote cross-cultural interactions (Mathabathe, 2019). Tourism is one of the sectors that is the foundation of economic and social development in many countries. The tourism sector provides job opportunities, improve living standards and welfare for the community. Thus tourism sector is believed to have the ability to increase economic growth (Ejikeme, 2024). Culture is viewed by many authors as a crucial foundation of tourism, commonly termed cultural tourism (Amorim et al., 2020). Cultural tourism enriches communities by facilitating cultural exchanges, with events like carnivals and festivals significantly contributing to its development within host communities (Ejikeme, 2024).

Social cohesion is the strength of relationships and the sense of solidarity among members of a society (Rutagard, 2024). It encompasses the willingness of individuals and groups to cooperate for the common good while respecting diversity. Social cohesion is achieved when a society operates in harmony, with a sense of trust, shared purpose, and inclusivity among its members (Rutagard, 2024). SC is defined as a society characterized by essential dimensions including place attachment, collective identity, and social networks (Dekker & Bolt, 2005; Kearns & Forrest, 2000; Mugnano & Palvarini, 2013). For Maxwell (1996), contends that “social cohesion refers to the processes of building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, facing shared challenges, and that they are members of the same community”. It was Schmeets (2012, p. 28) who submitted that Social cohesion ‘describes bonds or ‘glue’ that brings people together in a society, particularly in the context of ethnic diversity’. A twin to the issue of social cohesion is cultural identity, as both are integral to Nigeria's development. For social cohesion to be achieved, Nigeria must be perceived as a unified culture with shared goals. Key components of social cohesion include inclusion and equity, ensuring equal opportunities and resource access for all, irrespective of ethnicity, religion, or socio-economic status. **Social Capital:** Building trust and connections between individuals and communities. **Shared Identity:** Fostering a sense of belonging and a collective national identity while

celebrating diversity. **Mutual Respect and Understanding:** Encouraging dialogue and appreciation of different cultural, ethnic, and religious groups. Culture is a group's "style of living" that is passed down through the generations and includes its values, beliefs, artifacts, behavior, and communication (S. K. Balogun & Obosi, 2018). Different cultural groups possess unique norms, values, and beliefs, leading to diverse perspectives on common issues, as seen across the world's continents, sub-regions, nations, and peoples. Cultural understanding, on the other hand, involves recognizing, respecting, and valuing the diverse cultural backgrounds and practices of individuals within a society. It is an essential component for fostering social harmony and reducing conflicts that arise from cultural differences (Rutagard, 2024).

Yamaguchi (2018) study emphasized the importance of traditional festivals like Matsuri in fostering social cohesion and promoting a stronger, more cohesive society in Japanese communities. Brazil's vibrant carnival celebrations foster social cohesion and cultural understanding, temporarily dissolving social barriers and bringing people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds together (Rutagard, 2024). According to Silva (2019), carnival fosters social cohesion in Brazil by promoting cultural exchange and interaction, fostering appreciation for the country's diverse heritage and bridging social divides.

However, through cultural tourism, culture could be expressed in different communities among the ethnic groups in Nigeria. The tourists who visit the area came from places to witness cultures other than their own. As long as people travel and spend a little time in a place without settling down permanently or engaging in profitable activities, tourism includes all facets of the interactions and phenomena that take place during this time (Guanah, 2020). For World Tourism Organization (2001) tourism is defined as the temporary movement of individuals to destinations outside their usual residence for over 24 hours, without any intention of payment. It includes traveling to engage with cultural events to fulfill one's cultural needs and acquire new information and experiences (Benson, 2014). Culturally motivated', culturally inspired' and 'culturally attracted' tourists are generally high-income visitors who spend several nights at a destination (e.g. visitors to the Salzburg Music Festival). 'Culturally inspired' tourists are attracted to internationally renowned cultural and heritage sites (such as Venice, Versailles, or the Alhambra, in Granada) (Benson, 2014). Culture consists of "12 elements viz: handicrafts, language, traditions, gastronomy, art and music, history, local work

architecture, religion, educational system, dress and leisure activities". Traveling to explore a people's culture is known as cultural tourism. In terms of tourism, culture is seen as a product and a process (Ejikeme, 2024). In many nations, tourism is essential to social and economic advancement because it creates jobs, raises living standards, and improves community welfare (Ejikeme, 2024). Cultural tourism is founded upon cultures through its practices and manifestations. Cultural tourism is said to be an element of community enrichment, thanks to the meeting of different cultures (Ejikeme, 2024). Carnivals and festivals, for example, have a big impact on cultural tourism in host communities by promoting cross-cultural communication and strengthening social bonds (Ejikeme, 2024).

Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Gambia, and Zimbabwe focus on cultural tourism to leverage their cultural heritage, while South Africa, Botswana, Kenya, Tanzania, and Cameroon emphasize ecotourism (Elochukwu et al., 2022). In Nigeria, the case studies chosen by the researcher are known for their cultural expressions which feeds cultural tourism. The Calabar Carnival, the Argungu Fishing Festival, and the Osun-Osogbo Festival are significant. Notable historical sites such as the Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove and the Sukur Cultural Landscape, then community-based tourism projects that showcase Nigeria's cultural diversity. Cultural tourist destinations (CTDs) showcase aspects of society such as the arts, architecture, literature, music, creative industries, historical and culinary legacy, and more (United Nations World Tourism Organization, 2017).

Contributions of Cultural Tourism to Nigeria's Economy and Society

Nigeria's economy and society are greatly impacted by cultural tourism, which makes use of the nation's rich cultural legacy, varied customs, and thriving arts sector. With a wide array of cultural expressions, Nigeria has positioned itself as a hub for cultural exploration and appreciation. Below are the key contributions of cultural tourism to Nigeria's economy and society:

Economic Contributions

1. **Revenue Generation** Cultural tourism generates significant revenue for Nigeria through ticket sales to heritage sites, museums, festivals, and cultural performances. Destinations like the Osun-Osogbo festival, Argungu Fishing Festival, and Calabar Festival and Carnival attract both local and international visitors, contributing to the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Local businesses like tie and dye in a case of

Osun Osogbo enhance community economic growth and development. Local hand fans, baskets, shoes and mats are produced and sell to tourists as souvenirs. These artisans and craft makers receive supports from bank loans and organization in order to provide services and products to the tourists, thereby supporting local entrepreneurship. In the place of selling souvenir to tourists by the local artisans, they exchange views that creates a sense of belonging to both the host (host community) and guest (tourists, visitors, participants).

2. **Job Creation** The cultural tourism in the form of festivals provides employment opportunities across various levels, including tour guides, artisans, performers, and event organizers. Indirect employment is also created in sectors such as hospitality, transportation, and retail.
3. **Foreign Exchange Earnings** By attracting international tourists, cultural tourism generates foreign exchange earnings that help strengthen Nigeria's currency and support economic stability.
4. **Development of Infrastructure** Cultural tourism investments support the construction of roads, lodging facilities, and recreational areas, which benefits nearby towns and raises their standard of living in general.
5. **Support for Local Enterprises** The sale of locally made crafts, textiles, and souvenirs contributes to the growth of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and promotes entrepreneurship within the country.

Social Contributions

1. **Preservation of Heritage** Cultural tourism encourages the preservation and restoration of historical sites, monuments, and traditions, ensuring that Nigeria's cultural legacy is safeguarded for future generations.
2. **Promotion of National Identity** By showcasing Nigeria's diverse cultural heritage, tourism fosters a sense of pride and unity among citizens, strengthening national identity and social cohesion.
3. **Education and Awareness** Cultural tourism provides opportunities for both locals and visitors to learn about Nigeria's history, traditions, and values. This exchange of knowledge enhances cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.
4. **Community Empowerment** Many cultural tourism initiatives are community-driven, empowering local populations to take ownership of their cultural resources and benefit directly from tourism activities.

5. **Promotion of Peace and Stability** By creating platforms for cultural exchange and dialogue, cultural tourism can promote peace, tolerance, and mutual understanding among Nigeria's diverse ethnic groups.

Challenges to Social Cohesion in Nigeria

Nigeria's diverse society contends with significant challenges to social cohesion, including:

Ethnic and Religious Tensions: Nigeria has a history of ethnic and religious conflicts, often rooted in competition for resources, political representation, and historical grievances. Christianity and Islam face crises stemming from cultural ideology, government authority, and property ownership, resulting in media representation and division. This situation fosters discord among ethnic groups such as the Yoruba, Hausa-Fulani, and Igbo.

Historical and Societal Inequality: Systemic inequality was caused by colonial legacies, including unnatural borders and policies established during British control. Socioeconomic inequalities between urban and rural areas intensify feelings of isolation and marginalization. Certain communities suffer from restricted access to economic, healthcare, and educational opportunities, hindering their full societal participation. Consequently, promoting social cohesiveness is critical, as these challenges have often undermined national unity.

Strategies for the Challenges

Cultural tourism is a catalyst for promoting social cohesion in Nigeria by engendering cultural exchange and peacebuilding.

1. **Building Intercultural Understanding:** Some cultural expressions like festivals, heritage site visits, and rural-based tourism, bring people from different cultural setting to appreciate each other's culture. encourage individuals from diverse backgrounds to interact and appreciate each other's traditions. Of important is Argungu festival, Osun Osogbo festival and Calabar Carnival that host participants, tourists and visitors from different places, promoting ethnic inclusiveness and limiting racism. Tourism fosters interaction, which leads to dialogue, ultimately promoting mutual understanding and peace (Kumar, 2017).
2. **Global Recognition:** The cultural events in the communities showcase unity and togetherness. The uniqueness of the different cultural groups

in each region are landmark elements of history projecting Nigeria's cultural heritage to a global recognition. Osun Osogbo grove designated as a UNESCO site is evidence of the global recognition of its cultural significance.

3. **Inclusive Growth:** Bringing the image of cultural heritage of Nigeria to the entire help in educating the mind of people in order to become culturally sensitive of another culture. This ensures inclusive growth and sustainable development.
4. **Economic Growth: All the stakeholders especially the community benefits from cultural tourism.** It is a driver of economic empowerment, especially to the host communities who live around the destination area.
5. **Preservation of Cultural Heritage: Cultural tourism** should ensure that cultural heritage is transferred to future generations, strengthening cultural identity and cohesion.

Intercultural Dialogue Through Cultural Tourism: Tourism is a people-centered industry that promotes interaction across diverse political systems, contributing to national integration and understanding globally. It transcends geographical, caste, color, creed, and linguistic boundaries (Kumar, 2017). Cultural tourism serves as a powerful platform for fostering intercultural dialogue, where individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds engage with and learn about each other's traditions, values, and ways of life. Through shared experiences, cultural tourism breaks down stereotypes, builds mutual respect, and encourages a deeper appreciation of diversity. In a country as culturally diverse as Nigeria, where over 250 ethnic groups coexist, cultural tourism can act as a unifying force, bridging divides and promoting social harmony. By showcasing the richness of Nigeria's cultural heritage, tourism encourages visitors and participants to immerse themselves in local customs, cuisine, art, and history. This interaction not only fosters understanding but also highlights shared human experiences, paving the way for peaceful coexistence and collaboration among different communities.

Intercultural understanding is the harmony experienced when people travel to an alien cultural area (Ejikeme, 2011, p. 177). Ejikeme (2011) emphasized that it is the exchange of cultures that occurs between the tourists and host as a result of them coming into contact. It is a cognitive knowledge and effective attitudes, encompassing understanding one's own culture, other cultures, and their similarities and differences. The degree to which the tourist

process promotes comprehension or misinterpretation. There are two things that might be taken into account when looking at the role of tourism in intercultural understanding. These two factors are the number of visitors vis-à-vis the local population in a given time and how much time the visitors spend in the destination area. The more the length of stay, the greater likelihood of the visitors coming in close contact with the local people, and greater the likelihood of making greater penetration into the social and economic life of the people. There is need for good understanding between the tourist and the host to avoid conflict. Tourist-host encounter happens when the tourist exchange information face-to-face, for example, on a recreational park in a tourist site. As people travel from different parts of the country to witness the Calabar Carnival in Cross River State and the notable Argungu Fishing Festival in Kebbi State, they appreciate one another, thereby promoting understanding among themselves.

Nigeria's tourism industry fosters cultural exchange, as demonstrated by the Abuja carnival, which attracted Egypt, Canada, and India, involving 36 Nigerian states. Tourism plays a crucial role in understanding ourselves and our relationship with the material and non-material worlds through celebrations that showcase diverse cultures and exchange views. Tourism fosters social benefits, broadens interests, and fosters understanding of foreigners' tastes, bringing people from diverse cultural settings, languages, food, morals, and values together. On this note, tourism plays a crucial role in promoting intercultural dialogue, fostering peace, and promoting sustainable tourism development by providing spaces for all cultures to express themselves.

Overview of Osun-Osogbo Festival, the Argungu Fishing Festival, and the Calabar Carnival and Festival

These are festivals that have attained global recognition in Nigeria. According to Quinn (2013), cultural festivals foster community unity, identity, pride, and dialogue through shared practices, promoting mutual understanding and respect through cultural exchange and dialogue. Festivals offer a chance to socialize and connect with individuals from various parts of the world **(Balogun & Nkebem, 2022). They are successful cultural tourism initiatives in Nigeria.**

The Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove – A UNESCO World Heritage Site Fostering Cultural and Spiritual Unity

The Osun Osogbo Festival is an important cultural heritage event and a well-known tourist attraction with significant social, cultural, and economic importance (Asifat et al., 2024). The festival came as a result of Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is a premier ecotourism destination in southwestern Nigeria (Adesunloye & Arowosafe, 2023). It is a revered cultural landscape that embodies the spiritual and traditional values of the Yoruba people, which evolved naturally over time (Lameed et al., 2024). The annual Osun Osogbo Festival, celebrating the goddess of fertility, attracts local and international tourists (Ezenagu, 2020; Orga, 2016), showcasing the potential of sustainable tourism and driving conservative efforts. The Osun-Osogbo festival is a 12-day event that begins in the town palace of the Ataoja, beginning with (Iwopopo) the physical and ritual cleaning of the pilgrimage route from the palace in the center of the town (Gbaeme) to the grove by the royal priestess (Iya Osun) and the priest (Aworo) accompanying the household of the Oba with traditional chiefs, high chiefs, and other notables with dancing and singin. (Orga, 2016). It is the renewal of the spiritual covenant between Osun and other deities of the people (Orga, 2016). The Ataoja is then called into the temple where he sits on the stone throne to offer prayers to Osun with a calabash of sacrifice prepared by the Priestess, the priest, and other relevant Osun devotees (Orga, 2016). After the prayers, the sacrifice is then carried to the river for offering where everyone present begins to pray earnestly to Osun for individual and collective needs at the river-side (Lawrence, 2014). The Osun-Osogbo festival officially comes to an end when the votary maid (Arugba) who is the soul of the festival successfully returns to the Osun shrine in the palace. Two bitter cola nuts are placed in her mouth so that she cannot speak out the wondrous things that fill her mind on visiting Osun, therefore, exposing her fate and subsequently that of Osogbo to hazards of stumbling throughout the following year (Lawrence, 2014; Orga, 2016).

The Osun Osogbo festival is among the numerous religious festivals that have received a huge international following with adherents coming from different parts of the world to pay homage to the Osun River goddess who is believed potent and hold the power to wealth and fertility (Lawrence, 2014). According to Orga (2016), Osun-Osogbo annual festival attracts nearly two hundred thousand (200, 000) visitors. It is a moment of honouring the Yoruba goddess and of fertility and blessing. The festival's significance is yet to be fully

understood, particularly its social cohesion and intercultural dialogue among tourists and local communities. Osun Osogbo festival is a yearly celebration which normally occurred along the river Osun. The annual August event, centered on the sacred Osun river goddess grove, allows people from far and near to Osogbo to flow, earning UNESCO recognition (Probst, 2011). The festival promotes intercultural dialogue and understanding among tourists and participants, while also facilitating economic activities and promoting respect for Yoruba beliefs and practices. Asifat et al. (2024) highlight the economic benefits of the Osun-Osogbo festival, including increased income, employment, and appreciation of local crafts, thereby benefiting local communities. The Osun-Osogbo Festival significantly impacts Osogbo's socio-cultural life by showcasing local artisans' craft works, attracting visitors, and boosting demand for local products and hotels. Asifat et al. (2024) found that stakeholders, including organizers and site priests, view the Osun Osogbo festival as a significant cultural and ecological event.



Plate 2: The Arugba carry symbolic statues of Osun during the annual festival in her honour in Osogbo.
Source: shutterstock.com



Plate 1: 500 Osun Osogbo Royalty during Osun Osogbo Festival at Osun River.
Source: shutterstock.com



Plate 3: Foreign Devotees during Osun Osogbo Festival

Source: shutterstock.com

Calabar Festivals and Carnival – A Platform for Cross-Cultural Exchange and Celebration

The Calabar Festival, an annual event in Cross River State, attracts a diverse group of individuals, including tourists, investors, business people, and politicians, promoting socio-economic development (Ajijias et al., 2024). Carnival Calabar, dubbed "Africa's Biggest Street Party," is the festival's most significant component, a hybrid cultural spectacle combining African heritage and foreign sensibilities. It takes place from December 26th to 27th, showcasing music, dance, drama, and visual creativity (Endong, 2017). Carnival Calabar, Africa's largest cultural festival, features over 50,000 costumed revelers and 50,000 spectators, featuring five bands: Bayside, Freedom, Master Blaster, Passion 4, and Seagull (Endong, 2017). Each is headed by a leader who in consultation with prominent band leaders develops a guiding philosophy for the operations of the groups (Andrew & Ekpenyong, 2012). Oliveira (2020) found that the Carnival plays a significant role in promoting social cohesion by providing a platform for social interaction and cultural exchange. The festival also promotes cultural understanding by showcasing Brazil's rich cultural diversity, helping to bridge social divides and foster a sense of unity.

The Calabar Festival, an annual 32-day Christmas celebration in Calabar, Nigeria, begins on November 30th with a tree lighting ceremony and concludes with an interdenominational service on January 31st (Endong, 2017). The festivals typically feature various activities such as HIV/AIDS sensitization campaigns, musical concerts, cultural events, football

competitions, beauty pageants, fashion shows, culinary competitions, dance competitions, and carnival essay competitions (Endong, 2017). The Calabar Music Festival features various musical concerts, gospel events, and recreational activities like Nativity Play, Carol Night, Funkadelik, and Governor's Masked Fete, showcasing the region's diverse cultural heritage.

The Calabar Festival attracts large numbers of tourists, contributing to economic growth, with attendance increasing from 1.6 million in 2015 to 3.2 million in 2017 (Obijuru, 2023). The festival typically attracts attendees of all ages and features performances by various groups from the Cross-River Regions, national groups, and international participants, showcasing diverse cultural expressions from Africa and around the world (Ajake & Amalu, 2012; Amalu & Ajake, 2014). The Calabar Festival, excluding the ticketed Miss Africa beauty pageantry, attracts international visitors with free events, attracting spectators from all cultures and nations (Andrew, Agibe and Eneh, 2014). The event includes city walks, floats, dances, music, traditional masquerade performances, motorbike displays, a carnival, and competitions like as beauty pageantry and cultural parades. It has been covered by GOG Africa, NTA Calabar, and DSTV/Multichoice.



**Plate 4: Calabar Festival and Carnival - Africans
Largest Street Party.
Source: Tripadvisor, Transcorp Hotels, 2025**

Argungu Fishing Festival – Promoting Unity and Community Engagement Through Shared Traditions

Argungu Fishing Festival is probably one of the most eloquent efforts by an African people to relive and maintain a significant feature of its socio-cultural

heritage (Asogwa et al., 2012). It is an annual event that takes place in Argungu town, Kebbi State of Nigeria. The fishing festival in Argungu, Nigeria, began in 1934 as a tribute to the Sultan of Sokoto, and has since grown to attract 500,000 spectators and media coverage from around the world (Dantata, 2007). Argungu's cultural extravaganza features a bare-hand fishing competition among thousands of fishermen, promoting life, conserving natural resources, and preserving traditional life. This event serves as a precursor to modern fishery management measures (Asogwa et al., 2012).



Plate 5: Argungu Fishing Festival.
Source: (Mohammed, 2020)



Plate 6: The largest fish during Argungu Fishing Festival
Source; Getty Image

The Role of Cultural Tourism in Fostering Mutual Understanding and Respect

- 1. Promotes Oneness and Reduces Conflict:** Tourism is one of the most successful global industries, it has not only made economic contributions, but also has created a harmonious ground for all people to exchange cultures, understand each other and cooperate (Neupane, 2013). Tourism fosters social justice, equality, and human rights, promoting peace and fostering a strong economy, opportunities for all, and sustainability, thus contributing to a more peaceful society (Neupane, 2013). Cultural tourism connects people from diverse regions, fostering cultural exchange and exchange of views, but its limitations stem from exaggerated conception, erroneous interpretation, and adverse judgment. **For instance, during festivals like Osun Osogbo, Calabar Carnival, and Argungu Fishing Festival, the host communities come together to understand and share beliefs, developing trust and reducing opposition. This helps to soft-pedal conflict of culture to zero in a country with religious tension.**

2. **Fosters Shared Identity and Dignity in Cultural Heritage:** Cultural tourism help individuals to appreciate their boundaries and understanding their cultural unity. In Argungu Fishing Festival, the cultural system of Hausa and Fulani people are showcased all over the world, in spite of the diversities in ethnic group. The participants become friends and learn from each other's, thereby havng a shared identity. From coming together of visitors and participants and host communities, each individual will come to the knowledge that all the cultures put together is what made Nigeria a great country instead of paying attention to ethnic separations. This creates a stronger sense of national solidarity and unity.
3. **Enhance Global Recognition:** Cultural tourism brings the rich culture of Nigerian people to global recognition. This attracts international engagement and investment that contribute to the national togetherness and integrity. Through cultural tourism products the positive aspects of Nigerian heritage resources are shown and appreciated by the whole world. Osun Osogbo Festival, Calabar Carnival and Argungu Fishing Festival are among if not major events that are globally recognized bringing Nigeria to limelight. This has a way of connecting Nigeria to other countries for international cultural events, art exhibitions and festivals. On this, hospitality as a sub-sector within tourism that deals with accommodation, food, and guest services expand economically trough cultural tourism. Other branches (transport, attractions, events) work together with hospitality to create the complete tourist experience. Tourism cannot function without hospitality (no lodging, no meals, no care), and hospitality drives because tourism (guest and visitors). The money realized from tourists especially international tourist assist in cultural heritage preservation and empowering the indigenous communities. The revenue also adds to economic base of the states and the country at large.

Mechanisms for Promoting Intercultural Dialogue

1. **Festivals and Celebrations: This creates an opportunity for people to come from different areas to experience culture**
 - **Osun-Osogbo Festival:** Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove festival is an annual festival that revolves around the Ataoja and Osogbo people. Ataoja is

the high priest of the Osun grove. It is the renewal of the mystic bonds between Osun and other deities of the people (Ejikeme, 2022). Both domestic and international tourist come to witness the unique nature of the festival. The event attracts thousands of local and international participants. This strengthens the cultural identity of the host community, which promotes unity among the visitors and participants.

- **Argungu Fishing Festival:** This is an annual festival that x-rays the outstanding culture of Kebbi State. Visitors have the avenue in experiencing Hausa cultural resources like cuisine, food and craft.
 - **Calabar Carnival:** This is the biggest African Street Party exhibiting Nigeria's cultural diversity. The colourful costumes, performances and parades from diverse ethnic groups in Nigeria attracts tourists and visitors globally to appreciate the traditions of communities other than their own, thus, bringing mutual respect and understanding.
2. **Sustainable Tourism:** Sustainable tourism has emerged as a vital strategy in balancing environmental conservation with socio-economic development, particularly in culturally significant destinations (Asifat et al., 2025). This is through adopting responsible tourism is an approach that shape tourism as a catalyst in promoting environmental conservation, socio-cultural preservation and empowerment of local communities. Hawking of goods during the festival arena leads to indiscriminate dumping of waste and pollution of the sacred site and reduces its cultural and religious significance. Visitors are eager to experience culture that is different from theirs. It encourages tourists to respect local cultures, environments, and communities. Local communities should be positioned to benefit from tourism activities through community-based tourism and local interaction.
- **Community Accommodation:** At times during the events, tourists decide to lodge in community owned lodges and accommodation with profits directly benefiting the community. They form a bond as they participate on traditional activities with the locals. Corporate organizations, and governments (local, state, and federal) should provide accommodations near the festival site, generating revenue and creating job opportunities (Asifat et al., 2024).

- **Encourage of Local Products:** Tourists usually buy souvenir and depend on local foods when they visit a destination area. This encourages more production of local crafts and awakening of the dead ones (Ejikeme, 2022).
 - **Service Providers and Local Guides:** The local community are engaged as drivers, security personnel, semi-skilled workers, food vendors and local tourist's guides. This generates income for the local people. Visitors' interaction with the host community fosters intercultural understanding.
3. **Preserving Cultural Heritage:** Tourists are motivated by visiting a destination area with a different culture other than their own. The religious duties of the sites bloom the history of the study area. And upon this religious or spiritual aura is the site sustained.
- **Sukur Cultural Landscape and Osun-Osogbo Sacred Grove:** Both sites were listed as World Heritage sites (WHS) in Nigeria. The two sites are important components of the environment, they are viewed in two perspectives, one as a symbol of religion and secondly as natural topographical landscape sites in form of relief features such as forest and rivers (Osun River) (Ejikeme, 2022). For instance, Osun Osogbo Sacred Grove serves as a pilgrimage for the worshipers of the Osun goddess, while tourist visits Sukur to witness an aesthetic landscape. The tourism potentials of the two sites are rich enough for tourism development in Nigeria. Visitors develop a deeper understanding of the community's religious and cultural heritage when they visit the sites engendering social cohesion.

Recommendations for Leveraging Cultural Tourism as a Tool for Unity in Nigeria

To fully harness the potential of cultural tourism as a tool for unity, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Community Participation:** The very community that provides the attractions and cultural richness should benefit from tourism. This is crucial in sustainable tourism development. The local communities should be involved in decision making process.
2. **Cultural Education and Awareness:** Cultural awareness should be created to educate the host community the importance of the cultural

resources in their locality. The visitors are not left out in the awareness programme in order to sensitize the importance of respecting another people's culture. Government should implement educational programme in schools, from primary, secondary and tertiary institutions that promotes cultural sensitivity. Modood (2016) demonstrated that multicultural education programs in schools significantly improved students' cultural awareness and acceptance of different ethnic groups. These programs not only promote cultural understanding but also play a crucial role in reducing prejudices and fostering a more inclusive society.

3. **Collaboration and Sustainable Policies:** The government of Nigeria at all levels should collaborate with the policy makers in order to create inclusive sustainable framework for cultural tourism. Waste management and environmental conservation policies should be established. Foster partnerships between government agencies, local communities, and private sector stakeholders to promote sustainable tourism development.
4. **Infrastructure Development:** The provision of infrastructure and community amenities such as roads, transports, communication, water supply and recreational facilities sustains tourists to a destination.

Conclusion

The paper discussed how cultural tourism creates an environment for intercultural dialogue. Three festival events, Osun-Osogbo Festival, Calabar Carnival and Festival, and Argungu Fishing Festival were x-rayed in order to understand the subject matter. These festivals are rich cultural heritage and national pride that has contributed immensely to the development of cultural tourism in Nigeria. These events are global events that attracts both domestic and international tourists, thereby projecting the image of Nigeria to global recognition. Usually, tourists are motivated by visiting a destination with a different culture than their own. During the visits, the participants, tourist and visitors and the host communities interact when they come face to face and this fosters a sense of unity among them. The local communities witness cultural exchange, economic growth and sustainable development their area through cultural tourism. This reveals that the festivals influence is beyond economic benefits, as it promotes cultural tourism as a driver for social cohesion and intercultural dialogue.

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