

Calabar Carnival: Visualizing cultural authenticity and the paradigm of the street

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Calabar Festival and Carnival is an elaborate yearly event, a form of cultural syncretism that is a mix of indigenous cultures and performance traditions, and Black Atlantic carnival aesthetics. The carnival was initiated by the state government with the intent to establish Cross River State, Nigeria as a tourist destination and to build a cultural-tourism economy. The festival is a secular, cultural event driven by the state's fiscal scheme and the mechanism of planning and operation. The festival features as one aspect of a bigger project of tourism economy, and was initiated as a "healthy mix of business and leisure" (Onor 2015: 45) (fig. 1).

The Calabar Festival and Carnival started in 2004 by the political will of a regime led by Mr. Donald Duke who was the civilian governor of Cross River State between 1999 and 2007. The festival/carnival is a 30/31-day event. The event takes place on the streets of Calabar, a one-time slave-port with heavy traffic among people of south-eastern Nigeria during the trans-Atlantic slave trade in the Bight of Biafra. Calabar is now the metropolitan and political capital of Cross River State, Nigeria. Certain aspects of the festival take place beyond the street: at the Calabar Stadium; Eleven-Eleven arena; Calabar Cultural Centre and later the Calabar Municipal Local Government ground where the popular Carnival Village Market is positioned. In 2004/2005, the carnival was originally dubbed "Calabar Carnival Extravaganza" by the organisers, where a few "paradeliike walk-about" revelers displayed symbols of different tourism sites and other forms and symbols of government projects with very sparse costuming (Carlson 2010: 47).

This hybridized cultural "package" has grown in leaps and bounds as well as scope. It currently comprises a range of several indigenous and Caribbean cultural aesthetics, dance, parade, music, costumes, floats, drama, masquerades, and events tourism, with a strong presence and media coverage by some local, national and international media outfits like GOGA Africa,

NTA Calabar and DSTV/Multichoice. Performances are orchestrated by different groups from the Cross-River Regions, different national groups, with a strong element of international participation, group performance and reveling, represented by different cultural groups from Africa and beyond. The carnival is built around five localised competing bands: Bayside Band, Passion 4 Band, Freedom Band, Seagull Band and Master Blasta Band that compete yearly for prominence and are scored by an adjudicating committee. Intermittently, other ceremonial band groups like the Governor's Band are allowed to perform in certain years. Other contemporary entertainment events and popular performances grace the carnival at different gravity each year.

Calabar Festival and Carnival has over the past 15 years “metamorphosed” culturally and has developed complex layers of performance and aesthetics. By 2019, Calabar Festival and Carnival has morphed from its simple origin into an elaborate festival with ranges of complex multiple components, global spotlight and universal participation of about a million people yearly (Onnar 2019) (fig. 2). The complexity of this festival, its hybridities, its international representations, the preponderance of visual practices, its resonance with Black Atlantic carnival genres, as well as its strong governmental/capitalist inclination attuned to cultural commodification, call for a detailed scholastic investigation.ⁱ (fig. 3).

Since 2004, the festival/carnival is taken seriously by the Cross River State government and is seen as “a vector for the commercialization of culture” (Onor 2015: 45). It is now one of the weathering components of a withering touristic project. At its origin, the idea was based on utilizing an existing Calabar performance culture and indigenous philosophies in relation to festivals, masquerading and cultural parades and extending these to create a tourism template that would attract a global audience and would eventually help to diversify a mono-economic dependence on “oil money”. The carnival appropriated an existing cultural tradition of Efik

people known as *mbre ukabare-isua* (the popular Christmas celebrations in the Cross-River region, which has been around since the early 19th century), to remake an elaborate modernized and hybridized festival. In this carnival, as in many other festivals, the street plays a prominent role in performance and visibility. It remains a space of convergence where culture, visibility, creativity, economy, and the secular meet and entangle, creating changes and movements in cultural, political and visual aesthetics (fig. 4, 5 and 6).

In this photo essay, I draw from my photographic archive produced during fieldwork in Calabar Nigeria in 2019. My photographic and fieldwork experience in Calabar was reminiscent of my years of earning a livelihood in the port-city in the early 2000s, imbued with the tensions between environmental beauty and insecurity. I positioned myself as a “visual griot,” (as both a producer and an archivist). I attempted to document a history of contemporary Calabar Carnival in a visual form (Keller 2008). The archive is made up of over a thousand photographs produced within about 30 days of intense fieldwork on the streets of Calabar, and in a cultural terrain that is known for its social, economic and political instability. The outcomes of this instability are the preponderance of gross infrastructural dilapidation, economic hardship and a playout of different forms of administrative bottlenecks, “subtle” and physical violence, such that mobility and accessibility to spaces became very difficult, and respondents were sometimes unavailable. The archive is a performative outcome of energized photographic practice. The photographs in this archive represent not only the love of the art and “act of photography” (Edwards 2001: 3), but also the will to survive economic and social precarities during an intractable pandemic.ⁱⁱ The photographs in this essay are carefully selected in an attempt at narrating the different layers of aesthetics and performance on the streets, and the meanings and representations of a morphing African performance tradition (fig. 7).

My focus in this photo essay is primarily on Calabar Carnival, one core component of the elaborate 31-32 days Calabar Festival and Carnival. My essay considers how Calabar Carnival, and the street, have become contested landscapes where performative visual technologies engage with social, cultural, and political entanglements. This essay shows how the street has become an important component in the making of history, in the creation, performance and consumption of culture, and in curating and advancing visual practices, performances and technologies. I consider how photography functions as making “raw history” (Edwards 2001: 5), creating documents of a carnival of culture (fig. 8). However, the visual documentation of carnival by both local and international media networks like Multichoice/DSTV, professional photographers, amateur “vernacular photographers,” revelers, visitors and residents as well as researchers like myself is so prolific that we can also experience the event as a “carnival of photos” (fig. 9 and fig. 10). The street functions as a re-spatialized landscape through which culture is intensely visualized, and visibility is performed, curated and exhibited, and through which revelers, tourists and participants experience an “aura of authenticity” (Couldry 2005: 66-67) in relation to carnival participation and a modernized cultural engagement (fig. 11). Multiple photographic technologies, including aerial photography and the production of the larger festival landscape through the use of drone photography, are exhibited (fig. 12). Still and moving images produced through nascent technologies have been broadcast across several online platforms. This virtual repository and circulation of images stimulates viewers additionally through live feeds, social media platforms and television production. Social media repositories have become virtual sites for the circulation of carnival images in real time, thus extending carnival performance, participation and animation beyond its real time and beyond the cultural spatiality of the street.

The visual landscape of carnival is laced with vibrant aesthetic and performative scenes that are well-suited for photography. Intermittent shutter sounds and flashes flicker within each second. Hands popping out from the crowd and focusing phone cameras on certain picturesque targets are very common. Cameramen representing different media institutions stand amidst masqueraders, performers and spectators with their tripods ready to “shoot” and to record carnival videos. These images and videos are either posted on real-time transmission or are used at a later stage on several social media handles. Commercial street photographers also position their mobile studios at the margins of the streets and cultural arenas in search of patrons who want a document of the day and the people they shared it with. The images and videos produced during these events also jostle for dominance, relevance and patronage on virtual platforms, commercial branding and on several print media outlets (fig. 13 and fig. 14).

In this era of image proliferation, visual craze and digitization represented by the abundance of sophisticated digital cameras, camera phones and virtual storage applications, the boundaries of visibility have been loosened, with frequent obstacles overcome in the context of photographic technology, image production and manipulation, virtual participation, digital storage application, and seamless, immediate and uncontrollable circulation of images along internet networks. Leslie Witz argues that cultural productivities like performance, dance, floats, masquerades, touristic spectacles, as well as the visuals produced during festivals are by themselves “domains of historical representation” which can “articulate with each other” to offer analytical landscapes for the “production of history” (Leslie Witz 2003: 7) (fig. 15).

In this sense, and particularly in Calabar Carnival, the street becomes the curatorial stage for the interplay between cultural authenticity and invention, as well as between the secular and the vulgar. Carnival, and by extension the street, has become an arena for sociocultural and

political entanglement, a site for differentiated sociocultural contestations, politico-economic engagements, a space for international cultural diplomacy and a landscape for performative visual technologies and a different form of curatorial practices (fig. 16).

I consider how the street has also been a contested space where the “displays of excess and grotesque” (Bakhtin 1984: 18-24) tangle with power through the excessive and outrageous costuming of participating government officials, the flagrant display of wealth by state officials in different forms and the public exhibition of political control. The Calabar Carnival brings political power to the street and extends the spatiality of administrative control beyond the confines of political secretariats and administrative structures. It displays the divisions and hierarchies that exist in the society, and lays out the street as a “landscape of power” (Zukin 1991: 232). In the street of Calabar, during Calabar Carnival, power relations persist and follow the social dynamic of “dominance and subordination in modern capitalist societies” (Lears 1985: 567). Because of the capitalist economic motivation of the state’s political elites and their supporters, who institute, organize, and direct the carnival on their own terms, the “subalterns” or the masses follow through a hegemonic system, with minor forms of unrecognized resistance from the margins. (fig. 17).

While the streets are laced with different forms of colour, costume, sound, and performance that are either cultural, technical or sophisticated stunts, as well as arts, creativity, entertainment and commerce, the mechanism of power exhibited by agencies of government are also very prominent and easily noticeable, thus placing them “at the borderline between politics and aesthetics” (Esther Peeren 2007: 69). There are also the voices of dissidents heralded in the streets (seemingly unheard), pointing to governmental negligence and misappropriation of public funds evidenced by a plethora of dilapidated and abandoned infrastructures, poverty, insecurity

and the spate of violent political acts perpetrated in the port capital city in recent years. During Calabar Carnival, the street becomes a converging space where cultural authenticity and invention, the secular and the vulgar, and cultural and visual performance, as well as local, national and international identities, and an “unnoticed” voice of dissent contest for dominance, while also converging to create a “multifocal spectacle” of a complex carnival.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Calabar Carnival forms part of my doctoral dissertation research: “The politics of aesthetics and performance: Visuality and the remaking of culture in the Calabar Festival and Carnival, 2004 - 2019.

ⁱⁱ Covid-19 commenced its worldwide spread in December 2019.

Figure Captions

All photos by the author

1. A reveler taking a selfie during the carnival. These forms of photographic performances were rife during the carnival. The background is laced with revelers adorned with colourful costumes, a reflection of Black Atlantic carnival aesthetic.

Calabar Carnival, December 28-29, 2019

2. A Bangladesh troupe posed for a photograph as they prepared to participate in the international carnival that was held across the night. Bangladesh was one of the 33 international groups that participated and performed during the carnival in 2019.

Calabar Carnival, December 28-29, 2019

3. The executive governor of Cross River State, Prof Ben Ayade (center) speaking and praying to “flag off” or start the Calabar Carnival. He is flanked by his wife, Dr. Linda Ayade (right) and Mrs. Owanari Duke (wife of Mr. Donald Duke, former governor of Cross River State) (left) and Professor Ivara Esu (deputy governor of Cross Rover State) and his wife (far right). Colorful ribbons await the ceremonial cutting. Beaded and feathered crowns are worn by these political elites during the carnival. The crown’s type and specific design were worn only by senior political elites and a few of their cohorts as a way of defining class and rank, to invoke power and identity, and a strong element of capitalistic propensity.

Calabar Carnival, December 28, 2019

4. Local carnival revelers performing to hip hop music played by a popular DJ mounted on the float and adorning Caribbean style carnival costumes. Dancers moved to these sounds with sophisticated dance styles and choreographic dexterity.

5. Young members perform choreographed dance routines during the carnival. As much as Calabar carnival is a local cultural affair, it incorporates other forms of popular culture like hip hop choreography to advance its global positioning.

Calabar Carnival, December 28-29, 2019

6. The Passion 4 Float entitled “Homosaepiens: Paradox of a Double Helix” is decorated with a sophisticated sculpture of a warring male and an amorous lady mounted spirally, and in

fact spinning as the float moves. The float was used to tell a story of the complexity of humanity. Spectators are also looking at and taking photographs of this complex float.

Calabar Carnival, December 28-29, 2019

Calabar Carnival, December 28-29, 2019

7. A biker and his passenger performing during the 2019 Bikers' Carnival, part of the Calabar Carnival/Festival events. The Biker's Carnival is an elitist performance where money and fame is performed on the street, showcasing sophisticated and expensive Harley Davidson bikes, other popular and latest brands, and some customized bikes. The Bikers Carnival was introduced in 2015 as a means of introducing a new layer of aesthetic to the carnival and to further attract international participation.

Calabar Carnival, December 27, 2019

8. One of the Seagull Band's floats entitled "Endangered Species." The sculpture demonstrates the tendencies of "toxic masculinity" where the male figure reaches out to violate a minor. This float is telling the story of the inhumanity of man against man, it also affirms the call for all to embrace "humanity" which the state governor, Professor Ben Ayade calls "the greatest religion of all" during his flag off speech. The floats try to demonstrate and document the theme of the carnival each year.

Calabar Carnival, December 28-29, 2019

9. Participant taking a selfie with musicians in the background. Different forms of photographic performance on the street.

Calabar Carnival, December 28-29, 2019

10. Mr. Rahim, who is from Pakistan, takes a selfie during the 2019 Bikers' Carnival.

Calabar Carnival, December 27, 2019

11. A reporter for a local media station is positioned at the center of a group of dancers from the Seagull band performing "humanity," the theme of 2019 carnival through their costuming.

The Caribbean feather crowns and a basket of fruit attached to the costumes intend to demonstrate the generosity and productivity of the group.

Calabar Carnival, December 28, 2019

12. Mr. Edem and his team of photographers directing their drone with their ground cockpit. New photographic technologies like drones were used by individuals and media houses to compete for prominence in business patronage and social media posting of carnival photographs and videos. The background shows food vendors engaging in different forms of trade, a mixture of visuality and business.

13. Two participants posing for a photograph taken by one of the street photographers behind a backdrop stationed on the street.

Calabar Carnival, December 28-29, 2019

14. Photographers stand street-side and document a group depicting the injustice of war with their float of dynamite and dancers who wear shirts imitating amulet-covered Ghanaian *batakari* tunics. Notice the street functioning as a space of convergence of different forms of aesthetics.
Calabar Carnival, December 28-29, 2019

15. A reporter for a local media station interviews a dancer. Notice the Caribbean costume style popularly adopted in the carnival.
Calabar Carnival, December 28-29, 2019

16. Political elites with their cliques parading the street during the carnival with photographers jostling for images. Photographic performance comes in diverse forms: from street photography to vernacular amateurism, to professional media productions and the use of contemporary technologies like drones to create complicated and complex festival and visual landscapes.
Calabar Carnival, December 28-29, 2019

17. The yearly inauguration and organization of each carnival event is a political affair led by elites to assert their presence. They are meanwhile creating opportunities for economic empowerment for Calabar residents and the adjoining communities. Here, Hon. Gabriel Onah, Chairman of the Calabar Carnival Commission addresses the crowd and introduces the governor during the “flag off” or starting event.
Calabar Carnival, December 28-29, 2019

18. Detail from the Passion 4 Float entitled “Homosaepiens: Paradox of a Double Helix.” Notice the lady with a heart as a sign of love, while the man is flouting his morning star club. The spinning couple’s proximity to each other evokes the act of fornication. Notice observers at the background engaging in different acts of photography
Calabar Carnival, December 28-29, 2019

19. A member of the Vietnamese entourage during the Calabar Carnival street parade. A manifestation of international identity on the street.
Calabar Carnival, December 28-29, 2019.

20. The Cross River State Library in its dilapidated state was used as a preparatory and construction ground for one of the bands – Passion 4. Carnival preparations and rehearsals are taken seriously by the competing bands. They are always done in secret, kept from the view of other groups so as to avoid being “impersonated” by other bands. As a photographer, I was denied entry into secret practice spaces. I was asked to leave with the claim that I might be a spy for other band groups. Notice the dilapidated structures of the State library in Calabar now in a state of comatose: in a regime where the state governor and his deputy are professors in the academia.
Calabar Carnival, December 28-29, 2019