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STAGING TRADITION; THE IMPACT OF MODERNIZATION ON FESTIVAL PERFORMANCE IN NZEM BEROM, PUUS KAAT, AND BIT GOEMAI, NORTH-CENTRAL NIGERIA

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Abstract
This study examines the impact of modernisation on the structure, meaning, and performance of three major traditional festivals in North-Central Nigeria: Nzem Berom (Berom), Puus Kaat (Mwaghavul), and Bit Goemai (Goemai). Anchored in Performance Theory and Ritual Theory, the study investigates the extent to which contemporary transformations represent cultural erosion, continuity, or adaptive evolution within indigenous performance traditions. Employing a qualitative ethnographic research design, data were generated through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and oral historical accounts collected from traditional custodians, performers, and community elders. The analysis focuses on changes in ritual symbolism, performative aesthetics, music, dance, costume, masquerade, audience participation, and the influence of external forces such as Christianity, urbanisation, formal education, tourism, digital media, and globalisation. The findings reveal that these festivals have undergone significant transformations in both form and function while retaining their central role as repositories of indigenous knowledge, collective memory, and cultural identity. Although certain ritual practices have declined or been reinterpreted to accommodate contemporary religious and social realities, the festivals continue to function as dynamic cultural performances that negotiate tradition and modernity through selective adaptation and creative innovation. Rather than signalling the disappearance of indigenous cultural heritage, modernisation has generated hybrid performance forms that reflect both resilience and continuity within changing socio-cultural contexts. The study concludes that the sustainability of these festivals depends on deliberate documentation, intergenerational transmission, community participation, and supportive cultural policies aimed at safeguarding Nigeria's intangible cultural heritage in the face of rapid social transformation.

Keywords: Modernisation; Traditional Festivals; Cultural Transformation; Ritual Performance.

Introduction

Traditional festivals in Africa operate as dense cultural formations in which ritual, performance, and social meaning converge. Among the Berom, Mwaghavul, and Goemai of North-Central Nigeria, festivals such as Nzem Berom, Puus Kaat, and Bit Goemai function as embodied sites of collective memory, identity construction, and cosmological expression. These events are not merely celebratory; they encode systems of belief, reaffirm social hierarchies, and sustain communal continuity across generations.

Ethnographic Backgrounds The Mwaghavul: Puus Kaat

According to Joseph Dahip in *Towards a Mwaghavul History: An Exploration*: The Mwaghavul are located within the Central Zone of present-day Plateau State, Nigeria, and are among the larger ethnic groups in the state, alongside the Berom, Ngas, and Goemai. They are largely found in Mangu Local Government Area and in the western fringes of Pankshin Local Government Area. According to the 1963 census, their population was estimated at 59,623.

Their indigenous area of abode covers approximately 3,268 square kilometers on the high Plateau region, located between latitude 8°30′N and 10°10′N, and longitude 8°30′E and 10°00′E. Although secondary migrations have led to Mwaghavul settlements in Shendam, Quan Pan, Langtang South, Wase Local Government Areas of Plateau State, as well as in Saminaka and Zaria in Kaduna State. These Mwaghavul communities still owe traditional allegiance and trace their ancestry to their original homeland.

The Northern part of the area lies on the Plateau but slopes down toward a narrow southern wedge, where the landscape becomes rocky, characterized by granite outcrops and volcanic formations, with narrow valleys as common features. The climate is semi-temperate, with an average annual rainfall of about 1,400 mm.

Geographically, the Mwaghavul are bounded to the east and southeast by the Ngas and Mupun, both in Pankshin Local Government Area; to the Northeast by the Pyem (of Mangu LGA) and the Kadung (of Pankshin LGA, with Badni as a district in Chanso Ward of Mangu LGA); and to the North by the Berom of Barkin Ladi. To the west, they are bordered by the Ron and Mushere of Bokkos Local Government Area, while to the south they are bounded by the Kofyar Federation of Qua'an Pan Local Government Area. (Dahip, 2011, P. 18).

The Goemai: Bit Goemai

John P. Nkwap asserts that the Goemai people predominantly live on the southern plains of the

Jos Plateau. They are found within the present-day Shendam and Quaʻan Pan Local Government Areas of Plateau State, with many of them also indigenously found in Langtang South LGA of the state, and some in Awe LGA of Nasarawa State. They are on the northern part of the Middle Benue Valley, which is almost in the geographical center of Nigeria, a location commonly referred to as the Lowland because of its relatively low topography.

The land is generally flat and undulating, with rocky outcrops and buttresses here and there.

The Goemai geographical area is bordered by Ibi in Taraba State to the south, Qua‟an Pan LGA to the east, Pankshin LGA to the north, and Mikang LGA to the west.

Shendam is located on 8°53′N, 9°32′E. It has an area of 2,477 square kilometers and a population of 208,017 at the 2006 census" (Nkwap, 2022, P. 4)

The Bit Goemai is an annual festival celebrated by the Goemai people on the 26th of December. "*Bit*" mean "day", and "*Goemai*" means "humans". Take together, it translates "day of humans or Goemai (the people) day". The festival's main goal is to foster unity and restore oneness of purpose among the Goemai people. It is organized by the Goemai Unity and Development Organization (GUDO) every year.

The Berom: Nzem Berom

According to an online source: A renowned Berom historian who also fought for the British Empire during world war ll, Late Da Nyam Kanang says the Berom originally started from Rome and made their way southward into Africa, in search for land and glory and being led by key animals like the Chwei (Leopard), Murum (Lion), Gbwin (Elephant), Kwaya (Hedgehog), Bogwom (Gorilla), Gwom (Python), Kangyang (Gazelle), Yop (Bushbaby), Tok (Fish), Bot (Frog), Tsok (Toad) Gyang (Mouse), etc.

They had brief stops over the Kanem Borno territories and then for a longer than brief stay in Sokoto (the reason for their reffering to the Buzus as ' playmates'). They then moved and found a new home on the plains of the Jos Plateau.

According to history, the Beroms, who walked the lands from as far as Jengre (where they had a shrine) through to Jos (Jishe), Dogon Dutse, Chwel Nyapp (with another shrine there), Du (later), Foron, Riyom, Gwol Barikin Ladi (also later during the Tin mining days), met a solitary neighbour living to the East of Jishe, the Gwong or Anaguta, a small farmer population content on their land. Because of the hunter/gatherer disposition of the Berom man who spent long periods in the forests going after animals, he became more in touch with nature and by key implication, the spirit world. Like the Native American Indians, the Beroms integrated with such entities, birthing the Kwit (spiritism) culture. (BECO.Org n.d. Para. 2).

BECO. Org says, "The influx of Christianity and western Education paved way for many socio-cultural changes in Berom culture. The changes devalued the rich culture of the people bringing serious predicament of a severe social and cultural crisis. In order to avoid the danger of losing the socio-cultural practice of their ancestor, and the overall precolonial activities such as the Mandyeng, Nshok, Worom Chun, Vwana, ceremonies were brought into a single umbrella festival called Nzem Berom in 1980/81. Nzem Berom is held within the first week of April, to coincide with the period when Mandyeng, Nshok and Badu Festival are held. The Nzem is a period when different cultural displays are exhibited from different parts of Berom land, especially in music, dance, arts and culture. It historically marks the beginning of the planting season and the end of the marriage season (BECO. Org, n.d. Para. 17).

Problem

The expansion of modernization, through Christianity, Western education, urbanization, and global media, has introduced significant pressures on these indigenous forms. Scholars have long debated whether such forces precipitate cultural decline or stimulate adaptive transformation. Within Performance Theory, performance is understood as "restored behavior" (Schechner, 2006, P. 28). That is, practices that are continually recomposed and recontextualized rather than passively preserved. This suggests that festivals are inherently dynamic, capable of absorbing change while maintaining recognizable structures. Similarly, Ritual Theory conceptualizes ritual as a process marked by liminality and transformation, wherein participants exist in an in-between state where "the attributes of liminality or of liminal personae, are necessarily ambiguous" (Turner, 1969, P. 95). Such a view implies that social meanings are periodically reconfigured rather than fixed.

Empirical studies across African contexts complicate any singular narrative of loss. For instance, Peel argues that Christianity in southwestern Nigeria did not simply erase indigenous religious systems but often generated new forms of coexistence and reinterpretation. In his words, religious change in Yoruba society involved "interactions between old and new forms of religious life" (Peel, 2000, P. 14). It is also argued that African performance traditions persist through processes of reinterpretation, circulation, and audience renegotiation in modern contexts. As Karin Barber notes, popular arts in Africa are shaped through "the constant work of reappropriation and reinscription" (Barber, 1997, P. 3). These perspectives challenge reductive claims of cultural erosion by foregrounding continuity within change.

Research Questions

1. How do modern institutions reshape the ritual content and symbolic meanings of Nzem Berom, Puus Kaat, and Bit Goemai festivals?
2. In what ways are performative elements modified, retained, or reinterpreted in response to modern social, religious, and political pressures?
3. What forms of negotiation, resistance, or accommodation emerge between traditional custodians and modern actors in the contemporary staging of these festivals?

Literature Review

Modernization and the Reconfiguration of Indigenous Festivals

Scholarly debates on modernization and indigenous cultural practices have moved away from deterministic claims of cultural disappearance toward more nuanced interpretations of transformation. Early assumptions that Westernization would inevitably erode traditional institutions have been challenged by studies showing patterns of adaptation, hybridity, and selective continuity. Rather than vanishing, many indigenous practices are reconstituted within changing historical and social contexts.

A major contribution to this debate is Peel"s study of religious change in Nigeria, which demonstrates that the spread of Christianity did not simply displace indigenous systems but

produced layered identities in which traditional and modern elements coexist. As he explains,

religious transformation involved "interactions between old and new forms of religious life" (Peel, 2000, P. 14). This indicates that modernization often generates coexistence rather than replacement.

Similarly, Appadurai situates modernity within transnational cultural flows, arguing that global processes of migration, media, and ideology reshape local cultural forms. In his formulation, contemporary societies are influenced by overlapping "ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes" (Appadurai, 1996, P. 33). Within this framework, festivals are not static relics but adaptive cultural systems responding to contemporary pressures. From an African philosophical perspective, John Mbiti emphasizes that religion and culture remain deeply integrated in African societies, asserting that "Africans are notoriously religious" (Mbiti, 1969, P. 1). His insight suggests that even under modernization, ritual festivals often endure because they are embedded in broader worldviews rather than isolated customs. Thus, transformation does not necessarily imply disappearance.

Performance, Aesthetics, and Cultural Adaptation

Studies of African performance traditions consistently highlight their flexibility and resilience in the face of change. Rather than disappearing, performative elements such as music, dance, costume, and narrative are often reworked to align with new contexts and audiences. This underscores the capacity of performance traditions to negotiate continuity and innovation, simultaneously.

Finnegan‟s foundational work on oral traditions argues that oral and performative forms are not fixed inheritances but living practices that adapt alongside changing social realities. She notes that oral traditions are sustained through performance and "vary according to context and occasion" (Finnegan, 1970, P. 12). This means that variation and adaptation are intrinsic to tradition itself. Expanding this view, Barber examines how African expressive cultures circulate through urban and mediated spaces. She argues that popular arts endure through "constant work of reappropriation and reinscription" (Barber, 2007, P. 6). Performance traditions therefore survive not by resisting change, but by creatively reinterpreting themselves for new publics.

These studies suggest that changes in festival performance such as the incorporation of modern instruments, amplified sound systems, digital publicity, or staged choreography, should not be read solely as loss, but as strategic adaptation. However, such transformations may also generate tensions between aesthetic innovation and perceived authenticity, especially among cultural custodians who view certain ritual forms as sacrosanct.

Ritual, Identity and Communal Continuity

Beyond aesthetics, festivals also function as mechanisms for identity formation and social cohesion. Ritual gatherings reaffirm shared histories, collective memory, and communal belonging. In many African societies, festivals are occasions through which communities narrate who they are, where they come from, and the values they uphold.

Turner‟s theory of ritual highlights the communal dimension of ceremonial life. He argues that "rituals generate communitas" (Turner, 1969, P. 96), a sense of intense social togetherness emerging during liminal moments of collective participation. Festivals therefore become spaces where ordinary divisions of class, age, or status may be temporarily suspended in favour of shared identity.

Durkheim similarly contends that collective ceremonies renew the moral bonds of society, noting that "ritual gatherings reinforce the collective conscience of a people" (Durkheim, 1912/1995, P. 217). Applied to indigenous festivals, this suggests that their significance extends beyond entertainment to the reproduction of social solidarity.

In the context of the Berom, Mwaghavul, and Goemai, festivals such as Nzem Berom, Puus Kaat, and Bit Goemai can therefore be understood as more than cultural displays. They are symbolic institutions through which communities negotiate continuity, affirm belonging, and transmit values across generations. Even where modernization alters outward forms, their deeper social functions often remain intact.

Research Theories

This study is anchored in Performance Theory and Ritual Theory.

Performance Theory

Performance Theory is most prominently associated with Richard Schechner, whose interdisciplinary scholarship expanded the meaning of performance beyond theatre to include ritual, play, politics, sports, and everyday social interaction. According to Schechner, performance is not limited to dramatic presentation; rather, it includes patterned actions that are consciously framed and enacted before others. He famously defines performance as “twice-behaved behavior” (Schechner, 2013, P. 28), emphasizing those human actions can be repeated, revised, and displayed in multiple contexts.

A central concept in Schechner‟s thought is restored behavior; he explains that performances are made up of “strips of behavior” that can be rearranged or reconstructed and presented in new situations” (Schechner, 2003, P. 28). In this sense, cultural actions are never reproduced in identical form; they are inherited, reworked, and adapted to new historical circumstances. This insight is highly relevant to the present study because the dances, songs, chants, costumes, and ceremonial gestures found in Nzem Berom, Puus Kaat, and Bit Goemai are inherited practices that continue to evolve.

Another important concept in Performance Theory is framing. Schechner argues that performance is marked off from ordinary life through conventions that signal special attention, heightened meaning, and temporary transformation. In festival contexts, such frames include ceremonial entrances, drumming patterns, sacred costumes, designated grounds and processional order. These elements communicate that participants have entered a different social and symbolic space.

Schechner also emphasizes the relationship between performers and audiences. Performance is not created by performers alone. Meaning emerges through interaction between those who enact and those who witness. In the contemporary setting of these festivals, audiences are no longer limited to local community members. They may include visitors, journalists, state officials, researchers, and online viewers through digital platforms. This expanded audience often encourages stylization, spectacle, and visual performance.

Ritual Theory

Ritual Theory in this study is primarily drawn from the work of Victor Turner, whose analysis of ritual among the Ndembu in Africa profoundly shaped anthropological understandings of symbolism, ceremony, and social process. Turner rejects the view of ritual as a static survival from the past. Instead, he sees it as an active process through which communities negotiate values, tensions, and collective identity.

One of Turner‟s most influential concepts is liminality. He describes liminal persons as those who are “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner, 1969, P. 95). Liminality therefore refers to a threshold state in which ordinary structures are suspended and transformation becomes possible. This concept is especially relevant to festival life. During Nzem Berom, Puus Kaat, and Bit Goemai, ordinary routines are interrupted by special dress, ritual movement, sacred performances, and ceremonial authority. Participants enter a distinct temporal and symbolic order in which they reconnect with ancestry, memory, and communal belonging.

Turner‟s second major concept is communitas. He defines communitas as “a relationship between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals” (Turner, 1969, P. 131). Festivals often generate communitas by bringing together elders, youth, migrants, women, men, and visitors in a shared experience of identity and belonging.

Methodology Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative comparative ethnographic design. It is chosen to enable an in-depth interpretation of how modernization influences the structure, meaning, and performance of Nzem Berom, Puus Kaat, and Bit Goemai festivals. The design allows for cross-cultural comparison across the three festivals to identify patterns of change, continuity, and negotiation.

Study Area

The study is conducted in selected communities of Plateau State, North-Central Nigeria where the Nzem Berom, Puus Kaat, and Bit Goemai festivals are traditionally performed.

Population of the study, sample size and technique

The population consists of individuals directly involved in or knowledgeable about the festivals, including traditional rulers and custodians, festival performers, community elders, youth participants, and religious representatives.

A purposive sampling technique is used to select 30 participants based on their knowledge and involvement in festival practices:

10 participants each from Berom, Mwaghavul, and Goemai communities

This ensures informed and culturally relevant perspectives.

Methods of Data Collection

Data is collected through through the following: participant observation of festival performances, semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders and oral accounts from elders and custodians

Method of Data Analysis

Data is analyzed using thematic analysis, focusing on:

a. Ritual transformation
b. Performance changes
c. Influence of modernization (religion, politics, media)
d. Negotiation between tradition and modernity

Interpretation is guided by Performance Theory and Ritual Theory.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent obtained from participants

Confidentiality maintained where required

Cultural sensitivity observed during data collection

Results and Discussion

Ritual Reconfiguration Under Modern Pressures

Field evidence across Nzem Berom, Puus Kaat, and Bit Goemai shows a consistent pattern of ritual compression and selective visibility. Sacred components that once structured the festivals as cosmological events are increasingly shortened, relocated, or symbolically reframed.

An elder in the Berom community noted:

“What we used to celebrate for days is now very short because those who come from afar must travel back to their homes."

Similarly, a Mwaghavul custodian explained:

“Certain rites are still important, but because of church influence, they are not done publicly anymore.”

These accounts indicate that there is no disappearance, but a ritual repositioning, a shift from communal sacred enactment to controlled or restricted performance spaces. From the perspective of Ritual Theory, this reflects the inherently processual nature of ritual, where meaning is constantly reorganized through social tension and transformation.

Performance Aesthetics and the Rise of Spectacle

The performative dimensions of the festivals: dance, music, costume, and staging, have undergone visible transformation. Field observations show increased reliance on amplified sound systems, recorded music, and choreographed group performances.



Picture: illustrations of use of sound amplifiers at the Puus Kaat and Bit Goemai, respectively

A youth participant in Bit Goemai stated:

“Now people come mainly to watch and record. It feels like entertainment more than ritual.”

This shift reflects what Performance Theory describes as “restored behavior” performance as continuously reconstructed action shaped by present contexts rather than fixed tradition. Across all three festivals, performance is increasingly oriented toward audience visibility, aesthetic display, and external consumption (media, visitors, recordings).

Religion as a Filtering Mechanism of Tradition

One of the most influential forces reshaping festival practice is Christianity, which functions as a moral and symbolic filter for participation.

An elder in the Mwaghavul area observed:

“Some of our people refuse to join certain parts because of their church.”

This creates internal cultural stratification: participants who fully engage in ritual continuity, participants who selectively engage or abstain, youths who reinterpret festivals as cultural heritage rather than spiritual practice. Instead of eliminating festivals, religion produces selective participation and reinterpretation, leading to fragmented but persistent cultural expression.

Media Visibility and the Transformation of Audience

Across all three festivals, media technologies, especially smartphones and social platforms have altered both performance and audience structure.

A Goemai youth participant remarked:

“People now perform knowing they are being recorded.”

This introduces what can be described as mediated performance consciousness, where performers anticipate external digital audiences.





Picture: Case illustrations of smartphone recording during the sacred Kwamteng cult ritual (Goemai) and audience recording during Nzem Berom

The implication is significant because festivals shift from situated communal rituals to circulated visual performances

Political Instrumentalization of Festival Spaces

Field evidence across the three festivals reveals that festival grounds are increasingly becoming platforms for political visibility and symbolic campaigning. During observations, political figures were seen addressing gatherings, distributing branded materials, and associating themselves with cultural events.



Picture: Political flag flying (Bit Goemai), Gov Mutfwang arriving at Nzem Berom, and Hon. Ishaya Solomon Lalu (Member representing Mangu/Bokkos) delivering a speech at the Puus Kaat, respectively.

A community respondent noted:

“When festival time comes, politicians always come. They greet the people and talk about what they will do.”

In another instance, a youth participant observed:

"Sometimes it feels like the festival is also for elections. You will see posters everywhere"

Rather than being incidental, these interventions reshape the meaning of festival spaces. The grounds are no longer exclusively ritual or cultural arenas but have become hybrid public spaces of cultural celebration and political performance. This aligns with the idea that cultural performances can function as stages for legitimation and authority display, where political actors embed themselves within socially valued traditions to gain visibility and acceptance.

From a theoretical perspective, this can be read through Ritual Theory, particularly his concept of social drama, where public events become arenas of contestation and negotiation of power. However, unlike purely ritual crises, here the "drama" is structured and strategic, as political actors intentionally insert themselves into culturally meaningful spaces.

Conclusion

Summary of Key Findings

The findings demonstrate that modernization has not eliminated traditional festivals but has reconfigured their form, meaning, and social function across multiple dimensions:

1. Core ritual elements are increasingly shortened, privatized, or symbolically reframed due to religious influence and changing social values.
2. Festivals have become more aestheticized and audience-oriented, with increased emphasis on choreography, sound systems, and visual spectacle.
3. Christianity operates as a selective framework of participation, producing layered engagement rather than total rejection of festival practices.
4. The rise of smartphones and social media has transformed festivals into mediated events, where performances are shaped by their potential for online circulation.
5. Festival grounds increasingly function as platforms for political visibility, where actors embed themselves within cultural legitimacy structures.

Despite these shifts, festivals continue to serve as markers of identity, belonging, and ancestral connection, albeit in modified forms.

Erosion or Evolution?

The central question of whether modernization leads to the erosion or evolution of traditional festivals is best answered not as a binary, but as a dialectical transformation.

The evidence suggests that festivals are not eroding in totality, as core cultural symbols, identity markers, and communal participation structures remain active. However, they are also not unchanged; rather, they are undergoing selective transformation and functional redistribution.

Modernization does not destroy the festivals. It repositions them within new systems of power, media, religion, and social aspiration, producing hybrid forms that are both continuous with tradition and responsive to contemporary realities.

The Nzem Berom, Puus Kaat, and Bit Goemai festivals therefore persist not as static relics of the past, but as living cultural systems undergoing constant negotiation. Their survival lies precisely in their capacity to absorb, adapt, and reconfigure external influences while maintaining symbolic continuity with ancestral identity.

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