

How African cultural festivals are using innovative methods to attract new audiences, fund and host sustainable festivals

Introduction

Festivals have been occurring on the African continent for many years, particularly religious festivals like *Timkat* in Ethiopia and traditional festivals which celebrate tribal harvests. Some of the earliest recorded cultural festivals in modern times are the *Pan African Festival* held in Algiers in 1969 and the Zaire 74 festivals in Kinsasha. Since then, cultural festivals on the continent have grown in popularity and audience with festivals like *Mazawine* in Morocco attracting more than 30,000 people. Increasingly, African festivals are featured on lists of 'Must Attend Festivals' (i.e. Bushfire by MTV Iggy).

In the west, festivals have adapted to the changing times by becoming digital. Most of them have at least three active social media accounts (mostly Facebook, Twitter and Instagram). Social Media has allowed festivals to skip traditional press releases and reach a wider audience by connecting directly with their attendees. Instead of having to wait for journalists to release news about festival lineups, festival attendees can simply log onto Twitter and Facebook. Festivals like Coachella used their social media accounts to break the news that Outkast would be reuniting by performing at their festival and thirty nine others this year.

In terms of African festivals, according to the 'Best Festival Practice Toolkit' published by the Arterial Network, "marketing is a key part of the business plan of most festivals, often absorbing as much as 30-40% of the festival budget". According to the *International Festival of Comics* in Yaoundé, their marketing is still mostly through traditional press. "We work extensively with schools, where the festival is announced six months before, through posters. Then two months before the festival, radio spots are aired, volunteers go into cultural venues to talk about the festival. A week before the festival, we hold a press conference announcing the festival program, guest authors, etc." BD Mboa, International Festival of Comics in Yaoundé, Cameroon (Afrifestnet 54).

In recent times, a number of African festivals are on at least one social media network and are realizing that by combining social media and traditional press, they can attract new festival goers. These thoughts are echoed by the *African Festival Network (Afrifest Net)* which is an initiative of the *ARTerial Network* with the support of the British Council. "The vision is to develop, consolidate, build the independent sustainability of and promote African arts festivals and cultural events as key platforms to nurture, celebrate and project excellent and emerging African artists and creative work, nationally, regionally and internationally". One of their missions is to foster and build new audiences which it believes can be done with new technologies.

For instance, the *Harare International Festival of Arts Festival* held social media competitions where people could win tickets for liking their Facebook page. Bushfire festival in Swaziland asked people to submit pictures of how they 'bring their fire' and stood chances to win tickets to attend the festival. This helped to attract people who may have not attended if they had not won the competitions. *Vic Falls Carnival* liaised with hotels and lodges in Vic Falls town Zimbabwe to include festival tickets as packages when guests reserved their accommodation. This means tourists who may have travelled to the town just to see the Victoria Falls would have been encouraged to combine their trip with a day or two at the *Vic Falls Carnival*.

According to social media site *Mashable*, “in the United States, 66% of concert/festival attendees took pictures with their smart phones, 32% sent Facebook updates or tweets and 47 percent text or email each other at a show”. Social Media creates wanderlust amongst the networks of those sharing their festival images, which means that the next time a festival will be held, more people will attend. As Lake of Stars shared via its Twitter account @Lakeofstars “People also get to share their festival experience and let friends know what they got up to, how they travelled etc.” Shoko Festival shared via its twitter account @shokofestival, “Social Media has worked as a vehicle that reflects the experiences of young African people in entertainment and culture. In essence it has opened up the world to new African music and urban culture”.

There are no official figures for the number of festival attendees who use social media at festivals on the continent, but the *Harare International Festival of Arts* were innovative as they installed a television that showed attendees tweets and pictures during the festival. This is similar to what United States based festivals like *Bonnaroo* and *Lollapalooza* did when they partnered with Instagram to display festival goers’ images on jumbo screens and onstage monitors during their events. Another innovative way African festivals are using social media is by releasing apps, like the *Harare International Festival of Arts* (HIFA) and *Shoko Hip Hop Festival* in Harare, Zimbabwe, did in 2013.

Another trend of festivals in the West is live streaming, although it is arguable whether this attracts new audiences or discourages them from attending a festival as they can watch it from the comfort of their own home. I do not think African festivals will consider live streaming their festivals in the near future, as internet is still very expensive and not widely accessible in many African countries. However, one of the alternatives to recording festival performances has been by creating web series based on African festivals. An example of a related web series is ‘*The Fest Gurus*’; a travel docu-reality show that follows four young Africans on a quest to discover the best African international cultural festivals. Using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, Tumblr and Youtube, the Fest Gurus have shared their experiences at six festivals on the continent including the *Harare International Festival of Arts* (HIFA), *Lake of Stars*, *Vic Falls Carnival*, *Sauti Za Busara*, *Barefeet Festival* and *Shoko Hip Hop Festival*. The Fest Gurus hope that through showcasing these festivals, it will spur an inter-Africa festival culture and boost intra-Africa tourism.



With the increase of online banking and mobile money payment apps, African festivals have capitalized on attracting more festival goers by selling advance tickets online via their websites. Festivals like *Lake of Stars* in Malawi sell tickets almost a year in advance, which helps to oversee attendees plan their trips. *Sauti Za Busara*, which occurs in Zanzibar, east Africa uses mobile money payment app Mpesa to allow festival attendees to purchase tickets. *The East African festival* encourages more locals to attend by offering cheaper ticket prices and entrance is free during the day for locals.

Another way African festivals are attracting new audiences is by diversifying their lineup, as well as using popular artists as headliners. An example of a festival that has successfully done this is the *Cape Town Jazz Festival*. Initially created as a festival to celebrate and promote jazz music in South Africa, in recent years it has used primarily American artists such as Jill Scott (2013) and Erykah Badu (2014) as headliners. The balance of international and local South African pop artists such as Micasa and Mafikizolo caters to a broad spectrum of attendees as people who may not be fans of one artist playing but appreciate the headliner will purchase a ticket to the festival.

One of the stereotypes of festivals is that they are attended by the young and hip crowd. While these may be the primary attendees, some African festivals are finding ways to boost attendance and reach the older crowd. The last day of *Lake of Stars* festival is more family friendly as it begins in the afternoon and has activities for young children. *The Harare International Festival of Arts* has a Simba zone, which is a space that parents can leave their young children to be entertained with plays, mascots and other activities.

The *Shoko Hip Hop festival* in Harare, Zimbabwe has increased its audience by taking its festival “to the street”, i.e. having a one day free event in low income areas. Festivals like *Sauti Za Busara* host street parades at the beach to promote the festival and encourage more people to attend. Hosting fringe festival events in multiple locations is also a way African festivals are attracting new audiences. For instance, *Sauti Za Busara* hosted workshops and open mics at the nearby *Dhow Music Academy*, partnered with local restaurants and hotels to host live music bands and Dj sessions. These appealed to tourists who may not have known about the festival initially.

The use of public space also lures residents who may be from the same country or city hosting the festival but have never stepped foot in the area the festival is held. For instance, the city of Jamestown in Accra, Ghana, has long been known as a historical city, but is also considered a slum by many. The *Chale Wote street festival* is hosted there every year and has tried to show that Jamestown is a colorful and creative city. In an article titled ‘Accra’s art festivals make streetscapes into public space’ by the Guardian, the writer states “These spaces, in terms of usage, become fluid: streets, roads and (temporary) open spaces become the stages and venues for football games, races, dancing and ceremonies; sidewalks become front row seats for people watching, promenading, and meetings, conversations and impromptu reunions. Importantly, these are democratic, equitable spaces open to everyone – most, if not all, can participate. All can observe...Just like how the community shapes its social spaces, festival activities are strung along the street from the Jamestown Lighthouse and Mantse Agbonaa (the palace of the Jamestown Mantse, or chief) to Old Kingsway building...Action is at the street, on the sidewalk, in buildings and along walls. At the same time, the festival, through artistic commotion, creates the magnet needed for bringing the community and social activity into these shared spaces, and celebrates it” (Okoye).

However, as the ‘*Best Festival Toolkit Practice*’ reports, “Drawing significant numbers to your festival is satisfying, but success does not depend on size. Festivals responding to the Afrifestnet survey reported success with attendance figures of over 145,000 while others reported success even with intimate

audiences of just 700 for a short festival. Dance Umbrella identified their audiences as 'sold out' implying that the festival could be bigger if suitable theatres were larger or greater in number, a constraint no doubt shared by many festivals in Africa. Festivals with markets differentiated the professionals in attendance as distinct from the general audience. The Africa Sings Festival – International Choral Festival (Togo) quantify their audience and participants by nationality e.g. local (4570) and foreigners (430) as a means of measuring achievement of objectives. They also reflected growth by number of participating countries – eg: 2007: 4 countries, 2009: 7 countries, 2011: 11 countries, 2012: 10 countries” (Afrifestnet 53).

One of the innovative ways African festivals have widened their audiences is by linking their festivals to tourism, while heavily promoting the unique cultural aspect of the festival. For instance, the festival of Essaouira in Morocco has since 1998 “specialized mainly in traditional music, (and has brought about) a revival of Gnawa North African music and given a global dimension to traditional Moroccan music”. According to case study 4.6 in the UNESCO Creative Report 2013, “Since its first edition, the festival has given the city an international reputation and promoted Gnawa music from a local to a global scale. The festival provides a new impetus to the eclectic programming of the stage encounters between famous jazzmen...One of the factors contributing to the success of the festival is its spiritual element. The festival is originally an expression of worshiping rituals. This sacred dimension has also given rise to small-scale tourist flows. Such enthusiasm led to the construction of multiple resorts and restaurants, whose luxury services are far from the original spirit of the festival.

The size of the festival has grown over the years, gathering up to 400,000 people. The festival has been a meeting place for Moroccans, Europeans and Americans, especially young people. However, an older audience, with greater purchasing power, is also attracted to the event, resulting in a high demand for old houses, also known as riyadh, which foreign residents turn into expensive homes” (Nizar Hariri 64).



Funding

According to the 'Festivals Best practice toolkit' published by Afrifestnet, of the 28 festivals surveyed in the report, “all are set up as non-profit organisations. 80% cite fundraising as the area of most challenge”. (10). There is greater competition now – for audiences, for funding and other scarce resources (AfrifestNet 11).

One of the biggest donors of festivals in Southern Africa is the Dutch company HIVOS People Unlimited which is funded by Dutch Foreign Ministry, EU, Open Society Foundations, DFID, and DOEN Foundation.

According to their website “Hivos attempts to increase the outreach of cultural productions and create opportunities for artists by supporting festivals and cultural venues where artists and cultural workers find a platform to display their artistic work. Hivos provides financial support for these festivals and helps further

develop the managerial skills of the organisers of such events”. Hivos supports 30 festivals and activities in 12 countries.

“One example of festivals Hivos supports is the *Harare International Festival of the Arts* (HIFA). This 6-day annual festival showcases the very best of Zimbabwean, regional and international arts and culture in a comprehensive program of theatre, dance, music, circus, street performance, spoken word, craft and visual arts. HIFA brings together socially and culturally disparate groups of Zimbabweans to celebrate the healing and constructive capacity of the arts. The Festival has received recognition for its support of arts and culture in Zimbabwe and is seen as a major contributor to development in this area”.

According to the concept note of the African Festival Network (Afrifestnet), one of their goals is for festivals to realize the “benefits of shared economies of scale”. One way that festivals in Southern Africa have been innovative in terms of funding is by pooling their resources together via The Fire Fest Route. Pioneered by MTN Bushfire, Swaziland International Festival of The Arts, The Firefest route is a Southern Africa festival tour circuit believed to be the first festival tour circuit in Africa. The Firefest route includes Harare International Festival of Arts (HIFA), etc.

“The Firefest route is premised on knowledge sharing and pooling resources and skills to market regional music festivals through the route whilst contributing to local economic sectors. Sevi Spanoudi of Fireball, South Africa concurs “through the artist exchange program of the Firefest Route, with aligned festival dates we can facilitate more tours with the intention to address challenges associated with geography/distance and costs”.

In its second year, The Firefest Route is focusing on partnering with tourism sectors. This will undoubtedly increase the number of festival attendees if they can get cheaper packages to attend all or most of the festivals in the route.

One of the biggest innovative trends in funding in the last five years has been crowd funding online through various sites like Kickstarter, Go Fund Me, Indiegogo and more. Instead of waiting for grants from international organizations or government which come with lists of demands, a few African festivals are taking advantage of online crowd funding sites to fund their festivals. Examples of festivals that did this are Asaabako and Asaman Festivals.

The Asaabako festival is music, arts and dance festival held in Busua beach, Western Ghana. In February, the festival released a crowd funding campaign via Sponsume to raise 10,000 pounds which would go towards training programs, infrastructure and creating a beach maintenance initiative to preserve its natural beauty. The campaign managed to raise 2,396 pounds and the festival was held on March 6-8 2014.

The Asamaan Festival of music and astronomy also turned to crowd funding to raise funds to host their festival on the island of Gorée in Dakar, Senegal. According to its Kickstarter page, “ASAMAAN aims to function as both an educational platform for astronomy as well as an opportunity to viscerally experience the “music of the planets” via live performances in a concert under the stars. The costs of executing the festival are formidable – especially as we seek to remain a FREE public event. It is important to us to maximize accessibility by keeping admission open as we feel it appropriate to the resident community and the educational aims of the festival. Looking at the sky and listening to great music should be free! After receiving some initial backing from the US Embassy in Dakar, Insitut Français, Cinema Numerique Ambulant, and Eiffage Senegal, Asamaan has secured some of the essentials and engendered some

great support and enthusiasm around the event. However, we're not all the way there yet on the budget and need extra funds to make Asamaan a success". Unfortunately, their goal of raising \$6,000 was not reached and the festival which was scheduled to take place in April 2013 did not take place.

Despite none of the two festivals given in the example managing to reach their goals, more festivals will continue to use crowd funding to raise extra money by improving their publicity campaigns.

Sustainability

One of the main concerns festivals have is the impact they will have on the environment that they are held in. According to the Best Festivals Practice Toolkit, one of the most common research methodologies used to "ascertain whether your festival has the possibility to negatively affect the land or community that surrounds it, and how this could be minimized" (United Nations Development Program 19) is the Environmental impact assessment report.

To address this, the Festival sur le Niger created a model of entrepreneurship called 'Maaya'. According to the UNESCO Creative Report 2013 case study 4.1, Maaya was created in 2004 by Mamou Daffe. Maaya" is a Malian humanist vision that Daffe believes can bring about artistic, economic and social sustainable development based on local values but incorporating modern management principles. This vision has been applied through a festival that acts as a catalyst for local development, from artistic professions to hotels, catering, crafts and tourism. This approach helps to sustain the community in different ways, notably:

Economically: By having the local population supply all goods and services and by instigating the creation of the Council for the Promotion of Local Economy in the office of the Mayor of Ségou" (United Nations Development Program 55).

Sustainability correlates to an increased audience as evidenced by figures shown in the Case Study 4.1. Through the Maaya system, "By affording opportunities for those living in Ségou to interact with festival participants and audiences, over the past five years, the festival has developed a housing system that encourages festival goers to stay in private homes (200 families were accommodated in 2008), boosting income for local residents and fostering friendships. The numbers of participants increased over the various editions of the festival from 20,735 in 2010 to 26,180 in 2012, with the number of foreigners increasing by more than 70 per cent from 2,514 to 4,300 over the same period" (United Nations Development Program, 55).

In terms of environmental sustainability, festival Sur Le Niger has also been innovative. In addition to reforestation of the downtown river bank, the festival has established an observatory of the Niger river in Segou. Many other African festivals are sensitive to the environment and have recycling centers where attendees can learn about waste management. The Lake of Stars festival in 2013 held their festival in a wildlife sanctuary and created a stage made out of local tree wood.

Conclusion

If African festivals are to succeed in terms of enlarging their audience, attracting more funding and being more sustainable, they will have to be more innovative. Some festivals have adapted well to social media i.e. Harare International Festival of Arts, have diversified their lineups i.e. Capetown Jazz Festival or adopted methods to be more sustainable like Festival Sur Le Niger. In the near future, fewer festivals will be dependent on funding from governments or international cultural organizations, more of them will take advantage of social media and more of them will devise innovative ways to be more sustainable. Based on

the research presented in this paper, it is clear that African festivals are taking major steps in the right direction to be innovative.

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