

## THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF CHRISTIAN FESTIVALS IN THE REDEEMED CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF GOD.

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### **Abstract**

*The Redeemed Christian church of God, observes Christian festivals like most other Churches but the social implications of these festivals for RCCG members differ from other denominations. This study, therefore, investigates Christian festivals observed by RCCG to determine the social impact on their members in Nigeria. The researcher employed the historical method that systematically and objectively located, evaluated, and synthesized to establish facts and draw conclusions concerning past events. Focus groups, survey methods, participation observation, interview methods, and questionnaires were deployed to get desired responses from the members of RCCG. The secondary sources include relevant books, journals, encyclopedias, tapes, magazines, and the internet. Quantitative data were obtained through structured interviews with members of the church while three hundred copies of the questionnaire were administered in the RCCG camp. Data were subjected to qualitative analysis and percentages. The Redeemed Christian church of God observed the Annual Convention, Holy Ghost service, and Holy Ghost Congress. All these festivals take place at the church redemption camp. These festivals have a social impact on the members of RCCG. On the social impact, 75% of the respondents said they are always looking forward to the time of the festivals as their social lives changed for the better.*

**Keywords:** Christian, Festivals, Redeemed, Church.

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### **Introduction**

A festival is an event ordinarily celebrated by a community and centering on some characteristic aspect of that community and its religion or cultures. *Oxford Dictionary defined festival as a series of performances of music, plays, films, etc... usually organized in the same place once a year.*<sup>1</sup>

Christian festivals help people to remember the story of Jesus' life. They are also times to give thanks to God for His blessings and to celebrate the saints.

Christian festivals could be traced to the feasts and festivals of Israel in the Old Testament.

Leviticus 23:2 – Speak unto the children of Israel and say unto them, concerning the feast of the Lord, which ye shall proclaim to be holy convocations, even these are my feast.

The Bible reveals that God appointed certain days of the year to be remembered and celebrated by the congregation of Israel. The word ‘feast’ comes from two Hebrew words that mean (*Heb. Moaid*) *divinely appointed times and the other (Heb. Weg) means festival from the rare which means “to dance”*.

It is commonly believed among Christians that the first four feasts in the spring speak of the first coming of Jesus Christ (the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the beginning of the church) and the last three feasts in the fall speak of the second coming of Jesus. (The rapture, Israel receiving her messiah and the kingdom is set up on the earth).

However some Christian denominations and individuals do not attach serious importance to Christian festivals, and as such do not observe them for various reasons. This disenchantment disposition about Christian festivals replete some works of scholars for instance, David Pack asserts that the true origin of Christians could be traced to Pagan Culture and that all the various customs associated with it, such as craft giving, Father Christmas, Christmas high, Christmas tree, music, and carol took their root from Roman customs that have no bearing with the Christian faith<sup>3</sup>. He opines that Christ is never present in the celebration tagged ‘Christmas’ as assumed by its celebrants, therefore he concludes that in 245 CE Origen of Alexander drew reference from Leviticus 12:1-8 to discourage Christians from designating a day to commemorate the birth of Jesus<sup>4</sup>. According to him, going by the Bible records, it is only sinners who celebrated their birthdays, and such occasions resulted in the loss of lives. These were Pharaoh who hanged Chief Baker (Gen. 40:20-22) and Herod, who beheaded John the Baptist (Mark 6:21-27). To further strengthen their position of non-observance of Christmas, they indicated that in 303 CE, Arnobius intercepted the idea of celebrating the birthday of gods as ridiculous<sup>5</sup>. In addition to the above, Christmas is said to be commercialized and secularized in the contemporary time, making it lose its real significance. Therefore, it is regarded as a strategy employed by businessmen and business women who promote it vigorously, purposely to use it as a means to increase their sales and maximize profit.

Coming from the same angle, venerable Bede indicated that Easter derives its name from Easter, an Anglo-Saxon name of a Teutonic goddess of spring and fertility which by implication means that it is by nature a pagan pertinent to which Christians should distance themselves. Equally, the Easter tradition is regarded as a traditional Catholic celebration beset with a drive for materialism, not sanctioned in the Bible for Christian participation and therefore, becomes the tradition of men<sup>6</sup>. With regards to Harvest Thanksgiving, the God’s Kingdom Society (GKS) argues

that the Festival is not a Christian institution and as such, Christians are not commanded to celebrate it<sup>7</sup>. The Church said Christians should concern themselves not with material things but with things that have to do with the salvation of the righteous in the last days of the present evil world that is now running with terrific speed to its destruction.

Among the Nigeria Pentecostal churches, reference could be made to the Redeemed Christian Church, whose position of non-observance of Harvest Thanksgiving is indicated in its policy statement. It states that “The Redeemed Christian Church of God must not copy other churches in the world, especially in their method of fundraising through harvest,<sup>8</sup> etc. This statement does not mean the church disregards all festivals in Christendom. Holy Communion, Baptism, and New Year service are held in high esteem.

Unlike the above disenchanting pontificated view which attaches no serious importance to Christian festivals and opposes their observation in a way that seems to suggest that those observing them are neither spiritual nor with sound understanding of the Bible teachings, but are derailing from genuine Christianity, the Redeemed Christian Church of God, a Pentecostal Church, attaches great importance to them and approves moral observance. Thus, ethically speaking, the debate of whether or not it is morally appropriate to observe Christian festivals polarizes the Christian church.

The interest of the Redeemed Christian Church of God in Christian festivals is not by nature esoteric but all-embracing in which all its ministers and members participate actively and enthusiastically.

Every year, all Pastors, ministers, workers, and members participate in four of such festivals, (National convention, Holy Ghost Congress, and Holy Ghost service) with great interest and enthusiasm and suggestions that they are being impacted through them, which we believe would not have been the case, if otherwise. This intense enthusiastic interest of the congregation in the Christian festivals forms the basis of this work. It aims to assess how those festivals affect both the social and spiritual lives of the ministers and members in Nigeria.

The common assumption among writers is that congregations benefit economically and religiously during Christian festivals thereby giving the issue within the matrix of priestly profession.

Is it true in all cases, regardless of prevailing circumstances that the congregation benefits both socially during Christian festival(s)? Is it true that the Redeemed Christian Church of God does not celebrate Christmas and Easter festivals? How

have the festivals in the church impacted the lives of the members and environs? Are there any negative effects of such festivals?

The determination to verify the truthfulness or otherwise of the above claim and the discovery of any factor(s) that could invalidate it where possible prompted this empirical study, to determine the economic and religious effects of Christian festivals on members in Nigeria.

The research work investigates the Christian festivals observed by the Redeemed Christian Church of God, Nigeria, with the primary aim of discovering the interface between their observance and the social well-being of congregations in Nigeria. To facilitate the above major objective, the following sub-objectives were also pursued;

To determine the social effect of these festivals on RCCG members.

To investigate if there are likely identified adverse social effect of these festivals on the above congregations who formed our research target, including factors that may be responsible for such;

To discover and suggest ways in which such likely adverse social effect could be cured, so as to increase and sustain the positive benefits of the festivals on the affected the Redeemed Christian Church of God.

## **Methodology**

The research work employed the historical method, where it systematically and objectively located, evaluated, and synthesized evidence to establish facts and draw conclusions concerning past events. The use of this method proves relevant because Christian festivals have historical roots, some of which were traced to the Old Testament days. The etymological knowledge of this becomes indispensable as one tries to analyze issues generated in the contemporary Christian festivals. In this bid, there was the use of documents which included a wide range of written and print materials recorded to transmit historical information on the origin, nature, and significance of Christian festivals. In the same vein, through this method, there was the assessment of historical documentation on the Redeemed Christian Church of God, with particular reference to its work in Nigeria.

The work employed a focus group method, in which a small group of people was brought together in the Redemption Camp for in-depth discussions on the impact of Christian festivals on the congregation, and a set of questions relevant to how the selected Christian festivals affect the congregation was used. A set of questions

relevant to the work especially as to how the selected Christian festivals affect the social dispositions of congregations in Nigeria was designed with a moderator taking notes and guiding the discussion process. This afforded us a vantage point, whereby we had panoramic contributions, unlike what was obtained in one-to-one interviews. Also, it enables this work to examine some issues from different points based on the various perspectives of the discussants.

The research work involved in a deliberate search for truth participant observation is a system of data collection whereby the researcher examines the everyday routine of those he wishes to study. The method was used to avoid limitations that could come through self-repost. Securest, for example, has argued that social attitudes are often based on the set given socially desirable response

The researcher used in-depth interviews to gather relevant information from the respondents. Specific and carefully worded questions were used to elicit information aimed at knowing how familiar each interviewee is with the impact of the selected festivals on the members and the bearing of this on the social well-being of ministers, members, and neighbors.

### **Religious Festivals**

Religious festivals are those festivals celebrated to honor God or the deities in a religion. It is also a time of special importance marked by the adherents of a religion. It is not possible to separate the religion of people and their culture as the two are interwoven. Each culture and religion has festivals that showcase its history and culture. A religious festival is an important aspect of Nigeria. It is known to renew the life of a community; it brings the people together and strengthens their unity and cohesion. Religious and social values are repeated and renewed. Activities such as display of arts, music, dance, drama, and oral communication. A religious festival is seen as a way to communicate with the spirit world, keep the two worlds; the human and spiritual world healthy and receive specific instruction from the spirit world to keep the human world safe. Prayer, music, and dancing enhance the effectiveness of the festival. Celebration, offerings, and specific programs exist to ascertain the relationship between the Supreme Being, superhumanity, and humanity. Religious activities carried out during the festival play an important part in the festival and also give an insight to the participants of the festival about themselves and the connection they have to the festival.

Most Christians follow a cycle of annual festivals linked to the life of Jesus: Advent prepares for the coming of Jesus; Christmas celebrates his birth; Epiphany

celebrates his manifestation as God incarnate; Lent, which begins on Ash Wednesday is a time for preparation and repentance; Palm Sunday recalls Jesus' entry into Jerusalem just before his death, Maundy Thursday his last meal with his followers, and Good Friday his crucifixion; Easter celebrates Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

### **Social Impact of the Selected Christian Festivals on the members of RCCG**

This attempt was made to discuss how the selected Christian festivals impact RCCG members, in Nigeria. Our approach to this has not undermined how much impact symbiotically relates to their pastors, because of the existence of interconnectivity between what affects the former and the latter, especially during the time of such festivals.

Christian festivals generate tremendous impact on the individual Christian, families, and community as a whole. This underscores their importance to the pastors, since the clergy is also individual Christians, with their own families, and constituting a part of the community where they are. This, therefore, explains a reason for the continuous relevance of Christian festivals, especially in the RCCG. Among the areas in which their impacts are felt on members in our research setting as gathered in the research, the following are worth mentioning:

Christian festivals generate spiritual formation and growth of the Christians, especially in the RCCG members. What is meant by this spiritual function is that they have incorporeal and sacred effects on the Christian community with particular reference to the pastors. This spiritual enrichment is a necessary part of festivals, whereby the needs of man that are not terrestrial, physical, or corporeal are met. A human being is a creature that consists, not only of the corporeal or physical entity but also of the spiritual entity, whose need, if not met, would hinder his complete fulfillment.

Every human being, including each pastor, possesses a spiritual need that is as fundamental as the need for food. True spiritual fulfillment is an aspect of our spiritual need that is as vital as our physical need for food. Therefore, choosing to live by God's standard elevates one's life and contributes to real peace of mind, since it spares us from the plaque of a guilty conscience. Jesus says, "Man must not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4).

This is a fact that there is a craving in man, a longing, whose need could only be met spiritually. This issue is also related to the intellectual and higher endowment of man's mind, making him to become highly formed and reformed as the case may

be, in thought or feeling. It is the proper understanding of this tendency in man that made Robertson say: ... the connection between us and Christ is not of the body that passes, but of the spirit which endures. It is spiritual and in such a connection may be seriously perverted by the interference of sense and bodily sensation and on the whole, it is well that our spirit should be allowed to choose its eternal friendship and alliance by what is specially and exclusively its own so that the choice cannot be mistaken as the choice sometimes is when there is a mixture of physical and spiritual attractiveness which grants assurance of a blessed festival.

Prayers, supplication, and prophecies made throughout the festivals centered on protection from death and evil occurrences give a guarantee that the divine has spoken and it is sealed and with this confidence, the people look forward to the year. The blessings, precautions, and instructions given during the festival also create a belief in the presence of the divine which calls for a spiritual uplifting of the people. There is always a shift from the profane to the sacred including the timing of the festival. The main Levite involved in the festival is consecrated to make it easy for the spiritual connection to the divine. The constant fasting and prayer, the no sex, no lies telling, and confession of sins committed (upright living) that preceded the festival reflect the moral impact of the festival and as well prepare the people for an experience with the divine which in turn is fully manifested on the festival grand finale.

Christian festivals assist in boosting the morale of the Christians, especially the RCCG members in Nigeria. The presence of stress, distress, anguish, depression, fear, and the like, such that characterized some pastors' lives before the occurrence of Christmas, explicates the expediency of this role.

One of how Christian festivals boost members' morale, according to the contributions of our focus group's discussants, is the interaction that occurs among people who participate in the festivals. At such times, according to our respondents, the scenario of tranquility and companionship becomes enhanced, in place of loneliness and individualistic tendency. Such interactions heal the pains people, especially the pastors had before the time of each festival.

According to members interviewed, the sermons delivered by the General Overseer and invited ministers during festivals imbue in them psychological stability. For instance, such sermons that address the reality of God's love, which is the focal point of the convention message, make members know that they are in God's caring hands in the midst of their life's problems, frustrations, and challenging confrontations. Some of the pastors who constituted a part of our respondents disclosed

that this positive disposition of the membership directly aids their pastoral duty because the commitment and dedication it kindles in the members affect the psychological well-being of each member concerned.

Added to the above, before the coming of each festival, our investigation revealed that some pastors and their members were facing depression, stress, and so on, about their survival, as a result of insecurity arising from their poverty or social crisis in the community. However, at the instance of this festival, people gather and relate together. Those with whom they have not been relating before come to celebrate with them, and so they gain courage, and confidence and develop positive thinking and rapport among neighbors. The atmosphere of friendliness generated in this process helps in instilling cordiality. This gives rise to peaceful co-existence.

Annual convention, Holy Ghost congress, and Holy Ghost service assist in bringing about the reunion of members of the Christian families in RCCG members in Nigeria. People from different states in Nigeria and abroad usually travel down to the camp. The festivals bring a reunion of friends and brethren, they have not seen for a year or more together.

Apart from aiding the reunion of the immediate family members, Christian festivals also assist RCCG members to get better integrated into their larger community. What this means is that such festivals assist in combining and coordinating separate and diverse elements or units of the society into a unified whole. In other words, their conduct results in bringing about the unification and mutual adjustment of diverse groups of the society into a relatively, coordinated, and harmonious culture.

This role of Christian festivals is indispensable, considering the complexity of our contemporary society where there is a tendency to disintegrate rather than integrate people into a unified and harmonious relationship. According to those who participated in the FGD, the process of interaction is an active means whereby each of our festivals of interest articulates social integration.

An undeniable fact, attested to by our respondents, whereby the articulation of social integration occurs during Christian festivals, is the coming together of people of different tribes and cultures, for celebration. For instance, Christmas brings people of different cultures together as a unified whole, for a harmonious and peaceful relationship. On such occasions, interaction occurs, with people who see themselves as members of the same community, regardless of their cultural and status differences.



The research design and techniques adopted to achieve the study objectives were enunciated in this chapter. Specifically, the methodology employed was designed primarily to improve the reliability and validity of the data generated.

The specific research methods used in this design are inferences drawn from empirical information gathered through In-depth interviews, personal observations, questionnaires, and Focus Group Discussions. The adoption of this research design has helped greatly in the generation of both quantitative and qualitative data.

### **Findings**

The researcher discovered that through the respondents the Christian festivals in the Redeemed Christian church of God have a social impact on the lives of the members. When they were asked whether they had come to make a connection during the festival, 50% of respondents answered affirmatively while 40% said they were there for spiritual exercise and 10% were undecided. This shows that if people get what can fetch them money during the festivals they will do apart. 54.9% of respondents agreed that members come to Christian festivals to look for jobs. The respondents also said people come for the festivals to get jobs. During the festivals, there are temporary jobs for members to do?

### **Conclusion**

The Redeemed Christian of God and course, Churches in Nigeria as a whole have the opportunity of increasing the impact generated by Christian festivals on its members where the above proffered suggestions are implemented. This will increase the Church's population and social networking globally.

### **Recommendations**

Since there is no perfect system anywhere in the world, the researcher recommends these solutions to challenges observed in the course of carrying out this research work.

1. The poor network that always occurs during the festivals can be overcome by the installation of the mast to improve the network.
2. Also, the mission should increase the security personnel and installation of more CCTV cameras to curb the menace of theft in the camp.
3. Furthermore, The Redeemed Christian of God should make provisions for more accommodations as the number of hostels presently is not enough for members during the festivals.

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