

# Investigating the Role of Cultural Festivals in Promoting Tourism in Developing Countries: The Case of the Ngondo Traditional Festival of Cameroon

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**Abstract:** Tourism refers to traveling for business, pleasure, or service. Cultural festivals refer to events held as a means to showcase culture and traditions. The research set out to find the role cultural festivals play in promoting tourism in developing countries, using the Ngondo Traditional Festival of Cameroon as a case study. The study is guided by a review of the literature on the role of cultural festivals in promoting tourism in developing countries, and case studies of successful cultural festivals in other developing countries. It also reviews a brief historical background, what the festival is all about, and its main aim and significance to the people of Cameroon. The research was based on casual interviews and discussions with some randomly selected tour operators, friends, colleagues, and tourists who were all part of the festival. Information was also collected from secondary sources like journals, newspapers, and from other researchers. The results of the study reveal the impact of the Ngondo festival on tourism in Cameroon, the challenges faced in promoting the festival as a tourist attraction site, and the strategies implemented to attract tourists to the festival. The study also provides recommendations that the Government and Stakeholders can use to promote the Ngondo festival. In conclusion, the festival has great potential of becoming a major source of tourism if the challenges it faces are handled properly and the necessary recommendations are implemented.

Keywords: Cameroon, cultural festivals, Ngondo festival.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### Background of the study

There exist numerous definitions of tourism. The (UNWTO) refers to tourism as “the activities of people traveling to stay in places out of their environment for not up to a year. This travel is usually for business, leisure, or other purposes (UNWTO,2019). The tourism industry is very broad and is made up of several sectors. The tourism industry is considered to be the largest industry that provides employment opportunities and even provides a market for services and local products. (Buhalis,2021). This leads to an increase in general income levels in the country, which in turn boosts its economic growth and development. (UNWTO,2021). Tourism plays a very great role in the hospitality industry because it is one of the major drivers of hospitality services that are held by different countries as a means to celebrate and showcase their cultures and traditions (UNESCO, 2019). This is mostly done either nationally or regionally. People from all cultures and traditions can come together through tourism, where they can then showcase their customs to the rest of the nation and even the world. Simply said, cultural festivals are occasions to honor the traditions and practices of a specific nation or group of people. They have contributed significantly to the global marketing of tourism. This is due to the fact that they offer chances for travelers to explore their distinctive cultures and traditions. The Day of the Dead in Mexico, Carnival in Brazil, and Holi and Diwali in India are some of the most well-known festivals in some developing nations.

### Motivation/objectives of the study

Cameroon, just like any other developing country has as well recognized the great role those cultural festivals play in promoting tourism, both as a means of economic growth and a means of bringing about development. The "Ngondo" celebration of the Sawa people is among the most well-known and prominent cultural events in Cameroon. This festival is known for attracting thousands of visitors yearly. The aim of this research is therefore to investigate the impact of the festival on tourism in Cameroon, the challenges faced in promoting it as a tourist attraction site, the

strategies that the festival uses to attract tourists, and how the government and stakeholders can promote the Ngondo festival.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The Role of cultural festivals in promoting tourism in developing countries**

Most cultural festivals have played a great role in enhancing tourism in developing countries. They include;

#### **A. Unique and authentic experiences for tourists**

Every country's culture and traditions are particular to its residents. The majority of travelers are therefore intrigued to learn about and engage with various nations' distinctive cultures. They get the chance to witness and experience these cultures as a result of these cultural shows. In this way, it helps to promote and enhance tourism.

#### **B. Opportunities to interact and learn**

Most tourists that travel for cultural events get the chance to meet the residents there. Additionally, they have the chance to study the customs and cultures of the locals. They join in the dancing, pick up a few words in their native tongue, and are eager to try on their clothing as well. This gives tourists firsthand information about the people, and they may tend to invite others to experience these cultures. This is a great way of promoting tourism.

#### **C. Employment opportunities**

These festivals create employment opportunities for the residents of that country. It also helps to generate income for the local business, which overall contributes to the development of the country. Some of this money is further invested in promoting tourism activities (Mbaiwa,2011).

#### **D. Fostering social cohesion**

Cultural festivals bring together people from various regions of the country, and the world at large. This promotes social cohesion and helps to promote a sense of unity, pride, belonging, understanding, and mutual respect.

### **Case study of some successful cultural festivals in other developing countries**

#### **A. The Baliem festival in Papua, Indonesia**

This is the most popular festival in Papua (Indonesia). This festival is usually organized by their local government, alongside the Dani people every August. It is characterized by dances, folk music, inter-tribal sports competitions, tug of war, selling of traditional food and Arti crafts, fashion shows, and storytelling (Baliem,2021). This festival is usually a great success, and it has helped promote tourism greatly because it attracts thousands of visitors from around the world (Bieger & Wittmer,2006).

#### **B. Carnival in Brazil**

This is a very big carnival that is celebrated before the season of Lent. It is usually characterized by unique and beautiful costumes, samba music, food, and parades. The Rio Carnival, as it is known, is regarded as the largest carnival worldwide (Carnival, 2019). Since it brings millions of tourists to Brazil each year, this carnival is the biggest tourist draw. This carnival is significant because most people abstain from meat, sugar, food, and beverages throughout Lent. This festival however provides an opportunity for them to enjoy these things before the Lenten season begins.

### **Historical Background of the Ngondo Festival**

Cameroon, a nation in Central Africa, has a city called Douala which is extremely popular. (Emmanuel, 2012). This city, which has a population of about 3 million, serves as Cameroon's economic capital, and it is located in the Littoral region. Douala has an average annual population growth rate of 4.87% yearly. This city is most famous for a lot of industrial activities such as breweries, textile factories, palm oil, soap, and food processing plants which have helped to create job opportunities for most Cameroonians. It has over 150 neighborhoods and over 208 dialects. Douala is located at the bottom of the Gulf of Guinea, which is very close to neighboring countries such as Nigeria, Chad, and Congo, all located in Central Africa (Fidelis, 2015) The main Religion of the Douala people is Christianity.

The Douala people, also known as the “Sawa” people are a Bantu ethnic group of Cameroon. The history of Douala goes back to the time of a man named “Mbedi”, whose sons, Ewale and Dibombo migrated North and arrived at Pitti on the Dibamba River. Ewale moved to the mouth of Dibamba, around the Wouri River, and his people became the Douala people (David, 1995).

The Douala people tend to be very concerned and find various ways to promote their culture (Manga, 2016). In their Agenda 31 testament, they tried to find ways to promote their culture while focusing on sanitation, environmental conservation, and biodiversity (Lissongo, 2018). They went ahead to sign a partnership with the Sawa traditional people’s assembly to come up with different ways to promote and enhance their art and culture. Still based on the promotion and enhancement of culture, they set up a traditional and ritual festival called “Ngondo”. This is a very famous festival in Douala, and it is held yearly. This festival aims to preserve, and promote the Sawa culture and also serves as a means to showcase the beautiful customs and traditions of the Douala people (Lissongo, 2018). This is the biggest festival that is held in Cameroon every year.

### **What is the Ngondo festival all about? (Key features and events)**

The Ngondo festival is a very big traditional festival that is celebrated by the Sawa people in Douala, Cameroon. This festival dates as far back as 1949 and was led by a man named Ndoumbe Ekule (Daniel, 1998). Initially, this Ngondo committee was used to act as the customary court and later became a defense force for the interest of the Sawa people in the year 1900. The Ngondo festival holds at the banks of the river Wouri. It starts on November 1 and lasts through the first Sunday in December. Five Sawa tribes come together to celebrate this event on the day it is held. The main point of the whole festival is a ritual which is referred to as “Jengu” (Fidelis, 2015). During this ritual, some Sawa men put on their beautiful traditional regalia and gather around the banks of the river Wouri each carrying pots. They dive into the water and stay there for several minutes. It is believed that they go down there to get messages from their gods. During this time, however, while waiting for the men to return, other activities will be taking place. These include activities such as exhibitions, ethnic presentations, dance competitions, boating, beauty pageants, carnivals, folk dancing, wrestling, and choir activities. During the preparation week, they also have activities such as hygiene day. However, only locals are allowed to participate. Foreigners and visitors have opportunities to enjoy Cameroon culture and also to wear Cameroon traditional attire.

### **Main aim and significance of the festival to the people of Cameroon.**

One aim of the Ngondo festival is to enhance, promote and preserve the cultural heritage of the people of Douala, promote the speaking of their local language, and create cultural spaces (Emmanuel, 2012). It also aims to encourage local artists and creators who try to promote songs in the Sawa language or any Douala-related works of art.

Another aim is to bring people together, especially the Sawa community, and to ensure that they all continue to work together to develop their city (Lissongo, 2018). It also strives to use this as an opportunity to help the younger generations to know more about the tradition and also enables them to learn their local dialect. This is most helpful, especially for the youths who grow up away from their hometown.

Lastly, Ngondo aims to create ties and partnerships with people from other countries and enable them to attend and support their beautiful culture. No wonder, they have international partners from Benin and hope to partner with other countries such as Senegal India, and other countries around the world.

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

The research uses data and information obtained from journals, newspapers, social media influencers, bloggers, other dissertations, and the Cameroon newspapers. Also, information was gathered from focus group discussions and interviews with friends, tour operators, colleagues, relatives, stakeholders, and a few tourists.

## **4. RESULTS**

### **The impact of the Ngondo Festival on tourism in Cameroon.**

#### **A. Source of tourist attraction**

This Ngondo festival, the most famous cultural festival in Cameroon, is a major source of attraction to thousands of tourists (Kanmga, 2012). They come from different parts of the world just to experience this beautiful, rich, and unique

Sawa tradition. They dance and sing along with the locals, and also try on the Sawa traditional attire. They as well enjoy events such as canoe races, wrestling, miss contests, and many other fun activities. Most tourists usually go back with many great memories of this festival. This tends to be a great boost to the tourism industry of Cameroon and also helps to generate revenue for businesses in Cameroon.

### ***B. Cultural exchange***

It also promotes cultural exchange between the tourists and the people of Cameroon. (Nyah, 2015) As a result of the Ngondo festival, many visitors have an opportunity to interact with the locals and experience their cultures and traditions firsthand. This helps change their mindsets toward each other, in the sense that they all get to understand and appreciate the cultures of each other better.

### ***C. Preserves and promotes the Sawa culture.***

The Ngondo tradition helps to keep the Sawa culture alive and also promotes and preserves it by showing it out to others as well. Due to this culture, future generations of the Sawa people can get to know more about their traditions and learn to appreciate them more (Fonkou, 2013). This way, the tradition, and culture will never get lost. It also provides an opportunity for Sawa people to promote their local songs and works of art. It equally promotes harmonious relationships among municipal and traditional authorities.

### ***D. Boosts the local economy***

The Ngondo festival provides jobs for the locals and creates more business opportunities like hotels, restaurants, and souvenir shops. The budget of the festival is estimated to be around 185,000,000 cfa (320,000 USD) or (282,000 euros), which is a source of revenue for the state (Lissongo, 2018). It also carries out activities that help to preserve the environment, such as its famous "hygiene day". This money is again invested in promoting tourism activities in Cameroon.

## **Challenges faced in promoting Ngondo festival as a tourist attraction.**

### ***A. Lack of infrastructure***

The roads in Douala are very narrow, and due to the existence of many companies and factories, there is usually very tight traffic. Also, the infrastructure such as the transportation and accommodations are not enough to support the large number of visitors which the event can attract. The festival's area is still being developed and is sometimes affected by soil erosion (Lissongo, 2018).

### ***B. Lack of awareness***

In past years, promoting this festival has been a great challenge. Many people in Cameroon are usually not aware of this festival. This makes it difficult to attract visitors, both at home and abroad.

### ***C. Funding***

The Ngondo festival usually requires a large amount of funding. It is challenging for the organizers to get sufficient funds to organize the festival. This makes advertising and promotion difficult, hence tourists tend not to get information about the festival.

### ***D. Security***

Just like in most countries, safety and security in Cameroon are not 100% guaranteed. Cameroon has had some unrest and safety concerns in recent years. As a result of this, most visitors tend to be skeptical about attending this festival.

### ***E. Getting foreign partners***

It is usually challenging and expensive to get foreign partners to participate.

## **Strategies implemented to attract tourists to the Ngondo festival**

### ***A. Promotion and marketing***

In recent times, the organizers of the Ngondo festival have started promoting the event on all possible and necessary social media platforms (UNESCO, 2021). This is mostly done on travel blogs and tourism websites. The Government has also helped to promote it on its tourism board.

### ***B. Local and international media***

This is now streamed both on local and international media to further promote and create awareness of its existence.

### ***C. Hospitality Services***

Recently, organizers try to ensure that all necessary infrastructure is put in place to ensure the comfort of the tourists. Tourists are provided with all necessary hospitality services such as accommodation, transportation, and food, just to make sure that they are comfortable and feel at home.

### ***D. Discounts***

Most tourists tend to get entry fee discounts, based on a first come first serve basis, souvenirs, and as well as many other benefits. This has encouraged many tourists to keep attending this great festival.

### ***E. General participation***

In previous years, most tourists were only allowed to watch and not effectively participate in the activities. However, to encourage more tourists to attend, they are now given a chance to participate in some activities. This action has also helped to attract more tourists. Also, more activities have been included to make it even more fun.

### ***F. Creating more partners/sponsors***

The organizers are doing their best to involve more partners and sponsors. This has helped make the event even more famous and has reduced the financial burdens on them. They also have been seeking funds from private sources to support their promotional efforts.

## **5. DISCUSSIONS**

### **How can the Government and Stakeholders promote the Ngondo festival?**

This festival has great potential to become a big tourism source in Cameroon. However, there are still some serious challenges that are holding it back. If these challenges are addressed, then the Ngondo festival will have enormous growth.

#### ***A. Improve the infrastructure***

The government can start by creating better roads, constructing more accommodations, and providing more means of transportation. Also, the Government could help make the space for the festival more accommodating. This will help to improve the accessibility and attractiveness of the festival.

#### ***B. Security***

To solve the problem of insecurity, the Government can hire security guards or even assign the military to guard the festival area for the whole period of this festival. This will assure tourists that they are very safe and will motivate them to attend the festival.

#### ***C. Funding***

The Government can provide stipends to organizers, enabling them to set up a good plan to attract more tourists.

#### ***D. Expanding Online Presence***

This is another great strategy to promote this festival. It is important to involve local and international bloggers and social media influencers with many followers to advertise the festival. They can be paid to make the event famous on their various platforms. Also, creating a strong marketing team for promotion is a great strategy.

### **E. Partnering with other festivals to create a network of cultural events**

An adage goes thus "Unity is strength". If all festivals can agree to partner together and work hard to support each other, then the Ngondo festival will be able to get more international recognition.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The Ngondo festival of the Sawa people is known to be the most popular festival in the Republic of Cameroon. This festival has the potential to become a major source of tourist attraction in Cameroon if managed the right way. This study was able to analyze the impact which the Ngondo festival has on tourism. It again examined the challenges which the organizers of the festival encountered in promoting the festival as a tourist attraction site. It further analyzed the strategies used to attract tourists to the festival. The conclusions have significance for tourist management and marketing in developing nations, and suggestions have been made to strengthen the Ngondo festival's contribution to Cameroon's tourism promotion.

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