

# New Year Festival (Tradition) in Nigeria

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Nigeria the most populous country in Africa is ethnically, religiously and culturally diverse and has more than four hundred ethnic groups. As a result of this it becomes extremely difficult to refer to any particular religious or cultural festival to be representative of the whole country. The only festival that cuts across all ethnic, cultural and religious divides is the New Year Festival<sup>1</sup>, **traditionally celebrated on January 1st**. New Year festival in Nigeria is celebrated with pomp and pageantry by all the people and it is the most celebrated among all festivals or religio-cultural traditions. New Year celebration used to be associated with Christian annual festival especially in the southern, western and eastern parts of the country where Christianity predominates. Lately, all other religious groups especially Muslims began to make New Year one important aspect of their festivals. This is due to two important reasons: the fact that all other religious groups have begun to sense that New Year is remarkably different from Christmas--a Christian annual religious tradition; and also due to the fact that Nigerians recently are now becoming more religiously sensitive--each religious tradition sees no reason why its members could not commemorate the New Year festival in its peculiar way and in its unique place of worship. **New Year festival comes with many important features which are:**

First and foremost, the New Year eve is treated differently among the different religious and cultural traditions found in Nigeria, but the important basic thing is that virtually all people see it as a "Myth of Eternal Return."<sup>2</sup> According to Mircea Eliade, "The suspension of profane time answers to a profound need on the part of primitive man... a series of parallel conceptions relating to the regeneration of time and the symbolism of the New Year."<sup>3</sup> This period is marked by different kinds of religious rituals. One of such main rituals is to offer prayers at midnight of **December 31st**. People gather at churches and mosques, and these days at traditional local shrines at the stroke of the hour (12 midnight) and offer their prayers for a fruitful and lucky year ahead. Offering prayers is meant to be auspicious as it brings prosperity in the coming year. These prayers may take the form of what Victor Turner calls "Redressive Ritual."<sup>4</sup> By redressive ritual, it is meant a ritual of reversing evil happenings, occurrences and attacks in the previous year; or restitution prayer, which has to do with confession and renunciation of the past misdeeds

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<sup>1</sup> New year is usually regarded as Odún nlá (big festival) and Christmas as Odún kékeré (small festival) among the Yoruba speaking people

<sup>2</sup> Eliade Mircea, *The Myth of Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, translated from French by Willard R. Trask, with a new introduction by Jonathan Z. Smith, NJ (Princeton and Oxford): Princeton University Press, 2005 edition, p.36.

<sup>3</sup> See Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of Eternal Return*, *ibid.* page 36. We can safely here argue that as far as New Year tradition is concerned, it is not only primitive man but also modern individuals suspend the profane time to be able to partake in a sacred moment like the New Year.

<sup>4</sup> Turner Victor, *The Drums of Affliction: A Study of Religious Processes among the Ndembu of Zambia*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968, read pages 269-279.

and sinful behaviors. Leading to what Nigerians call “New Year, New Revolution” or “New Year, New Resolution.”

Secondly, it is a time when people offer wishes and greetings to one another. Such ritual wishes or greetings range from perhaps worldwide phenomenal sporadic and thunderous “Happy New Year”<sup>5</sup> at the stroke of the hour, praying for success for one another in the New Year, and to singing and dancing to traditional local drums with different songs of hopes and of aspirations. Some certain individuals make it a point of duty to go and tell those who have offended them that they have been forgiven, and thereby could continue with their former cordial relationships. In recent times however, certain Evangelical and Pentecostal/ Aladura<sup>6</sup> groups of churches usually declare fasting for their members throughout the whole month of December (some are usually for only seven days or three days) preceding the New Year eve, coupled with intense prayers that would herald the coming of the New Year. **This consecrated hour/day is now also an integral part of Islamic doctrine.** Among certain ethnic groups, masquerades usually come out during the midnight of December 31<sup>st</sup> till the morning of January 1<sup>st</sup> for ritual cleansing and blessings.

The third ritual stage is the “throwing of banger” which is the same thing as American huge Fire Works in commemoration of July 4-- the American Independence day. Banger throwing or shooting is a very unique aspect and usually adds color and glory to the celebration of the New Year. While the American Fire Works is at a particular location and by designated persons; Nigerian case is carried out by the youths who move from place to place and from house to house. But because the youths are the ones involved in the throwing of bangers in the Nigerian case, there have been occasions when they have gone out of control. So it is usually the case that some of these youths were being arrested by the police officers, with the aim of curbing their excesses.

The fourth ritual stage is the gift and exchange of gifts such as; foods and drinks and perhaps of gift of cash and kinds. In some churches, quite a number of people use the occasion of the New Year to bring gifts to their priests. **People, irrespective of their religious background also** use the occasion of the New Year to buy clothes and sandals for their children, even if they could not afford to buy for themselves, **and exchange gift with their friends and relatives.** It is highly interesting also to note that New Year festival is a time when many people travel from their respective places of work in the cosmopolitans within the country, while some individuals make it a habit to travel from different parts of the world such as USA, United Kingdom, and a host of other countries to their various villages and cities in Nigeria to enjoy the festive moods with their loved ones especially parents who are still alive. Those people travelling to their respective villages and cities use the opportunity to bring good gifts to their parents and the loved ones.

We may conclude by saying that the New Year is an interesting and a remarkable festival that Nigerian people are always looking forward to, because it is a time when busy-ness is cast aside and people enter into the moods of festivity. It is a time when every Nigerian seems to sigh

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<sup>5</sup> Among the youths in the Yoruba ethnic group, the phrase “Happy New Year” has been rechristened to “A pinnu Iya” which means “We have put an end to sufferings”, depending on what suffering means to individual person.

<sup>6</sup> The Aladura groups of churches are the Christ Apostolic Church, The Apostolic Church, Cherubim and Seraphim church, the Celestial church of Christ, while the Evangelical/Pentecostal groups of churches can be likened to Joel Osteen’ Lake Wood church in Houston, Creflo Dollars’ Ministries in Maryland, USA.

at least a temporary sigh of relief from hustling and bustling of daily life, and from fear of unknown. It is a time when the people enjoy themselves to the fullest. The weather seems to be very auspicious at this time too. It is our suspicion that a typical Nigerian would perhaps wish that a New Year festival is celebrated on a constant basis.