

# THE KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF MULTICULTURAL FESTIVALS: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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## Abstract

Many societies are becoming progressively more multicultural and the importance of, and interest in, building well-functioning multicultural societies is growing. With such interest in becoming well-functioning multicultural societies, a number of multicultural festivals have emerged in many societies as one of the strategies within a multicultural policy for promoting social harmony and social integration, and celebrating cultural diversity for both ethnic minorities and the dominant population. While these festivals have become a significant part of social life in a multicultural society and they offer a unique and valuable experience to its visitors, there are few studies published which focus on the role of multicultural festivals in a multicultural society.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to propose the key characteristics of multicultural festivals by drawing upon the literature from various sectors in order to conceptualize the role of multicultural festivals. The paper concludes that multicultural festivals play a significant role in multicultural societies for the development of successful multiculturalism.

**Key words:** multicultural festival, cultural celebration, cultural identity, cultural expression, social interaction

## INTRODUCTION

The current trends in increasing world trade, globalisation of short term labour, internationalisation of education, and cross-cultural marriages mean an increasing number of people move between countries as immigrants or sojourners for overseas work or studies. It is estimated that there were almost 191 million international migrants on a world-wide basis in 2005 and it has increased by 121 million over 45 years (United Nations, 2005). The number of countries that host a significant number of migrants has increased during the period. In 1960, 30 countries hosted more than 500,000 migrants each; the number of such countries had increased to 64 by 2005.

With such trends, many societies have become multicultural and the importance of, and interest in, building well-organised multicultural societies are increasing (Parekh, 2006). The growing cultural diversity of societies gives rise to the need to develop or adapt procedures

that ensure adequate and fair treatment of individuals of all cultural groups in a society. As one of instruments to the development of successful multiculturalism, multicultural festivals have emerged around the world. While there are many research studies on festivals in general, research on different kinds of festival, in particular multicultural festivals, is lacking. As there are differences between each kind of festival and it is hard to generalize the findings from one to another, research on multicultural festivals is needed to investigate.

Moreover, while it may appear that many societies have used multicultural festivals as one policy strategy to promote social harmony, research on whether this is a successful strategy and if successful how it works is limited. If multicultural societies are to truly embrace 'multicultural festivals' as a policy strategy promoting social harmony, then they must consider the characteristics and contents of multicultural festivals, and how these characteristics and contents of the festival contribute to building better multiculturalism. To evaluate multicultural festivals as an instrument for the development of multiculturalism, research into multicultural festivals is essential.

The approach taken in this paper includes an examination of literature relating to the areas of multiculturalism, general festivals, and cultural and community festivals. Through an analytical review of the available literature, the characteristics of multicultural festivals are identified and the roles of multicultural festivals are suggested. Moreover, recommendations for further research on the contribution of multicultural festivals in multicultural societies are stated in this paper.

## **MULTICULTURALISM**

While this paper examines the literature on the characteristics of multicultural festivals, understanding the concept of multiculturalism and the strategies for a successful multicultural society is essential for constructing a knowledge platform from which to proceed.

As the mobility of people between countries is increasing, the term, multiculturalism, has become popular in the world over the past two decades. The term, multiculturalism, has no fixed definition, either in political debate, or in cultural and scholarly discourse. Multiculturalism is often used to describe a situation characterized by a multitude of ethnic groups, cultures, religions, and languages (Chadwyck, 2009; Chin, 1992). But this definition lacks the clarity necessary to fully describe the concept's complexities in contemporary society. Runblom (1994) defined multiculturalism as "an ideal situation of peaceful coexistence between individuals or groups of diverse origin"(p. 624). The definition of Runblom (1994) seems to be more comprehensive than the former. Based the Runblom's definition of multiculturalism, a multicultural society can be defined as an ideal society of peaceful coexistence between individuals or groups of diverse origin.

Many suggestions and recommendations for a successful multicultural society have been made in previous research. Berry et al. (2006) suggest that governments should consider providing support for minorities so that cultural loss is limited or prevented, and their ethnic identity is promoted. It is also suggested that governments should develop policies and programs for the dominant population to support the multiculturalism orientation. Similarly, Koscie et al. (2005) suggest having implementation programs designed to change the attitude of the dominant population towards minorities to help reduce inter-ethnic conflict. Approaches based on educational work and judicial measures might be good examples for such a program.

The contact theory formalised by Allport (1954) suggests that negative attitudes and prejudices held by one group towards another can be reduced by intergroup contact. When individuals of two groups come into positive, personal, and cooperative contact with each other, they will get to know each other, a consequence of which is that prejudices will be eliminated or reduced. Important is that the interaction takes place between individuals with equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation and with the support of authorities, law or custom (Allport, 1954). Pettigrew (1997, 1998) reformed the contact theory by adding an additional condition, friendship potential, for optimal contact. Under these conditions mutual attitudes and interaction will become more positive, for instance, through a growing recognition of similarities (Pettigrew, 1997, 1998), and will help acculturation. In addition, the importance of social support is emphasised through coping strategies for acculturation change. New skills and information regarding the mainstream and migrant cultures and society are required for both immigrants and the dominant population.

In light of the suggestions in previous literature, multicultural festivals have emerged around the world not only to encourage minorities to maintain their culture of origin, but also to increase the contact between the dominant population and minority group members, so that negative attitudes and prejudices towards each other can be reduced and a well-organised multicultural society can be built. As such, nowadays many cities in the world are holding annual multicultural festivals.

### **MULTICULTURAL FESTIVALS**

McClinchey (2008) defined a multicultural festival as a place for public celebrations, showcasing the ethnic culture of communities that have settled in a region due to immigration. This definition of multicultural festival seems to focus on the showcase nature of festivals, and not consider the meanings. In contrast, Duffy (2005) defined multicultural festivals more specifically as places for on-going dialogues and negotiations within communities as individuals and groups attempt to define meaningful concepts of identity and belonging, as well as notions of exclusion. Although Duffy's definition of multicultural festival covers the meanings of multicultural festivals, the meanings are limited in terms of identity and belonging, and notions of exclusion. The meanings of multicultural festivals can be more various. Based on McClinchey's and Duffy's definitions of multicultural festivals, multicultural festival can be defined as a public multi-cultural themed celebration at which multi-ethnic people including ethnic minorities and the dominant population have extraordinary experience which are expected to be beneficial.

Although multicultural festivals are held in many cities to promote social harmony and integration, there appears to be very little research into the role of multicultural festivals. Due to the increased number of multicultural festivals with the lack of knowledge on the festivals, there is a clear need to research on multicultural festivals and the characteristics of the festivals to respond to the increasing interests on the role of multicultural festivals in multicultural societies and on the festival management techniques to maximise its role in multicultural societies.

Although little is known specifically about multicultural festivals, the literature generally clusters the key characteristics of general festivals and cultural and community festivals into cultural celebration, cultural identity and expression, and social interaction, and these characteristics can be applicable to the multicultural festival context. These characteristics of multicultural festivals, identified from the literature review, revealed the contribution of multicultural festival in a multicultural society.

## **Cultural celebration**

Celebration is seen as a 'performance entailing the dramatic presentation of cultural symbols', 'public, with no social exclusion', or 'participatory entertainment' (Manning, 1983, p. 4). It is generally argued that celebrations seek to focus people's attention, and intention, in a positive way. Thus, the resulting celebratory acts or products create a time and place for the cultural expression of what a particular individual or community positively values. Given the four characteristics of celebration according to Arcodia and Whitford (2007); performance of cultural symbols, entertainment, undertaken in a public place, and community participation, many agree that the most common type of public community celebration is a festival as festivals contain all aspects of celebration.

There are further definitions that show celebration as one of the experiences of festivals. For example, Janiskee views festivals as "formal periods or programs of pleasurable activities, entertainment, or events having a festive character and publicly celebrating some concept, happening or fact" (in De Bres & Davis, 2001, p. 329). Also the United Kingdom Policy Studies Institute claims that "a festival was traditionally a time of celebration and recuperation which often followed a period of hard physical labour, sowing or harvesting of crops, for example. The essential feature of these festivals was the celebration or reaffirmation of community or culture. The artistic content of such events was variable and many had a religious or ritualistic aspect, but music, dance and drama were important features of the celebration" (in Bowdin & Williams, 2005, p. 466).

In Hilbers' (2006) study, the range of activities for community celebrations are defined. These include creation of arts products by artists, performances, art and craft activities, music, dance, food, commercial stalls, markets, fireworks, parades, fundraising, displays, show and tell activities, demonstrations, show bags, speakers, competitions, talent quests, environmental activities, bonfires, and publications. Hilbers (2006) also claims that community celebrations have one or more of themes such as enjoyment, fun and relief from everyday life; bringing people together and creating a sense of community; building community; showcasing people, the arts, cultural traditions, community assets; educating through providing opportunities for skill development or personal transformation; creative expression; social healing, for example, Aboriginal reconciliation; valuing diversity by providing exposure to a range of ethnic cultures and challenging racist values; social action, in particular advocacy for the most disadvantaged within the community; and the interconnection between self, community, spirit and the earth.

In light of these themes of celebration, festivals that have a celebratory theme allow people, regardless of culture and status, to participate in an occasion that generates a feeling of goodwill and community (Salamone, 2000). Such festivals have the potential to strengthen communal ties and unite people (Earls, 1993) and foster belonging and sharing among a family, social group, community or nation (Getz, 2007). These celebrations, often developed as arts, fringe, and folk festivals, are representative of the many aspects of the social and cultural fabric of the community in which they are celebrated. Furthermore, they not only facilitate the development of contemporary cultural identity, but enhance the well being of the community by, among other things, providing an 'opportunity to break away from daily routines and allowing us to socialise with family and friends within the larger community' (Earls, 1993, p.32).

Rokam (2005) also supports the idea that the celebration of festivals provides community a sense of common identity since this creates the feeling of a shared history. It provides a common platform where the individual members of a community share their sense of joy. Rokam (2005) thought cultural festivals are emerged to make it a common platform to get together and also to display the socio-cultural ethos. The main attractions include ritual performances, cultural programmes, games and sports events. Cultural festivals or multicultural festivals for minority groups, in particular, represent the cultural specialties providing sustenance to it, and ultimately promote the continuance of custom, tradition and culture. It provides a common platform to the community, bringing manifold aspects and diverse features of the minorities' life style and unifying them.

In addition, recently, a growing interest has grown in festivals as vehicles for fostering social change (Sharpe, 2008) in his study in the role of festivals as avenues for social change argued that festivals are social gatherings convened for the purpose of celebration with music, activities and attractions, and its organisers also often have emancipator aims and attempt to position a festival as a vehicle for social change. Sharpe (2008) also considers personal inspiration and transformation as one of the social changes possible through festival attendance. Similarly, Arcodia and Whitford (2007) argued that a focus on celebration provided in festivals has a clear relationship with the development of social capital.

Within this perspective, multicultural festivals seem to provide minority groups with a place for cultural community celebration drawing on people's memories and experiences of birth places and reaffirming community and culture. As Arcodia and Whitford (2007) also point out multicultural festivals in Australia which celebrate the character and richness of cultural diversity are successful models of multiculturalism policy, multicultural festivals seem to be held for celebrate the cultural diversity of the society. In addition, in terms of educational aspects, multicultural festivals play a role in different ways to different groups of visitors. While many migrants see these festivals as opportunities to educate younger generations about the traditions, beliefs and practices associated with their cultural heritage, many in the dominant population see these festivals as opportunities to learn other communities' or countries' culture.

### **Cultural identity and expression**

The second characteristic of multicultural festivals is cultural identity and expression. Although cultural expression and preservation form important parts of a minority culture's identity, minority cultures struggle to collectively express, share and thus preserve their cultural heritage in light of a system and structure that favours the dominant population and culture. Goodman (1999) defines cultural participation and expression as a universal imperative. Celebration and expression of culture allows minority cultural groups to preserve their culture, both as a collective group and as a part of an individual's identity, and to ensure its continuation from generation to generation (Lentz, 2001; Osterlund-Potzsch, 2004). Similarly, Guss (2000) views the goal of cultural expression as celebrating and preserving culture. This expression, whether public or private, is commonly shared amongst cultural group members, thus allowing culture to be maintained and preserved through group interaction and practice (Fong, 2004; Schiavoni, 1991).

Cultural expression in its public form is a key component of cultural preservation for ethnic minorities (Bailey & Oetzel, 2004; Fong, 2004). Day to day cultural expression is usually limited by the structure of the dominant society which favours the expression and thus maintenance of the dominant cultural group. Every day, the dominant population are 'living

out' their culture: it is sub-consciously and implicitly practiced throughout their daily lives (Bailey & Oetzel, 2004; Chiu & Hong, 2006). Conversely, ethnic minorities rely on allocation of space, resources and time for public cultural celebrations, and private times such as at family parties (Dyke & Dyke, 2002). It has been thus highlighted that consideration needs to be given to cultural groups in terms of allocation of space and opportunity for public cultural expression.

Several researchers assert that festivals provide an opportunity for new and emerging communities to strengthen their sense of identity and distinctiveness, and capacity to express their own culture (Falassi, 1987; Hilbers, 2006). In this sense multicultural festivals seem to play an important role for minority group members, offering the place for cultural participation and expression. For example, The Australian government has mainly defined and concentrated on cultural expressions as public spectacles, and multicultural festivals in particular are used as the major form of public cultural celebration and cultural expression for minority ethnicities (Multicultural Affairs Queensland, 2006). Osterlund-Potzsch (2004) also suggest that public festivals such as multicultural festivals is one ethnic arena in which there exists a readiness for ethnic communication and ethnic expressions are to be expected.

Multicultural festivals as a public display can allow ethnic minorities to re-establish ties with their homeland and its culture through shared expression and collaboration with other members of the same ethnicity, which is central to the sustenance of a member's cultural identity. It also provides opportunities for various cultural groups to support and share with each other in their struggle as a minority group in a mainstream culture (Bailey & Oetzel, 2004; Fong, 2004; Lentz, 2001). Therefore, although daily cultural expression supported by societal infrastructure holds obvious advantages in comparison to infrequent public displays of culture, these public displays are still significant to ethnic minorities for the sustaining of their cultural identities. Moreover, through expressing their own culture and strengthening their identity, minority groups can feel comfortable and secure in the multicultural society. Working together on a common activity such as a public performance can also foster dialogue within groups about the nature of their cultural identity.

Multicultural festivals offer a variety of programmes such as folk dance and ethnic music, and cooking ethnic food. These performative traditions are of great importance to ethnic minorities as they are a positive means of profiling the minority to the general public while simultaneously providing an opportunity for mobilisation to the in-group (Osterlund-Potzsch, 2004). In fact, performative genres such as folk dance and ethnic music have become the main format to present ethnic culture as traditional song and music usually have a strong sentimental value. Osterlund-Potzsch (2004) also state that ethnic cooking and special food-items also represent ethnicity. Through such programmes multicultural festivals offer opportunities to express the minority cultural to the public; thus multicultural festivals are used to not only celebrate and preserve culture, but also to foster cultural acceptance within the mainstream community, generate community acceptance of cultural diversity, and reinforce the society as a multicultural society in the collective mind of the community (Jupp, 1996). It is also important to note that multicultural festivals are not only providing minority groups the opportunity to express their culture, but also the dominant population to view others' cultures (Picard & Robinson, 2006).

### **Social interaction**

All types of festivals seem to involve some form of social concentration and connectivity. In its most simple form, this occurs at the individual level when at least two individuals meet

and exchange a form of interaction. At the macro level, this occurs when one or several groups of individuals meet in a single time-space frame (Picard & Robinson, 2006). Group is seen here in a necessarily broad sense to include, on the one hand, highly structured social entities based on established kinship, friendship or professional networks. On the other hand, it includes much looser social entities, often without a strong internal structure, based on a form of shared reference to, for instance, common interests, problems, feelings of belonging, residence, ethnicity, race, social status, etc. The meeting of members of such groups, whatever their motivation or criteria to define group inclusion, is a necessary formal principle of any form of festival. Similarly, Kuutma (1998) states that cultural festivals present expressive forms of culture where social interaction is instrumental. Festivals provide the scenery for the interplay of tradition and innovation in communicative social life. The created communicative situation reflects shared experience of the group, promotes social revitalization, and celebrates ethnic identity in the context of cultural expression.

In a similar vein to multicultural festivals, all visitors including minority and dominant population interact as visitors, exhibitors and performers, and such interactions can help both the minority and the dominant population to break prejudices and stereotypes. As shown in Cho's (2006) study of South Korea, 44 percentage of minority group member respondents do not interact with the dominant population except for school teachers. The dominant population and minority group members hardly meet and interact with each other in everyday life. Such lack of interaction causes prejudice and stereotypes. According to Stephan's (1987) contact hypothesis which claims that patterns of prejudice and stereotypes can be broken by direct intergroup contact, such interactions through multicultural festivals can facilitate the end of prejudice and promote social harmony.

In addition, multicultural festivals seem to provide opportunities for not only interactions between minorities and the dominant population, but also between minority group members themselves. As Kuutma (1998) states a multicultural festival can be seen as a place for minority group members to meet, communicate with the people who have the same culture, and relieve their nostalgia for their homeland.

## **DISCUSSION**

It was suggested in the paper that multicultural festivals include three characteristics – cultural celebration, cultural identity and expression, and social interaction. These three characteristics of multicultural festivals showed the potential of a number of roles of multicultural festivals in a multicultural society for the development of successful multiculturalism.

First, multicultural festivals seems to provide minority groups with a place for cultural community celebration drawing on people's memories and experiences of birth places and reaffirming community and culture. It also provides an opportunity to have extraordinary experience as the place for ethnic minorities to celebrate their origin culture is limited. Thus, multicultural festivals help ethnic minorities to get rid of daily stress, to relieve their nostalgia for their homeland, and to feel more comfortable to live in a mainstream culture by engaging in celebration of their culture of origin.

Second, multicultural festivals offer ethnic minorities the place for cultural participation and cultural expression. For ethnic minorities, it is hard to express their culture of origin in daily life, hence their cultural participation and cultural expression at multicultural festivals is

extraordinary and valuable. It has been argued that the opportunities and facilities to maintain ethnic minorities' culture of origin are necessary to lessen stress for ethnic minorities and to be balanced for an ideal multicultural society (Berry et al., 2006). Thus, multicultural festivals contribute for the development of successful multiculturalism, allowing ethnic minorities to preserve their culture, to ensure its continuation from generation to generation, and to reduce stress.

Lastly, multicultural festivals allow ethnic minorities and the dominant population to socialise with family and friends. Multicultural festivals provide a place for interaction between ethnic minorities and the dominant population, and between ethnic minority group members themselves. Such interaction between ethnic minorities and the dominant population can break prejudices toward each other and promote social harmony. Moreover, as ethnic minorities can meet and communicate with the people who have the same culture at the festival, they can share information and make new friends; hence they can settle down easily. Therefore, it could be argued that multicultural festivals play a significant role in multicultural societies for the development of successful multiculturalism.

## **CONCLUSION**

The paper has critically examined the previous literature which is relevant to the characteristics and the role of multicultural festivals. Some of the areas covered in this review are the characteristics of general festivals and cultural and community festivals. Through an analytical review of the available literature, the characteristics of multicultural festivals were identified and it was suggested that multicultural festivals play a significant role in multicultural societies for the development of successful multiculturalism. It is believed that this paper provided needed information on and understanding of the role of multicultural festivals for building a better multicultural society. It is also hoped that this paper will encourage future research and initiate the directions for future and more comprehensive research in this area.

There is a need to further develop more empirical research on the role of multicultural festivals. Potential areas of investigation include what experiences and benefits visitors gain from a visit to multicultural festivals, and how these experiences and benefits contribute to building a better multicultural society. There is also a need to compare the different role of multicultural festivals for ethnic minorities and the dominant population. These are issues which need to be addressed because identifying multicultural festival visitor experiences and benefits can be a barometer for the contribution of multicultural festivals to the development of multiculturalism and may assist in improving social integration. Identifying what experience leads to which benefit also helps the multicultural festival organisers and public sector to achieve the foundational aim of multicultural festivals which is promoting the understanding of different cultures and facilitating harmony between cultures.

It is believed that better understanding of visitor experiences at and benefits from multicultural festivals will encourage industry and governments to consider multicultural festivals as an important strategy for the development of successful multiculturalism. If multicultural festivals help the dominant population and ethnic minorities to come closer together, and help ethnic minorities to settle down in a mainstream culture, the society will become more mature both in culture and economy.

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