

Festivals as Ritual Assertions for Sustaining Diaspora Communities: Comparing Cases in the USA and Japan

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Introduction: Festivals as Rituals for Politics

This paper presents a preliminary exploration for a comparative study of diaspora formation in the USA and Japan, using Koreans in Japan and African Americans as case studies. I am interested in looking into how the forced relocation of people inevitably produces political activism for liberation and how cultural festivals provide an effective tool for crystallizing everyday political activism. In the current paper, I compare the Zora! Festival and the One Korea Festival in Osaka, Japan.

Upon participating in the 2007 Zora! Festival, I witnessed striking similarities between this festival and ethnic festivals held by Koreans in Japan. As I approached the festival site, I saw people heading for it with a spirit of festivity. At the festival gate, I saw children and adults lining up for ethnic cuisine and walking around small shops. I noticed vendors from Senegal, Ghana, and Mali in the "African Village Marketplace." Across from those shops, I noticed a center stage with large speakers and a big festival banner. I saw technicians adjusting stereo equipment and musicians tuning their instruments. Soon music started and the spirit of festivity began to reach a higher level.

Likewise, while walking to the site of the One Korea Festival in October 2004, I saw children and adults hurrying to it with a spirit of festivity. As I entered the site, I saw vendors selling ethnic cuisines from Korea, Okinawa, and the Philippines, and people walking around. I noticed a big banner with a map of the Korean Peninsula at a center stage set up against the backdrop of the Osaka Castle. I saw technicians and musicians preparing for performance. The visitors' attention was drawn from the shops to the center stage,

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when children and adults in colorful costumes began to approach the stage, pounding Korean percussion instruments, swaying in dance, and raising the spirit of festivity.

Yet, what struck me most as similar between the two festivals was not those ordinary components of festivals, but educational programs taking place at the festival sites. Those programs were not merely educational but politically-charged, generating a spirit of political activism. At the Zora! Festival, I attended "Words and Voices" listening to poets and scholars discussing struggles with social discrimination. I visited the Hurston Museum, and learned about the histories of Eatonville quilters while enjoying the beauty of their products. I watched a film about the life of a young couple, the script of which was based on a novel by Hurston. I learned about her life at a photo exhibition in the Eatonville Public Library. At the Korea Week, a week-long event into which the One Korea Festival was integrated in 2004, I attended an international conference on a Korean transnational network in North East Asia, learning about ethnic education and economic survival of the Korean Diaspora in that region. I saw a film depicting Koreans' struggle for survival in postcolonial Osaka. After listening to a musician playing the film's soundtrack at a makeshift theater, I went upstairs to visit an art gallery displaying beautiful ceramics created by Korean artists in Osaka.

Located physically on the margins of the festival site and scheduled as secondary to the major events in the center stage, the educational programs at the Zora! Festival might seem peripheral at first. After making a few trips between the center stage and the sites of the educational programs, however, I began to see the relationship in a reverse way; the educational programs were actually central to the whole event with the center stage performance as peripheral. I was convinced of my observation when I met N.Y. Nathiri. As Deidre Crumbley, a colleague of mine from North Carolina State University who serves as national planner for the festival, introduced me to her at the gate of the Hurston Museum, Nathiri held my hand firmly. The act of shaking hands in this introduction turned into a memorable moment to me. In some fifteen seconds while holding my hand, she told me the gist of the festival. Giving a glance at the center stage, she said something like this: "Ordinary people like to come to the festival to eat, drink, and listen to music. We

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need to capture them there and take them to educational events. The question is how.”

Yet, by the time I left the Zora! Festival, I had reached another level of understanding; that is, the festival was a complex intersection of the cultural and the political, which was implicit around the center stage and more explicit in the educational programs. This understanding was guided by what the organizer of the One Korea Festival said to me. In my interview with him,¹ Chung Kapsu, a Korean in Osaka who conceived the idea of the festival and has been running it annually for a couple of decades, described the festival as a site for “politics without a word of politics.” He stressed that he worked very hard to make the festival enjoyable, inviting popular musicians, holding lessons for visitors to learn Korean dance, and incorporating what was most fashionable in the entertaining world at the time of each festival. Yet, he said: “The festival is a way to disseminate political messages. We can take advantage of the power of culture for politics.” He quickly added, like Nathiri did, “I have been tackling the question of how to implement this in practice.”

In the two festivals, there existed a simultaneous presence of the cultural and the political. While entertaining spectators with dance, music, and food, these festivals were ritual assertions of cultural and political identities as well as educational instruments for social change. Put differently, they are rituals drawing on the power of cultural performance, producing a spirit of political activism, and educating participants through culture about politics. The important question for the festival planners is not merely how to generate a spirit of festivity but more importantly how to turn that spirit into a political one.

In his discussion on carnivals in the African Diaspora, John O. Stewart makes a link between cultural festival and politics, arguing that the festival (or the carnival) “as a social and aesthetic event is inevitably framed by political dimensions at its core and in its relations with the surrounding conventions by which it is contextualized” (218). This argument raises two questions about the nature of politics involved in the festival. First, what is the core political goal of the festival? Second, what is the political context in which the festival takes place?

These questions have been dealt with in festival studies. To illustrate,

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S. Schnell delineates how an innocuous drum ritual in rural Japan emerged as a medium of political resistance during Japan's modernization. A. Louie examines a case in which the Chinese (P.R.C.) government holds a festival for overseas Chinese youth to connect them to the Chinese state. H.R. Shin presents a case from South Korea, in which a festival, initiated by local government to impose their definition of a city, became a place for the city's civil society to negotiate and redefine the city's identity. Drawing on the example of the Louisiana Cajuns, C.L. Bankston and J. Henry shed light on how a festival, set up as a place for the consumption of ethnic culture, can be deployed as a measure to assimilate the ethnic group into American national culture. Stewart discusses how the government of Trinidad tries to make a carnival a ritual expression of transcendent nationhood. As these examples show, festivals differ in political contexts and intentions.

Manifesting similarities in their outward structures, the Zora! Festival and the One Korea Festival have differences as well as similarities when it comes to their historical contexts and political goals. I would like to compare and contrast the two festivals, focusing on how they came into being and how their political messages have changed according to changing political circumstances. I want to begin by pointing out one critical similarity: the two groups central to the two festivals, people of African descent in the United States and people of Korean descent in Japan, are both diasporic, carrying a legacy of imperialism, European and Japanese respectively. Thus, I am exploring how these different diasporic peoples shape festivals in adaptation to different opportunities and constraints while sharing the legacy of imperialism.

The One Korea Festival

Let me discuss the One Korea Festival first. It differs significantly from the Zora! Festival in that it is for resident foreigners, not for full-fledged legal citizens. The majority of Koreans in Japan are former colonial subjects and their offspring. About 60,000 Koreans remaining in postwar Japan lost their Japanese citizenship after the end of the Pacific War. Their offspring, including fourth- and fifth-generation Koreans, have also been born as legal aliens.² Many of those Koreans have been engaged in political activism,