

Bakhtin's Carnival in the Hornbill Festival of Nagaland

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Abstract

The Russian theorist and linguist Mikhail Bakhtin whose work on folk culture and language introduced intellectuals and scholars to new insights and concepts made his mark with his take on Carnival. The Hornbill Festival of Nagaland possesses the characteristics of Bakhtin's Carnival. This paper will introduce and analyse the traits of carnival present in the festival.

Keywords: Mikhail Bakhtin, Carnival, Hornbill Festival, Culture.

1. Introduction

Mikhail Bakhtin was a Russian intellectual born in Orel, a town in Moscow and educated at St. Petersburg University. He largely focused his writings on language and culture and his books *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981) and *Rabelais and His World* (1965) are his most notable works. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin analysed Rabelais' work *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and attempted to interpret and give it the recognition it deserves. Bakhtin believed that though Rabelais' ideas and works were accepted and loved by his contemporaries, he could not be comprehended and accurately judged by the later generations. In the introduction to *Rabelais and His World* he writes "of all great writers of world literature, Rabelais is the least popular, the least understood and appreciated" (1).

In order to understand Bakhtin's work, we must first look into Francois Rabelais and his novel. Rabelais was a French Renaissance writer and a Greek scholar whose book *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, a comic novel gained him fame. The most important features of this book were excessive exaggeration and openness. Since the novel contains offensive language and scenes, slang words, vulgar jokes, frank treatment of the female body parts, and the church and its teaching were ridiculed, the people of the period found it repulsive and the writer was accused of being unconventional and his book was branded as obscene as they were not familiar with such openness. Nonetheless, those who understood him applauded his work and Hugo declared him as one of the greatest "geniuses of humanity" (Bakhtin 1).

Bakhtin coined the word 'carnivalization' and explains carnival and its qualities through reading of Rabelais' work. Carnival type celebration occupies a significant place in the life of medieval men. Approximately three months in a year were devoted to these celebrations. The spirit of these festivities causes a person to renounce his official duties as a monk or scholar and engage himself in this recreation. Theologians and priests indulge "in gay recreation as relaxation from pious seriousness" (Bakhtin 13). According to Bakhtin, carnival is sanctioned by the society and during this time the people create an ideal world different from the reality: "One might say that it builds its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state" (88).

Bakhtin in his observation of carnival gives its characteristic features which are:

- The venue of the carnival is a world where hierarchic positions do not exist. It is replaced with role playing or reversal of status where people can not only imagine but get to experience it. The abolition of power structure also facilitates interaction between people. It brings them together; it unites them as opposed to alienation. As such, there is no restriction in contact between people of different status.
- The familiarity that the people experience leads to creation of a new form of speech. Etiquettes in speech or the usage of proper language while interacting with others are not observed and are replaced with indecent and abusive words to mock and insult. But these repulsive abuses and treatments are not considered contemptible but are accepted in a positive way. Bakhtin states that these insults are "abusive praise and praiseful abuse" (168).
- The people get to experience freedom, equality and immunity from laws and obligations. The atmosphere is one of humour and disorder therefore people are seeing freely engaging in conducts and activities which are normally prohibited. They are not punished for their actions so the carnival acts as a relief valve where people get to express their suppressed emotions without any fear. The serious institutions of the state thus become subject of laughter and ridicule because of this liberty granted to the people.

- d) The people are allowed to mock the church, the monarchy, the government or any important institution during the carnival. Whatever is revered, esteemed, and feared is derided. Bakhtin mentions the “feast of fools” which was popular in the medieval period. People during this celebration indulge in improper, grotesque and obscene acts. The churches were banned from celebrating such feast at the end of the Middle Age but it continued to be celebrated on streets and inns particularly in France. A letter in support of the feast was written and published in the circular of the Paris School of Theology in 1444 stating that such celebration is essential “so that foolishness, which is our second nature and seems to be inherent in man might freely spend itself at least once a year” (Bakhtin 75).
- e) The most important trait is the carnival laughter. Humour and mirth supersedes seriousness. Mischief, unrestraint freedom, playfulness dominates the mood. According to Rabelais, laughter is “a universal philosophical principle that heals and regenerates” (70). Carnival is thus, as Bakhtin observes “the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal” (10). The celebration gives a new meaning and unveils a different perception of the world to the people.

2. Bakhtin’s Carnival in the Hornbill Festival

The Hornbill festival which is considered to be one of the biggest festivals in India is a cultural festival of the Nagas introduced in the year 2000 by the Tourism Department and Art and Culture Department, Nagaland. The Nagas observe the Hornbill Festival once a year in the month of December at Kisama in Kohima district to celebrate unity and culture but during the occasion the components of carnival that Bakhtin discussed are noticed, which are:

- a) The existence of a ‘second world and second life’ (Bakhtin 6) and absence of hierarchy and liberty
Foremost, the festival is approved by the state and the people are given the license to celebrate. The place where the main festival is organised is situated on the outskirts of the capital city and the people are introduced to a utopia and world where they are permitted to choose their role. An instance of this is seen when the participants in the feast comes dressed in attires worn only by the chiefs of the village, the rich or the learned. In the olden days, clothes and ornaments determine the status and achievements of a person. For instance, in Angami tradition only the most skilled warriors and those who have held the ‘feast of merit’ are awarded with ‘ramei’ or the hornbill feather. These practices have been discontinued decades ago but during the festival an exhibition of these feathers on the headgears of ordinary men and women is witnessed.

The make believe world of Anime Cosplay or Cosfest is also capturing the interest of young anime fans looking for entertainment and a certain kind of lifestyle. It was founded in 2011 and the first festival was held on 2013. It was introduced in the Hornbill Festival in 2014. Dimapur Anime Guild and Nagaland Anime Junkies (NAJ) are some popular anime groups in Nagaland who host the event during the festival. The participants dressed up to represent certain characters especially from popular Japanese anime and video games. Through costumes the player inhabits the body of another, resumes its identity and is renewed. The venue of the Cosfest becomes the utopia for the players, a play within a play where the people are in a state of liberty where dressing in a costume or playing the role of a character does not appear as unusual as everyone in that space is connected by that similarity.

Night Carnival is also an event worth mentioning. The busy street of Kohima metamorphoses into a quaint locale at night cramped with stalls and stages, foods and goods where visitors of all age groups get to experience a different reality where they are free to indulge in revelry. People put on costumes, and masks and paint their face and charade as another person which makes the carnival akin to a masquerade party. The mask according to Bakhtin is, “connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself” (40-41). The Carnival is supposed to present a temporary place distinctly differing from the day-to-day world where the people can celebrate ‘newness’ – a new order and hierarchy. But this cannot be achieved without a new identity. Thus, masks and costumes help the people to change and reincarnate and engage in the joy of rejecting ‘conformity to oneself.’ Also, by hiding behind a mask, an individual is filled with a sense of liberty and security, as well as the desire to do as one pleases as he is in a temporal state of anonymity.

In 2018, Hornbill Night Carnival Parade was introduced at the Night Carnival featuring marching band, Naga cultural troupes adorned in traditional attires, Cosplayers dressed as popular anime characters, models in weddings gown, and a group of clowns. The sound of the instruments, folk songs of the tribal groups, together with the screams and cheers of the spectators and participants displayed unrestrained behaviour where the freedom to be playful, laugh, or mock is tolerated.

b) Carnival Laughter

Carnival laughter according to Bakhtin is the “laughter of all the people. It is directed at all and everyone... this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant and at the same time mocking, deriding” (11-12). Some cultural events and indigenous games while being performed and played for enlightenment also aims at evoking laughter which establishes a sense of familiarity and unity. However, laughter aroused from such events are not derisive or mocking but resembles a ‘festive laughter’ (Bakhtin 11). Besides the form of gay or lively entertainment that exists at the festival, there are comic programs which are specifically designed to call forth laughter at the expense of others. However, a more derisive class of carnival laughter can be found, for instance, among a group of people seated by the hearth outside the *Morung*, a traditional dormitory for the youth at Kisama, sharing a joke, teasing and taunting without fear of the authority. Such laughter can be relaxing but at the same time possess the power to “penetrate the highest forms of religious cult and thought” (Bakhtin 13).

c) Freedom from the laws of the state

During the festival, in the name of promoting the cuisine of the state, preparing and consumption of locally brewed alcohol is permitted. The church is an ardent supporter of the NLTP Act of 1989 and is bent on total prohibition of liquor in the state but an open disregard for the law is seen during the festival. All kinds of liquor including the local brew are made available not only at the official venue of the festival, Kisama, but also at the places where Night Carnival is held. The rice beer is considered to be a specialty of the Nagas, hence, it is openly promoted and the tourists are encouraged to taste it as part of their experience and the local visitors also relish in it in the name of the festival. This suggests freedom from laws and a “world which exists in a realm that is independent of officialdom” (Edgar 15), or as Bakhtin puts it, “a temporary suspension of the entire official system with all its prohibitions...” (89). It can also be taken as a derision of the church and government by refusing to acknowledge their authority. Such open dismissal of rules by the public is not witnessed during the other time of the year. The thought or fear of being punished is absent as there is a “temporary liberation from the established order” (Bakhtin 10).

The Church and the state government also seeks to protect the fauna of the land by banning hunting and serving wild meat during special occasions but the meat of birds and wild animals such as venison, boar, monkey and squirrel find its way into the food stalls during the festival. The revellers also freely relish such delicacies and liquors as they are in a time and place where nobody oppose and judge their action.

d) Carnival Unity

Bakhtin says about the carnival, “all were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age” (10). Similarly, during the Hornbill festival barriers cease to exist. People from all age group and from different parts of the state, country and world participate, meet and interact, thereby, making it possible to celebrate their voices and their contact as well. The active participation of foreigners and tourists in competitions and other form of activities also signify a breakdown of social hierarchies and cultural boundaries and the existence of everyone in a same space and time without any distinctions. It offers a kind of interaction and communication not possible in the ordinary course of events or everyday life. This contact leads to release from certain standard of manners and decency which are imposed at other times.

Bakhtin goes on to state that Carnival is:

“not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants” (7).

The importance of the participation of the actors and spectators in the carnival is repeatedly highlighted by Bakhtin as the spirit of the carnival can only be realised in their dynamic involvement. In an interesting way, tourists become participants and competitors in certain events.

There are critics who are critical of Bakhtin’s idea of carnival. They argue that carnival is an apparatus used by the upper class to suppress revolutionary thoughts and actions by permitting the lower and middle class to express and release their frustrations. Andrew Edgar and Peter Segwick mentions in their book *Cultural Theory: The Key Thinkers*, “carnival undermines dominant culture not in a directly practical sense, but in the sense that it invades and inverts

conventional structures of language and thought” (15). In carnival is invested the potential to overthrow or weaken the prevailing culture which means that it intrudes on the established system and reverse the conventional order.

References

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