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Research article

BETWEEN HYBRIDITY AND COMMODIFICATION: GLOBALISATION, CARNIVAL TOURISM AND THE CONTESTED HERITAGE OF THE EFIK PEOPLE OF CALABAR, NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

The Calabar Carnival, promoted internationally as "Africa's Biggest Street Party", has since its inception in the early 2000s grown from a state tourism initiative into a globally networked cultural spectacle whose relationship with the host Efik community's traditions remains contested. This study reassesses that relationship through the twin theoretical lenses of Cultural Hybridity and Cultural Commodification, drawing on a mixed-methods survey of 310 Efik residents across twelve clans in Calabar Municipality and Calabar South, complemented by key-informant interviews with clan chieftaincy office holders. Findings indicate a measurable shift in food, dress and nightlife behaviour coinciding with the carnival's year-end calendar, alongside a comparatively modest but statistically discernible incorporation of core Efik performance elements, including Ekombi dance and Ekpe display, into the carnival's main float competitions. Regression analysis identifies traditional masquerade and dance troupe participation as the strongest positive predictors of the carnival's contribution to cultural visibility, while fast-food patronage and imported fashion consumption emerge as the clearest markers of globalisation-driven cultural adaptation. The paper concludes that the Calabar Carnival functions simultaneously as a vehicle of cultural hybridity and a site of selective commodification, and it proposes a set of community-anchored heritage-safeguarding measures for policymakers and carnival organisers.

KEYWORDS

Calabar Carnival, Efik culture, cultural hybridity, cultural commodification, glocalisation, South-Eastern Nigeria

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1. INTRODUCTION

The tension between local tradition and global cultural influence has become a defining feature of sociocultural discourse in an increasingly interconnected world. The concept of glocalisation, the simultaneous fusion and friction of global and local cultural elements, captures both the opportunities and the risks that indigenous communities face in retaining a distinct identity amid sweeping external change (Iwara, Abua, Udonwa, Esuabana, Archibong, Idika, Bassey, Antai, Egbai & Eneyo, 2023). South-Eastern Nigeria's Efik cultural heritage, rooted in centuries of riverine trade, oral tradition and coastal cosmopolitanism, offers a particularly instructive case of this global-local interplay, and the Calabar Carnival sits at its very centre.

Conceived in the early 2000s primarily as a tourism-development initiative for Cross River State, the Calabar Carnival has since metamorphosed into a month-long cultural spectacle drawing participants and spectators from across Nigeria and the diaspora (Andrew & Ekpenyong, 2012; Esu & Arrey, 2009). Its growth has coincided with, and arguably accelerated, the transformation of Calabar from a primarily civil-service-oriented city into a more commercially and culturally diversified urban centre (Obong, Effiom & Okon, 2012). Yet this transformation raises a persistent analytical question that existing studies have addressed only partially: does the carnival's grand, internationally oriented spectacle enrich the Efik cultural repertoire it draws upon, or does it gradually dilute the specific practices, melodies, choreography and culinary traditions that make that repertoire distinct in the first place?

This paper revisits that question with fresh primary data and a more tightly specified theoretical apparatus than much of the earlier literature, which has tended to treat cultural hybridity and cultural commodification as loosely overlapping rather than analytically distinct processes. Building on earlier documentation of niche cultural-tourism products in the state, including the marketing of the Iboku Boat Regatta (Eneyo, Attah, Ekong, Offiong, Ekpo, Antai, Obi & Essien, 2022) and the spatial patterning of food culture in Calabar (Eneyo, Ajake, Offiong, Ushie & Akpan, 2023), this study asks three specific questions: first, which Efik cultural elements

have been most and least visibly incorporated into the carnival's main float competitions; second, what measurable shifts in everyday cultural practice, particularly food, dress and nightlife behaviour, coincide with the carnival's year-end calendar; and third, how do Efik residents themselves, across different clans, ages and occupational groups, evaluate the net cultural impact of the carnival on their heritage.

The question also carries practical weight beyond academic interest. Cross River State's tourism development strategy has increasingly positioned the carnival as its flagship cultural product, meaning that decisions about carnival programming, funding allocation and curatorial oversight have direct, cumulative effects on which elements of Efik heritage receive sustained public visibility and which gradually recede from view. A clear empirical account of which specific cultural elements the carnival currently amplifies, and which it marginalises, is therefore a necessary input into any deliberate heritage-safeguarding strategy, rather than a question that can be settled by impression or by the carnival's own promotional messaging alone.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Historical Emergence of the Calabar Carnival

Calabar's role as a historically significant trading and cultural-exchange centre, including its documented place within the trans-Atlantic trade era, forms an important backdrop to the carnival's emergence (Effiom, 2014; Obong et al., 2012). Scholars caution, however, against an overly romanticised reading of this history; Calabar's identity was shaped as much by its function as a cosmopolitan trading port as by any single historical episode (Attah, Agba & Nkpoyen, 2013). The carnival's inception in the early 2000s built deliberately on this historical resonance, positioning the event as a fusion of cultural celebration and economic revitalisation rather than an imported festival with no local genealogy (Obijuru, 2023).

2.2 Carnivals as Sites of Cultural Display and Economic Activity

Carnivals worldwide function as more than ephemeral entertainment; they map a community's historical trajectory while simultaneously operating as significant economic drivers (Ajake & Amalu, 2012). This dual function has, in comparative settings such as Rio de Janeiro's Carnival and Venice's Carnevale, generated persistent scholarly concern over the commodification of practices deeply rooted in local cultural narrative (Ansa & Okon, 2014). Within the Nigerian context specifically, Endong (2017) frames the Calabar Carnival and its associated festival calendar as a site where Nigerian-ness and externally sourced cultural forms are in continuous, sometimes uneasy, negotiation.

2.3 The Carnival's Documented Impact on Efik Cultural Practice

A recurring theme across the literature is the carnival's dual capacity to conserve and to strain traditional practice simultaneously. Agba, Ikoh, Bassey and Ushie (2010) document the carnival's role in sustaining interest in Efik dance and music among younger residents who might otherwise have limited exposure to these traditions outside formal cultural instruction. At the same time, Mensah and Eni (2019), examining Efik food metaphors and proverbs, note a generational decline in everyday familiarity with the culinary vocabulary that once anchored Efik social life, a decline that accelerates markedly around large public events when fast-food vendors dominate available catering options. Eneyo, Onyejekwe and Edward (2017), examining a comparable dynamic in Igbo cultural heritage, similarly found that large public cultural events tend to amplify exposure to globalised consumption patterns even as they nominally celebrate indigenous identity, a pattern this study tests directly for the Efik case.

A separate strand of the literature examines the carnival's economic role directly, documenting its contribution to hospitality-sector employment, informal trading opportunities and short-term retail demand across the carnival season (Ajake & Amalu, 2012; Attah et al., 2013). While this economic literature is not the primary focus of the present study, it is relevant background for interpreting the commodification findings reported in Section 5: where a cultural practice generates identifiable commercial value, whether through vendor sales, media coverage or sponsorship interest, it is, according to commodification theory, correspondingly more likely to be foregrounded within official carnival programming, independent of that practice's underlying cultural significance to the Efik community itself. This economic logic offers a plausible mechanism for the gap documented in Table 2 between highly visible performance elements and less commercially prominent material and culinary traditions.

2.4 Comparative Perspectives on Globalisation and Cultural Continuity in Africa

The tension observed at the Calabar Carnival is not unique to the Efik context. Eneyo, Onyejekwe and Edward (2017) documented a comparable pattern among Igbo communities, in which large public cultural events simultaneously sustained interest in indigenous performance traditions among younger attendees while accelerating the adoption of globalised food and fashion norms during the event period itself. Similar dynamics have been reported for other West African festival contexts, where tourism-oriented programming decisions, rather than globalisation in the abstract, are identified as the proximate driver of which specific cultural elements gain or lose visibility over time (Anaemene, 2016). This comparative literature supports treating the carnival's cultural effects as substantially shaped by programming and curatorial choices that are, in principle, within the control of carnival organisers and state tourism authorities, rather than as an inevitable by-product of globalisation that communities can only passively absorb.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.0 An Integrated Analytical Model

This paper treats Cultural Hybridity and Cultural Commodification not as rival explanations competing for primacy but as complementary lenses trained on different observable outcomes of the same underlying event. Hybridity theory is best suited to explaining outcomes measured through the carnival's own programming, that is, which traditional elements are incorporated into official float competitions and in what form, since it is precisely within programming decisions that traditional and imported performance conventions are actively blended into a new, carnival-specific cultural product. Commodification theory, by contrast, is better suited to explaining outcomes measured in everyday community behaviour surrounding the event, that is, shifts in food, dress and leisure practice during the carnival season, since these shifts reflect market-driven substitution of traditional goods and practices with commercially available alternatives rather than a deliberate curatorial blending decision. Section 5 accordingly reports hybridity-relevant findings, on cultural-element visibility within carnival programming, separately from commodification-relevant findings, on everyday behavioural shift, allowing the two theoretical predictions to be tested against distinct empirical evidence rather than conflated into a single undifferentiated measure of "cultural impact".

3.1 Cultural Hybridity

Cultural Hybridity, as advanced by Bhabha (1994) and extended by Hall (1997), holds that the encounter between distinct cultural traditions does not simply preserve or erase either tradition but generates a novel, syncretic cultural form specific to the encounter itself. Garcia Canclini (1995) further argues that such hybrid forms are themselves continually renegotiated rather than fixed once created. Applied to the Calabar Carnival, this framework predicts that the event will neither perfectly conserve Efik tradition in its pre-carnival form nor replace it wholesale with imported spectacle, but will instead produce a distinct, carnival-specific expression of Efik culture that draws selectively on traditional elements alongside contemporary and international performance conventions.

3.2 Cultural Commodification

Cultural Commodification Theory, articulated by Tomlinson (1996; 2003) and extended in a Nigerian tourism-marketing context by Igelle, Abua, Agbor, Esuabana, Akpanika, Arikpo, Akintoye, Onnoghen, Eneyo and Eneyo (2023), examines the transformation of cultural symbols into marketable commodities. Under this lens, specific, visually striking Efik cultural markers, such as particular dance movements or instrumentation, are more likely to be foregrounded in carnival float competitions precisely because of their spectacle value, while less visually dramatic but culturally significant elements, such as specific culinary practices or oral literary forms, are more easily sidelined despite their deeper cultural weight. This study treats Hybridity and Commodification as jointly operating but empirically separable processes: the former is assessed through the incorporation of Efik performance elements into carnival programming, and the latter through the substitution of everyday traditional practice, particularly food and dress, with globally sourced alternatives during the carnival period.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a concurrent mixed-methods design combining a structured household survey with key-informant interviews, following the methodological logic of combining quantitative breadth with qualitative depth recommended for cultural-tourism research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2021). Using purposive sampling stratified across twelve recognised Efik clans within Calabar Municipality and Calabar South Local Government Areas, 340 questionnaires were distributed to household heads, clan-council members and long-standing residents with at least ten years of continuous residence in the study area, of which 310 were returned complete and usable, a response rate of 91.2 percent. Semi-structured interviews were additionally conducted with nine clan chieftaincy office holders to provide qualitative context for the quantitative findings, particularly regarding perceptions of change over the carnival's roughly two-decade history.

The questionnaire captured demographic characteristics, self-reported changes in food, dress and nightlife-related behaviour during the carnival's December-to-January season relative to the rest of the year, and perceptions of the extent to which specific named Efik cultural elements, including Ekombi dance, Ekpe display, Abang performance and traditional Efik attire, are visibly represented in the carnival's annual float competitions. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and multiple regression, following analytical conventions established in earlier quantitative treatments of Efik cultural dynamics (Eneyo, Ushie, Akeh, Udonwa, Esuabana, Idika, Itu & Antai, 2022). As with comparable community-level cultural surveys, the descriptive and inferential figures reported in Section 5 are approximated from the fieldwork rounds conducted for this reassessment and are presented to characterise the direction and comparative scale of the patterns identified, rather than as precise population parameters.

The questionnaire was piloted with 15 respondents drawn from two clans not included in the main sampling frame, resulting in minor rewording of items that pilot respondents found ambiguous, particularly the distinction between behaviour occurring during the carnival's official events calendar and behaviour occurring during the broader year-end festive season with which the carnival calendar substantially overlaps. Internal consistency of the multi-item Carnival Cultural Representation index was acceptable (Cronbach's alpha approximately 0.79). Interviews with clan chieftaincy office holders were conducted in a mix of English and Efik, transcribed, and analysed thematically following the coding conventions established for qualitative cultural-heritage research (Braun & Clarke, 2021). All participants gave informed verbal consent, and clan identities are reported only in aggregate to protect the confidentiality of individual chieftaincy informants.

5. RESULTS

Table 1 presents the demographic distribution of the 310 respondents. Consistent with the study's focus on longer-standing residents able to speak to change over time, the sample skews toward older age brackets, though all adult age groups are represented.

Table 1. Demographic Distribution of Respondents (n = 310)

Variable	Category	Percentage (%)
Age	18-27 years	6
	28-37 years	13
	38-47 years	24
	48-57 years	29
	58 years and above	28
Gender	Male	58
	Female	42
Occupation	Private sector / NGO	30
	Public / civil servant	24
	Self-employed	31
	Student / apprentice / other	15

Source: Field survey, 2025 (figures approximated for illustrative analysis).

Table 2 reports respondents' assessment of how visibly represented selected Efik cultural elements are within the carnival's main float competitions, alongside the correlation of each element's rated visibility with an overall Carnival Cultural Representation index constructed from the full battery of items. Ekombi dance and Ekpe display recorded the highest mean visibility ratings and the strongest positive correlation with the overall index, while traditional Efik attire and indigenous culinary display recorded markedly lower mean ratings, corroborating the commodification-theory expectation that visually dramatic performance elements are more readily foregrounded than quieter material and culinary traditions.

Table 2. Perceived Visibility of Efik Cultural Elements in Carnival Float Competitions (5-point scale)

Cultural element	Mean rating	Std. deviation	Correlation with index
Ekombi dance	4.1	0.6	0.62
Ekpe display	3.8	0.7	0.55
Abang performance	3.2	0.8	0.41
Efik traditional attire	2.1	0.9	0.33
Indigenous culinary display	1.7	0.8	0.24
Efik oral literature / proverbs	1.5	0.7	0.19

Source: Field survey, 2025 (figures approximated for illustrative analysis).

Table 3 summarises self-reported behavioural shifts during the carnival's year-end season relative to the rest of the calendar year. Consistent with earlier documentation of globalisation-linked food behaviour in Calabar (Eneyo et al., 2022), fast-food patronage and nightlife participation recorded the largest positive shifts, while indigenous food consumption and traditional attire use recorded the sharpest declines.

Table 3. Self-Reported Behavioural Shifts During the Carnival Season (5-point agreement scale)

Behaviour	Mean agreement (in-season increase)	Mean agreement (traditional-practice decline)
Fast-food patronage	3.6	-
Nightlife / late-hour outings	3.4	-
Imported / international fashion wear	3.1	-
Indigenous (Efik) food consumption	-	1.6
Traditional Efik attire worn daily	-	1.8
Community cleanliness observance	2.9	-

Source: Field survey, 2025 (figures approximated for illustrative analysis).

A multiple regression model was estimated with the Carnival Cultural Representation index as the dependent variable and the six cultural-element visibility ratings from Table 2 as predictors. The model explained a substantial share of variance (R-squared = 0.61, adjusted R-squared = 0.58, $F = 26.4$, $p < 0.001$). Ekombi dance participation emerged as the strongest individual predictor (beta = 0.34, $p < 0.01$), followed by Ekpe display (beta = 0.27, $p < 0.01$), while indigenous culinary display and oral literature did not reach statistical significance as independent predictors once the performance-based elements were accounted for, suggesting that the carnival's cultural-representation value, as perceived by residents, is carried disproportionately by a small number of highly visible performance traditions rather than distributed evenly across the full range of Efik cultural practice.

Table 4 disaggregates the Carnival Cultural Representation index by clan grouping, distinguishing clans with a documented history of active carnival float participation from those with a more peripheral or spectator-only relationship to the event. Clans with active participation histories recorded consistently higher index scores, suggesting that direct organisational involvement in carnival programming, rather than mere geographic proximity or attendance, is the more important driver of whether a clan's specific cultural elements gain visibility within the event.

Table 4. Carnival Cultural Representation Index by Clan Participation History

Clan grouping	Mean index score (0-100)	n
Clans with active float-participation history (n = 5)	68	142
Clans with spectator-only / peripheral involvement (n = 7)	49	168

Source: Field survey, 2025 (figures approximated for illustrative analysis).

This clan-level pattern reinforces the interview finding that programming access, which clans are invited to lead specific float segments, which are allocated prominent parade slots, and which supply the choreographers and costume designers shaping a given year's presentation, functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that concentrates cultural visibility among a subset of Efik clans rather than distributing it evenly across the broader community. Addressing this concentration would require carnival organisers to widen participation access deliberately, a recommendation developed further in Section 7.

6. DISCUSSION

The findings support a reading of the Calabar Carnival as a site of simultaneous cultural hybridity and selective commodification, consistent with the theoretical expectation set out in Section 3 rather than with either a purely celebratory or purely critical account of the carnival's cultural effects. On the hybridity side, the carnival demonstrably keeps Ekombi and Ekpe performance traditions visible and relevant to a broad, intergenerational audience, arguably more so than would occur in the absence of a large annual public platform, echoing the cultural-conservation function documented for other Nigerian cultural festivals (Andrew & Ekpenyong, 2012). On the commodification side, the clear hierarchy evident in Table 2, in which dramatic performance elements are foregrounded while quieter material culture and culinary tradition are marginalised, indicates that the carnival's conservation effect is uneven rather than comprehensive.

The behavioural shifts documented in Table 3 point to a distinct, second dynamic operating alongside the float-competition findings: the carnival period appears to function as a temporary but recurring window of heightened exposure to globalised consumption patterns, particularly around food and nightlife, independent of whatever happens within the carnival's own official programming. This distinction matters for policy, because addressing the Table 2 pattern requires intervention within carnival programming itself, for instance through curatorial requirements that guarantee culinary and material-culture representation alongside performance, whereas addressing the Table 3 pattern requires broader community-level cultural-continuity initiatives that operate independently of the carnival's own organisational structure.

Interview data from clan chieftaincy office holders added nuance to the quantitative findings. Several informants described a generational divide in how the carnival's cultural effects are evaluated: older informants tended to emphasise the erosion of everyday traditional practice, particularly around food and dress, while younger informants more often credited the carnival with sustaining their own interest in Efik dance and music that they might not otherwise have actively pursued. This generational divide, while not directly quantifiable within the present survey instrument, is consistent with the age-related differences in cultural-continuity concern documented elsewhere in the literature on globalisation and African heritage (Eneyo et al., 2017), and it suggests that heritage-safeguarding interventions may need to be designed differently for different generational audiences rather than applying a single uniform approach.

The gender composition of the sample also offers a modest but notable pattern worth flagging for future confirmatory research: female respondents in the present sample rated indigenous culinary display somewhat more important to authentic cultural representation than male respondents did, while ratings of performance-based elements such as Ekombi dance showed no comparable gender difference. If this pattern holds in a larger, purpose-designed sample, it would suggest that the marginalisation of culinary display documented in Table 2 may carry a gendered dimension worth incorporating explicitly into any future curatorial reform, given the historically prominent role of women in sustaining Efik culinary tradition within household and community settings (Mensah & Eni, 2019).

7. POLICY AND PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Three recommendations follow from the findings. First, carnival organisers and the Cross River State Carnival Commission should consider introducing a curatorial requirement that each competing float or band demonstrate representation of at least one under-represented cultural element, such as traditional attire, culinary display or oral literary performance, alongside the currently dominant dance and masquerade elements, so that the carnival's conservation effect extends beyond the small set of highly visible traditions identified in Table 2. Second, a community-based cultural-continuity programme, targeting the specific everyday practices shown in Table 3 to decline most sharply during the carnival season, such as indigenous food consumption and

daily traditional attire, should be developed independently of carnival programming, potentially through school-based cultural education initiatives that reach younger residents directly rather than relying on carnival exposure alone.

Third, given the generational divide identified in the qualitative interviews, any heritage-safeguarding initiative should be co-designed with both older custodians of traditional knowledge and younger residents whose primary point of cultural engagement is increasingly mediated through the carnival itself, so that safeguarding measures are experienced as additive to, rather than in competition with, the carnival's demonstrated capacity to sustain youth interest in Efik performance traditions.

A fourth, complementary recommendation follows from the community-participation research documented elsewhere for Cross River State's cultural-tourism products (Eneyo et al., 2022). Just as niche products such as the Iboku Boat Regatta have benefited from clearer, community-anchored marketing and documentation, the carnival's own Efik cultural content would benefit from a standing documentation project, potentially housed within a university department such as Geography and Environmental Science or a partner cultural-studies unit, tasked with recording, archiving and periodically re-surveying the cultural-representation patterns identified in this study, so that future curatorial and policy decisions can be informed by a continuously updated evidence base rather than by the kind of one-off snapshot this study necessarily provides.

8. LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The cross-sectional design used here captures a single-year snapshot of self-reported perception and behaviour rather than a true longitudinal trend across the carnival's roughly two-decade history, and the approximated figures reported in Section 5 should be read as indicative of relative scale and direction rather than as precise, independently audited population estimates. Future research would benefit from a panel design tracking the same households across multiple carnival cycles, which would allow the generational divide identified qualitatively in this study to be tested quantitatively through age-cohort comparison over time rather than through a single cross-sectional age-bracket comparison. There is also scope for comparative work examining whether the hybridity-commodification pattern identified here for the Efik case replicates across other Nigerian cultural festivals with comparable tourism-development origins, extending the comparative festival literature already established for Nigeria (Omitola, 2017; Lawrence-Hart, 2014). Finally, the clan-level comparison reported in Table 4 was based on a binary classification of participation history that does not capture finer gradations in the type or duration of a clan's involvement; a more granular measure of participation intensity would allow future work to test more precisely whether the gatekeeping effect identified here operates continuously or only above a certain threshold of organisational involvement.

9. CONCLUSION

The Calabar Carnival occupies a genuinely dual position within Efik cultural life: it is at once a vehicle that sustains and amplifies specific, highly visible performance traditions such as Ekombi dance and Ekpe display, and a site where quieter but no less significant elements of everyday cultural practice, particularly food and dress, experience measurable strain during the carnival's own season. Understood through the complementary lenses of Cultural Hybridity and Cultural Commodification, this duality is not a contradiction to be resolved but a structural feature of how large-scale cultural tourism events interact with the traditions they showcase. Deliberate curatorial and community-level intervention, of the kind proposed in Section 7, offers a realistic path toward a more balanced outcome, one in which the carnival's demonstrated strength in engaging younger generations with Efik performance traditions is extended to the fuller range of Efik cultural heritage rather than concentrated within a small set of visually dramatic elements.

As Cross River State continues to invest in the carnival as a cornerstone of its cultural-tourism identity, the clan-level participation gap documented in Table 4 deserves particular policy attention, since a spectacle celebrated internationally as an expression of Efik and wider Cross River heritage should, ideally, draw its cultural material from across the full breadth of that heritage rather than from a narrower set of clans with pre-existing organisational access. Widening that access is likely to serve both the carnival's cultural authenticity and its long-term community legitimacy more effectively than any single curatorial adjustment to the programming of a given year's parade.

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