

*Research Paper*

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## **Nyege Nyege Music Festival in Uganda: A Growing Leisure Activity with a Moral Dilemma**

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### **Abstract**

Launched in December 2015, the Nyege Nyege musical festival has become a popular leisure tourism activity in Uganda attracting national and international participants. The festival involves an all-night event characterized by wild partying and diverse leisure activities usually lasting four days. Despite its growing popularity, the festival has received sharp criticisms in the national media and other public forums across the country. The barrage of attacks against the festival are premised on cultural, moral, and religious ground. Critics argue that Uganda being a strong cultural and religious conservative society should regulate (and restrict) leisure activities that deviate from the culturally and religiously acceptable moral behaviors and expectations. In this paper, we analyze the paradox of promoting Nyege Nyege music festival – a post-modern leisure practice within a morally sensitive environment. We argue that unregulated embracement of festivals expose society to foreign cultural influences of the so-called progressive contemporary neoliberal post-colonial leisure economy. This paper contributes to the body of knowledge on leisure and tourism with implications for unraveling its potential for diversification of tourism products in Uganda and the moral dilemmas that come with it.

## INTERNATIONAL LEISURE REVIEW

**Keywords:** *COVID-19, Leisure, Nyege Nyege, Music Festival, Moral Dilemma, Tourism, Uganda*

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### Introduction

For centuries, sociologists have studied human behavior and thinking, norms and values to understand the nature of society. Society is comprised of a group of people who share a common culture especially common rule of behavior and social organization (Hofstede, 1980; Stankova & Vassenska, 2015). However, a society can only remain as closely knitted together in so long as the individuals/groups within it continue to uphold the principles, common rules of behavior and thinking, norms and values of the society where they belong. The principles, norms and values usually provide standards and act as lenses through which individual or group actions/activities (in this case a leisure activity) is judged as morally right or wrong. However, the moral rightness or wrongness of actions/activities vary from society to society though with some overlap on how right or wrong is perceived. Nevertheless, the social values of a society can be (re)produced to match the changing expectations of the members of a society or the one it interacts with. Also, members of society can (re)connect and (re)produce social values through participation in leisure activities – which may also be fostered through interacting with members from other societies during a leisure activity. Like many societies, including those in Uganda, different factors including travel and leisure activities are influencing shifts in social values across different generations (Sheldon & Daniele, 2017; Higgins-Desbiolles *et al.*, 2019; Akena, 2020).

Generally, leisure is considered as ‘free time’ outside of work schedule. According to Wilson (1980:21), leisure can be regarded as ‘the quality of experience unconfined to particular times. Leisure activities play a very important role in improving the human wellbeing (Godbey *et al.*, 2005). It is that moment when an individual is free to undertake a particular activity that enables them to reconnect with their inner self. Participation in leisure activities is motivated by a desire for enjoyment, fun, and experiences with the ultimate aim of rejuvenating the human mind (Shaw, 1986). Like in many continents, the celebration of leisure time in Africa and Uganda in particular, has existed for millennia and included participation in (sports) hunting (Ochieng *et al.*, 2020), music, dance, and different rituals, among others. However, the moral acceptability of leisure activities is judged based on preexisting behavior, thinking, norms and moral values of a particular society. Ostensibly, there is a possibility that the (re)presentation of content of a particular leisure activity can



conflict with the dominantly held values of a society. While this may be perceived negatively by the “beholders” of dominant social values, other groups of the same society (especially young generation) may be more open to activities perceived to be in conflict with local social values. It is within the context of the degree of involvement in (personally) unregulated leisure activities that the individual can sometimes transcend the boundary of socially defined and acceptable moral philosophy.

Consequently, following advancement in technology and innovation, the meaning of leisure and how it is celebrated is changing (Pegg & Patterson, 2010). Previously, although leisure was celebrated during free time (see Shaw, 1986), emerging trends show that some leisure activities are celebrated during breaks in between work time (Filho, 2010). As such, there is a growing interest in understanding the politics of leisure change and how contextually a leisure activity can foster social change (Sharpe, 2008). While (leisure) tourism activities such as music festivals, culture and arts can essentially augment cultural interactions for positive outcomes (Wood *et al.*, 2009), these activities if and when permitted can inevitably lead to modification of the principles and values of the other cultures thereby resulting in changes in the core values and principles of the host culture. Thus, Coalter (1997:257) argues that leisure studies ought to ‘analyze it as a site of struggle, cultural contestation, (re)negotiation, and resistance’. Ostensibly, every society ought to design and apply relevant and pragmatic ways to identify and mitigate potential social risks associated with leisure activities hosted in their locale (Wood *et al.*, 2009). In Uganda, the practice of Nyege Nyege festival is critiqued for exposing society to discordant cultural practices (such as involvement in open sexual activities during the festivals). While embracing leisure practices, stakeholders ought to remain aware of the contested meaning of leisure, as well as how it is practiced and its impact interpreted, as it might all turn out to be a matter of politics (Sharpe, 2008). According to Coalter (1997:256) leisure can be considered ‘as a site where broader social, political, and cultural relations and conflicts are visible’. As observed by Sharpe (2008:217), ‘leisure is not “innocent” or exempt from relations of power’. Its practice and interpretation are intrinsically link to power – be it for recognition or control. It is therefore not surprising then that when people gather to celebrate a particular leisure activity, government(s) tend to superimpose its authority to protect its existence – as some events, arts etc., have in their core – the tendency to challenge establishment.

Despite the extensive literature on leisure studies and leisure sciences (e.g., Coalter, 1997; Godbey *et al.*, 2005; Picard & Robinson, 2006; Pegg & Patterson, 2010), leisure tourism segment in Uganda remains under researched and underrepresented in academic literature. And yet (leisure) tourism and festivals are

## **INTERNATIONAL LEISURE REVIEW**

intrinsically linked and reinforce one another in a social setting (Picard and Robinson, 2006). This article represents one of the first attempts to incorporate leisure celebration and the moral debate surrounding leisure practices in Uganda into international academic debate on leisure and morality.

Therefore, our discussion of Nyege Nyege music festival is guided by the following questions: What was the motivation for introducing Nyege Nyege music festival in Uganda; what are the moral issues surrounding its growing popularity? The rest of the paper is structured into four parts thus: in section two, we paint a picture of tourism in Uganda and briefly examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the industry. In section three, we consider the changing meaning of leisure in a postmodern society and the origin of Nyege Nyege music festival as a form of leisure. This is followed by a discussion of Nyege Nyege music festival as a popular leisure activity as well as how it is popularized in the digital age. Section four examines the moral question surrounding the popular growth of Nyege Nyege and, finally, we provide some concluding remarks in part four.

### **Music festivals, events and the cultural tourism promotion**

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a festival as an “often periodic celebration or program of events or entertainment having a specified focus”. This definition implies that the performance of festivals and events is guided by spatial-temporal attributes with specific themes. Generally, festivals – derived from the word feast – implies a moment of celebrations (Dorret, 2004; Rudolph, 2016). According to Lyck *et al.* (2012:11), a festival is “an organized set of special events on a specific cultural man-made theme taking place on a specific day or period normally on a specific place gathering people in mutual and direct contact to the festival theme”. Although festivals and events are celebrated in many often-interconnected forms, music, culture, arts or film, religious are important features during the celebration (Derret, 2004). Most festivals are usually celebrated once a year (De Geus et al., 2016) and are accompanied by powerful performance of diverse leisure activities by a group of people with common culture usually to honor someone of high reputations such as a patron Saint, offering thanksgiving for different reasons or remembrance of certain important historical events (Stroud, 2008; Guarato, 2017).

Festivals and events have been distinguished as important moments in human history (De Geus et al., 2016). They are seen as occasions for expressing collective belonging to a group or a place (Quinn, 2005). As such, most organizers and promoters of festivals and events do so in the hope of creating a unique and memorable experience in the mind of the festival and events attendees (De Geus et al., 2016) which they cannot find elsewhere. In many places, the celebration of festivals



involves the playing of loud music, food, alcohol, drugs, sex, with several people in attendance full of excitement or joy (Rudolph, 2016) especially when the festival goers come to a realization that they are free to express themselves in anyway without fear of victimization. After all, usually the purpose of attending music (festivals) is to reconnect attendees/group of people with common (though it may be temporary) interests and aspirations.

Globally, music festivals and events are emerging as a fast-growing sector of the tourism and leisure industry (Pavluković *et al.*, 2017; González-Revertá & Miralbell-Izard, 2009) with social and economic relevance (De Geus *et al.*, 2016). Some of the world's popularly celebrated festivals and events include the Summa Cum Laude, an International Youth Music Festival in Vienne, the International Music Festival of the Adriatic (IMFA) in Duino, Italy, the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival celebrated in Indio, California among others (Rudolph, 2016), the "Easter Chalk Drawing Festival in Svaneke" (Lyck *et al.* (2012), Tomorrowland, a Belgian electronic dance music festival and Amsterdam Electronic Dance, and Burning Man and Festival du Désert in Mali, a world recognized festival in Africa, among others.

Music festivals are important avenues for expanding the local tourism attraction base (see Hernández-Mogollón *et al.*, 2018). Music festivals have spatial-temporal element and is associated with consumption of tourism products. The festival goers have to be in a particular place in time to be able optimally participate in the fun and enjoyment that comes with attending the event. As noted by Dorret (2004) festivals play an important role in image formation and marketing of the region which are key aspects in fostering prolonged stay of visitors in a destination. As such, places that have gained reputation for popular festivals, therefore, are able to build and enhance their image.

As a growing tourism field, cultural tourism is being promoted as a tool for achieving the preservation of unique cultural attributes of a society while enabling income generation in tourist destinations. Festivals therefore have the potential to foster not only the realization of more benefits from tourism for local people (González-Revertá & Miralbell-Izard, 2009), as well as cultural inclusion (Liang & Mair, 2015) but could also be used as tool to challenge traditional and established forms of leisure. More so, destination managers should promote festivals as an important cultural aspect to foster the adoption of 'slow tourism' (opposed to mass tourism) – which aims to afford tourists the opportunity to immerse themselves at the destination for a more meaningful social and economic benefits (see Koh *et al.* forthcoming). Evidence shows that festivals can boost the local economic base especially with increased in the number of festival goers – who end up spending money in local accommodation, food, drinks, art and crafts (cf. González-Revertá &

## INTERNATIONAL LEISURE REVIEW

Miralbell-Izard, 2009; De Geus et al., 2016). Furthermore, hosting music festivals can lead to improvement of infrastructure or creation of jobs (Getz, 2008; Hernández-Mogollón *et al.*, 2018; Laing & Miar, 2015; Spowage, 2020), increase in knowledge about other cultures and traditions (Sdrali & Chazapi, 2007), competitive positioning (Smith, 2004), new opportunities for tourist destination formation (Litvin & Fetter, 2006; González-Revertá & Miralbell-Izard, 2009).

### Tourism in Uganda

Uganda is relatively well known internationally as a nature-based tourism destination. Nature tourism is an important source of foreign exchange earning to the country, leveraging the possibility of hotel and affiliated cottage industries (Akena, 2020). (Inter)national tourism campaigns have for long been focused on promoting wildlife, cultural and arts tourism. Tourism generates over US\$ 1.6 billion in foreign exchange which translates to approximately 7.7 percent of the Uganda's GDP (MTWA, 2019). However, the World Bank Group (2013) report that only about 18 percent of the total number of tourists in Uganda come for leisure, recreation, and holidays. Out of these, 39 percent come for wildlife safaris, 26 percent for gorilla viewing, 25 percent for adventure tourism and 17 percent are backpacker travelers. While leisure visitors only make up 18% of arrivals, they are highly valuable and account for 89% of visitor expenditure. Other fairly low popular segments e.g., Meetings and conferences (about 11 percent) and cultural tourism (2 percent) in Uganda by 2013 (World Bank Group, 2013) have potential to attract tourists. According to the World Bank (2020), Uganda has started gaining international recognition as an (International) Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Events (MICE) destination and cultural tourism (World Bank, 2020). According to the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), Uganda is now ranked sixth in Africa in terms of the number of events and conferences hosted (ICCA, 2020). With over 1.5 million visitors recorded in 2018 from over eight hundred thousand tourists in 2009 (World Bank, 2020), leisure tourism including culture, arts, festivals and MICE can and should be regarded as a 'cash-cow' for the country.

Realizing the enormous potential to boost the country's economic growth through tourism, the government of Uganda announced plans in 2018 to attract 4 million tourists by the year 2020. Good ambitious and well-intended as the plan was, it was received with skepticism since the country does not have adequate tourist infrastructure to handle the proposed big number of tourists. Instead, the sceptics repeatedly challenged the government to prioritize the increasing of budget allocation to the tourism sector, provide credit facilities to enable private sector to invest in tourist infrastructure through partnership agreements. For example, in the case Clouds



Mountains Gorilla Lodge in the southern sector of Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, the government through the Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) mediated signing of a private-community partnership to construct a high-end lodge in the area to provide accommodation to tourists while sharing proceeds with the local communities (Ahebwa *et al.*, 2018). Further, the country has the largest number of freshwater lakes in Africa, feeder rivers with astounding falls and mountains views holding various nature reserves awaiting development in addition to the already well marketed national parks (Akena, 2020) to leverage revenue earning from leisure tourism. Leisure tourism products including culture, arts, festivals and MICE recognizably provide enormous potentials to diversify and maximize tourism opportunities in the country. Nonetheless, to maximize these various tourism potentials, we reiterate massive investment in hospitality facilities and roads infrastructure – these will not only lead to achieving heightened number of tourists in a short time but also availing the necessary facilities to meet their needs.

#### **COVID-19 Pandemic and (leisure) tourism in Uganda**

Uganda continues to consider (leisure) tourism, particularly festivals, culture, art, and MICE as opportunities to diversify the country's tourism products which that attracts increased foreign revenue. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic which disrupted global economies has not spare Uganda's tourism sector either. Accordingly, the country which had projected to attract over 1.6 million tourists in the year 2020 alone, ended up losing an estimated one million tourists in the year 2020 (MTWA, 2020). By June 2020, The International Monetary Fund warned that Uganda's tourism earnings were expected to fall 54% in the 2019/20 fiscal year and decline 52% in the year 2021 due to the impact of COVID-19 (Reuters, 2020). This according to President Yoweri Museveni, would see the country lose \$ 1.6 billion dollars per annum from the loss of tourism (Reuters, 2020).

To mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Uganda, the government through the relevant agencies, such as Uganda wildlife Authority (UWA) and Uganda Tourism Board (UTB), are having engagements with the private sector on ways to promote domestic tourism. The UTB is among other campaigns spearheading the Tulambule ("let's tour") campaigns to encourage Ugandans to visit tourists' local destinations within the country. Consequently, the UWA has reduced gorilla permits to US\$400 per person from US\$700 and park entry fees by 50% in all Savannah parks to encourage visitation by Ugandans and foreign residents. Similarly, the accommodation services providers have also significantly reduced their room rates to encourage visitation by locals. Further, the government is exploring diversification of tourism product range and in the post-pandemic period as well as offering stimulus packages to

## ... INTERNATIONAL LEISURE REVIEW

enable private sectors remain afloat. In terms of tourism product diversification, although the country had started recognizing the growing importance of (leisure) tourism activities such as festivals, cultural, art and MICE, comedy shows and weekend beach parties and holidays that are mainly appealing to nationals and foreign residents, continued implementation of COVID-19 restrictions impedes more goes to large gatherings including music events. As such, the country needs to plan to revive its tourism industry by paying equal attention to festivals, cultural, arts, MICE and short weekend excursions and holidays which can be considered as low-hanging fruits for boosting tourist numbers in Uganda. As observed by Picard & Robinson (2006), festivals provide opportunities to positively respond to various forms of crisis such as the one posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Festivals have the potential to help mend the broken social ties and encourages social inclusion (Liang & Mair, 2015) that many people have lost due to stringent COVID-19 lockdown measures.

### **The changing meaning of leisure in a postmodern society**

There is a growing debate that the postmodern meaning of leisure just like many other aspects of society has become subject of media influence. According to Akena (2020:5), “the media has enormous influence in defining the concept of right and wrong, frame debates about socio-political and economic concepts, inflect craving, memory and fantasy in the minds of the audience”. Moreover, the concept of leisure or what constitute leisure activity is not static. According to Coalter (1997:260) “the nature and meaning of the leisure/consumption experience have changed”. These changes in (the meaning of) leisure activity or leisure time vary from society to society (Pegg & Patterson, 2010; Marques & Pimentel Biscaia, 2019) and is influenced by changes in time and technological innovation (Pegg & Patterson, 2010). Further, Marques & Pimentel Biscaia, (2019:162), confirm that ‘there are rapid changes in the leisure landscape involving emergence of new forms of leisure consumption and practice, new leisure businesses, new challenges and new opportunities.

The wind of change in the meaning and consumption of leisure started during the turn of the last century when Union works in America and elsewhere in Europe advocated for more free time off-work to spend on leisure activities (Wilson, 1980). With technological innovation taking center stage in the global political economy, more workers, especially the youth with more disposable income and less family responsibility have evidently engaged in leisure activities during breaks taken during working hours. By implication, there is almost no differentiation between time for work and time for leisure – as already being seen in work environments where Television sets are placed in workplace lobbies. In many workplaces, staff have the liberty to access the internet and social media platforms during working hours. A



recent incident in Uganda provides a vivid example where a group of interns from Law development center (LDC) were cautioned for recording and sharing a video of themselves leisurely dancing in a courtroom during a short morning break (The Daily Monitor, Wednesday January 06 2021). The LDC is a Ugandan institution accredited to offer the Bar Course leading to the award of the post-graduate Diploma in Legal Practice in the country. The incident took place at the Commercial Division of the High Court premises in the Ugandan Capital Kampala (on January 4, 2021). To the Judiciary Institution, the students' behavior was unethical and amount to an abuse of the integrity of the temple of justice specifically and the Judiciary as a whole. Although the intern students apologized and promised never to repeat the behavior, some sections of social media users argued that the students were unfairly assaulted since the behavior occurred during breaktime. Others argued that subjecting the students to caution was reactionary and a direct assault by the Judiciary against the episodic use of leisure time which would not in any way dent the reputation of judicial institution.

With the available evidence in literature, there is no doubt that the leisure landscape is changing. However, the extent to which these changes are likely to be regarded as morally 'right' or 'wrong' will very much depend on the general societal interpretation. Leisure tourism as a social reality is subject to human interpretation. According to Kelly (1974:130) 'social reality is never known without interpretation and always in process of change'. In the context of this paper, festivals as leisure activity can be considered as social realities which change with time and advancement in technological innovation (Pegg & Patterson, 2010). The values society ascribe to (music) festivals as leisure also change based on the interpretation that society attach to it (Kelly, 1974). While there is no doubt that globalization and technological innovation continues to foster the ease with which promoters of festivals (e.g. music, cultural, religious and arts) reach their consumers (Pegg & Patterson, 2010), technological innovations can also help in shaping leisure preferences (Marques & Pimentel Biscaia, 2019). Consequently, increasing the 'meaning that was previously attached to leisure has since been replaced by spectacle and sensation has overpowered value (Coalter, 1997; Rojek, 1993). Ostensibly, leisure services providers ought to integrate technological innovation in both the design and consumption of leisure products to be able to capture the 'new' emerging leisure market.

#### **Nyege Nyege music festival as a leisure tourism activity in Uganda**

One of the growing popular festivals being promoted for tourism development in Uganda is the Nyege Nyege musical festival. The festival was launched in December 2015 as a new leisure activity in the country. The idea for the festival was first birthed

## INTERNATIONAL LEISURE REVIEW

and registered in 2013 by two gentlemen, Arlen Dilsizian and Derek Debru, who lived in Belgium before relocating to Kampala, Uganda. They promote Nyege Nyege festival as a collective with two record labels and a multi-day annual music festival ([www.nyegenyege.com](http://www.nyegenyege.com)). The name 'Nyege Nyege' is said to have been derived from a Luganda (one of the local dialects mainly spoken in central Uganda) word describing 'a sudden, uncontrollable urge to dance' and is currently promoted as an event that celebrates arts, culture and creativity ([www.nyegenyege.com](http://www.nyegenyege.com)). Arlen Dilsizian and Derek Debru further confirm that the Nyege Nyege music festival emerged as a result of a craving for crazy ideas – involving all night partying usually lasting for four days. Further, Spowage (2020:14) observe that “nyege nyege – ‘the irresistible urge to dance’ – is an immersive journey into the sonic landscape of East Africa, which brings together the most cutting-edge musical acts from around Africa...”. Ostensibly, the main gist of the festival is usually the experience that one gets from participating in the different activities at the event. Derek Debru, a co-founder of the festival emphatically confirmed that ‘we want to give people an immersive experience that makes them travel across the continent and discover many different scenes’ of the festival (Yaseen, 2020).

What is unique about the Nyege Nyege music festival is that it is the first of its kind in the country with goers usually treated to a wild party lasting four days of nonstop music on the bank of the Nile River in Uganda’s Eastern City of Jinja. As Spowage (2020:41) notes, Nyege Nyege music festival was “created communally, is experienced collectively and is international, contemporary and popular and looks to create intense and affective aesthetic experiences for its participants”. Every edition of the festival is held with its own theme, and organizers aim to make every theme unique from the previous one. Spowage (2020:42) further confirms that Nyege Nyege music festival is “now considered one of East Africa’s most significant cultural events... with a long-term ambition to support other activities throughout the year, including the development and distribution of new sounds from across East Africa to the world”.

Despite the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic and its resultant lockdown measures, the organizers of the Nyege Nyege music festival held a sixth edition of the festival online from 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> December 2020 with the theme “African Unity”. The 2020 edition of the festival “combined a Covid-19 safe party with a digital experience and featured music co-curated by 20 collectives from across Africa with over 300 artists performing (Staff, 2020). It presented a pan-African music, art, culture and creativity featuring performances of both local and international music genre as well as comedy shows by local and international comedians (Yaseen, 2020). The year’s edition was also hosted via a digital platform developed by African Digital Art (ADA)



(Yaseen, 2020).

As observed by Pegg and Patterson (2010:86), ‘festivals and events need to differentiate themselves to remain distinctive, and, ... must be willing to provide better value (as perceived by the consumer) than their competitors’. Ostensibly, promoters of the Nyege Nyege festival attempt to maintain unique features of their event in terms of the quality of the artists they invite every year, the music played and other services provided in order to minimize potential competition. Research evidence from elsewhere show that many music festivals fail to pick up due to failure to offer experiences with relevance and meaning to the audience, and integrating new virtual technologies that can help to enhance sensory feelings and imaginations (Robertson *et al.*, 2015). In the case of Nyege Nyege music festival, its popularity seems not to only depend on the use of traditional and social media platforms to attract attendees, but also the attendees being able to virtually share with the entire world the exciting moments and experiences one gets from attending the festival. It is thus, possible that creating space for offline and online platform (cf. Simons, 2019) is one way to help the organizers popularize the next edition of the festival. Amplifying this position, Simons (2019) expands the comprehension of events to include the social interactions that take place during and post events into the virtual (online) space resulting into hybrid communities of offline and an online dimension.

### **The moral arguments around Nyege Nyege Musical festival**

Following the launch in 2015, Nyege Nyege music festival continues to grow in popularity. To attract more revelers, the promoters often promise that every edition will be full of unforgettable experiences. Despite the growing popularity of the festival in Uganda, it continues to receive negative perceptions among some sections of the Ugandan society – something which has given rise to several calls for its ban on the moral and religious grounds. As Weiss (1942: 383) states, “morality embraces what men want to do. It covers the whole field of etiquette and manners, fashions and taboos, established customs, laws, and feud”. Thus, morality defines a set of standards, rules, values that a group in society ought to follow. As further noted by Weiss (1942), a man or woman or societal practice is considered moral only if it conforms to the established practices and customs of the given group in society.

Although, there is evidence that Nyege Nyege festival goers aim for totally immersive, mesmerizing African party experience, diving deep into the cauldron of contemporary African music and its wider diaspora genres (Théophile Pillault, 2020), the event is also marred with allegation of the revelers involving themselves in open act of sexual promiscuity in the course of the festival (see The East Africa, 2018). Consequently, the festival has received a backlash from Uganda's religious and human

## INTERNATIONAL LEISURE REVIEW

right activists, politicians, and government over its alleged affiliation with the LGBT community. Ostensibly, those bent towards banning the festival seem to be informed by the rather controversial meaning of the name Nyege Nyege – the sudden, uncontrollable urge to dance – with a sexual connotation. As noted by John Twells (2018), “there’s certainly something egalitarian about Nyege Nyege festival, and freedom tends to rattle the resolve of most politicians, Western, African or otherwise”. John Twells (2018), further summarizes that “the name Nyege Nyege provocatively means “horny horny” or “the urge” for something – provocatively meaning “sex, sex” or urge for sex (The East Africa, 2018).

With this understanding of the meaning of the festival, it attracted outright condemnation from among cultural, church leaders and some politicians. For example, the Minister of Ethics and Integrity, Fr. Simon Lokodo came out to openly condemn the festival and called for its immediate ban. According to Ilado (2018) a reporter of Music Africa magazine, the Minister, in a letter dated 3 September 2018, without evidence, informed the public that “I have received credible information from religious leaders, opinion leaders and local authorities that the purpose of this festival, in the last two years, has been compromised to accommodate the celebration and recruitment of young people into homosexuality, and LGBT movement” (Ilado, 2018). The argument of the Minister about the decision to ban the event was based on the grounds that Uganda is strong cultural and religious conservative society with a strongly held and dominant social perceptions against same sex relations. In this regard, the minister expressed his concerns that the festival perpetuated freedom to explore drug, alcohol, and open sex, including homosexuality and LGBTQ (John Twells, 2018). While at the Uganda Media Centre (WMC), Fr. Simon Lokodo, claimed that the festival would “compromise national integrity” and put citizens “at risk of deviant sexual immorality” (The East African, 2018).

Further, members of the public, civil society and religious groups have equally questioned the underlying reasons behind the growing popularity of Nyege Nyege music and cultural festival. While many continue guessing what could be the reason for Nyege Nyege, Derek Debru, a co-founder of the festival in an interview revealed that the festival ‘...creates the sort of kinship that weaves the global underground together’ (Yaseen, 2020). As articulated elsewhere in an online article, the festival is “to develop the culture industry in Uganda by creating conducive platforms and opportunities for upcoming artists”<sup>1</sup>. This according to the organizers, would be accomplished by connecting celebrated artists from around the continent with each other and with producers working with African music outside the continent. Further, in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.musicinafrica.net/directory/nyege-nyege-international-music-festival#:~:text=The%20festival%20aims%20to%20connect,African%20music%20outside%20the%20continent.>



an online news article, Yaseen (2020) confirms that the festival is now praised for 'defying colonial-era governments laws and religious critics and for legitimizing itself as an essential hub for Africa's growing electronic music scene'. With this growing popularity of the festival, going forward, one can only imagine what potential changes the festival is likely to cultivate among Uganda's current and future generations.

In other instances, the Minister, has issued a number of threats of arrest to a number of celebrity personalities in Uganda for circulating pictures or videos of themselves in ways that could be perceived indecently dressed or nudes on social media platforms before. In a way, this reflects the conservative nature of Uganda's society unwillingness to accept deviant cultural practices that are deemed to threaten the culture of Ugandans. Notwithstanding the potential risks associated with the festival and other acts that could be perceived as indecent of celebrity personalities, the Minister maintained that "culture, music and hospitality of our people which is directly associated with inscription "the Pearl of Africa" and the celebration of our uniqueness and diversity of our culture should be preserved" (The Daily Monitor, 2018). One could argue that for a similar reason, the Hon. Kiwanda, a junior minister in charge of tourism in Uganda recently came out openly to launch curvy women as 'touristic attractions' under the guise of celebrating the plus size women (Akena, 2020). With Nyege Nyege festival, this can also be viewed from a morality stand point, as this not only objectifies part of the society (women), but also puts them as sexual objects (cf. Akena, 2020). We, therefore, submit that this is an indirect form of instigating sexual tourism and sexual objectification of a person who is an integral part of the Ugandan society. Further, we argue that there is a sense, then, in which the Nyege Nyege music festival can promote sexual promiscuity in a traditionally conservative society, the very opposite of conventional philosophy of morality. One implication of this might be the shift in the economic forces in which young people struggle to secure a standard of living beyond mere survival.

Despite calls from some section of the population to ban the festival, there are those who believe that any attempt at banning the music festival would affect local and international tourism. Their claim was that Uganda was on track to register 4 million tourists by the year 2020. To them, the festival presented an enormous opportunity to achieve this ambitious goal. As reported by Xanthia Leni (2019), the organizers continue to promote the festival to showcase all the exciting development on the East African scene, to show daring projects and give a real voice to the underground, making it a highlight for both audiences and musicians alike. The 2018 edition was expected to attract close to 300 artists up from about 200 artists from more than 30 countries in 2016 (Xanthia Leni, 2019). As a result, Jinja, the city where the festival is annually held is no longer only promoted as the adventure capital of Uganda with

## **INTERNATIONAL LEISURE REVIEW**

popular tourism activities such as bungee jumping, kayaking, quad biking, white-water rafting; but also, as a historic industrial town; and for exhibitions, cultural and festival celebrations in Uganda. With this, one could argue that both government and private sector can and should leverage these potentials for tourism development.

Nevertheless, in what appeared like a U-turn of events, just one day after the Minister of Ethics and Integrity threatened to ban the event, the government spokesperson, tweeted: “Just spoken to [the] Internal Affairs Minister, he states that the Nyege Nyege organizers should go ahead with preparations for their function” (Ilado, 2018). In a meeting chaired by the Internal Affairs Minister General Jeje Odongo, the government and the organizers of the Nyege Nyege festival agreed to continue with the festival (Ilado, 2018). However, the reason(s) why government decided to make a U-turn on its early communication to the event’s organizers was never communicated to the public. While this could be argued to be a matter of reaching a consensus involving a give-and-take principle typical of diplomatic negotiation process (see Mouzas, 2006), we also see it as shift in government position. The shift to conform to international standard since other countries are also holding festivals to boost tourism (Akena, 2020) and contribute to mitigating the bitter impacts of COVID-19. Even so, in an interview in the Daily Monitor, Fr. Simon Lokodo maintained that, “this thing [Nyege Nyege] is not the best at all. I have dug into it and established that it’s not innocent. It’s an instrument being used by our brothers and sisters of Western world to introduce to us a culture, a behavior and attitude that is foreign and not in our laws, culture and religion” (The Daily Monitor, 2018).

The decision by the Minister of Internal Affairs was criticized not only in the court of public opinion, but also in the Legislative arms of government. For instance, a section of lawmakers on the Public Accounts Committee invited officials from the Ministry of Ethics and Integrity to explain why they sanctioned the event. Interesting the Legislatures also described the event as “immoral and not befitting the norms and values of Ugandans. For instance, a legislator from the Public Accounts Committee questioned the Minister’s failure to assertively convince his colleagues in the Ministry of Internal Affairs that the festival involves participants engaging in indecent acts contrary to the aspirations of the Ugandan society. In his response, the Minister lamented “I tried my best to block it, but the devil has a strong hand. I had to backtrack” (Xanthia Leni, 2019). The Minister’s response demonstrates classical government behavior in shifting positions on issues that are locally and internationally controversial.

Interestingly, during the 2019 edition, the organizers and the Uganda police signed a memorandum of understanding which allowed police unfettered access to the festival to ensure compliance with what has been agreed (Kazibwe, 2019). The



memorandum of understanding had clear guidelines including “Organizers to provide guidelines to the revelers prohibiting any use of prohibited drugs at the venue, acts of homosexuality, open sex and any other acts considered immoral because the Ugandan culture is a conservative one” (Kazibwe, 2019).

As reported by Xanthia Leni (2019) some of the attendees regarded the venue of the festival as “a perfect place for a swim or spiritual contemplation, as well as wild river rafting and other fun activities”. Generally, the organizers have argued that “the festival stands for peace, love and abundant joy, for underground music and musicians in Africa, from Africa or with a deep interest in getting to know the Continent better and that the event stands for fun and curiosity and pushing boundaries always with a sense of inclusivity and an invitation to wonder” (Xanthia Leni, 2019).

### **The impact of Nyege Nyege music festival in Uganda**

Following its launch, the festival has become a popular event in the music, art, culture and entertainment industry’s calendar in Uganda, with revelers coming from within East Africa and beyond. Despite criticisms from cultural, religious and the political circles, the festival has continued to be hosted in Uganda with the just concluded 6<sup>th</sup> edition hosted in December 2020. As noted by Atiluk (2019), the impact of the Nyege Nyege music festival in Uganda can no longer be ignored. Ostensibly, the Nyege Nyege music festival seems to be promoted potentially enhancing the image of Uganda not only as a nature-based tourist destination, but also as a music, cultural, art and entertainment destination. As Hernández-Mogollón *et al.* (2017) assert, events (such as the Nyege Nyege music festival) form the image of a tourist destination. Already, Couteau (2018) and Twells (2018) emphatically confirm that the festival now positions Uganda as one of the hotspots for electronic music festival in the world. As it appears, it seems the burden to prove that the event is damaging the cultural foundation of the country is now laid upon the skeptics to prove otherwise. Otherwise, with thousands of performers and revelers coming from all parts of the world, the festival is growing to become East Africa’s biggest music event. Already, there is evidence that revelers from within East Africa, of the last editions have been coming by bus several days ahead of the festival, to enjoy some of Uganda’s renowned nightlife and hospitality prior to the main event (Atiluk, 2019). For example, in 2016, the British Council awarded the festival organizers the East Africa Arts Mobility travel grant – which was used to facilitate transportation of over 60 artists from Kenya alone to attend and participate in the ([www.britishcouncil.org](http://www.britishcouncil.org)). Similarly, many cities around the world, including Brighton in the UK, festivals e.g. the Brighton festival play a key role in boosting both their local and international tourism demand for food, music, arts and culture tourism and is a boost the local economies.

## **INTERNATIONAL LEISURE REVIEW**

According to Spowage (2020:106), “the Nyege Nyege has emerged as an event with a local, regional, global reputation, and international partnerships”. As reported by Spowage (2020), the 2018 edition of Nyege Nyege music festival attracted over 10,000 goers, and over 300 artists performed at the event, with the event managed by 300 staff from around the world. Moreover, the festival was recognized as the ‘Best Overall Tourism Event in Uganda, 2018’ (Daily Media 2019; also see Spowage, 2020). This could be attributed to the fact that the festival is part of the 41 African-Afro centric collectives hosted around the continent ([www.nyegenyege.com](http://www.nyegenyege.com)). As evidenced by the increasing number of festival goers over the years, the number of sponsors and donors and partners have also been increasing for every single edition. Although the festival started with financial and logistics support from the founders, the 2018 edition’s list of donors and corporate sponsors included MTN (UG), Ugandan Breweries Ltd. (UG), Coca Cola (UG), Boutiq Electroniq, Talent Africa (UG), Radio City (UG), Boiler Room (UK), British Council (KE), Jumia Travel (UG), Brussels Airlines (BE) and Mookh Africa (KE) (Spowage, 2020:41).

Further, the 2018 edition was expected to attract close to 300 artists up from about 200 artists from more than 30 countries in 2016. The list included the Kenyan rumba band, an iconic musical Orchestra Les Mangelepa that is said to have last held a performance in Uganda in the early 1980s. The 2018 attendance was estimated at 8,000 people, up from 6,000 the previous year. According to Boniface Nyanga a Kenyan tour operator, the festival is already viewed as a great opportunity to market Uganda as a destination in the neighboring countries. For example, Kenyan tour operators organize an all-inclusive tour packages for festival goers to allow them enjoy an all-inclusive experience that goes beyond just the festival.

Furthermore, the festival has not only created awareness about its very existence in Uganda, but also caused the locals to become aware of the values and morals they are supposed to protect in society. According to Stankova & Vassenska (2015), festivals provide opportunities to raise cultural awareness. This could be in terms of the positive aspects of the culture or drawing attention to the fact the culture of a people is under threat from an emerging new culture. For example, cultural and church leaders and politicians alike raised concerns about the underlying principles of the Nyege Nyege music festival and started. As a result, the organizers were forced to start following police guidelines including ensuring that the Uganda police had unrestricted access to all the stages at the venue, including strict prohibition of drug use, acts of homosexuality, open sex and any other acts considered immoral and contrary to the conservative Ugandan culture (Kazibwe, 2019).

World over, festivals are considered as avenues for creating social cohesion among the peoples. In spite of its controversial meaning and elusive motive, Nyege



Nyege music festival is considered as “one of East Africa’s most significant cultural events” (Spowage, 2020:42). It brings together different nationalities to celebrate the spirit of Africa through music, dance, culture, art and entertainment in one place. Evidence from academic literature indicates that “festivals are often staged for broad social goals, including engaging the community, breaking down entry barriers, and increasing tolerance and acceptance of diversity” (Laing & Mair, 2015:265). However, as noted by Wood *et al.* (2009) the challenge is usually in understanding how the motives of festivals can result in potential social benefits within the limits of favored government policy ideals – which could include blocking infiltration of foreign culture in a society through musical festivals, culture and arts.

There is evidence that the Nyege Nyege music festival has become highly popular within and outside Uganda – attracting over 8,000 tourists in 2018 (Musungu, 2018). Although it involves heavy partying and fun, the event’s promoters believe that the festival brings foreign exchange and promotes Uganda’s tourism (Musungu, 2018). Further, with the festival’s corporate sponsorship growing since 2015, there is hope that they will continue to generate income for artists via the record labels, international tour operators, the festival organizers, local businesses in Jinja and the country at large. As noted by Spowage (2020::201-21), the festival now “holds the promise of a successful social enterprise that can continue to subsidize other activities associated with the collective. Narratives of enterprise and entrepreneurship – of sustainability – are increasingly popular in attracting donors and partners”. With these developments, it seems like the Nyege Nyege festival will continue enjoying the recognition as a game changer in the Ugandan art, culture and entertainment industry (Kaggwa, 2018).

#### **Nyege Nyege musical festival as a vehicle for societal change?**

In the case of Nyege Nyege music festival, there were various reports about religious, social, and political interference with its organization including raising concern about the content of the festival. For example, on September 4, 2019 in the Tower Post (an online news outlet), Ayebazibwe reported that Uganda Police met the organizers of the festival and set tough guidelines, including banning use of drugs and open sex (Ayebazibwe, 2019). While the police and other security agents were concerned that the festival could be linked to opposition politicians intending to promote ‘subversive’ activities and could threaten national security, the Uganda police is not new to selective implementation of the law. The action of the police could be argued as one aimed at ensuring public safety at public events as provided for in the 2013, Public Order Management Act (POMA). POMA requires that anybody/group intending to hold any public gathering should seek clearance from the police who would in turn provide security to the attendees.

## **INTERNATIONAL LEISURE REVIEW**

As already noted previously, the popularity of the Nyege Nyege music festival continue to grow as the first kind of music festival where revelers are treated to several days and nights of fun music and entertainment in Uganda. However, an important question is on the extent to which this growing popularity of this event is actually leading to change in Uganda's society. As observed by Pegg & Patterson (2010:86), 'festivals and events need to differentiate themselves to remain distinctive, and, ... must be willing to provide better value (as perceived by the consumer) than their competitors'. Ostensibly, promoters of Nyege Nyege festival attempt to maintain unique features of their event in terms of the quality of the artists they invite every year, the music played and other services provided in order to minimize potential competition. Research evidence from elsewhere show that many music festivals fail to pick up due to failure to offer experiences with relevance and meaning to the audience, and integrating new virtual technologies that can help to enhance sensory feelings and imaginations (Robertson *et al.*, 2015). In the case of Nyege Nyege music festival, its popularity seems not to only depend on the use of traditional and social media platforms to attract attendees, but also the attendees being able to share with the entire world the exciting moments and experiences they get from attending the festival with the outside world through various media. It is thus, possible that this is in itself one way to help the organizers popularize the next edition of the festival. But, although not yet substantial, the festival is gradually opening up Uganda from the previously conservative society to an egalitarian one – more liberal and accommodative in nature. We argue that unregulated embracement of porosity exposes Ugandan society to foreign cultural influences of the so-called progressive contemporary (conscience of the) neoliberal post-colonial leisure economy.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this paper, we analyzed the paradox of promoting Nyege Nyege music festival – a post-modern leisure practice within a morally sensitive environment. Since its launch in 2015, the festival now attracts over ten thousand revelers. Despite its growing popularity and potential to develop cultural, art, music and festival tourism in Uganda, the festival has often time found itself in a position of a growing leisure activity with a moral dilemma in Uganda. With the government's original ambitious plan to attract 4 million tourists by the year 2020, some tourism promoters thought the festival would provide opportunity to realize this ambitious plan by then. Even though this plan was criticized as overly ambitious, emergence of new and exciting tourist activities such as Nyege Nyege can indeed help to foster the realization of this dream or at least lead to diversification of tourist products and eventually increase tourists' numbers to the country. With this development, it is then incumbent upon destination



stakeholders to improvise to address the lack of tourist accommodation facilities to meet perceived demand that the 4 million tourists would spur. Conversely, moralists believe that some of the tourist 'products' (whether targeting locals or international visitors) like Nyege Nyege music festival presented a moral dilemma for a strong culturally and religiously conservative society like Uganda.

With the increasing advancements in global technological innovations, there is hope that even poor countries like Uganda will be able to harness these technologies to promote the country and its unique attributes. Conversely, there is also a danger that advancements in technologies and emergence of certain tourist attractions such as the increasingly popular Nyege Nyege musical festival will potentially be dangerous for conservative societies as the citizens are exposed to a lot of foreign influence that could easily dilute the culture and leisure practices. We argue that unregulated embracement of porosity exposes Ugandan society to foreign cultural influences of the so-called progressive contemporary (conscience of the) neoliberal post-colonial leisure economy. Even in trying to regulate influence of foreign cultures, recipient societies ought to cautiously do so while respecting citizen's rights to free choice and association. Already, human rights activists argue that government's failed attempt to block the Nyege Nyege music festival in 2018 was in contravention to citizen's right to free choice and association as many people had already freely bought tickets and were willing to attend the event. Global rights defenders and advocates also argued that Uganda's government was being insensitive to deviant and minor groups and yet the country is signatory to global rights treaties. Nevertheless, as a sovereign state, the government of Uganda has duties and responsibility to ensure that the human rights of all citizens, (including those of the Nyege Nyege music festival attendees) are respected and protected. It could be argued that partly, it is for this reason that the government agreed to the continuation of the festival with demands that the organizers cooperate with the police department to ensure compliance and safety of all people in attendance and their property, like it also happens in other countries, even if in a different setting. Finally, in this paper, we endeavored to contribute to the body of knowledge on leisure tourism with implications for unraveling its potential for diversification of tourism products in Uganda.

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