

CORA Arts stampede: Reminiscences on the early years

By SOLA BALOGUN

The need to create a veritable platform to discuss issues concerning Nigeria's arts and culture led to the birth and growth of the quarterly Arts Stampede organised by the Committee for Relevant Art (CORA). At the time of its conception, there was obviously no public forum like that in Nigeria for artists, culture practitioners and enthusiasts to assemble on a regular basis to subject their affairs to scrutiny. So when it finally came, the Arts Stampede filled a wide gap in the nation's cultural history, drawing the arts and culture community together for the purpose of dialoguing on ways and strategies of repositioning the sector.

As a cub reporter then in the early 1990s, I remember leaving my house at Ojodu area of Lagos for the Island to cover the early editions of the Stampede at the popular Jazz 38 on Awolowo Road, Ikoyi. Jazz 38 was a club owned and run by Tunde and Frances Kuboye, the great artistic couple who gave the venue to the founding fathers of CORA such as Yomi Layinka, Tunde Olanipekun, Toyin Akinosho, Jahman Anikulapo and a few others whom I cannot remember now. The stampede held quarterly on Sundays with a kind of informal gathering to discuss burning issues affecting the arts and culture community in the country. On such Sundays, the stampede would take off around 2pm with Akinosho, then Secretary General of CORA playing the role of compere/moderator. He would call the forum to order by acknowledging dignitaries in attendance as well as introducing the main speakers of the day. He would then go on to remind the gathering about the topic of discussion which the speakers and others would expectedly react to. By doing this, everyone in attendance knew what to say and when to say it. I can also remember that the task of organising the Stampede later rested on the duo of Akinosho and Anikulapo, who invested their personal resources and money in the growth and sustenance of CORA and its numerous activities such as the Lagos Book and Arts Festival (LABAF) and others.

I remember too well some of the topics which were hotly debated in the early years of the Stampede and which somehow prompted certain government decisions or influenced policies on arts and culture at the time. Issues such as Cultural Policy, National Endowment for the Arts, National Festival of Arts and Culture (NAFEST), Appointments of Culture ministers and directors, welfare of artistes, activities, achievements or shortcomings of the chief executives of various agencies and parastatals, Growth of literature and the arts, Fate of the National Theatre complex, among many others were extensively discussed. But CORA Stampede was not merely a jaw jaw session, it was also a forum for participants to relax, interact, perform or savour musical entertainment. At first, Tunde Kuboye and his family entertained guests at Jazz 38, but by the time the forum moved to other venues like the Aaragon Gallery at Obanikoro, Universal Studio for the Arts (National Theatre), as well as the Artistes' Village, the organisers either played highlife music or invited singers and dancers such as Tunji Sotimirin, Seyi Solagbade, Muyiwa Osinnaike, Jumoke Oke, the Segun Adefila-led Crown Troupe of Nigeria and others to thrill guests. While the Stampede was in session, guests were always treated to palm wine served in calabash and groundnuts as refreshments, while occasionally too, participants were invited to the dancing floor to display their talents.

I cannot also forget the high quality of attendance at CORA arts Stampedes. The organisers, out of the share need to address serious issues that bother on policies, usually invited top government officials, heads of culture-based agencies and professional associations to the gathering. Although many of these officials were fond of dodging the Stampede for the obvious fear of being criticised or questioned, the Stampede enjoyed the robust patronage of respected culture practitioners and enthusiasts such as Pa Steve Rhodes, Ambassador Segun Olusola, Col Sir Tunde Akogun, Mr (Now Oba) Gbenga Sonuga, Mr Frank Aig Imoukhuede, Ben Tomoloju, Duro Oni, Theo Alfreds, Ahmed Yerima, Martin Adaji, Arnold Udoka, Kole Ade Odutola, Sola Osofisan, Sola Fosudo, Gbile Oshadipe, Ayo Oluwasanmi, Dele Morakinyo, Mahmoud Ali-Balogun, Segun Ojewuyi, Odia Ofeimun, Isreal Eboh, Edmund Enaibe, Tunji Sotimirin, Frances Kuboye, Amaka Igwe, Richard Mofe Damijo, Tunde Kelani, Sehwenu Akran, Taiwo Ajai Lycett, Joke Silva, Muyiwa Majekodunmi, Jide Ogungbade, Seinde Odimayo, Tunde Adetunji, Bunmi Oyinsan, and many others.

At the end of each edition of the Arts Stampede, a communiqué would be prepared and copies of it would be forwarded to the media and government for necessary action. However, as a newspaper reporter then working for *The Guardian* under the supervision of Ben Tomoloju and later Jahman Oladejo Anikulapo, I was expected to have filed in a news story on the Stampede well before publishing a feature that would come later. The reason was simple, *The Guardian* at that time was the leading newspaper in the coverage of arts and culture and the cutting edge of the paper was its deliberate policy of subjecting issues of culture and the arts to serious debate and investigation. Above all, I was an active player in the business of reporting and monitoring the Culture sector and the team then was championed by both Tomoloju and Anikulapo; who incidentally was a founding member of CORA. Other members of the group that constituted the Arts Desk of *The Guardian* were Bankole Ebisemiju, Steve Ayorinde, Olayiwola Adeniji, Ozolua Uhakheme, Chuka Nnabuife, Uduma Kalu, Kabir Alabi Garba, and Justin Akpovi Esade.