

Annual Street Carnivals and Youth Violence in South-West Nigeria

by

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Abstract

The growing number of carnival-related violence has added another dimension to the problem of youth violence in Nigeria. On this basis, this study investigated youth violence associated with annual street carnivals in south-west Nigeria. Social disorganisation theory was adopted as a theoretical framework. In-depth interview, key-informant interview and focus group discussion methods were employed for data collection; and purposive and snowball sampling techniques were utilised for the selection of 68 respondents. Findings revealed that youth attached spiritual and symbolic meanings to their annual end-of-the-year street carnivals. However, there were divergent opinions regarding the benefits accruable from street carnivals as most of the respondents contended that street carnivals are increasingly becoming synonymous with violence in south-west Nigeria. Lax security arrangements at carnival grounds, supremacy battle, and retaliation among carnival participants were the major factors promoting violence. Therefore, state governors in the region should be more proactive towards addressing violence associated with annual street carnivals.

Keywords: carnival, youth, youth violence, south-west Nigeria

Introduction

In the last one decade, there has been an increase in the incidence of youth-carnival related violence in south-west Nigeria (Adelaja, 2013; Osun Defender, 2013; Awoyinfa, 2012; Okoli, 2012; Igomu, 2011). Although the end-of-the-year carnivals are primarily organised by various neighbourhood youths in most major cities and some rural communities for the purpose of reunification, merriment and entertainment, the incessant outbreak of carnival-related violence and its attendant loss of lives and property have made it an issue of major concern in most of the States in south-west Nigeria in recent times. For instance, in December, 2013, a 13-year old boy was stabbed to death during a carnival that turned violent in Ota, Ogun State (Osun Defender, 2013). Similarly, in December, 2013, 15 women were reportedly sexually assaulted, while 60 commercial vehicles were destroyed at a carnival organised by youths of Idikan in Ibadan North-West Local Government (Ogunsola, 2013) Furthermore, in 2011, a man, Kehinde Ogundare, was hit by a stray bullet at a carnival organised at Humani Street, Somolu area in Lagos (Balogun & Oseghale, 2012).

Carnival-related violence has added another dimension to the problem of youth violence. Globally, youth violence has been recognised to be a serious problem with a wide range of socio-economic and health implications (Human Right Watch, 2008; United State Agency for International Development, 2005; Krug et al., 2002; Satcher, 2001). Although violence affects all age groups, youths between the ages of 12 and 24 are more likely to be victims of violent crimes compared to persons of other ages (Krug et al., 2002). The Nigerian society, and indeed, many other African countries have witnessed an increasing trend in the scope and sophistication of youth immorality and violent antisocial acts (Olusanya, 2011). Between 1999 and 2007 alone, violent deaths continued to rise in Nigeria, increasing from 70 to 80 murders per 100,000,000 people (Human Right Watch, 2008).

Presdee (2012) submits that carnival is a time of great festive excess where pleasures of the 'body' are foregrounded in opposition to the dominant and accepted values of restraint and sobriety. Awoyinfa (2012) traced the origin of end-of-the-year carnival in Nigeria to the 1850s when people of African origin who were earlier sold into slavery returned to Lagos from Brazil, Cuba and Sierra Leone. Similarly, Ikuomola, Okunola & Akindutire (2014) assert that street carnival in contemporary Lagos State and other parts of Nigeria has its roots in the cultural expression of the African- Brazilian returnees on the Lagos Island.

The period of carnival, according to Bakhtin (1984), is a time when people come together to relieve themselves from the prevailing truth and established order; it serves as a good time to oppose official feasts, and is often marked with the "suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions". Through its acts, structure and imagery, carnival legitimises its participants behaviour that would have been otherwise considered, outside of carnival, to be deviation from the norms, and beyond the bounds of what is generally seen as proper within the 'normal' social space and calendar of everyday life (Presdee, 2002).

Although carnival can be both violent and law breaking, yet, the need for it is accepted and to some extent tolerated as a senseless time full of senseless irrational acts that appeared necessary, even 'natural' in the rhythm of the year (Presdee, 2002). However, unlike government organised carnivals, private carnival organisers, typically, do not put adequate measures, especially security into basic logistics at the planning phase of most street carnivals (Brunt, Mwaby & Hambly, 2000). Consequently, in the ecstatic, marginal, chaotic acts of carnival, damage is done, people are hurt and some 'pleasurable' performances reflect on or articulate pain (Presdee, 2002).

Street carnivals in Nigeria are gradually becoming marked with different arrays of deviant and criminal activities which often result in constant tensions between residents, carnival organisers, the Police and local authorities in most communities (Ikuomola, Okunola & Akindutire, 2014). However, in spite of the fact that incidence of carnival-related violence has become an annual phenomenon in most of the cities in south-west Nigeria, the problem has attracted little scholarly attention. Therefore, this study investigated youth violence associated with annual street carnivals in south-west Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on the propositions of social disorganisation theory. This theory was first developed in the studies of urban crime and delinquency by sociologists at the University of Chicago and the Institute for Juvenile Research in Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s. Proponents of this theory saw social disorganisation as the inability of local communities to solve common problems, and they believed that the degree of disorganisation in a community was largely predicated upon the extent of residential mobility and heterogeneity present in that community (Schmallegger & Volk, 2011). As a theoretical approach to the study of crime, social disorganisation theory has its roots in the process of social change. Rapid social change was viewed as damaging the organised society's web of normative social controls; and thus, results in social disorganisation in which normative consensus is replaced by normative dissensus. According to the basic logic of disorganisation theory, social disorganisation is likely to be followed by personal disorganisation (Pfohl, 1994). A breakdown in the normative control increases the likelihood that individuals will experience a similar breakdown in moral constraints in the everyday behaviour because social disorganisation has disrupted socialization, the process through which one generation of people passes its beliefs, values and normative constraints to another. The power of traditional beliefs, values and norms is dissipated by a disorganised moral climate in which "anything goes". At the individual level, this means that many people will fail to develop the self-censoring conscience which are said to regulate behaviour in a well organized society (Pfohl, 1994). Normative competition, conflicts, or dissensus are a key characteristic of social disorganisation, and one of the by-products of disorganisation is an increase in deviant behaviour which is a natural by-product of rapid social change.

High rates of non-conformity occur when too much change in too much a time disrupt the normative order of society (Pfohl, 1994). The frequency with which outbreak of violence is being recorded during the annual end-of-the-year carnival celebration in south-west Nigeria in recent times may be explained as resulting from the inability of some neighbourhoods to solve common problems due to a breakdown in the normative control that formerly regulated individuals' behaviour through the development of moral constraint and self-censoring conscience.

Research Setting and Study Population

The study was conducted in south-west Nigeria. Specifically, two major cities (Lagos and Ibadan) were covered. The rationale behind the selection of Lagos and Ibadan was predicated on the fact that incidents of youths' carnival-related violence have been on the increase in the two cities in recent times (Adeloye, 2013; Adesuyi, 2013; Balogun & Oseghale, 2012). The locations where youth carnivals are annually held were targeted in the two metropolis. Some of the areas covered in Ibadan included: Agbowo, Anfani, Beere, Bodija, Mapo, Sango, Ojoo and Orita-Merin. With regard to the city of Lagos, the areas targeted were Abule-Egba, Iyana-Ipaja and Mushin. Furthermore, youths involved in carnival planning and arrangement, who were 18 years and above, constituted the primary target population. In addition, some community leaders and carnival participants were involved in the study as a way of capturing the power dynamics between young men and adult community members to allow for a holistic understanding of the subject matter.

Methodology

The research was non-experimental and exploratory in design. This approach allows for unveiling the unconscious and promotes the understanding of perceptions and underlying drivers that often informed belief, attitude and behaviour. The study adopted a blend of three qualitative techniques namely, in-depth Interview (IDI), focus group discussion (FGD) key informant interview (KII) methods of data collection. Specifically, 30 in-depth interviews were conducted with youths involved in the planning and organisation of annual carnival. Also, four focus group discussion sessions (2 per city) comprising seven discussants each were held. In addition, 10 key informant interviews were conducted with some selected community leaders. With regard to sampling, locations covered in the two cities were purposively selected because end-of-the-year carnivals are annually held by the youths in such neighbourhoods. Also, the purposive and convenience sampling techniques were utilised for the selection of carnival participants and youths involved in carnival planning, while community leaders were purposively selected. To ensure the validity of the instruments of data collection, a pilot study was conducted in Akinyele Local Government of Ibadan.

This step was principally taken as a way of familiarising research assistants with the study objectives, research instruments and process of interviewing. Data collection started concurrently in the selected locations in Ibadan and Lagos Metropolis. At the analysis stage, all the elicited data were processed through content analysis and ethnographic summaries, using narrative techniques of reporting. And thus, our results and discussion involve a thematic presentation of the major findings established in this study. The main issues covered included: reasons youths engaged in annual street carnivals, benefits accruable from annual carnival, patterns and factors promoting carnival-related violence. The results were systematically arranged as a way of ensuring clarity and logic of discourse.

Reasons for Organizing Annual Street Carnivals

The end-of-the-year street carnivals organised by some neighbourhood youths in Nigeria are typically not sponsored by State Governments or any of their agencies. Hence, it was considered important to unravel the motivating factors encouraging the youths to organise carnival annually. Most of the youths confirmed that their zeal to organise annual carnival mainly emanates from the fact it has both spiritual and symbolic implications for them. For instance, one of the youths interviewed in Ibadan stated thus:

We usually organise it (carnival) just to make ourselves happy. It is like an annual festival for us. The reasons behind it are many. Every evening, we usually gather at our base to enjoy ourselves. Then, we do contribute money, and some of our elders too do support us financially. So, we usually make use of our money to organise carnival at the end of the year. It is whatever money that we realised from the carnival that we usually shared among ourselves (IDI/Male/Carnival Organiser/Orita-Merin Area/Ibadan).

In the words of another respondent:

Our reason for organising carnival is to thank God for sparing our lives throughout the year. It is an act of appreciating God. When we had our first carnival here (Ojoo), all of us were still around, none of us had left the community. But later on, some of us got married, some gained admission into higher institutions, while others travelled. But whenever we organise carnival, all of us will come around and we will be happy to see ourselves again. We will eat, drink and enjoy ourselves moderately (IDI/Male/Carnival Organiser/Ojoo Area/Ibadan).

Similarly, one of the respondents sampled in Lagos stated:

We usually organise street carnival annually to enable us unwind, merry together, dance, and share drinks, wear ‘and-co’ (uniformed party clothes) and give God His deserved glory for sparing our lives since last year. He deserves special thanks for this (FGD/Female/Carnival Participant/Iyana-Ipaja Area/Lagos).

It can be deduced from the responses of the interviewees that high premium is attached to organising street carnivals by the youths. Hence, it usually entails a long-term and meticulous planning. Also, it is clear from the narratives presented that annual street carnivals is mainly seen by the youths as serving two major purposes – it is a means through which they usually express their gratitude to God for keeping them alive during the course of the year; and it also provides a platform for a kind of reunion in which friends who had separated earlier in the year will come together to engage in merriments and frolicking. This finding is in tandem with the submission of Bakhtin (1984) that the period of carnival is a time when people usually come together to relieve themselves from the prevailing truth and established order.

Benefits Accruable from Organizing Annual Street Carnivals

In recent times, annual street carnivals organised by the youths in major cities in south-west Nigeria are increasingly becoming synonymous with violence (Adelaja, 2013; Osun Defender, 2013; Okoli, 2012). Therefore, some of the respondents were probed on the benefits accruable from organising them. The submissions of the respondents indicate that in spite of the frequent violence outbreak during annual street carnivals, there are still some latent and manifest benefits that are derivable from organising them. One of the youth carnival organisers in Ibadan described the benefits this way:

If you are looking for someone who has gained from carnival, I am the one. First, I always sew all the “asoebi” (uniform party attire) that we usually wear during our carnival celebration. Hence, I make more money whenever we are organizing our carnival. Also, when I was preparing for my wedding ceremony, my carnival members single-handedly organised and financed my bachelor’s eve party. All the drinks, the *suya* (barbecue), the dinner, the event-centre that we used, and the suit I wore were catered for. I did not spend any money. Even members that could not come sent me money. I was so happy. When I have more money I can spend everything on this carnival. It is all about love. It is because of the love that we share (IDI/Male/Carnival Organiser/Beere Area/Ibadan).

Another respondent said:

For me, organising carnivals connect me with influential people in the society. We usually have the opportunity to interact with politicians whenever we go out to seek for assistance for our carnival programmes. Through carnival, I have enjoyed a lot of benefits from politicians. Occasionally, whenever I call them (politicians) on phone to greet them, they will say ‘go and meet my secretary and collect some money’. I have also collected bags of rice from some of them (IDI/Male/Carnival Organiser/Ojoo Area/Ibadan).

In the words of another:

Look at that drainage at the other side of the road over there; we repaired it because the Landlord Association failed to take any step about it. Also, the electricity pole over there we bought it when the previous one spoilt, and we even plastered that culvert over there. We were able to do all these projects through the proceeds we realised from organising carnival. Apart from these, on the morning of the carnival, we usually cook food and give to people in the community. We do give people drinks too before starting our programme proper in the evening (IDI/Male/Carnival Organiser/Anfani Area/Ibadan).

However, most of the community leaders interviewed expressed contrary opinions. The response given by one of the key informants was typical of the others’ submissions:

There is no particular benefit that carnivals bring to our neighbourhood because they are usually organised by thugs and touts. It is because they are jobless. There is no benefit at all. Whenever they staged their carnivals, you will see them forcing passersby to give them money. It is nonsense. I do not like it at all. What is not good is not good (KII/Male/Community Leader/Ojoo Area/Ibadan)

These findings clearly demonstrate the power-play and politics of opinions that often characterised the staging and organisation of carnivals in south-west Nigeria. On the one hand, the youths, who are most times, the planners and organisers of the annual end-of-the-year street carnivals, believed that carnival is beneficial to them and their communities in numerous ways because it serves as a means of making money, forming new social contacts, promoting social solidarity and attracting development. On the other hand, the community elders felt that carnivals did not have any benefit because they are usually organised by groups of idle youths whose major aim is to make money through any available means. These contradictory opinions may be due to the fact that community elders felt that the frequent outbreak of violence on carnival grounds makes the costs associated with it to far outweigh the benefits accruable from organising it. Also, the strong positive opinion of the youths about annual street carnivals results from the fact that they are its primary beneficiaries. These findings support a major submission of social disorganisation theory which asserts that deviance and crime arise due to the inability of local communities to solve common problems. In addition, this result is in tandem with Ikuomola, Okunola & Akindutire's (2014) submission that carnivals and their associated anomalies are increasingly breeding tensions between carnival organisers, community residents and local authorities.

Major Events Usually Staged During Annual Street Carnivals

To gain significant insights into the major events usually staged during carnival celebrations, respondents were asked to relive their experience at some of the street carnivals in which they had participated in the past. Many of the interviewees and focus group discussants narrated their experiences with nostalgia. A respondent described her experience this way:

Ha! It was the *Ile-Eja* carnival that I enjoyed most. It was in the year 2013. I really enjoyed it. Some dance groups performed. In fact, they really entertained us. There was one small boy among them, the boy danced like...oh my God! Most of the spectators were asking one another, 'how can a very small boy like this have this kind of dancing skill?' The boy entertained the audience. Another one I attended was the *Aponrin* carnival. There were more than enough foods and drinks. More importantly, the DJ was superb. We really danced that day (FGD/Female/Carnival Participant/Anfani Area/Ibadan).

In the words of another respondent:

Our street carnival often attracts spectators who are mostly youths from far and near. Because it is an annual event, people (the youths) usually prepare to attend it ahead of time. They usually make provision for their participation by paying the necessary dues and buying the chosen uniform attire. They usually enjoy themselves at the event by either watching upcoming musicians who have been invited or dancers competing for medals. The carnivals afford the upcoming artists the opportunity to display their talent (IDI/Carnival Organiser/Male/Abule-Egba Area/Lagos)

Another respondent said:

It was the *Labaowo* carnival in 2013. It was a memorable day for me because the Fuji musician that was invited happened to be my favourite, Wasiu Alabi Pasuma “Oganla” (a popular musician in south-west Nigeria). Also, that day was my birthday, so I went there to enjoy myself because it was a day of double celebration for me. In fact, it was a wonderful day for me which I can never forget (IDI/Male/Carnival Participant/Beere Area/Ibadan).

It can be deduced from these narratives that many carnivals are staged annually by the youths. Also, it can be inferred that the venues of annual street carnivals are typically public spaces that are often characterised by social events, including dancing competition, singing competition, alcohol-drinking competition, free-styling and general merry-making. Equally, this finding is in line with Presdee’s (2002) articulation that the structure and associated imagery of carnival legitimises its participants’ behaviour that ordinarily would be considered outside of carnival to be outside the norm and beyond the bounds that is generally seen as proper within the ‘normal’ social space and calendar of everyday life. In addition, the implication of this result is that there would always be likelihood outbreak of violent disagreement occurring on carnival grounds because of the petty rivalries that often accompanied competitions and contests, especially when these are not carefully managed.

Patterns of Carnival-Related Violence

Information was sought on the patterns of carnival-related violence as a way of understanding the scale and dimension of the problem. Findings indicated that most of the respondents interviewed and participants at the focus group discussion agreed that most annual street carnivals are often marred by violence. A participant in one of the focus group discussion sessions held in Ibadan metropolis described the situation this way:

In the past, carnivals were organised by learned people in Ibadan. You know, whatever the learned people do will be different from that of people like us (non-formally educated). In the past, you can only hear of Anfani carnival, Felele carnival, Challenge carnival in Ibadan city. They were all organised by literate people. They would call DJs and enjoy themselves. They do not fight, but they will just be speaking big vocabularies. For people like us, we can slap, and break bottles on anybody's head (FGD/Male/Carnival Participant/Ojoo Area/Ibadan).

A key-informant said:

There is no carnival in which people will not be drinking and fighting. I do not support it (carnival) at all. I do not believe in it. It is full of violence. What is the meaning of carnival? What does it stand for? What is the benefit? A group of lazy youths will just come together and be extorting money from road users, stopping vehicles and causing traffic jam. I do not see any meaning in it. The carnival that I attended which was marred by violence was like four years ago. Since then, I have not attended any other one. They did not even organise it anymore because the community complained that they do not want such violence (KII/Male/Community Leader/Agbowo Area/Ibadan).

An FGD participant said:

The main concern for planners and organisers of annual neighbourhood street carnivals has been the rise in violent activities against women which often borders on rape and other forms of sexual assaults (IDI/Male/Carnival Organiser/Abule-Egba Area/Lagos).

An interviewee had this to say:

In 2013, at the *Bronckia* carnival we really fought seriously. Haa! There was enough *casala* (serious fighting) that day o. There were some people that wanted to demonstrate their supremacy at that carnival. It was actually the sitting arrangement that caused the problem. We arrived at the venue before them, but they wanted us to stand up for them. Many people were injured...many persons got marks through stabbing. Some injuries that even their grandchildren would see (IDI/Male/Carnival Participant/Sango Area/Ibadan).

It can be deduced from this finding that most of the respondents believed that annual street carnivals organised by neighbourhood youths often degenerate into violence because they are mostly planned and managed by touts and unemployed youths who usually enjoy engaging in violent acts. This finding also highlights the vulnerability of female participants to sexual assaults on carnival grounds. Unlike the peaceful end-of-the-year carnivals organised in the past by the elites, the annual street carnivals in recent times are synonymous with violence. Presdee (2002) has equally contended that many senseless and irrational acts bordering on violence and law breaking often occur during carnivals. Furthermore, the implication of this finding is that non-violent individuals who may be willing to participate and share in the fun often associated with carnivals may be unwilling to partake due to fear of outbreak of violence. This result also demonstrates the relevance of social disorganisation theory adopted for this study. According to this theory, rapid social change damages the organised society's web of normative social controls; and thus, results in social disorganisation in which normative consensus is replaced by normative dissensus.

Factors Promoting Carnival-Related Violence

To better understand the social context leading to the continual occurrence of carnival-related violence, investigation was conducted into the factors responsible for violence during annual street carnival celebrations. The responses of the respondents suggested that a wide range of factors are responsible for the increasing cases of violence outbreak during end-of-the-year carnivals. A typical response given by most of them was captured in the submission of one of the interviewees:

Most times, it is about retaliation. When carnival planners and organisers are violent people, individuals whom they might have hurt in the past would always attempt to disrupt their own programmes for revenge. There are many cases. Some people do not know how to organise carnival. May be they attended a carnival in another neighbourhood and caused problem there. Those people too will come back and revenge. Then, when there is no security arrangement in place, people will want to cause problem at carnivals (IDI/Male/Carnival Participant/Beere Area/Ibadan).

In the words of another:

There is no carnival that people will not smoke marijuana, because different kind of guests will come - the invited and the uninvited. Another thing that causes violence at carnivals is the issue relating to dancing arrangement. All these can lead to violence. Some people will be chasing one another with knives and broken bottles. Some people have died as a result of this. Another factor that usually causes pandemonium at carnivals is that some of the participants would have been drunk even before the programme commences, there is no how they would not misbehave or foment trouble (IDI/Male/Carnival Participant/Mushin Area/Lagos).

Another respondent said:

From personal experience, there was a time I attended a carnival, somebody was smoking and the people around him were not comfortable with that. They told him to leave but he refused. Before we knew it, they started dragging themselves. So a lot of things can generate violence at carnivals. There are some people that are always looking for troubles at carnivals, they may go and dance with another person's girlfriend and the concerned boyfriend will definitely *spark* (get angry and react). Some people may get drunk and start to misbehave (IDI/Female/Carnival Participant/Beere Area/Ibadan).

From the submissions of the respondents, it is clear that a mono-causal factor cannot be adduced to the outbreak of violence during annual carnival celebration by the youths. Generally, retaliation for past disagreements, inadequate security arrangement, drug use/excessive alcohol consumption, sitting/dancing arrangement-related disagreements and supremacy battle were the major factors identified by the majority of the respondents as contributing to carnival-related violence. This finding is consistent with the position of Brunt, Mwaby & Hambly (2000) that unlike government organised carnivals, private carnival organisers, typically, do not put adequate measures, especially security into basic logistics at the planning phase of most street carnivals. Equally, this finding validates the proposition of social disorganisation theory which postulates that the power of traditional beliefs, values and norms is dissipated by a disorganised moral climate in which “anything goes”.

Conclusion

This article has examined incidence of youth violence associated with annual street carnivals in south-west Nigeria. The results of the study indicated that youths in the region generally organised end-of-the-year carnivals because of the spiritual and symbolic functions attached to them. Although youths involved in the planning and organising of carnivals believed they are beneficial in many ways. However, most community leaders were of the opinion that street carnivals only promote violence and chaos. Also, most carnival participants agreed that carnival-related violence have increased in recent times. In addition, retaliation and revenge, supremacy battle, inadequate security arrangement and drug use/excessive alcohol consumption were the major factors accounting for carnival-related violence. The end-of-the-year street carnivals organised by the youths could have positive socio-economic implications if the outbreak of violence frequently associated with it is addressed. Therefore, the following recommendations are suggested as a way of addressing the problem:

There is a need for State Governors in south-west Nigeria to show more commitment towards regulating annual street carnivals organised by the youths. Although while it may not be necessary to ban the staging of carnivals outrightly, effective modalities can be put in place to checkmate some excesses often associated with carnival grounds that usually generate violence. For instance, carnival organisers and planners can be required to obtain police permit and approval before they can stage their programme. This step would make it easy for law enforcement officials to identify people to be held responsible when there is an outbreak of violence. Once carnival organisers realised the risk involved, they would want to go extra mile to eschew violence.

Similarly, a formal request for the presence of personnel of the Nigeria Police Force or officials of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps at carnival grounds should be included as a part of the mandatory criteria to be met by carnival organisers before they can be permitted to stage their programmes. The rationale behind this suggestion is predicated on the fact that any act that can potentially lead to the breakdown of law and order during carnival celebrations can easily be prevented or curtailed by law enforcement officers present at such venues.

Also, since street carnivals typically hold at night, State Governors should formulate laws that would make it mandatory for all end-of-the-year annual street carnival programmes in their respective States to end before 12:00am. This step would go a long way in containing carnival-related violence. Apart from the fact that the number of hours for carnival programmes would be reduced, the violent propensity of individuals, who usually capitalised on the lax security arrangement at carnival grounds during the wee hours of the night to foment trouble would also be discouraged. In addition, carnival organisers and planners should be more proactive towards preventing outbreak of violence whenever they are staging their end-of-the-year carnivals. Apart from being vigilant and proactive to forestall any outbreak of violence, they should repeatedly let other carnival participants realise the fact that they would not tolerate any form of violence in the course of their programme.

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