

## The Geographies of Artists and Stall holders at Afrikaans Arts Festivals, South Africa

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### Abstract

South African arts festivals have been the subject of considerable research, with a focus on the economics, attendee patterns and impacts on local communities. Importantly, numerous role-players (stall holders, artists, festival attendees, amongst others) contribute to the diversity, origin and character of these arts festivals. Despite this, little is known of their mobility, spatiality and geographies. To this end, artists and stall holders across five large Afrikaans Language Arts festivals were interviewed to establish their itineraries, travel behaviours, festival involvement and cultural expression. On this basis, this study hopes to enable a better understanding of the geographies of Afrikaans arts festivals. Results suggest that artists and stall holders contribute significantly to shaping the geographies of these arts festivals as they are the most mobile of all participants. Their mobility creates a shared or communal festival geography – albeit now severely disrupted by COVID-19 – across Afrikaans arts festival boundaries. Unfortunately, this shared geography may also undermine the local flavour, authenticity, and regional diversity of such arts festivals.

**Keywords:** Afrikaans, arts festivals, stall holders, tourism geography, cultural tourism

### Introduction

Festivals have a history dating back thousands of years. The ‘professionalization’ of festivals, however, seems to have begun in Edinburgh, Scotland and Avignon, France in 1947 (Newbold, Jordan, Bianchini & Maughan, 2015). More recently, there has been an increase in the number of festivals with a diversity of thrusts varying from the performing and visual arts, through agriculture to sport festivals (Cudny, Korec & Rouba, 2012; Finkel, 2009; Van Zyl & Botha, 2004; Visser, 2005). The establishment of festivals has gathered such momentum that it now translates to the festivalisation of almost everything, resulting in the ‘eventification’ of everyday phenomena to create a special interest or to revive a particular place or setting (Attala, 2012; Hadžić, 2020; Hague, 2021; Richards, 2007; Steinbrink, Haferburg & Ley, 2011; Ronström, 2016). The burgeoning of festivals, especially arts festivals, has been observed both internationally and in South Africa – most notably post 1994 (Kruger & Saayman, 2012; Van Niekerk, 2016; Viviers, Botha & Perl, 2013; Viviers & Botha, 2019). Visser (2005) identified 211 annual festivals in South Africa. Donaldson (2018) claimed more than 1000 festivals are held annually although not all are geared for attendees other than local residents while Scholtz,

Viviers and Maputsoe (2019) counted over 300 festivals with arts festivals specifically showing significant growth. The years 2018-2019 may have been the pinnacle, however, with Snowball and Antrobus (2020) finding around 600 annual cultural festivals annually and noting a drop in visitor attendance.

The South African tourism sector, of which arts festivals form an important part, has not escaped the devastating impacts of the global COVID-19 pandemic. A body of research is fast developing with these impacts at its focus (see Bama & Nyikana, 2021; Rogerson & Baum, 2020; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020a, 2020b, 2021). Some have examined how the festival scape is adapting to the new era (Bama & Nyikana, 2021; Daniel, 2021). In response to the pandemic and the resulting mitigating measures imposed by government, most arts festivals were forced to cancel for 2020 (Brink, 2020; Pienaar & Bessinger, 2020; Pople, 2020; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020b; Steyn, 2020). In 2021 some opted to move their content online to maintain some continuity and survive financially (Die Burger, 2020; Opperman, 2020). The move to virtual inevitably had a major impact on the travelling artists and stall owners, and by extension, the geographies of role-players in this sector (Kruger, 2020; Rogerson & Baum, 2020).

The objective of this study was to investigate the geographies of artists and stall holders in Afrikaans arts festivals during the pre-COVID-19 era, as revealed by two specific variables i.e., travel behaviour and cultural expression. To date art festival research in South Africa has focused largely on visitor experience, visitor spending, local economic impacts, ticket purchases, and visitor loyalty (Drummond, Snowball, Antrobus, & Drummond, 2021; Erasmus, 2012; Kruger, Saayman & Ellis, 2010; Kruger & Saayman, 2019; Labuschagne, 2014; Saayman & Saayman, 2015; Snowball & Antrobus, 2005; Strydom, Saayman & Saayman, 2006; Tanford & Jung, 2017; Viviers, Botha & Marumo, 2019; Viviers & Botha, 2019). Furthermore, although local tourism geography research is extensive, little is known about Afrikaans arts festivals from a geographical perspective. The geographies of Afrikaans arts festivals have an inextricable link to culture as the language spoken in specific regions is in turn linked to how a place is perceived, interpreted and experienced (Fouberg & Murphy, 2020). It is, therefore, the aim of this study to address this hiatus (Donaldson, 2018; Hoogendoorn & Rogerson, 2015; Magi & Nzama, 2002; Rogerson & Visser, 2011; Visser, 2005, 2016; Visser & Hoogendoorn, 2011).

### **South African art festivals**

In terms of the arts, South African festivals have a history that dates to the 1970s, when South Africa was still an apartheid state. In the 1970s, the South African arts festival landscape was dominated by the National Arts Festival (established in 1974) in Makhanda (formerly Grahamstown). The National Arts Festival drew heavily on the culture and political leanings of the English speaking white South African population, taking a broad-minded approach. The liberal approach of the National Arts Festival was rather different to the Afrikaans arts scene, which was directly controlled by the Afrikaans nationalist government, via district arts councils. These district arts councils lost their prominence with the advent of the post-apartheid state (around 1994). The lifting of the heavy-handed, nationalist (and perhaps even jingoistic) State led approach, opened the playing field for Afrikaans art in a way not experienced before. The sudden loss of Afrikaans national and language prominence in government, created a scramble to protect Afrikaans heritage and so various national arts festivals were launched. The Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees (KKNK) was the first, holding its first festival in Oudtshoorn (Western Cape) in 1995 (Figure 1). Following the success of the KKNK, Aardklop Nasionale Kunstefees was established in Potchefstroom (North West Province) in 1998, Woordfees (Western Cape) in Stellenbosch in 1999, Vrystaat Kunstefees in Bloemfontein (Free State) in 2001 followed by Innibos Laeveld Nasionale Kunstefees (Innibos) in Mbombela

/ Nelspruit (Mpumalanga) in 2004. The Gariep Kunstefees in Kimberley (Northern Cape Province) was one of the largest, but this festival came to an end in 2018 (Gariep Kunstefees, 2018). Typically, these festivals last between four and eleven days, drawing visitors from their home province as well as Gauteng (Kruger & Saayman, 2012; Saayman & Rossouw, 2011). Although these arts festivals set out to preserve and celebrate Afrikaans culture, over the past two decades they have evolved into inclusive and diverse festivals, the Vrystaat Kunstefees especially so.

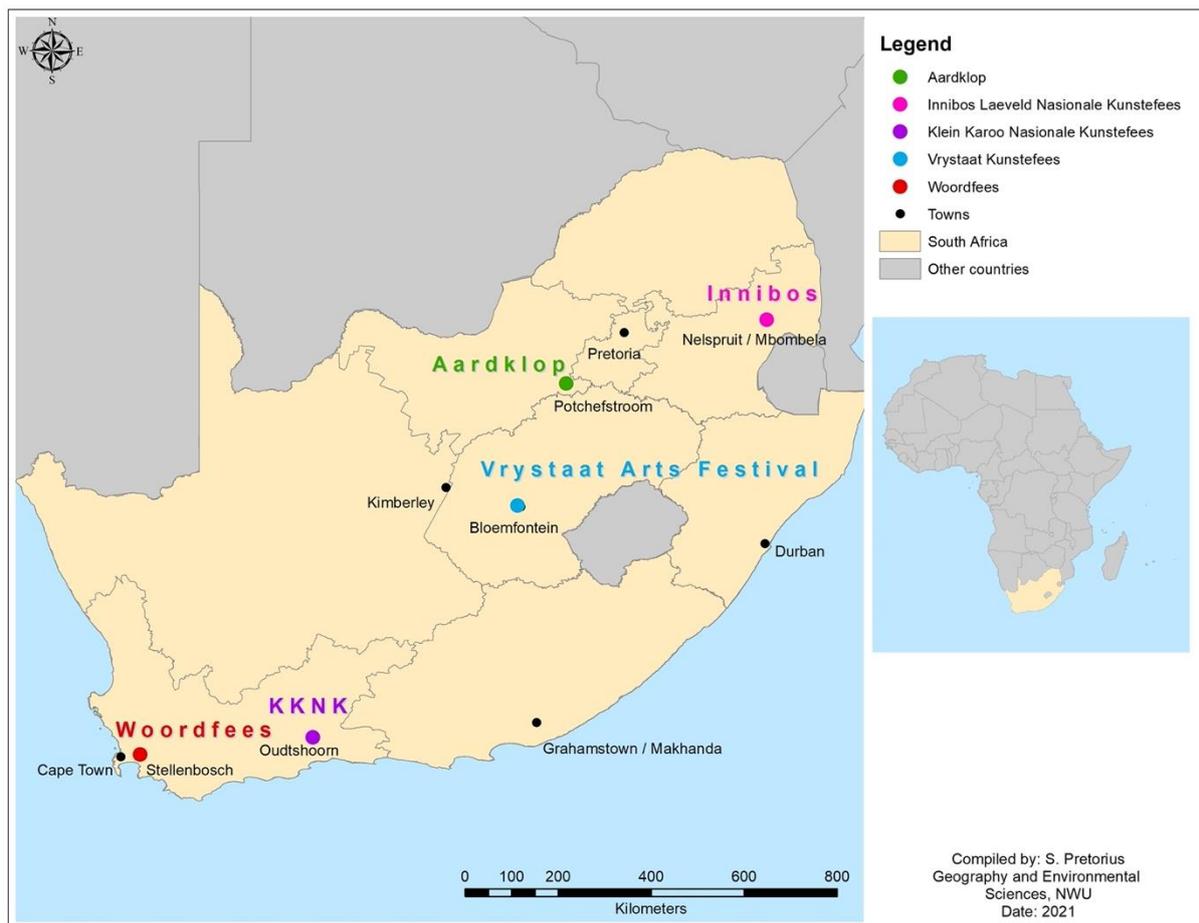


Figure 1: Major Afrikaans arts festivals in South Africa (Source: Author's survey)

## Methodology

Five major Afrikaans arts festivals: the Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees (KKNK), Innibos Laeveld Nasionale Kunstefees, Aardklop, Woordfees and Vrystaat Arts Festival (see Figure 1) were selected for this study. The festivals were selected based on their national reach, prominence and their annual duration (more than four days). Arts festivals are co-produced by management as well as an array of different stakeholders making various contributions (Van Niekerk & Getz, 2016; Wallace & Michopoulou, 2019). In the context of this investigation, stakeholders refer specifically to those who contribute to the arts and other products on offer; as well as the technical support needed to ensure a successful arts festival. These include stall holders, artists (fine and performing arts), various stage management personnel, security, and tickets sales, but excluding management and festival attendees. This study focused on artists (actors, visual and performing artists) and stall holders (henceforth grouped together and referred to as participants) of which the latter are a sizeable portion of the festival content, and by extension, a considerable portion of the attraction of arts festivals (Kruger, 2020).

Snowball sampling was conducted based on the availability and willingness of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Huberman & Miles, 2002). Altogether 37 interviews were conducted using a questionnaire with four sections, of which the first three focused on (1) general festival attendees, (2) service providers, artists and stall holders, and (3) festival management. The fourth section focused on the self-declared demographics of respondents. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed using Atlas.ti software. Data were collected between March 2018 and July 2019, that is, pre-COVID-19. As the festival landscape has changed dramatically since March 2020, this study provides a baseline for future post-COVID-19 research. As a first level analysis the data are grouped together across the five festivals. It was evident that participants across the different arts festivals had similar backgrounds and experiences, therefore common themes have emerged. Some of these themes are elaborated upon in the following section.

### Artists and stall holders in focus

#### *Demographics and dedication*

Stakeholders were asked to share demographic information. Figure 2 summarises the gender and age composition of the stakeholders interviewed. From the data it is evident that the best represented age groups among stakeholders were the ages 41 to 70. A total of 23 male respondents and 14 female respondents took part. The one young male respondent owns a coffee cart and was interviewed at Woodfees. The oldest female respondent was interviewed at Innibos and traded in home baked cookies and rusks, complimenting her ‘granny’ image.

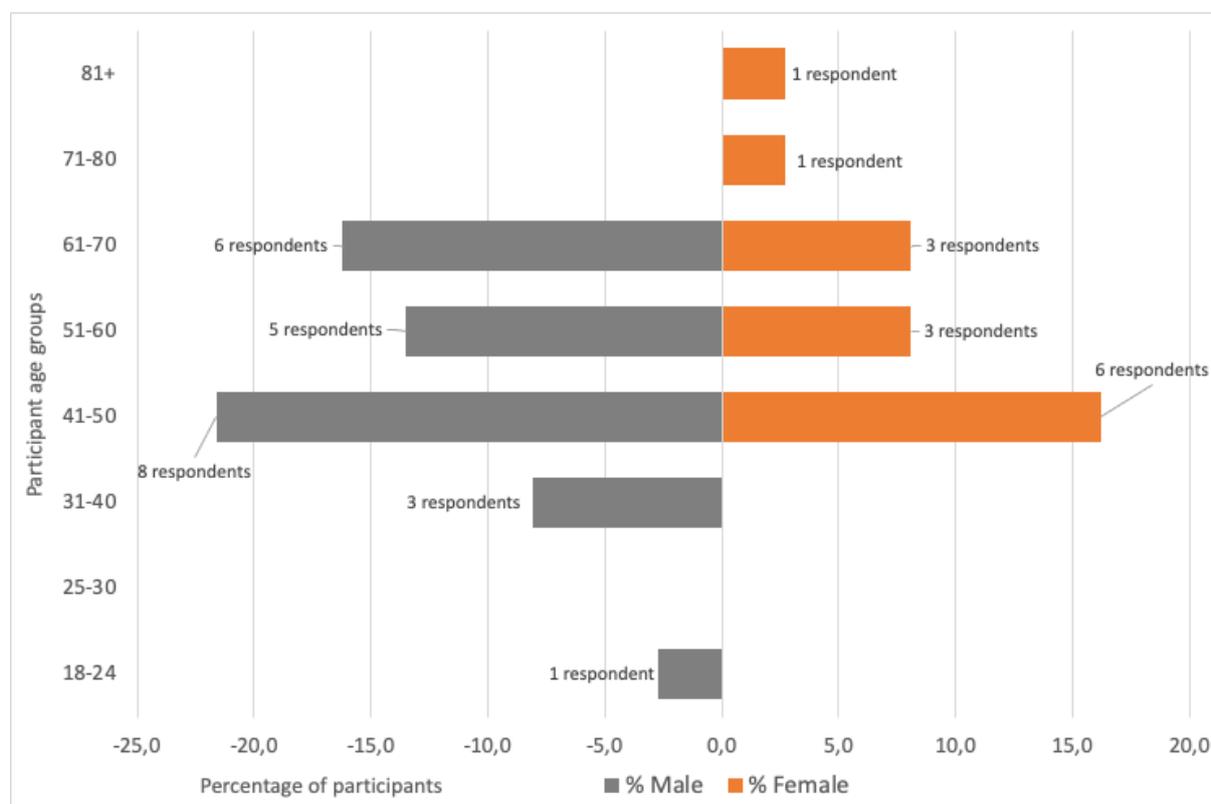


Figure 2: Stakeholders - Age, gender ratios (Source: Author’s survey)

Most stakeholders had exhibited at one of the festivals for ten or more times, albeit not necessarily in consecutive years (see Figure 3). It was observed that there was considerable renewal of interest in terms of new exhibitors entering the market, as suggested by the number of those indicating that they had participated from one to six times.

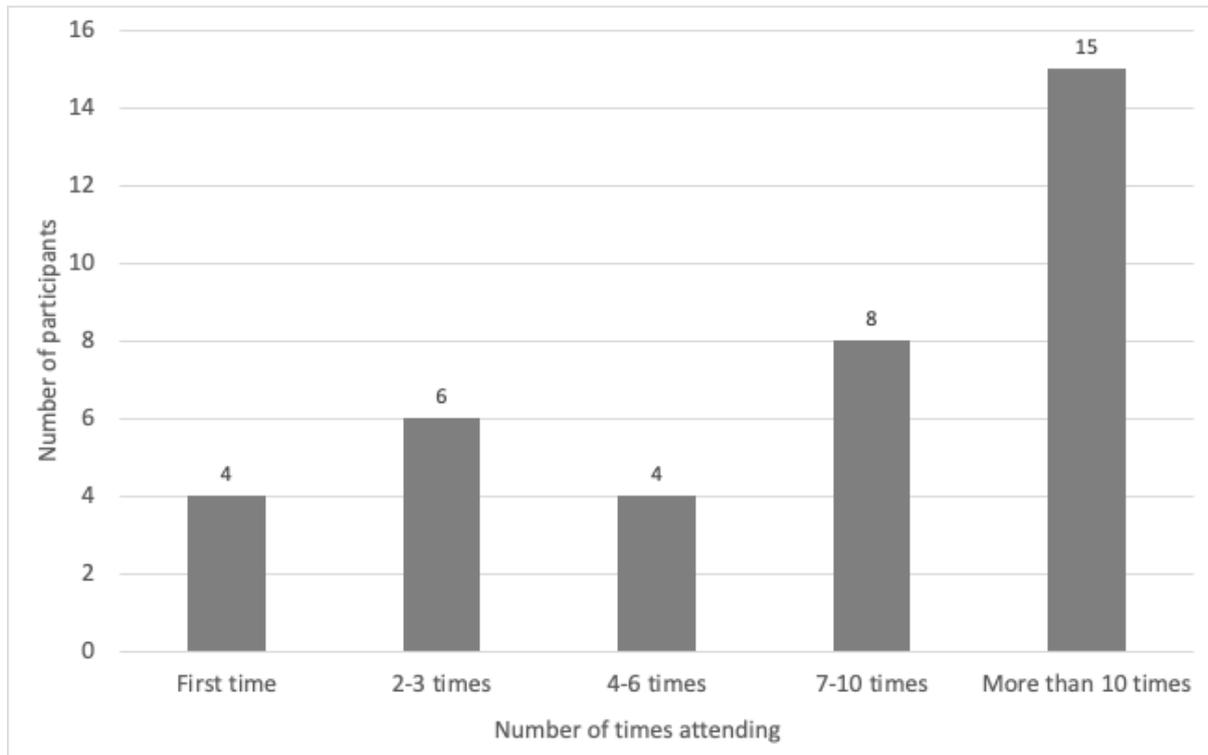


Figure 3: Stakeholders: Annual participation rates (Source: Author's survey)

### ***The geographies of festival stakeholders***

The various places of origin and the routes that the stakeholders follow to and from arts festivals, i.e., the spatialities, are important components of the geographies of the Afrikaans arts festivals. Stakeholders were asked to indicate their hometown and the routes they follow to and from arts festivals and events. Figure 4 depicts the spatiality of the respondents.

Each arts festival has local stakeholders residing in or around the town where the festival takes place. At the same time, all of these also have stakeholders travelling from a particular town or city to the relevant festivals. From Figure 4 it is evident that KKNK and Woordfees draw more stakeholders from Gauteng than from their immediate vicinity, while Innibos, Aardklop and Vrystaat Arts Festival enjoy stronger local support. Those from the Western Cape Province are less inclined to travel to the northern parts of the country.

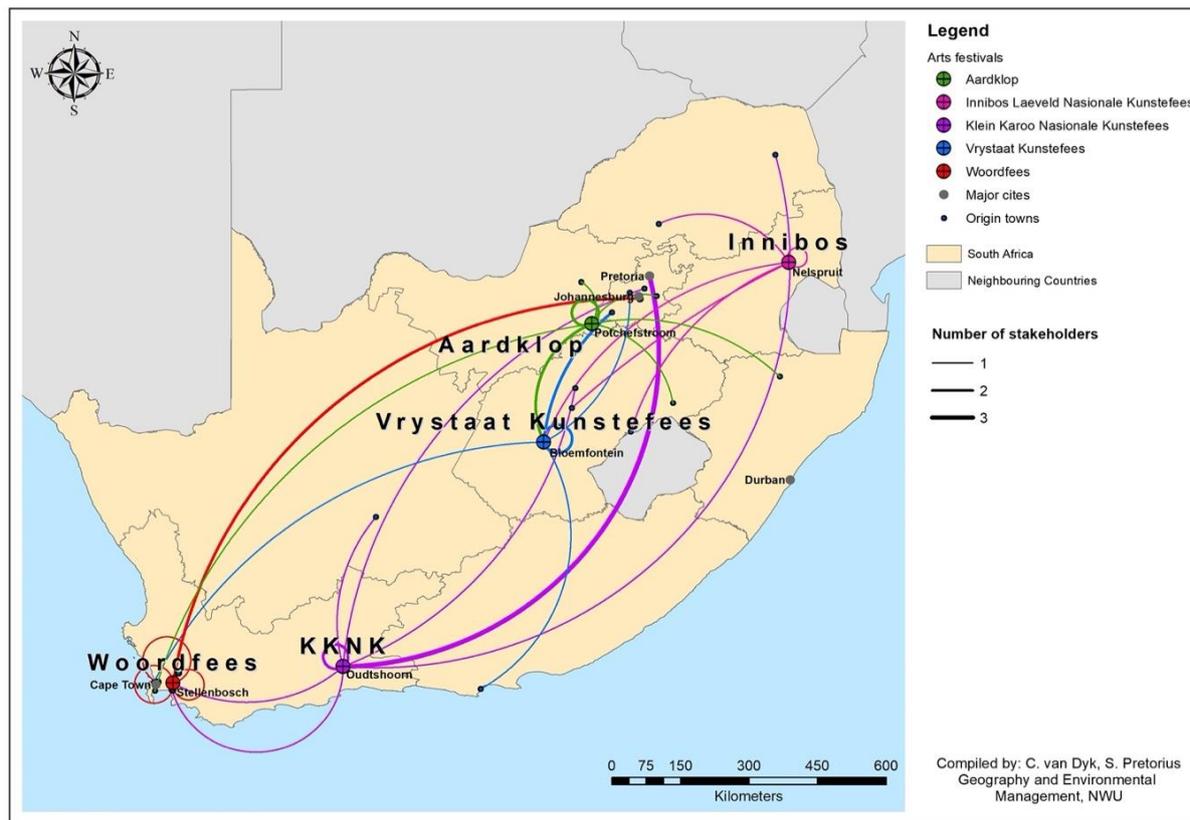


Figure 4: Origin and spatiality of festival participants (Source: Author's survey)

### *Typifying participants and their spatialities*

It was found that participants preferred unique routes to get to arts festivals and to go back home. Based on travel behaviour they can be divided into two groups: (1) the local entrepreneur and (2) the travelling artist / stall holder.

The *local entrepreneur* (1) views the arts festival as an opportunity to trade in foodstuffs for example. Foodstuffs are typically speciality coffee carts, a pancake stall or a local restaurant participating in the festival. Such a restaurant then has a presence at the festival, capitalising on visitors to the festival space. Sometimes the local entrepreneur is a public organisation or a non-profit entity such as a local school or church, using the arts festival as an annual fund-raising opportunity. In the case of Aardklop these are often churches from the greater Potchefstroom district or as far as Koster or Viljoenskroon (100+km distant). These fund-raising activities usually take the form of food stalls specialising in local delicacies such as venison burgers, 'skilpadjies', or 'pap-en-kaiings'. These dishes represent traditional Afrikaans cuisine. Although the presence of this cuisine is true to the Afrikaans culture it is not necessarily endemic to Potchefstroom. In such cases traditional rural (platteland) Afrikaans culture is dressed up as local culture for the benefit of the city dweller who typically visits the festival as a day outing, signalling perhaps a form of cultural appropriation. Befitting a fundraising initiative, the content of the food stalls is often sponsored by members of the congregation such as a dedicated 'Kudu stall' where the meat from this indigenous antelope is harvested from a game farm belonging to said congregation member(s). These food stalls are often manned by volunteers. Such help is viewed as community service and almost a moral obligation.

*Local entrepreneurs* also trade in durable or popular goods. This varies from high end imported hunting / farming paraphernalia to clothing, hair products, jewellery and home décor, including “trendy” products which they either buy locally or import. Members of arts festival management are, however, sensitive to imported products as this can create a market in sameness, where similar goods are everywhere. For this reason, arts festival market spaces are highly curated. Participants need to submit portfolios of their merchandise (months in advance) for vetting. Although curating merchandise is important to preserve uniqueness, it is a sensitive issue. By not allowing imported products, some local participants may be excluded, leading to resentment towards the festival. The advantage is that participants are forced to be creative and original which keeps the festival markets vibrant and interesting. The contribution of *local entrepreneurs* to spatiality is that they are unique to their local festival and therefore are important contributors to specific local character, flavour and sense of place. This contrasts with the travelling participants.

Travelling costs are of great concern to the *travelling artist / stall holder*) due to increased overheads which in turn influence profitability. Consequently, this influences their travel behaviour. They usually take the shortest route possible, keeping time spent on the road to an absolute minimum. Some travel to a festival a day or two in advance (to set up shop) and then travel straight back home after the festival. Others optimise the time spent away from home by attending various smaller events *en route*, usually anchored by a large event and then again, attend some smaller events on their way home. These participants design their itineraries around the event calendar. Sometimes they fill the days between events by visiting friends, family or tourist destinations. One participant, an outdoor enthusiast, included a holiday visit to Augrabies National Park when travelling to the (now extinct) Gariep Kunstefees in Kimberley and a Kruger National Park visit before or after trading at Innibos in Nelspruit. In this way the local economy (in a broader sense) is stimulated by these arts festivals, not only by visiting attendees, but also by travelling participants. Since the demise of the Gariep Kunstefees, this person no longer attends smaller events in Olifantshoek and Kathu. So, the collapse of a larger event has a ripple effect on smaller events in the region. This hard reality was echoed by an unrelated stall owner interviewed at Aardklop:

*“We always did Gariep and after that we did Kuruman (agricultural show) because Kuruman used to be an incredible show with incredible people, really, the Kuruman and Kathu area has hearty, upright people. The stall owners did Gariep and then Kuruman and then went home, but now Gariep has closed down and now it is no longer cost effective to go to Kuruman alone.”*

This observation was repeated by several others, one of whom went on to speculate that this may happen to more small agricultural shows in future, such as the agricultural show in De Aar. Thus, large arts festivals not only boost and support the economy in the town in which they are held, but they support a far larger region and events with varying themes and foci. Arts festivals are, therefore, not just about promoting the arts, they are the economic foundation on which many other events are built.

The second group *travelling artist / stall holders* are those who travel to a number of festivals every year. They comprise of two distinct groups: (1) *Touch base participants* who travel to an event and then go straight back home after the event is completed and (2) *Travelling participants* following almost nomadic “trading routes” anchored by a major event such as an arts festival. These will now be discussed.

### ***Travelling participant behaviour – ‘Touch base’ participants and Travelling participants***

All participants exhibited unique travel behaviours based on their own individual needs and event diaries, but two broad trends are evident. Some individuals travel directly to a festival

and back home - deemed a 'touch base participant'. Others opt to plan dedicated trading tours anchored by one or two major events and filled in with smaller events – deemed a 'travelling participant'. Most participants said that earlier in their careers they had visited many festivals and events, but over time elected to focus on larger arts festivals and events. These trends are now explored.

The travelling behaviour displayed by the 'touch base' participant is usually anchored by their home-town (see Figure 5). They typically operate from their homes or dedicated business premises which they want to get back to. They need to limit the time they spend away from home. They usually trade at one event per trip or in rare cases two per trip, if the dates are suitable. Figure 5 is an example of a touch base participant from Bloemfontein (Free State) who typically does 12 trips per year. She only attends events large enough to make it worth the effort. She typically does not include smaller events in her itinerary, due to effort, time or cost, unless these events were close enough to home to limit the expense of travelling. The greater the distance from home, the larger the event needs to be to make business sense. She felt the central geographical position of Bloemfontein fits well into her business model and optimizes her travel behaviour.

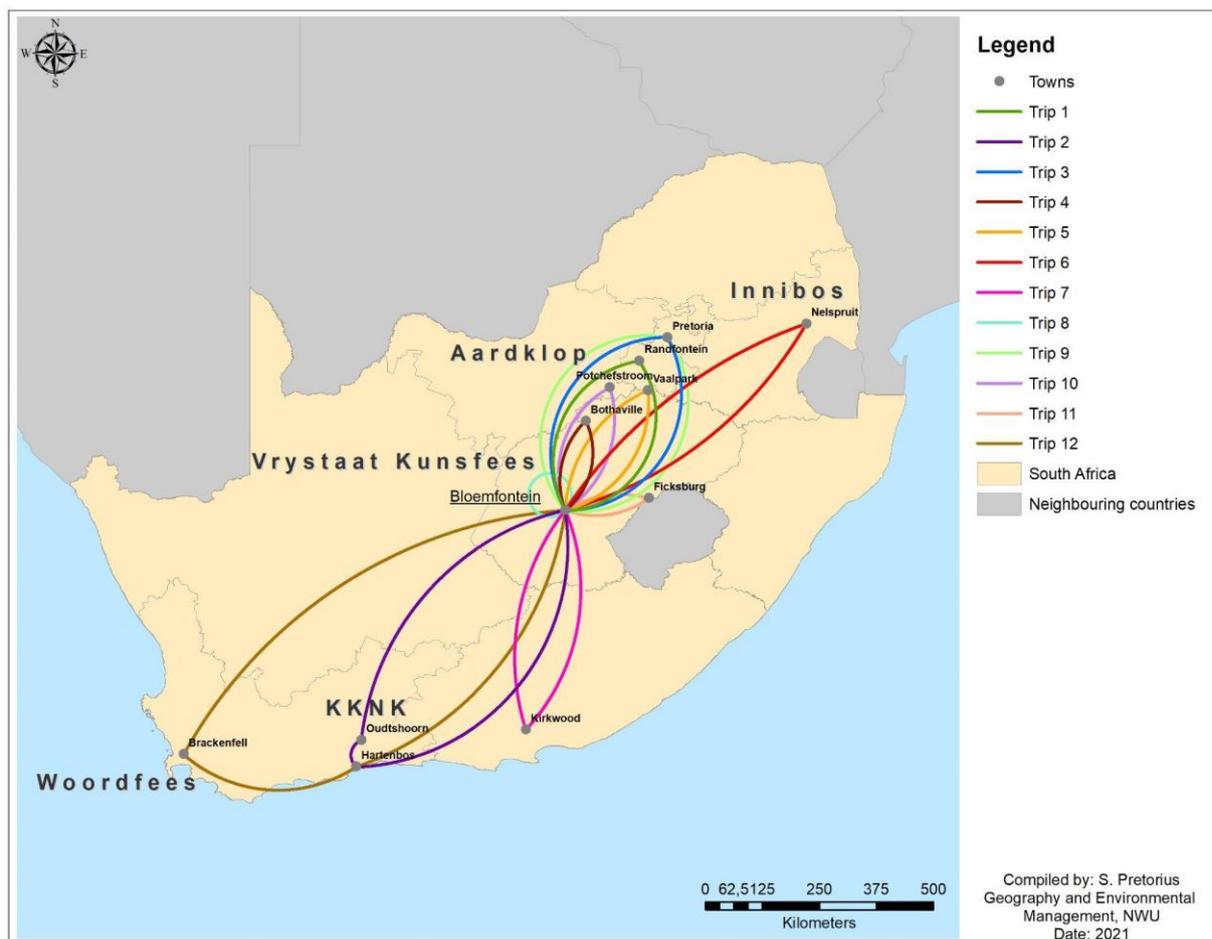


Figure 5: Annual traveling routes of a 'touch base' participant (Source: Author's survey)

The travel behaviour displayed by a *travelling participant* who resides in Somerset-West in the Western Cape is depicted in Figure 6. He plans his trading routes around larger events, filled in with smaller events to make his trips efficient and cost effective. As his children are adults,

he can be away from home for longer periods of time and is sometimes joined by his wife, as was the case at KKNK where she had her own dedicated stall.

The product type also influences which festivals to attend and which routes to take. A participant who trades in durable outdoor wear which appeals to farmers, horse riding enthusiasts and adventurers, will include agricultural shows and outdoor focused events in their itinerary, for example. Someone trading in high end products (such as art or down duvets) is more likely to include interior and decor events in their travel itinerary. Product type, therefore, influences the spatiality of festivals.

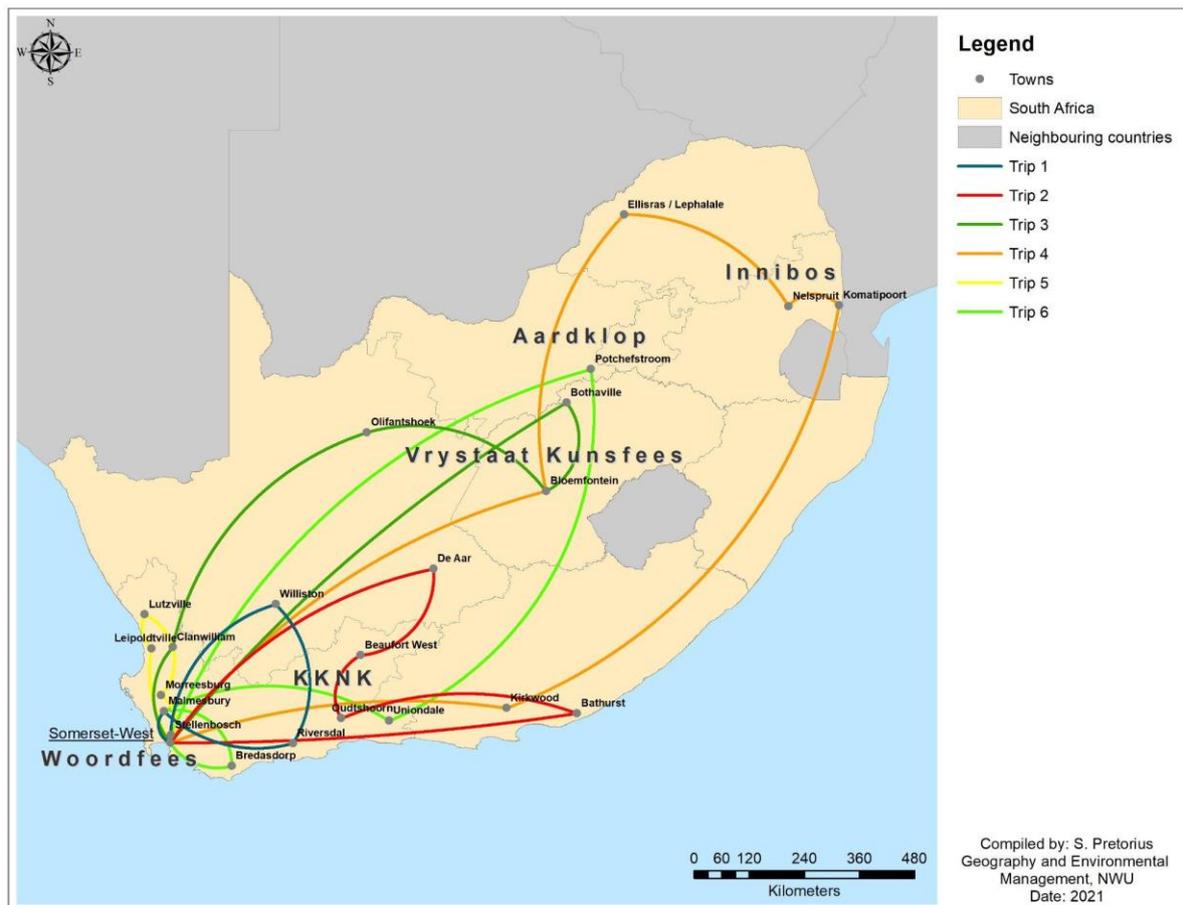


Figure 6: Annual routes of a travelling participant (Source: Author’s survey)

### ***Cultural expression***

Importantly, while the different arts festivals all had Afrikaans as their main focus, each had a slightly different approach. Participants were asked to express their views on what the festival meant to them personally in terms of their culture. Some expressed a deep appreciation for the role of Afrikaans arts festivals in preserving and enhancing Afrikaans culture. Others were neutral on the subject. A minority expressed disdain. Some examples will now be given to illustrate the various perceptions.

Several stall owners enjoyed the Afrikaans theme of the festivals. They felt that they were able to freely express themselves in Afrikaans. They found comfort in the idea that most festival goers were like-minded and of the same culture. When expressing their appreciation for the Afrikaans culture, many respondents found it necessary to add a disclaimer that they were not racist, an indicator of how Afrikaans culture is viewed by others as intricately woven into the fabric of South Africa’s apartheid past.

Although the Vrystaat arts festival has an Afrikaans language focus, one Nigerian participant felt the festival gave him an opportunity to express his Nigerian culture. In particular, he used the festival as an opportunity to capitalise on his indigenous cultural knowledge by creating, exhibiting and selling his art. Importantly, allowing him to do so, even though he is not Afrikaans, indicates that the arts festival is also a vehicle for cultural reconciliation and enrichment.

A Black African artist at Aardklop had the following to say about cultural meaning:

*“In that perspective, in terms of culture, I can say that I can learn something because when I walk around, I see different views of people. It is so interesting for example, some people are even more creative than I am and I can learn from that and that can motivate me to even become bigger in my business.”*

He was able to do this despite not being Afrikaans speaking or associated with Afrikaans culture. Members of festival management would agree that exposure to new cultures and different points of view is one of the greatest advantages of arts festivals. However, the same participant also said, in answer to the following question:

*Interviewer: And speaking of culture, is this an expression of your culture or is this commercial art, something you make because it sells, or does it have meaning?*

*Participant: This has no meaning at all, it is just art and craft without any meaning. I just make it to earn a living.*

The discrepancy between the art he creates and sells and the level at which he experiences the festival is telling of both commercialisation of the arts and society’s level of appreciation for higher forms of art.

His view corresponds with another white, English speaking artist at the same festival:

*I can't just live off inspiration. I've got to live off what other people are going to buy. Before I can live off inspiration, I first have to pay my bills and then I can be inspired and do whatever I want. Sometimes I do what I want to do and sometimes I do what I have to do.*

This participant articulates the trade-off that many artists must make. They must choose between creating something popular that will sell (low or popular art and crafts) and something personal, creative and ground-breaking (higher art) that may not sell. This approach was often encountered at the festivals. This artist did however include “high art” in the stall content, items that could be ten times the value of the average painting in the stall, but greatly outnumbered by the popular art.

This same artist took the following approach towards the Afrikaans culture encountered at these festivals:

*I've been learning through this how to speak Afrikaans and (have) become bilingual, so culturally I've learnt a lot about the Afrikaans culture and how to be part of it. I always try to engage them as fellow Afrikaans speakers.*

Assimilating with the culture to make the prospective buyer more at ease and more inclined to buying is good business. One artist produces artworks which he collectively refers to as ‘nostalgia’. This includes landscapes of South Africa, paintings of smaller places (towns) and reproductions of photographs on request. These items / themes appeal to the average festival attendees as they are reminders of their past, such as spending time on their grandparents’ farm. These kinds of paintings have a spatial connotation and thereby contribute to the geographies in the same ways as traditional foods alluded to earlier.

Other Afrikaans speaking stall owners said that while they appreciated the sense of community and shared culture, business was the main motivating factor for trading at the festivals. One stall owner at Innibos, however, expressed a deep dislike of the Afrikaans culture. He was attending purely to sell his product.

### ***Participants' attendance at performing arts***

Most stall owners seldom attend theatre or music productions at the festival either due to cost or lack of time. Some festivals, like Innibos for example, expect stall owners to trade into the night. With time needed to prepare for the next day, they cannot support other cultural offerings. Moreover, since most of the stall owners usually attend the same arts events as the artists, they are already familiar with the artist's work or repertoire and therefore do not see any need to attend their shows.

### **Discussion**

There appears to be a predominance of artists and stallholders from the age group 40 to 70 (31 of 37 respondents) which corresponds with findings by other researchers (Labuschagne, 2014; Saayman et al., 2011). They proved to be remarkably loyal with most participating in the festival for ten years or more, confirming findings by Kruger (2010). A healthy renewal of interest was observed with younger and fledgling traders also joining the ranks. With the arts content being highly curated, a renewal and ensuing vibrance has been encouraged by allowing new traders and new ideas to bloom at festivals.

Regarding the geographies of participants, the traders and artists showed very diverse mobilities with unique itineraries based on their own personal circumstances and career needs. Some only trade at their local festival, others travel home after each event, yet others spend most of their time on the road - travelling from one event to another, often taking several trading tours annually, with trips anchored by larger events. Some choose to use the time in between events as leisure time. These travelling participants bind the Afrikaans arts festivals together in content, in their unique experience-based community and in their shared travelling habits and resulting geographies on a national scale. In the pre-COVID-19 era, the travel behaviour of participants developed into a unique travelling economy designed around Afrikaans arts festivals and created a communal identity connecting the arts festivals, which was brought to an abrupt standstill in 2020 by the COVID-19 pandemic during which all large public gatherings were banned. The effect of travel restrictions imposed by the government, forcing festivals to an online format at best and cancellation at worst, has had a drastic adverse impact on arts festivals. For example, stakeholders who chose to focus only on a few festivals are particularly vulnerable now that arts festivals are no longer taking place in their traditional live open-air format. Moreover, the closure of the large arts festivals due to the pandemic is likely to have a permanent ripple effect on smaller festivals, and by extension most likely also on other aspects of the tourism and hospitality industry including restaurants, accommodation, and transportation. The lifestyle which these people had built around the festival landscape, was effectively obliterated by the pandemic. Informal follow-up conversations with several participants gave insight into how they had needed to adapt very quickly, including moving to, or increasing online sales.

Apart from the unsurprising preference of the majority of participants for Afrikaans cultural expression, the appreciation from members of very different cultures such as Nigerian was unexpected. It suggests that appreciation of cultural expression *per se* is not limited to similar cultures, and bodes well for growth of this dimension of arts festivals. The poor attendance by stall holders of artistic productions demonstrates the extent to which the festivals provide a platform for their business and not their leisure. This disconnect between two vital groups of stakeholders contributes to the complex geographies and nature of these arts festivals. Future research is needed to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on Afrikaans arts festivals and to further disentangle the interplay of unique local character with the uniformity of the offering by the nomadic stall holder and artists. Furthermore, exploration and documentation

of the institutional memory of festival managers, as well as the cultural expressions observed at the festivals is necessary.

## Conclusion

This paper set out to explore the geographies of artists and stall holders at the five largest Afrikaans arts festivals in South Africa, and in doing so has provided rich insights into the greater Afrikaans arts festival phenomenon. Many participants were veteran stall owners, actors and technical staff involved since the conception and establishment of the first KKNK in Oudtshoorn in 1995; and therefore, are invaluable sources of information and institutional memory. It is evident that the artists, and the travelling stall holders, function in intricate patterns of movement between their home-towns and the various festival destinations, all the while providing essentially the same offering at each festival. Hence, although every arts festival wants to exhibit a unique character, loyal travelling traders are also welcomed at their festivals because of their contribution to the success of the festival. However, the presence of the travelling artists and traders may act to erode local sense of place and local character. The geographies of artists and stall holders are therefore a complex web of uniqueness and similarity, distributed over space and time.

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