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festac '77



NIGERIA
LAGOS • KADUNA
15th JANUARY – 12th FEBRUARY 1977

Mask of Benin

THE SECOND WORLD BLACK AND AFRICAN FESTIVAL OF ARTS AND CULTURE: LAGOS, NIGERIA

by Ife Enohoro

THE FESTIVAL EMBLEM

THE ROYAL IVORY MASK OF BENIN

This 16th Century Ivory Mask from Benin has emerged through the years as one of the finest examples of known African and black art.

It was worn as a pectoral by Benin Kings on royal ancestral ceremonial occasions; was last worn by King Ovaramwen who was dethroned at the fall of the Benin Empire in 1897. The same year, it fell into the hands of the Consul General of the Niger Coast Protectorate, Sir Ralph Moor, and now rests in the British Museum. The tiara formation at the crest of the Mask is made of 10 stylised heads and symbolises the King's divine supremacy and suzerainty. The two incisions on the forehead which were originally filled with iron strips are royal tattoo marks round the neck; the artist has carved the coral bead collar which is a common feature of the King's paraphernalia.

"FESTAC '77"

I shared a feeling with my people.
I looked into their faces
and saw mine.

Our smiles and laughter needed
not a common
Language to be understood.
To be appreciated.
Welcome brother they said to me.
Welcome Home!

Lidge Daily
Soledad Prison

INTRODUCTION

The "Scramble for Africa" ravaged Africa's human and natural resources and gave impetus to the establishment of institutions which have continually deprived Africans throughout the world both socio-psychologically and materially. For the past four hundred years the essence of life for black people has been the search for the effective theories and methods to implement decolonization, encompassing both the internal and external components.

As a necessary ramification, many pragmatic prescriptions have been contravened, conjoined and/or repudiated during theoretical discussions, yet there is no indication that these doctrinal disputes are near an end. In fact, if these disputes desisted today, it would cause an insurmountable set-back in the growing sophistication of the liberation struggle for

Africa, for the self-acknowledged African descendant in the New World, and the yet-to-be ideologically defined "Third World Alliance." There has been, however, one carefully elaborated concept, and that is Négritude.* The essence of Négritude is the black "consciousness," that which perceives the real and causes understanding. This essence gives Négritude its cultural foundation, which President Senghor promotes as the basis for African Unity.

The phenomenon of Négritude in its contemporary form—that as a conscious reality—can be traced back to the period of 1804 to the present, although foundations were laid long before then. For example, the documentation of suicides and rebellions aboard the slave ships. For, anything threatening the essence of a person must be resisted and destroyed.

Historically, the term was used in the first issues of *L'Étudiant Noir*, a student review edited in Paris during the 1930s by Aimé Césaire of Martinique and Leopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal. Drawing inspiration from DuBois' Pan Africanism and Alain Locke's concept of the New Negro, these two figures, in company with Damas and others, launched a movement which found a brilliant fruition in *Presence Africaine*, both a journal and a publishing house, which from its Paris home has organized two cultural congresses of persons of African descent and inspired the first World Festival of Negro Arts, held in Dakar in April, 1966.¹

Evolving to the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture held in Nigeria, January/February 1977:

At the end of that First Festival in 1966, Nigeria was invited to host the Second Festival in 1970. Nigeria accepted the invitation, but because of the internal situation in the country, it was not possible to hold the Festival that year.

* "Négritude has been defined as the whole complex of civilized values—cultural, economic, social and political—which characterizes the black peoples, or more precisely, the Negro African world." Walter A. C. Skurnik, *The Foreign Policy of Senegal* (Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 201.

At the end of the Nigerian civil war, the matter was resuscitated, and the Festival was rescheduled to be held at the end of 1975. But consequent on changes in the Federal Military Government of Nigeria (the host government) in July 1975, the Festival was postponed 'in view of the obvious difficulties in providing all necessary facilities.'²

On the question of unity, contemporary Négritudinists generally feel that one of the major prerequisites for unification of black people towards a federation is knowledge of 'who we are.' It is necessary to know each other on a personalized basis in order to develop as a people. Part of this knowledge is an awareness of the past, of our heritage, our history; and thus an understanding and appreciation for our cultural achievements, for example, religion, philosophy and art.

In this article we will describe the external forces of the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, and the internal impact, "the spirit of FESTAC," held in Nigeria, 1977, hopefully demonstrating the importance of FESTAC as an international forum for both the development of the black communities in and outside the continent and the survival of black culture within our respective visions as artists.

FESTIVAL FLAG

The flag of the festival is a tricolor flag of three equal perpendicular rectangles.

The two outside rectangles are in black and the central rectangle is gold. Over the gold is superimposed centrally the festival emblem.

The black color represents the black people of the world.

The gold color represents two ideas. It represents the wealth of the culture of the areas and peoples embraced by the festival. It also stands for the non-black peoples associated with black people in the festival.

AIMS OF THE FESTIVAL

The principal aims of the festival are:

(i) to ensure the revival, resurgence, propagation and promotion of black and African culture and black and African cultural values and civilization;

(ii) to present black and African culture in its highest and widest conception;

(iii) to bring to light the diverse contributions of black and African peoples to the universal currents of thought and arts;

(iv) to promote black and African artists, performers and writers and facilitate their world acceptance and their access to world outlets;

(v) to promote better international and interracial understanding;

(vi) to facilitate a periodic return to origin in Africa by black artists, writers and performers uprooted to other continents.

FESTAC '77

Although the emotion, the life, the sensual feeling of the rhythm of joy, of fear, of love, is subdued when we use literary forms of communication, it often becomes necessary in order to share an experience with a broader audience.

Communication on the external, physical level, and on the internal mind-soul level was the central theme of the festival. The essence of this dialogue being the establishment of a spiritual bond of the heart and soul of the participants and visitors. On Saturday, January 29, Ethiopia presented "Our Struggle"—an epic story of their revolution. In a three-act dance drama, it carried a message that the spirit and love put into the dance would unify all oppressed brothers and sisters under a united front in the struggle against all forms of human oppression. A brief resumé on the play explained that the revolutionary dance drama was prepared to transcend all languages and other

barriers and also to reach all oppressed black and African peoples everywhere.

It also stated that it was meant to remove the yoke of feudalism, imperialism, neo-colonialism, all forms of human oppression and also, to serve as a moral support for those engaged in the struggle to liberate themselves. This spirit—this motivation—is exemplary of the messages brought to the festival from the fifty-seven representative contingencies.

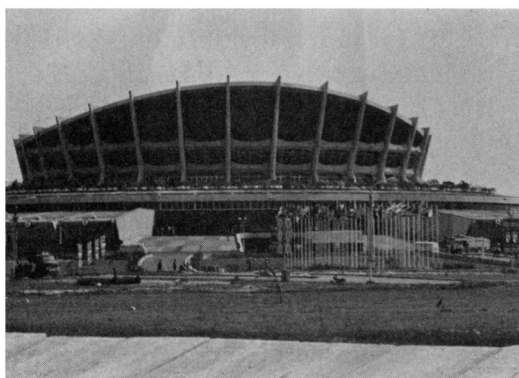
His Excellency Lt.-General Osegun Obasanjo, Head of State of Nigeria and Festival Patron, in his numerous addresses, charged the participants and visitors at the festival with the responsibility of continuing and spreading the "Spirit of FESTAC."

Most expressedly said in his opening address at the Durbar:

In a sense the whole of FESTAC is one grand Durbar in which African peoples with their kith and kin are in one *simple* event trying to recapture their common identity and pride which is the beginning of a new independent collective future. We must derive pride and inspiration from each and every contribution no matter from what African country and which part of the black world. I do hope Your Excellencies will carry away lasting impressions of this Durbar and all other contributions made to this Festival and keep the spirit and the purpose of the Festival alive for the good of our peoples.

The following interviews are presented in an effort to transmit a glimpse of the nature of the "Spirit of FESTAC," how the participants were most inspired and how they envisage building these energies into tangible practicalities.

Our first interview was with Ms. Hasani La Reine La Mar. She is a vivacious and stimulating singer and instrumentalist. As a member of the National Black Theatre of New York, added to her artistic skills are duties of administrator, teacher, and manager of public relations. Hasani is a dedicated young lady who has been part-



National Theatre. Photo by Ayodele Okanlawon



Opening Ceremony. Photo by Ayodele Okanlawon

icipating in the Theatre group for nine years.

"The goal of the National Black Theatre is to inspire people especially black people, although we transcend color, to love themselves. Our performances are designed to rehabilitate our ability to love ourselves. We project gut-real images so that our audiences leave the theatre in a state of joy, and can at a later date reflect this love in each other. We aim to incite a common purpose of love and respect to remove blocks and barriers in the mind. Essentially we work to free the mind. So, in our performance feedback is necessary, not just the presentation of the show.

"We started feeling the spirit before our performance. We walked through FESTAC Village giving flyers about, face to face invitations to the other 'participants; the outcome being a build up in interest by the audience. It seemed as though every contingent was represented that night and a clear hook-up in energy and spiritual transmission could be felt. We became one family.

"FESTAC is a tremendous opportunity for mixture of artists from all countries. We gained a sense of the struggle from different perspectives. To continue and to spread the "Spirit of FESTAC," it would be advantageous if black television and radio stations in The Americas would feature material of FESTAC in their community programs. This would aid in getting across cultural interaction and project culture of other countries."

The second interview was with Mr. Lenardo Dedman of the Troy Robinson Youth Orchestra, in Los Angeles, CA. Lenardo plays alto saxophone; he has been playing for twenty years and started with the tenor saxophone.

"I came to FESTAC as a replacement for one of the original musicians, two weeks before leaving. Prior to that I didn't

know about FESTAC. Even on the way over, I didn't understand fully the magnitude of FESTAC. This is the last day and I am only beginning to understand—awakening to what is happening. This is really a super strong political event. Artistic! It is one of the most fantastic things I have ever seen. Seeing and interacting with people from all over the world to see how music has grown from this source (Africa). This is an artist's dream. When I return to America I will incorporate into my lifestyle a new feeling of closeness that I have with black men, and use the music and ideas I've learned to create more music. For my five children I am bringing many pictures, I will tell them of their black ancestors and of the African instruments I have seen and I will tell them how nice people are.

"To me, finding a common language is one of the most important decisions we as a people can make, which would promote unification."

The third interview was with Nontsizi Cayou. Nontsizi is creator and director of "Wajumbe," people who bring a message, established in San Francisco in 1969. She has been an instructor of Dance, Department of Physical Education, San Francisco State University since 1967. Another dedicated young sister known throughout the Bay Area for her tireless efforts in promoting African culture, she describes "Wajumbe" as a cultural ensemble that works from the African concept that Art is life. Therefore whatever ideas and themes they have come out of reality and not as intellectual or artistic exercises.

"The spirit is blackness, this time and space. It is a harmonious energy that is invigorating, uplifting, gives knowledge that collectively you can do anything. The energy keeps you moving, you realize the little need you have of sleep.

"You become spiritually awakened, your consciousness is expanded. I was in-

spired by being a representative of blacks from the United States. Being there in the African World Village, where you could go across the street to Tanzania, next door to Trinidad, three blocks to Anzania, look out your window to the Ivory Coast. Just to be there to be part of the celebration and part of the history of black people throughout the world and mankind.

"For the success of future festivals it is necessary to intensify the interest of the regions here in America. We must get out the word of the significance of FESTAC, that it is continuous and that it must grow and develop. Generally, FESTAC should be an independent black venture. The festival should be seen as a collective black festival, rather than a hosted festival; this way all the countries contribute skills and finances to help solve basic problems.

"It would be extremely beneficial if future United States participants were oriented to the realities of the motherland and the importance of their roles as cultural representatives of a group and of all blacks.

"A special day could be added to the festival format so that people could get together in areas of their interest. Dance ensembles of all countries come together to find ways of organization and communication for the next festival.

"We can translate the spirit here by institution building. By teaching—instilling African values; then the atmosphere will recreate the spirit of FESTAC. Touch the latent Africanism which will lead to another development, another commitment—to work."

Our fourth interview was with Mr. Arthur Monroe. Arthur is a visual artist acclaimed internationally. He has studied and worked in South America, the Orient, Africa and throughout the United States. He is curator at the Sanderson Museum, in the African American Historical and Cultural Society of San Francisco and is

Director of FESTAC, Far West Region, North American Zone.

For Arthur FESTAC is a way of life. He has been actively coordinating and directing FESTAC in the Western Region and on the National Board for five years.

"It all goes back to what Gowan said: devise a way to develop a federation—for equal participation. But how can you have a federation when people do not know each other? FESTAC is a step to bridge the gap between the diaspora. In an arena such as FESTAC, people had the first time to engage or test ideas in a comparative way. This enabled us to understand what is happening in our consensual systems. It will no longer be just an association of myths. People were able to see each other, to talk, to touch, to love, and exchange information. No longer can Western societies define art for those who went. Not what art is; but how it functions, for in the course of its functioning therein lie many things that sustain a culture. It can be seen in expressions, eating, walking, talking, modes of thinking, in the forms of utility and adornment. All of that interplay and cross cultural reference of blacks and Africans heightened the spiritual qualities of the festival, which gave us a feeling and sense of identity and security.

"Now we must look out for our up and coming young artists. Why are black art students not taught African technologies in their studio classes? What can we do to see that they are introduced and trained to African sensibilities? Inclusive of people, ideas, and places, FESTAC has shown us that an exchange is one of the most viable ways to bring the black community in close proximity to its heritage. Ideas worth consideration would be, first, to organize and facilitate an immediate exchange of Afro-American artists and African artists in their respective communities on both continents. This would

include participants in all the various disciplines, both artists and craftsmen, painting, sculpture, and printmaking, the performing arts, dance, drama and music, and all technical assistance.

"Secondly, to provide educational services that will include the presentation of necessary information that is accessible through these artists and that should be made available to the black community. Priorities being a concern with supplying an added dimension to the educational-cultural needs of the children in the community, and with encouraging, developing, and supporting the artistic potential of these children and providing a forum in which to display their work. At the other end of the spectrum, we should also work closely with the senior citizens to satisfy their cultural and artistic needs and develop an oral history program."

It is safe to infer that the above interviews in conjunction with the principal aims of the festival indicate that FESTAC is a viable mechanism for presentation and exchange.

This time is a critical phase in the black man's struggle for independence which necessitates our extending all efforts to establish a wholesome atmosphere for its growth. It is a matter of concern for the black community that the time lapse between the International Black Festival of Arts in Senegal in 1966 and the Second Black and African Festival of Arts in Nigeria in 1977 was so long, and too impersonal. Steps are being taken to see that this does not reoccur. Throughout the country FESTAC committees are presenting motivating projects and programs to the community. We not only seek community input in the form of suggestions but on a physical level of involvement in planning and implementing events leading to the next festival. The charge to spread and to continue the "Spirit of FESTAC" must be taken seriously.

Notes

1. Berrian A. H., Long, R. A., *Négritude: Essays and Studies* (Virginia: Hampton Institute Press), p. 1.

2. *FESTAC '77: Spotlight*, Publicity Division, International Secretariat, Nigeria, Academy Press Ltd., Lagos.



Closing Ceremony. Photo by Tumani Onabiyi



FESTAC Emblem, National Theatre. Photo by Ayodele Okanlawon



Nigerian Roadsign. Photo by Ayodele Okanlawon