

ANTONIO de FIGUEIREDO looks at the political backdrop of Festac '77 — the pan-African cultural festival now on in Lagos which has cost between £700M and £1,000M to stage

The power behind black culture

THE SIGNIFICANCE of Festac '77—the black and African cultural festival—for Nigeria and the black world is being questioned even before it draws to an end in Lagos on February 12.

The staggering cost alone put at between £700 millions and £1,000 millions is enough to start the controversy. At the higher estimate it represents nearly 15 per cent of Nigeria's annual export earnings. But even the lower estimate would exceed the total gross national product of many of the 45 black African, Arab and Caribbean countries which are represented here.

Indeed the question of cost has jeopardised its chances of ever being held again in its present form. Ethiopia, the country chosen to hold the next Festac in 1981, has not given a firm commitment. Festac '77, however, is too big an event in its cultural and political implications to be measured in financial terms alone.

Many black intellectuals describe its aims in highly emotional language. Put simply, Festac would perhaps be no more than another step towards African integration. But since there are as yet no conditions for a pan-African economic community, the trend is still in the stage of cultural exchanges. However, the pan-Africanist mood of Festac '77 towards such crucial issues as apartheid and Israel seems to herald important new trends in African politics.

The origins of Festac can be traced to the anti-colonialist ideals of the African Society for Culture which in 1956 and 1959 promoted the first and second congresses of black artists and

writers in Paris and Rome respectively.

The aim of bringing together black intellectuals and Pan-Africanist militants acquired a new momentum in the Sixties, the decade of African independence, when poet President Leopold Senghor of the Senegal sponsored the first World Festival of black arts in Dakar in 1966.

To this day the black and African festival reflects the rather intellectual and literary approach of its earlier promoters. As early as 1969, when the Organisation of African Unity promoted its first pan-African cultural festival in Algiers, various black and Arab interests had begun to widen the political aims of what was to become a four-yearly gathering of black and African people from all over the world.

'The pan-Africanist mood towards apartheid and Israel heralds new trends in African politics'

It is significant that Senegal, which wanted to confine the festival to Africans and objected to Arab participation, did not join Festac '77 until last August. The joint black and Arab participation might again strengthen the anti-Israel and anti-South African pan-African policies.

As it turned out, Festac '77 was a further search for identity in which many discoveries were made and many doubts raised. For the cultural purposes of Festac, Afro-Arab unity was based upon a purely geographical criterion and, as such, exclude Arab countries east of Suez. But the participation of delegations from black

communities in the United States, Brazil, the West Indies, Canada, the United Kingdom and the supposedly Afro-aborigines of Australia, seemed to emphasise the racial exclusiveness of this year's black festival which, alas, has no white or yellow counterparts.

Covering music, dance, cinema, drama, literature and popular dressing, Festac '77 was simultaneously like the Welsh annual international folklore gathering, the Cannes film festival, the world theatre season plus a literary congress and an international fashion show all rolled into one.

The popular arts include a regatta in Lagos and horse racing at Kaduna, the northern city which was also the venue for many other promotions. The central event was an intellectual gathering of some of the world's outstanding black academics who mingled with internationally renowned jazz musicians, singers, actors, painters and sculptors from Africa and the black diaspora.

It was in fact so big an enterprise that no single individual can claim to have seen more than a part of what went on. But while the most naive artists danced and academics discoursed on the vigour of primitive African arts and customs, there were many indications that Festac '77 might well be remembered as a turning point in modern African politics.

The periodical gathering of Africans and blacks has always proved to be an emotional occasion. In so far as Nigeria is concerned, it showed that this old nation-in-the-making which is already the headquarters of Ecowas — the economic community of West African

states—is now as dominant a power in the trend towards African integration as France or West Germany were in the European equivalent.

But in a wider African context, Festac and the role of Nigeria will certainly have far-reaching consequences in the immediate future. In their search for identity and unity Africans have long discovered that all their individual countries if not cities and regions inside each country are still turned more towards Europe and America than towards the mainland of Africa.

The foreign-built switchboard of past connections is still serviceable—most African countries enjoy better telecommunications with their former coloniser nations than between themselves.

Festac was thus a considerable step towards pan-Africanism and prompted the promotion of many publicly financed activities in individual developing countries in preparation for this cultural Olympiad of national prestige and racial achievement.

One could not help but sense, however, that this seemingly innocent and superficially reported festival provided the backdrop for important political decisions.

As old-style colonialism has ceased to act as a common denominator for African and black unity, the situation in white dominated South Africa and Rhodesia is now acting as the rallying point for a new unity crusade.

Some cynical observers say that like God, if apartheid did not exist it would have to be invented. In fact when one studies the obsessive concern with apartheid displayed both in Festac proceedings as well as by the media in black Africa, one realises the manifold internal and pan-African political uses made of the campaign against apartheid.

In daily news reports, more publicity is given to killings of Africans by racialists in Southern Africa than to pressing internal problems within each developing and militarily-ruled African country.

It is significant also that President Kaunda's increasingly militant stand against Rhodesia and South Africa prior to this week's crucial OAU meeting in Lusaka was preceded by personal talks with both the Nigerian and the Ghanaian Governments at Festac's inaugural ceremonies.

'Festac '77 might well be remembered as a turning point in modern African politics'

There can be no doubt that the resurgence of African unity in

turning point in modern African politics'

There can be no doubt that the upsurge of African unity in a continent still divided between tribes, separated by Arab and African lines, and with its own regional and international disputes, will put the campaign against apartheid in the forefront.

The Chinese who are anyway temporarily beset by internal problems were conspicuously absent from Lagos and the political agitating that animated most of the Festac proceedings. But the Russians were indirectly represented by the outstanding Cuban delegation and the militancy of the participants from Guinea-Conakry and the newly independent and Communist inclined states of Guinea-Bissau, Angola and Mozambique.

The Americans, who have sent their newly-appointed UN ambassador, Mr Andrew Young, to Lagos leading a fresh contingent of American participants to Festac, seem to be aware of the new dangers and threats emerging on the African political scene.

But they are hopelessly handicapped in a situation where some Afro-Americans have seen it necessary to publicly deny that all US delegates or visitors are CIA agents, while Cubans, Angolans and Mozambicans and all other delegations seem to receive a warm welcome.

Mr Young, a former aide of the late Martin Luther King Jr. is being quoted here as stating that he also sees a direct relationship between black power in America and black power in Africa, in much the same way as Jewish politics in the US has had an overwhelming effect on what Washington does in the Middle East.

'Before going to war, Africans always liked to warm up by beating drums and singing songs'

When asked if it is prudent for the US to become involved in southern Africa, Mr Young is reported to have replied: "The question is not whether we are going to be involved. We are. The question is how and with what groups."

Africa seems indeed "to have come of age" as the head of state Lieutenant-General Obasanjo claimed in his inaugural address and Nigeria certainly realises its growing economic power. Multinational American, British, French, West German, and Japanese firms might find it increasingly difficult to trade simultaneously with South Africa and with black Africa. In some cases the balance of interests is beginning to turn towards the more numerous and developing black block of nations.

South Africa might be sufficiently strong and obstinate to provide black Africans with the rallying point of unity they require for some time to come.

But at any rate the feelings displayed at Festac combined with the day to day reporting of events in most of black Africa seem to herald what is becoming tomorrow's crusade against the last bastion of white supremacy on the black continent.