

BLACK FESTIVAL

A Spectacular Nigerian Ordeal

By Jonathan C. Randal

LAGOS, Jan. 27 (WP).—Nearly halfway through the second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, Lagos citizens have taken refuge in gallows humor to survive what has become a further ordeal in their already harassed lives.

Pride of playing host to FESTAC—as the festival is called—has given way to a certain sullen resentment.

Slashing ticket prices in half—from a \$16 top to a new student rate of 18 cents—has done little to entice Nigerians to attend events at the giant parade ground, the national stadium and the brand new National Theater.

Television cameras sweep across empty seats at the theater, with a seating capacity of 5,000. But even the extensive TV coverage is reserved only for the rich able to afford sets.

Penny Wise

"We've spent hundreds of millions of dollars on FESTAC," a Nigerian journalist said, "but we're being penny wise and pound foolish, those empty seats should have been given away to schoolchildren."

The festival's splendid isolation is dictated by the ruling military regime's strict security measures, which, in turn, are motivated by real fears of terrorist attack.

Armed troops and police are stationed in and around the various festival sites, at the special village housing thousands of performers and on hundreds of FESTAC vehicles.

But the armed-camp mood only serves to underline earlier criticism voiced by many leading Nigerian artists, performers and intellectuals. They boycotted the planning of FESTAC to protest the military regime's inflexibility,

which they insisted would prevent ordinary citizens from participating in the events.

Press Comment

The government-controlled press had felt no compunction about criticizing FESTAC. Articles have reported price gouging at the bars in the new theater (the problem was solved by ending all service), the theft of FESTAC vehicles and the firing of 300 FESTAC drivers, described by police as hired in a "hush hush" manner and "not only rude, but of shady character."

The most telling criticism appeared in a cartoon in the Daily Times, the leading newspaper. It turned on the controversial use by special traffic troops of braided horsewhips on recalcitrant motorists.

The cartoon showed two men lost in the otherwise empty theater. One man asked the other "Hey man, what's keeping the others away? The gate fee or the whip?"

Other factors contributing to poor attendance are the normal cash problems after Christmas and the payment of quarterly school fees.

The 200-member U.S. delegation to FESTAC has been perhaps the biggest single disappointment. For a variety of reasons—poor planning, postponements of the festival itself—the U.S. superstars are not here. The unimpressive U.S. showing was obvious in everything from music to the colloquium on black civilization and education.

At one amateurish American ballet performance at the National Theater, the few paying guests walked out long before the evening was over.

An American black poet vented her bitterness by saying: "Every other country sent their very best performers except us. How do you think some of us feel having American black intellectuals represented by Ron Karenga?" He is a San Diego-based exponent of radical black nationalism.

But if the Africans had every right to be disappointed in the Americans, the Americans themselves have sopped up a lot of concentrated Africana. Living at FESTAC village with performers from a variety of African countries has tended to encourage a kind of "homecoming" sentimentality, especially among the young. It's perhaps to be expected in light of the success of Alex Haley's "Roots." (Story page 14.)

But black Americans who have been to Africa before take a

more jaundiced view. For them Thomas Wolfe summed it up in the thirties when he wrote, "You Can't Go Home Again."

An American recalled the recent travail of a black American radical who moved to Nigeria with wife and five children and decided to return to the land. After a year of subsistence farming and surviving on cassava, a West African staple, the wife's family in the United States sent return air tickets for her and the children, but not for the husband. He was reported still up country scratching out a bare living on the farm.

Various French-speaking African countries have thrown caution—and bras—to the winds in defying FESTAC's prudish ban on topless dancing. Even in these blasé days of skin magazines and full frontal nudity, the African public found itself wildly cheering the bare-breasted dancers. Young dancing girls from the Ivory Coast, for example, featured an African version of the old tassel dance, once the highlight of bygone American burlesque houses. The tassel dance involves rotating the breasts in opposite directions. The Ivory Coast dancers sported no tassels, but brought the house down.

If only because it was free, the great crowd-pleasing event of FESTAC has turned out to be the three-day canoe regatta on Lagos creek. Two hundred gaudily festooned canoes from eight of the country's 19 states swept by the reviewing stand in what might be called the world's biggest paddle-past.

Dancers and musicians on board the boats whooped it up and were answered by other dancers and musicians on shore. A contingent from Rivers State—where Nigeria's oil comes from—sporting carved sharks and crabs and fish on top of their head-dresses. At one point a colleague took pity on the dancers whose heads were entirely shrouded in brightly colored cloth and produced a wooden fan which he brandished to help cool them off.

The biggest applause was reserved for a rattan screen which mysteriously skittered in front of the crowd with speed and dexterity without visible means of locomotion.

It was just the kind of show to make even the most put-upon Nigerian forget the heat, humidity, the power breakdowns, resurgent traffic jams (despite a theoretically draconian edict limiting driving to every other day) and the beer shortage—a large bottle, supposed to cost 42 cents, goes for \$1.60 or better.