

Festac '77: navigating dis:connections in postcolonial pan-African festivals, legacy, and memory

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The year is 1977. Lagos, a bustling postcolonial city and the then-capital of Nigeria, was preparing to host one of the biggest cultural events in the history of the Black world: the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, FESTAC '77. The streets were colourfully decorated with festival flags and banners bearing the iconic mask of Ancient Benin's Queen Idia, adopted as the festival's logo (see figure 1).¹

The city and a few other locations – especially Kaduna and Kano – became massive construction sites, hosting dual-purpose development and modernisation projects in General Yakubu Gowon's post-civil-war infrastructural renaissance plan, the Reconciliation, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction (3Rs) Programme. This led to the construction of new motorways to ease Lagos's notorious traffic congestion, a racecourse in Kaduna, hotels and guest houses, and a festival village. However, a gleaming new National Theatre Complex, equipped with cutting-edge technologies in modern staging, emerged as the hub of the event.²

The scale of the festival and its venues revealed far greater ambitions that went beyond restoring the nation's reputation in the wake of the kwashiorkor crisis in Southeastern Nigeria during the civil war. The goal was to showcase Nigeria's international prestige and newfound oil wealth and to project a welcoming atmosphere



Fig. 01
The festival emblem depicting a mask
of Queen Idia (Image: International
Festival Committee, CBAAC)

1 International Festival Committee, *Festac '77 Report and Summary of Accounts*, (Lagos: Modern Publication Co. Ltd., n.d.).

2 International Festival Committee, *Festac '77 Report and Summary of Accounts*, 13.

to the over 17,000 Black and African descendants from about 55 countries attending the festival. Nigeria sought to present itself as the de facto leader of the Black world.³

FESTAC '77, FESMAN Dakar 1966, PANAF Algiers 1969 and the Zaire Music Festival Kinshasa 1974 were 'postcolonial pan-African festivals' – a series of cultural festivals organised and held across Africa after independence between 1966 and 1977, mostly planned and financed by states, to demonstrate Pan-African unity and envision a renascent Africa.⁴ Here I explore the ideational and political transformations that shaped the agenda of FESTAC '77, highlighting the dis:connections in its organisational process and the tensions that underpinned these processes.

Dis:connective pathways to pan-African renaissance through festivals

The origins of postcolonial pan-African festivals are often traced to the Congress of Black Writers and Artists held in Paris (1956) and Rome (1959). These congresses generated ideas for organising festivals to demonstrate the objectives of a renascent Africa, and they established an organisational model for the inaugural staging in Dakar. Although postcolonial pan-African festivals emerged as a cultural project promoted by a broad coalition of groups loosely connected by the objective of promoting pan-African unity through socio-political, intellectual and cultural contacts between the continent and its diaspora, their organisation and visions of development were often contradictory and disconnected.

The seeds of these disputes first became visible at the congresses. Though envisioned as a 'Cultural Bandung' for intellectual discourse on postcolonial pan-African culture and political development, the intense intellectual exchange at the congresses pitted the *Négritude* movement against most other Black/African intellectuals, notably Frantz Fanon, James Baldwin and Richard Wright.⁵ While the *Négritude* camp, led by Léopold Senghor, championed a Black/African heritage that sought not only to reclaim the elements of Black identity and culture erased by colonialism, but also to recognise Africa's cultural, social, economic and political contributions that could enrich a future 'civilisation of the universal', Fanon and other artist-scholars criticised Senghor's worldview as politically insufficient,

3 Andrew Apter, *The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

4 Gideon Morison, 'From Renaissance to festivalisation: Festival networks and institutional legacies of selected pan-African cultural productions, 1977-2019' (PhD LMU, 2022).

5 Guirlex Masse, 'A Diasporic Encounter: The Politics of Race and Culture at the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists' (PhD Emory University, 2016), 13-14.

essentialising and elitist.⁶ For these 'radical' artist-scholars, African heritage and culture had the potential to improve the economic and social experiences of the masses, rather than merely celebrating spiritual connections that served the social elites. Thus, the Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, held in April 1966 to demonstrate *Négritude* as a path for Africa's postcolonial development, provoked strong reactions in the African Renaissance movement. Beyond ideological disagreements over the theoretical limits of *Négritude* in postcolonial development, some considered the organisation of FESMAN to be exclusionary, which gave rise to the Pan-African Cultural Festival (PANAF) in Algiers as a counter-festival.⁷

PANAF was one of the most revolutionary and representative Pan-African events of the 20th century.⁸ The organisers of the festival attracted participants from all member countries of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), Black diaspora movements worldwide, national liberation movements in Africa, as well as representatives from the Middle East and Asia.⁹ In contrast to FESMAN, PANAF focused on demonstrating the inextricable link between culture and the ideological struggle for the liberation of the continent from the forces of colonialism, neocolonialism and imperialism.¹⁰ At PANAF, *Négritude* was denounced as 'neocolonial pacifism' and instead a *Pan-African Cultural Manifesto* was published as a guiding principle for Africa's radical cultural practices and revolutionary postcolonial future.¹¹

The next major postcolonial pan-African festival was scheduled to be held in Lagos in 1970 as a continuation of the Dakar event, but due to the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967–70) and organisational shortcomings, the event did not take place until 1977. In the meantime, Zaire '74 in Kinshasa emerged as a stopgap event between Lagos '75 and later FESTAC '77. Since Zaire '74 was mainly focused on music and linked to Mobutu's power and interpretation of the African cultural renaissance – Mobutuism – it has been largely ignored in the literature on postcolonial pan-African festivals.¹²

The Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (Festac) Lagos 1977 was the largest and grandest postcolonial

6 Samuel Anderson, "'Negritude is Dead": Performing the African Revolution at the First Pan-African Cultural Festival (Algiers, 1969)', in *The First World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar 1966: Contexts and Legacies*, ed. David Murphy (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).

7 Anthony Ratcliff, 'When *Négritude* Was in Vogue: Critical Reflections of the First World Festival of Negro Arts and Culture in 1966', *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 6, no. 7 (2014).

8 Anderson, "'Negritude is Dead"'.

9 Anderson, "'Negritude is Dead"'.

10 Ratcliff, 'When *Négritude* Was in Vogue', 87.

11 Anderson, "'Negritude is Dead"', 134.

12 For an in-depth exploration of Zaire '74 as a postcolonial pan-African festival, see Dominique Malaquais, 'Rumble in the Jungle: boxe, festival et politique', *Africultures* 2, no. 73 (2008).

Pan-African festival of the era. Following ideological rivalry within the Pan-African renaissance movement, Festac '77 was organised as a compromise event to reconcile extreme ideological positions and paths towards Black/African renaissance. Its organisers drew inspiration from both the cultural heritage of the continent's past civilisations and the contemporary radical spirit to propose a developmental pathway towards a technology-driven Black/African cultural modernity. According to Nigeria's then-military-head-of-state, Olusegun Obasanjo, this pathway led through the adoption of modern technology, industrialisation and technological advancement.¹³

However, Senegal's campaign for the exclusion of the North African Zone (especially Algeria) from parts of the festival not only led to a diplomatic dispute between Senegal, Nigeria and Guinea on one side and the North African countries on the other, but also to organisational crises in the International Festival Committee (IFC). This crisis led to Senegal's withdrawal from the festival and the quiet resignation of Senghor as one of the festival's patrons, as well as the dismissal of Alioune Diop as secretary of the IFC.¹⁴ Although Senegal was readmitted to the festival a year later in a 'spirit of solidarity and unity' after mediation from a panel of prominent artists led by Wole Soyinka, the negative media coverage the crisis triggered, along with other organisational crises such as the 'squandermania' affair, 'dos Nascimento' affair and the 'Fela' affair, dampened interest in the events and played a central role in tarnishing the legacy and memory of the event at the national level.¹⁵

Archiving Festac '77 and its contradictory memory

Following the example of FESMAN in 1966, Festac '77 was hosted with a focus on preserving its memories through archiving.¹⁶ Given that colonial archives were instrumental in propagating negative narratives and perceptions of the continent, it is not surprising that organisers of postcolonial pan-African festivals sought to preserve both the spirit and memories of these festivities by archiving and building institutions. Thus, Festac '77 led to the establishment of various cultural institutions that served as the physical and institutional legacies of the event in Nigeria.

13 Dayo Duyide, 'Obasanjo Opens FESTAC '77: Africans have come of age', in *Festac '77 – A Daily Sketch Souvenir* (Lagos: Sketch Publishing Company, 1977).

14 International Festival Committee, *Festac '77 Report and Summary of Accounts*, 9.

15 Morison, 'From Renaissance to festivalisation', 170-76.

16 David Murphy, 'The Performance of Pan-Africanism: Staging the African Renaissance at the First World Festival of Negro Art', in *The First World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar 1966: Contexts and Legacies*, ed. David Murphy (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016).



Of these, the Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilisation (CBAAC) stands out for its archiving mandate. CBAAC was founded as a pan-African institution based in Nigeria to function as a research centre to preserve the collective memory of the festival and promote African arts and civilisation in a globalised, yet fragmented cultural space (see figure 2).

The archive holds all the materials used at the festival in trust for the 59 Black and African countries and communities that participated. This includes key materials, documents and minutes of the International Festival Committee (IFC) as well as artistic collections and artefacts. It also seeks, acquires and holds rare cultural objects of Black/African heritage through donation or repatriation from public and private institutions worldwide. Envisioned as a multidimensional agency with a strategic Pan-African mandate to preserve, promote and propagate Black/African cultural and creative heritage, the centre's collection currently comprises approximately 1300 audio-visual materials from Festac '77, 13,579 books and publications, and over 1200 artworks and artefacts, distributed across four archival departments: museum, archives, audio-visual collection and the library (see figure 3).

Considering the 'collective and collaborative' nature of its collections, the Pan-African vision of its mandate and the contested legacy of its commemorative event, CBAAC has attempted to navigate the disconnections of Festac '77 by projecting a more positive and inclusive narrative of the event through programmes, events and initiatives. However, this narrative of the festival offers an overtly national perspective, placing disproportionate emphasis on Nigeria as the host nation at the expense of a pan-African vision, despite the broad range of contributions that made it a unique

Fig. 02
The CBAAC Office in Broad Street,
Lagos (Photo: Gideon Morison)



pan-African experience.¹⁷ The implication is that, just as ‘host-nation omnipotence’ became an institutional practice, generating tensions and discontinuities in postcolonial pan-African festivals, it also accounts for dis:connective archiving and a certain operational dynamic in CBAAC. Central to this dis:connective dynamic is the fact that the archive operates in the administrative and operational structures of the Nigerian government in terms of funding and personnel, and it is almost completely disconnected from the operational agendas of Pan-African institutions like the African Union, apart from occasional contacts for event promotion and commemorative festivities.

Apart from this, the memory of the festival in the country is contested. This contestation is shaped by a combination of negative press about the corruption and waste that characterised the event’s organisation, the derelict physical condition of its legacy projects – Festac Town and the National Theatre – due to ineffective maintenance, negative religious reinterpretation of the festival’s spiritual dimensions in Nigeria’s burgeoning Pentecostal Christian circles, and, until recently, the decline of historical studies in educational curricula. Taken together, these factors weave a unique web of dis:connective narratives around the legacy and memory of Festac ’77, both nationally and transnationally.

Epilogue

I’ve examined dis:connections in the organisational and archival processes of postcolonial pan-African festivals, focussing

Fig. 03
The CBAAC archives
(Photo: Gideon Morison)

17 Étienne Lock, ‘Identité africaine et Catholicisme: problématique de la rencontre de deux notions à travers l’itinéraire d’Alioune Diop (1956-1995)’ (Docteur Université Charles-de-Gaulle, 2014).

particularly on the legacy and memory of Festac '77 in Lagos, Nigeria. Festac '77 embodied Nigeria's global ambitions and visions of postcolonial development, driven largely by its newfound oil wealth in the 1970s. However, its organisational and archival processes were characterised by major operational deficiencies, conceptual discontinuities, political tensions and logistical limitations that made the event the last hallmark festival of the era until the 1990s.

While the archiving of this event has sought to navigate these disconnections through collective and collaborative pan-African initiatives, its embeddedness in the administrative and operational structures of the Nigerian government has produced a dis:connective dynamic that seems to perpetuate a 'host-nation omnipotence' that generated tension in the organisation of postcolonial pan-African festivals. Given the global nature of Black/African heritage and cultures, and the transnational aims of their promotion and remembrance, Festac '77 and the CBAAC collection allow a critical reappraisal of the collaborative and disruptive processes that enabled the conception and organisation of postcolonial pan-African festivals, highlighting the inherent complexity and duality of their organisational and archival framework.

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