

4-1-1977

FESTAC 77: More Than Song and Dance

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Recommended Citation

Said, Adulkadir N. (1977) "FESTAC 77: More Than Song and Dance," *New Directions*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 3.

Available at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol4/iss3/3>

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ABDULKADIR N. SA

FESTAC '77

The round structure on the opposite page is the ultra-modern *National Theater* in Lagos where most of the cultural exchange took place. It was constructed at a cost of approximately U. S. \$40 million. The theater's design is similar to the Palace of Culture and Sports in Varna, Bulgaria. Its main features include a modern 5000-seat auditorium, a 1600-seat conference hall, two 800-seat cinema halls, two large exhibition halls, four snack bars, a closed-circuit TV system, media booths, projection facilities, VIP rooms, underground garage and eighty administrative offices.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROY LEWIS

More Than Song and Dance

By Abdulkadir N. Said

It can now be said that the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture was both successful and historic. From the moment the festival was declared open on January 15th to its closing on February 12th, Black people from Africa and from other parts of the world transformed the capital city of the host country into a giant international arena replete with the diversity and the richness that make up the cultural heritage of Africa.

A new chapter was being written in Lagos at the very moment that millions of African descendants in the United States were being captivated by the power and the message of *Roots*, as seen through the TV cameras. Indeed, Alex Haley's remarkable work was one way of depicting

interest of the African heritage/identity on the part of many Black Americans—particularly those who through conditions beyond their control may never get to experience firsthand the land of their ancestors. This is to say, *Roots* represented a re-awakening of the inherent kinship to Africa that lay dormant in the minds and the hearts of the displaced Black man and woman of America.

As Black America was in the midst of celebrating Haley's formidable contribution back-to-back with Black History Month, on the other side of the Atlantic ocean, nearly a thousand Black Americans were partaking in the observance of another equally significant experience—FESTAC. Some of them were moved to tears upon their arrival at the ancestral roots of Kunta Kinte, Haley's hero. What more can be rewarding than to find oneself involved with history in the making? The Lagos festival of arts and culture was more than a television show; more

than a passing event; more than a family get-together; more than song and dance.

If history is taken as the great equalizer, and historical events as the lifeline of a people or a society, there can be no question that the festival in Nigeria forms one part of that equation.

Indeed, the festival was the foremost catalyst that pulled together Black people from Africa and elsewhere—people who, in many instances are divergent in politics, religion and language. But within that diversity a common purpose was evident. This was the magic of FESTAC. The participants and observers, for example included: Aborigines from Australia, who proclaimed their kinship to Africa while calling for support in their struggle for justice and equality back home. Similarly, there were members of the liberation movements with the message that Africa cannot celebrate pride in its independence so long as parts of the Continent are under foreign rule. There were people of



African descent from New Zealand, from Europe, from the Caribbean, from North, Central and South America—all contributing to, and learning from, one of the largest gatherings of this decade. In all, more than 15,000 people came—in addition to the thousands of Nigerians who got involved.

Under the same roof—in most instances on the same stage—artists from places like Cuba, Ethiopia, Guinea, Guyana, Ivory Coast, Jamaica, Kenya, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Trinidad, Tunisia, Uganda and the United States shared their music, their dance, their songs and their poetry with the thousands who came to appreciate the seemingly endless cultural exchange. The dance presentations ranged from the traditional to the modern. There was music—from the talking drums to the space-age sound of Sun Ra. Mariam Makeba was there, moving everybody to a high level of ecstasy through her songs.

was not scheduled to perform, was a special treat.

There was drama—from comedy to plays that gave graphic depictions of the struggle of Black people against neo-colonialism and cultural exploitation.

There were films—from short documentaries to a powerful Cuban feature on the institution of slavery. There was literature—from poetry to fables and legends.

Also, there were exhibitions depicting the early and contemporary history of Africa, as well as the contribution of Black people to science and technology.

In a sense, a formidable interaction of the culture and art of Africans in the Continent and people of African descent in diaspora took place during the month-long festival.

And Nigeria, the host country, made the difference in making the festival a success. That is, so long as one does not confuse *success* with *perfection*.

In view of the political situation in Nigeria in recent years, particularly the

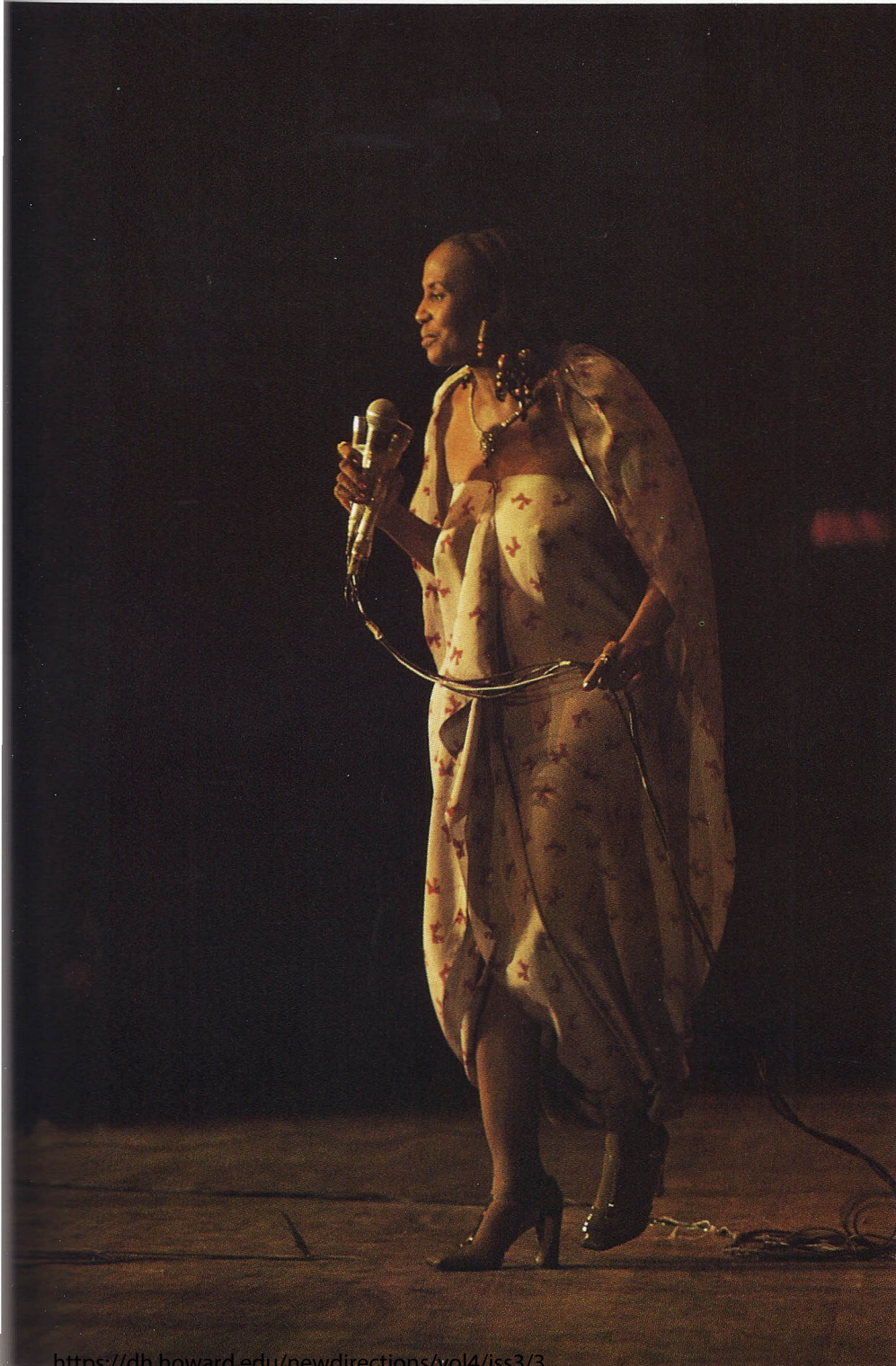
civil war and the coups d'etat, the fact that the festival did take place at all gives reason for celebration. It is likely that some of the early skeptics were hoping for a failure. Hence the charge—real or imagined—that the foes of Black people are out to sabotage the event.

There may have been others who asked the rhetorical question: "Why Lagos? But despite the logistical problems for which Lagos has become famous, oil-rich Nigeria may well have been the logical choice for such a monumental undertaking. (Some Nigerians were heard grumbling about the high cost of the festival, oblivious to the fact that their nation had a commitment to fulfill).

Oh yes, there were also those who threatened to boycott the festival for dialectical reasons—specifically on the principle that the festival maintain its Black identity by excluding certain countries who, although geographically part of the Continent, did not fit the stereotypical concept of the African mold. Could



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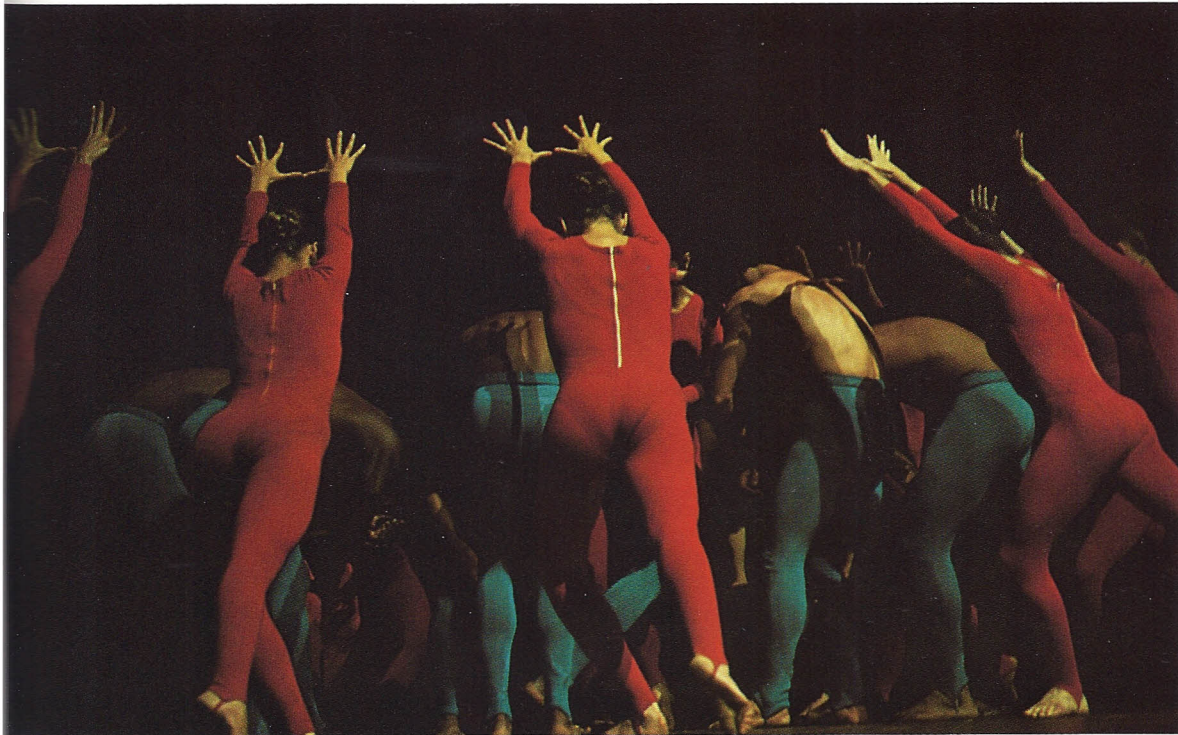


it have been the "Blacker than thou" syndrome? But reason and logic prevailed and the controversy, which at times threatened to overshadow the orderly preparation of the festival, was resolved.

On January 15th, when the Nigerian Head of State formally opened the festival in a stadium packed with thousands of spectators, all of Africa and the African communities of the world shared in that historic experience.

In the historical context, the Lagos festival—like its predecessor in Dakar—and the others in-between—traces its roots to the cultural/political movements that gave birth to the series of Pan African Congresses. It is important to note, also, that the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s is part of this progressive tradition.

In 1974, when the Sixth Pan African Congress was convened in Tanzania, that gathering assured the continuity of a tradition dating back to 1900. A series of five gatherings were held outside Africa between the two World Wars. The Sixth



ent by being the first to be convened on an African soil, and in a country under total control of Africans.

Historically, Pan Africanism came into being because of the dedication of a select group, who through collective effort, sought to bring freedom and justice to Africa—and promote solidarity between Blacks abroad and Africans in the Continent.

The unity sought by individuals like W.E.B. Dubois, Kwame Nkrumah, George Padmore and Wallace Johnson was present in Dar-es-Salaam. Certainly, in Lagos, too. However, this is not to say that the Black world has found utopia.

It was fitting, therefore, for the planners of the Lagos festival to include in the agenda a two-week dialogue which enabled scholars to make an inquiry into Black civilization and history; review the form and content of the education of the African child; emphasize the importance of oral tradition in the context of culture; look into the question of an integrated

media in educating and informing the masses from a Black perspective.

The main theme of the Colloquium was: Black Civilization and Education, with the following 10 sub-themes: The Arts, Philosophy, Literature, African Languages, Historical Awareness, Pedagogy, Religion, Science and Technology, African Governments, and Mass Media.

It would be correct to assume that some of the recommendations adopted in Lagos will have been carried out four years from now when Ethiopia hosts the third festival of arts and culture. In 1966, during the first festival in Dakar, both Nigeria and Ethiopia were chosen to host the second and the third festivals, respectively.

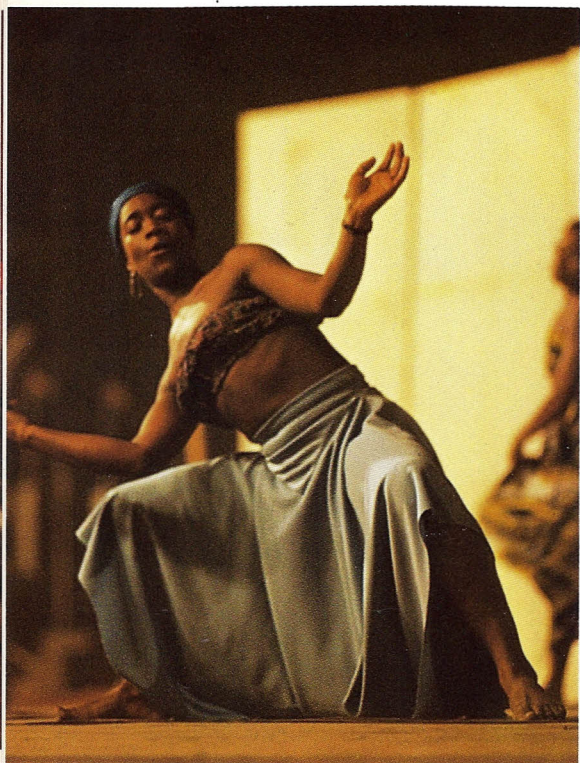
The Colloquium brought together prominent scholars, thinkers, and writers—to examine the overwhelming issues facing the Black world today. More than any other aspect of the festival, it gave insights into the constant struggle in which Africans and other Black people of Africa are engaged in their efforts

to curb the negativism left behind by the colonial experience in Africa, and slavery in the United States and the Caribbean. It also brought forth the differences in political direction among the delegates. A few delegates had original ideas that could be useful, while others continued to attempt to find solutions to Africa's problems through non-progressive means.

It was difficult, at times, to reconcile the differences among those with progressive ideas and those who were merely pushing official positions of governments. Some of the discourse merely tantalized the audience while lacking in substance and clouding the issues.

The opposing dialogue between Senegal and Guinea on whether the concept of *Negritude* was relevant or useless, for instance, may have been enlightening, or dull, or interesting—depending on one's sentiments.

After the deliberations, the disagreements, the agreements and the personality clashes, the Colloquium closed. But in the end, the diversity that threatened



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ABDULKADIR N. SAID



the proceedings also provided for the attainment of a common ground. The draft report which was read at the closing of the Colloquium failed to bring home the key items that were covered in earlier committee reports. In other words, the report lacked the substance it needed to make it acceptable to the majority of the delegates. Angry delegates cried "whitewash."

Don't despair. A workable resolution was found after a delegate from Somalia, Hussein Adan, and another from the United States, Ron Karenga, spoke on behalf of their colleagues and asked that the deficiency in the final report be corrected. The Colloquium chairman agreed and promised that all of the committee reports would be made part of the final document. Another possible crisis was averted.

In summary, the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture opened with a fanfare; closed with a re-

message of the festival anthem reverberated throughout the open-air arena. The anthem was excerpted from the poem, *For My People*, by Margaret Walker, a Black American, with music by Akin Euba, a Nigerian.

*Let a race of men now rise
And take control. □*

The author is the editor of New Directions.

*Let a new earth rise
Let another world be born
Let a bloody peace
Be written in the sky*

*Let a second generation
Full of courage issue forth
Let a people loving freedom
Come to growth*

*Let a beauty full of healing
And strength of final clenching
Be the pulsing in our spirits
And our blood*

*Let the martial songs be written
Let the dirges disappear*