ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Reminiscences and Legacies of Festac 77 in Cultural Development in Nigeria

UFUOMA ISIORO ONOBRAKPEYA

Department of Fine Art, School of Art, Design and Printing Yaba College of Technology, Yaba Lagos onobrak@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper examines the Reminiscences and Legacies of Festac 77 and how FESTAC was made to improve and develop the African culture and Nigeria in particular. It discusses the important legacies of FESTAC such as the National Theatre in Iganmu Lagos where performances were held and the FESTAC village built for the FESTAC 77 to accommodate the 17,000 participants. This paper further discusses the aims of the festival and how FESTAC has brought about development of the arts to Nigeria and Africa and how generations would be influenced by FESTAC. This paper highlights the exhibitions that took place in the National Theatre, the National Museum and around Tafawa Balewa Square and the artists that exhibited their works. FESTAC 77 was a source of development, generating ideas to transform Africa and enabling the colonialists to present Nigeria in a better way.

Keywords: Reminiscences, Legacies, FESTAC 77, Development, Culture

Introduction

Culture according to the dictionary definition is the arts, customs and habits that characterize a particular society or nation. Arts and culture have been with us right from when civilization commenced. In modern times, art and culture permeate the entire spectrum of the society. Our art and crafts attract a large number of people, local and foreign, to our markets, boutiques, art galleries and museums, carnivals and traditional festivals thus bringing foreign exchange into our economy. Art supports tourism which is estimated to employ eight percent of the labour to serve as alternative sources of income to oil.

From the Nigerian Independence in 1960 which was about 60 years ago the contemporary art of Nigeria continued to grow striving to be more and more relevant to the people who now use it as an instrument of change. The artworks produced by Nigerian artists today have now been accepted by the west as both contemporary and modern acknowledging the fact that as members of the global village we can now draw from and upgrade our inherited values and good ideas that are foreign. The first agent in this continued development is the federal and state governments which set up art schools, institutions and programmes. The international trade fair which showcased art was one of the programmes, and showcased works of pioneer artists like Aina Onabolu, Ben Enwonwu and Akinola Lasekan were shown side by side with those of younger artists at that time like Professor Bruce Onobrakpeya, Professor Yusuf Grillo who were students from Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology now Ahmadu Bello University Zaria who would later be credited with a philosophy that revolutionized our post-independence art. In 1977 Nigeria staged FESTAC which gave the contemporary art an International focus.

Reminiscences and Legacies of FESTAC 77

Background

FESTAC 77 took place between January and February 1977. Delegates from sixty countries and communities belonging to the Black and African world came together to express the quintessential aspects of their culture through music, literature, arts and politics. The festival extended the boundaries and definitions of Blackness and Africanness in an attempt to exhibit notions of Negritude and Pan Africanism explorers in previous festivals. Arthur Monroe (1977) mentioned that a 500-member United States

contingent was organized by the USA committee to take part in every aspect of the festival. People came from every conceivable geographical corner of the earth. It was the largest group of African American artists that came to Africa as a single group. Babsehinde Augustine Ademuleya and Micheal Olusegun Fajugbe (2015) emphasized in their journal that FESTAC 77 has as one of its cardinal goals the quest to provide a forum for the discussion of the enormous richness and diversity of African contributions to world culture and also to provide opportunity for recounting the achievements of their ancestors. It was attended by thousands of artists, musicians and scholars from Africa and the diaspora. According to them the festival also provided opportunity for continental and diaspora interaction. The core of the festival developed multi linguistic, multi colonial framework of traditional dancers, secular plays, exhibitions and discussions.

The festival attracted about 500,000 spectators who attended the rounds of the activities and special events. Lagos was a Mecca for black artists, Black Americans, Cubans, Jamaicans or Brazilians. The Nigerian government put itself through a rigorous schedule to complete the construction of a forty million dollars National Theatre and considerable additional money was spent on a fifteen thousand unit low cost housing development that lodged participants and afterwards would attempt to take some strain from the housing situation in Lagos and other Islands. Kaduna also hosted the Durber which was a colourful event with the Emirs. In Lagos, handicrafts such as bark paintings from aboriginal Australia, Makonde carvings, Cloth from Sierra Leone were exhibited at Tafawa Balewa. The Schedules at the National Stadium had the ongoing Yoruba folk singers, Caribbean dancers, children from Lesotho, Steel band, etc. Apart from the performing arts, of special and significant role was the exhibition by the National Museum of Antiquities which traced 2000 years of Nigeria Sculpture through its incredible diversity and originality. Impressive terra-cotta heads of Nok culture and Benin plaques of mounted Chiefs with attendants and elaborate art were exhibited at the museum. Joseph Alufa did more than 70 pieces of the carving which the federal government used as souvenirs for the visiting Heads of States and other dignitaries who attended the event.

Onobrakpeya (1985) buttressed the fact that Nigeria encouraged by her art festival successes organized the 2nd All Black and African Festival otherwise known as FESTAC 77 that brought people from all around the world assembling in the cities of Lagos and Kaduna to dramatize and exhibit cultural values. Onobrakpeya further mentioned that through Music, dance, sculptures, paintings, drama and story telling the participants celebrated the convergence of black people after the great diaspora. After the festival the participants, particularly Americans, returned with greater knowledge of Africa, noting that Africa is not the domain of Tarzan but a continent vibrating with energy and yearnings to have prominence amongst developed nations.

FESTAC 77 aimed to accommodate and appeal to both local and international audiences. In the context of Nigeria, the event fostered national culture, creating an appreciation of the artistic production of the country's various ethnic groups and promoting multi ethnic society with the inclusion of a broad range of cultural initiatives. The government's agenda at the international level was for the festival to champion the image of the country abroad. It was to prove to the world the meaning of modernity of Nigerian terms which was by means of a black internationalist and Pan Africanist approach. In 2012 Across the Board Interdisciplinary Practice was a conference and colloquium organized and supported by Tate Modern London in collaboration with Chimurenga, and Terra Kulture Lagos. The conference in Lagos converged discussants, academics and prominent personalities who participated in FESTAC 77 such as Professor Bruce Onobrakpeya a world renowned master printmaker, painter and sculptor who was amongst other artists who exhibited their artworks during

FESTAC 77, Professor Gabriel Babawale who was at that time the Director of CBAAC Centre for Black and Art and Civilization that has the archives of FESTAC 77 materials , Jimi Solanke a musician, playwright and broadcaster who was a main character actor in the play 'Langbodo', Nigeria's entry at FESTAC 77, and he was also the Assistant Choreographer in the dance section at FESTAC 77, and also a folk singer Odia Ofeimun a poet and journalist who all recounted their experiences to the audience present.

The Nigerian government positioned itself far from the conceptualization of modernity provided by Senghor's Negritude or Kwame Nkrumah's African Personality. At FESTAC 77 Nigeria celebrated the emergence of a distinct black and African modernity from the collective of traditional culture. In pure terms FESTAC 77 assisted to enhance an existing and ongoing connection of all kinds of black and African artists from around the world. Preparations for the FESTAC commenced in Lagos on October 3 1972 when the International Festival Committee met for the first time and decided that the festival would be held in November 1974. The name of the Festival was changed from World Black Festival of Arts and Culture to Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture to accommodate the realities of African Unity. To generate publicity for the festival the International committee advised the zones to encourage preliminary festivals. Some mini festivals took place such as Carifesta hosted by Guyana, the Commonwealth Festival in London, Ghana's national exhibition of arts and craft and Nigeria's NAFEST. The festival committee also chose as the Festival emblem a replica by Erhabor Emokpae of the 16th century Benin Ivory Mask. The important event before FESTAC was in Paris in 1956. The meeting led to another conference of African writers and artists. The FESTAC 77 was organized to recount achievements of the forefathers. It was also organized to promote international understanding at the global level. FESTAC draws attention to the black race. The Centre for Black and African Art (CEBAAC) was established in 1978 towards the promotion and development of Nigerian and African culture. Toyin Falola and Ann Genova (2009) mentioned that Nigeria hosted two FESTAC festivals. The second and most popular was held in Lagos in January and February 1977. The Federal Government at that time contributed thirty million naira to the festivities. The goals of FESTAC 77 included the promotion of African cultural values, the contributions of black and African people to the fields of science technology and culture and promoting interracial dialogue and understanding. The events according to Toyin Falola and Ann Genova (2009) included twelve exhibitions depicting the origin of human race, cultural development in Africa and African migration patterns.

Chimurenga Library (2019) notes that FESTAC had delegates from sixty countries in attendance. FESTAC 77 was also a microcosm for the geopolitics of the era. FESTAC 77 provided an opportunity for a myriad of personal and artists' encounters that allow for an understanding of diaspora. FESTAC 77 points to both Africa's role in defining its Diaspora and inversely the Diaspora's role in the invention of Africa. According to Chimurenga, today the National Theatre established before FESTAC 77 as the exemplary center not only for festival activities but also a new Nigeria stands as a failed political and cultural project.

Nigerian National Exhibition Contemporary Visual Arts

A Nigerian National exhibition that included the contemporary visual arts was one of the activities that took place during the FESTAC 77 at the Lagos State Cultural Centre, Eleke Crescent, Victoria-Island Lagos. According to Onobrakpeya (2020), in an interview conducted with him at his premises and studio, a Visual Arts subcommittee was set up for the Contemporary Visual Arts exhibition with Professor Yusuf Adebayo Grillo as the Chairman. The committee included Professors Ben Enwonwu, Uche Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya,

Kolade Oshinowo and Saidu Na-Allah. As part of the preparations for the Nigerian Pavilion of the Art exhibition the committee had to travel to Ipele a small town near Owo in Ondo State to inspect the artworks of the great artist Akinola Lasekan who was a pioneer Nigerian artist who made cartoons for the West African Pilot in the fifties and who lectured in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts at Nsukka and Ife until 1972. When the committee reached Lasekan's residence at Ipele the committee was told that Akinola Lasekan's artworks have been shared amongst his wives and children and his artworks under his bed had been eaten by termites making it impossible for them to collect any of his artworks so the committee had to return to Lagos. According to Professor Onobrakpeya another interesting and spectacular thing that happened while preparing for the Contemporary visual arts exhibition was the presentation from Ahmadu Bello University Zaria which was a very big Nok Terracotta pottery head that was brought from Zaria in a trailer. The University mandated some lecturers to bring the big pottery safely to Lagos from Zaria and when the artworks eventually arrived in Lagos there was excitement and jubilation by the lecturers whose job was on the line if anything happened to that big Terracotta poetry head. Onobrakpeya during the interview said the committee during the preparation for the exhibition also went to the residence of Aina Onabolu another pioneer Portrait, Painter and Art teacher at his house at Ebutte Metta in Lagos and discovered that the artist's artwork have been boxed and kept under the steps and the only artworks left was some artworks by himself and his students that adorned the steps in his house.

The artists that exhibited their artworks during the Nigerian National Exhibition, Contemporary Visual Arts included Akinola Lasekan with Portrait of a Lady, Atilogwu dancers, Self-portrait all oil on canvas taken from the family collection, Charles Shainumi with Hunting Expedition and Hunter both in oil, Simon Okeke with Devotion (oil on canvas), Family(Water colour), Portrait of a girl (water colour), Eke Okaybulu with Mother and Child (Drawing) and Abang (Water Colour), Bruce Onobrakpeya with Aro Ezomo (Print), Obaro Ishoshi (Print), Eruvbu Vona (Print), Paul Igboanugo with Ikenga exhibition (poster gouache), V.C. Amafunah with Uli Language (Lino print and Mr. Big stuff (lithograph), Uche Okeke with Come back with empty Uli bowl (Pen and ink on paper), Kolade Oshinowo with Music maker and Durber both oil on board, Bojerenu with Sato Dancers (Oil on board), J. Elaiho with Ecstacy (oil on Board), Omo-Erese with Benin Chief (Oil on board). Inyang Ema , Ben Enwonwu, R. Fatuyi, Agbo Folarin, Jimoh Akolo, H. Yesika, John Kamen, Yusuf Grillo, Jimoh Buraimoh, Isreal Ala, J.K. Osakwe, E. Utuk, Ayo Ajayi, G. Odutokun, Abayomi Barber, O.I. Oshiga, L.T. Bentu, Twin 77, Mrs. Ego Okeke, Jubilee Owei, B. Aina, Erhabor Emokpae, Mrs. E. Ugbodaga-Ngu, F. Idubor, F. Osagwe, and Mike Osunde. There was also ceramics section during the exhibition. During the exhibition there was a section for Art students such as Institute of Management and Technology Enugu, Yaba College of Technology, and Ahmadu Bello University Zaria. There was also a textile section.

Facilities

A housing estate known as FESTAC Village was constructed as accommodation for 17,000 participants. However, the long-term objective of the village under the Federal housing programme was to make easy some of the housing challenges in Lagos. The housing project was proposed for construction within two years with more than 40 contractors on different sites of the project. During the festival the housing estate was the venue for performances rehearsals and interaction by participants as various troupes rehearsed their routines in the day and night. For hosting the performances and lectures a state-of-the-art multipurpose theatre was built to serve as a lasting center for African Arts and Culture. The theatre design was based on the Palace of Culture and Sports in Varna Bulgaria and it was the Bulgarian

firm that built it. The new complex had two exhibition halls, a 5000-capacity performance and event hall, a conference hall with 1,600 seats and two cinema halls. The theatre hosted dance, music, art exhibitions, cinema, drama and colloquium.

Aims of the Festival

The aims of the festival were

- To ensure the revival, resurgence, propagation and promotion of black and African culture and black and African cultural values and civilization.
- To present black and African culture in its highest conception.
- To bring to the light the diverse contributions of black and African people to the universal currents of thought and arts.
- To promote black and African artists, performers and writers and facilitate their world acceptance and their access to the world art and cultural events.
- To promote better international and interracial understanding.
- To facilitate a return to origin in Africa by black artists, writers and performers up rooted to other continents.

Visual and Performing Arts

Performing and visual art shows such as films, drama, music and dance were mostly staged during the afternoons and evenings in the National Theatre. Some drama and music shows were also staged at Tafawa Balewa Square. In total about 50 plays, 150 music and dance shows, 80 films and 40 art exhibitions, and 200 poetry and dance sessions were staged. On the eve of the inaugural ceremonies Kandia Kouyate a master Mande griot had vocal and coral performances to the heads of state and government. The setting was reminiscent of medieval Africa's Imperial Royalty. Other musicians who performed were Sibasa, Mariam Makeba, Osibisa BembeJazz. A music meeting was held on 29 January 1977 under the leadership of composer Akin Euba.

Several art exhibitions took place at the National Theatre, at the National Museum and at Tafawa Balewa Square. At the square each country represented at the festival was given a booth to exhibit their paintings, musical Instruments, books and art objects. Some other notable exhibitions took place such as Africa and the Origin of Man which was held at the National Theatre and Ekpo Eyo's 2000 years of Nigerian Art, which included Nok terracottas, Benin Art, Igbo Ukwu, Ife and Tsoede bronzes and art objects. A contemporary Nigerian exhibit featuring works from Professors' Bruce Onobrakpeya, Ben Enwonwu, Yusuf Grillo, and Uche Okeke was also amongst the event. FESTAC helped to create values for the Arts. FESTAC also helped to place the fine artists on a higher pedestal and helped to place the artists as cultural ambassadors to other countries.

Legacies of FESTAC

FESTAC brought in the different artists to embellish the building. The National Theatre provides venues for Conferences, Seminars and exhibitions. It also provides office spaces for government parastatals. Other legacies are as follows:

- FESTAC 77 helped to create values for the art such as the Fine Arts and Theatre.
- FESTAC 77 helped set up informal art residences such as the Harmattan Workshop in Agbarha-Otor organized by Professor Bruce Onobrakpeya where artists converge every year to interact and create art that sustains the creativity for posterity.
- FESTAC 77 helped to place the artists as cultural ambassadors to other countries.
- FESTAC 77 helped to project Nigeria to the world, enabling a better understanding of our cultures.
- The FESTAC village was built during the FESTAC 77 to house visitors from all around the world.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Given the many important legacies derived from FESTAC 77, it is recommended that the Federal

Government should organize a big cultural festival similar to FESTAC 77 which would generate foreign exchange for Nigeria and would bring tourists from all around the world to Nigeria thereby placing Nigeria in the map of the world.

The Federal Government should also renovate the National Theatre which is an important legacy from FESTAC 77 and make it functional. The National Theatre houses the National Gallery of Modern Art which has great collections of our pioneer artists like Professors Ben Enwonwu and Bruce Onobrakpeya amongst others. The FG should therefore renovate the gallery to enable tourists and visitors from abroad to appreciate our art and cultural heritage.

The Federal Government should help promote young artists by funding their art and organizing festivals like FESTAC 77 to promote their artwork and provide exposure for them.

The Federal Government sponsor cultural exchange programmes for artists to travel abroad and exhibit, and visit museums and collaborate with other artists outside Nigeria thereby promoting artists as done before.

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