

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Festac . . . Memories of an Oil Boom

AKUA BANFUL

Lagos 1977 and the Poetry of Black Consciousness

Mariamama Bâ's poem "Festac . . . Memories of Lagos" is guided by a voice that travels from a recently renamed¹ airport; pauses to marvel at architectural wonders; and flits through symposia, art exhibits, and dance showcases. A studious catalog of the contents and logistics of the monthlong Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) held in Lagos in 1977, Bâ's poetry bears witness to a gathering whose agenda was the consolidation of a global black consciousness, underwritten by the petro-naira (the iteration of Nigeria's currency inextricable from oil booms and busts). These poetic "memories of Lagos" are drawn from an era of Nigeria's geopolitical ascendance in the wake of a 1973 oil embargo that transformed its fortunes almost overnight—the Lagos of 1977 and of Bâ's poem is a city awash with the flamboyance and contradictions of an oil boom. This essay reads Bâ's historically self-aware poem as a window into a festival that was a stage for competing agendas that coincided with the project of national development and the contingencies of an oil boom.

FESTAC was preceded by the First World Festival of Negro Arts (FESMAN) in Dakar in 1966, whose curatorial axis spun around negritude—an aesthetic and philosophical notion of blackness articulated by francophone intellectuals hailing from France's colonies whose project was to recuperate blackness from discourses of primitivism and spaces of negation. As instructive as it was controversial, negritude ushered in a flowering of black consciousness that bore political fruit in Africa and the Caribbean.² FESTAC was the second major iteration of a postcolonial fashioning of a global black consciousness that had begun in Dakar under the auspices of a set of

AKUA BANFUL is assistant professor of English at the University of California, Davis. Her research explores questions of climate, culture, and empire. She is at work on a book manuscript titled "Constructing the Tropics: Empire, Ideology and the Making of Climate."

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intellectual and curatorial practices shaped by the Senegalese state and, more specifically, by Léopold Sédar Senghor's political and aesthetic philosophies. Passing the cultural torch to Nigeria was a decision that rested on the nation's historical and geopolitical significance as a pivotal center of power and resistance during Atlantic World slavery through the fight for decolonization. It was also a shrewd prediction of Nigeria's ascent within a decolonized world order propelled by its populousness and oil reserves.

Nigeria's approach to the shaping of national and global notions of black culture offered a sharp deviation from FESMAN's: it sidelined negritude in favor of a different vision of global black solidarity and culture, a move enabled by the nation's newfound affluence following the 1973 embargo by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). More than a manifestation of oil money, or a hallmark of Nigerian flair, FESTAC's flamboyance, which Bâ's poem remarks upon six times, was a theatrical display of power whereby the Nigerian state conscripted the arts and intellectual production as window dressing for political realities such as authoritarianism, ethnic chauvinism, and uneven development.

In the material workings of the festival that "Memories of Lagos" documents—fleets of cars, architectural marvels, and logistical fanfare—flamboyance also denotes FESTAC as a site of multiple and at times competing agendas that operate on different scales: domestic, international, and transnational. Bâ's poem carries an awareness of these competing scales and fixes its sights on the transnational project of black consciousness. The closing lines of "Festac . . . Memories of Lagos" read, "Lagos? A second élan of Black people! Lagos? A hope for the quenching of sharp thirsts! / Lagos reinvigorates the seeds of the past to sow the future" (Bâ). In these closing lines, the persona stages a call-and-response where "Lagos?" is both the call and the question at the start of a historic and long-awaited festival, eleven years in the making, interrupted by a civil war, a coup d'état, and tribunals of inquiry, propelled to dazzling execution by oil wealth. In response, the voice offers,

emphatically, what Lagos in that moment is: a "second élan of Black people!" and a "hope for the quenching of sharp thirsts!" The Lagos of Bâ's poem is emphatically a site of linkages that tends to the intercontinental, translinguistic productions of global black consciousness.

FESTAC offered a Nigerian iteration of, and imprint on, a transnational agenda whose genealogy can be traced back to the first Pan-African congresses at the turn of the twentieth century in London, Paris, Brussels, and Lisbon, which envisioned a decolonized world and festivals on decolonized soil.³ As such, Lagos is a site that "reinvigorates the seeds" of an African and diasporic past whose syncretic and universal notion of blackness included nations as far-flung as Fiji.⁴ Even so, the poetic hopes of the poem's closing call-and-response are laden with trepidation. "Lagos?," the persona asks, as though this place, this event, can quench the thirsts of oppression, diaspora, and colonization. Faced with such a lofty task, can any one city, festival, or event truly meet that task?

Nineteen seventy-seven was a historical moment when the dreams of Pan-African congresses had borne fruit in the shape of fledgling Black nations inhabiting a contradictory season of self-determination. The decolonizing world was buoyed by solidarity and festivals and dashed by wars, coups, and the economic realities of neocolonialism. Perhaps it is this set of contradictions that makes FESTAC a site of hope for the poem's persona: a place of cultural and intellectual rest in a season of ontological unrest. Whereas the connections between FESTAC and earlier Pan-African gatherings have been explored at length, the fact that these festivals derive from a long tradition of colonial exhibitions whose political agendas have historically been entangled with imperial self-fashioning has received less attention. Originating in colonial exhibitions of the nineteenth century, they enlisted "the entire machinery of representation" to bolster imperial subjectivity (Mitchell 5). Turning to a colonial model as an instrument of postcolonial self-fashioning intended to consolidate a global black consciousness raises questions

of affordances. Put simply: Is the model up to the task, or can the master's tools dismantle the master's house? Agendas for liberation and global black consciousness embedded in conferences and festivals were often sites of contestation. Negritude, which served as the ideological linchpin for FESMAN in 1966, functioned in other quarters as a cover for the consolidation of political power by Senghor in Senegal. Nigeria's visions of uniting all black peoples, spurred on by FESTAC in 1977, yielded memos whose intentions were deeply paternalistic. The flamboyance of international spectacles operates as a political smoke screen. On the one hand, FESTAC was a festival that celebrated the arts and culture of the decolonized black world and sought to spread the gospel of decolonization and black self-determination. On the other, it was a festival staged by a heavy-handed military government that was hardly in the business of espousing liberatory politics at home. International spectacles, even those that proffer seemingly clear agendas, are complicated by the workings of geopolitics. In the case of FESTAC, the consolidation of a global black consciousness was entangled with a politics that was buoyed by the gains of oil wealth, and complicated by the tensions that Nigeria's wealth allowed its heavy-handed military government to create and evade at home and on the world stage.⁵

The Political Ecology of an Oil Boom

When Nigeria joined OPEC in 1971, it marked a decisive turn in the fortunes of a nation that had been mired in a three-year civil war driven in part by the question of who ought to control its extensive oil reserves. Following the end of the Biafra war in 1970 and efforts to reunite an ethnically and economically fractious nation whose infrastructure had been hollowed out by war, joining OPEC solidified Nigeria's identity as an oil-producing postcolonial state. The OPEC embargo of 1973, which sent crude oil prices soaring to record highs, making Nigeria "suddenly, startlingly affluent" almost overnight, was, at face value, a god-send to a nation sorely in need of funds to reconstruct its war-torn infrastructure and develop its

human capital (Ikonne 178). History offers the lesson, however, that oil booms are cautionary tales. Writing in the wake of FESTAC, and on the eve of a coup carried out by Ibrahim Babangida in August 1985, the Nigerian political scientist Cliff Edogun notes that "the basic assumption that large increases in oil revenues accruing to producer states increase their capacity to intervene on behalf of autonomous nationalist development [is largely] heuristic" (109).

A traveler arriving in a new land is greeted first by their point of entry and then by people. "Memories of Lagos" follows this sequence, disembarking at the "Lagos airport," where its traveler is wrapped in "fraternal and revitalizing handshakes" (Bà). The administrative and alienating atmosphere of airports, a reminder of national borders with customs, security, and immigration, is transformed into a space of effusive and restorative greetings. At once foreign and familiar, Lagos is a space of black and Pan-African homecoming whose brotherly greetings transform its airport from a place that marks a border into an open crossing for the encounter of peoples from the African continent and black diaspora.

The airport welcome is as warm as it is well coordinated and flamboyant. "[F]raternal handshakes" lead the way to "[c]ars with 'Festac' license plates in the green and white colors of the Nigerian flag," giving visiting delegations the fanfare accorded to diplomatic envoys, dignitaries, or celebrities. This VIP envoy ferries the persona into the city, a site of wonders where "[f]inished public works and construction sites testify to large financial investments!" Lagos dazzles, and much of what the persona lays their eyes on is new, "New: the buildings of the 'village,' new: the National Theatre in the shape of a kepi; / Perched high up, the new Tafawa Balewa Square!" More than preparation for the festival, these public works are a geopolitical statement: their construction by the Nigerian government an announcement that Nigeria has transitioned from a colonized and impoverished nation into an international force and thus taken its rightful seat among the nations of the world. As Uchenna Ikonne notes:

In advance of the festival new roads and expressways were constructed. The bustling urban plaza at Tafawa Balewa Square in Lagos was revamped. An ultramodern housing estate was built in the Lagos suburbs (at a cost of around \$80 million) to accommodate the thousands of guests expected to attend. Five-star hotels were erected on the government's dime in Lagos and Kaduna, as was a cutting-edge racecourse. The crown jewel of all the construction projects, though, was the National Arts Theatre.

(178–79)

The extent of the construction projects undertaken to make FESTAC possible highlights the developmental distance Nigeria had traveled. To construct roads, theaters, and squares where there were none frames FESTAC as both a staging of global black consciousness and a self-conscious production of Nigerian culture. In this instance, national culture is forged not in the context of a struggle for liberation, as Frantz Fanon's dictum suggests, but in its aftermath, when the dividends of oil construct public monuments and support acts of curation that decide what constitutes Nigeria in the wake of a struggle for independence, unification, and political and economic control. In the eyes of the state, culture is decided in the aftermath of struggle and the petro-naira appears to settle the score.⁶

The flamboyant welcome that greets Bâ's persona as they arrive in Lagos—fleets of cars, brand new roads, impressive architecture—suggests they have arrived in a well-heeled city. This initial perception of an affluent place was grounded in uneven appearances, and performances that, like the gains of the oil boom, did not spread evenly across Nigerian society. To return to Edogun's point, however, the correlation between large oil reserves and "autonomous national development" remained a fallacy of affirming the consequent. The "large financial investments" surrounding FESTAC were not indicative of the health of the Nigerian economy or the state of its human capital; they had instead become symbols of graft that had earned FESTAC the name "festival of awards and contracts." The "squandermania" that surrounded FESTAC was among the numerous corruption

scandals that prompted the ouster of the Nigerian president Yakubu Gowon by coup d'état in July 1975 (Apter 90–91). With the festival indefinitely postponed, a "tribunal of inquiry into FESTAC's finances revealed a frenzy of unofficial consulting fees, irregular charges, untendered bids, inflated contracts, extravagant purchases, and a considerable amount of sheer personal enrichment" (90). "Festac . . . Memories of Lagos" gestures toward what it does not name: the political and economic interruptions that have filled the eleven-year distance between FESMAN and FESTAC, of which Bâ, a Senegalese citizen attending the festival as a representative of the newspaper *L'Ouest Africain* (*The West African*), would have been keenly aware. The poem's speaker arrives in Lagos in 1977, not in 1974 or 1975 as initially intended, freighting the "Finally" that precedes the "fraternal and revitalizing handshakes" that greet participants with political contingencies—the coups, assassinations, and corruption scandals—that delayed this historic cultural meeting. These observations, then, are not entirely euphoric; they are also politically and historically self-aware. Poetry that is aware of the logistics and infrastructure that make its production possible is a vehicle sensitized to the mechanics of cultural production amid the pressures of postcolonial national development.

For festival participants, arriving in Lagos likely offered a sense of culmination and relief; evidence suggests that Nigerians felt a mixture of pride and consternation at having an arts festival elevated to the same level as Operation Feed the Nation. The current of national frustration was amplified by high levels of state control over citizen participation in the festival, which was greeted with curatorial chauvinism and at times outright repression and violence. In the months following FESTAC, a sense of disillusionment toward the festival, its public works, and the oil boom lingered in public discourse, with newspapers running headlines asking, "Is This an Oil Boom or an Oil Doom?"⁷

If readers detect a tone of wonder as Bâ's persona travels through the festival soaking in ideas and watching performances, it is because "despite the inevitable conflicts in a conversation of this

scale” (Bâ), FESTAC ’77 is the gathering of a lifetime. Everything present, including the roads, theaters, and squares, “[c]ontributes to the flowering of Black culture.” The choice of vegetal imagery in reference to the project of black culture gestures toward an understanding of its ongoing and cyclical nature; like a flowering plant, it buds, blooms, withers, and begins the cycle anew. Crucially, these seeds, representative of the project of a transnational black culture, germinate in the buildings and alongside roads constructed by the petro-naira. These infrastructural details also signal the workings of national development, temporarily entangling the two projects and their disparate timescales. If the organic seed of culture carries the promise of germination, then roads and theaters, prone to decline and decay, carry no hopes of autonomous regeneration. Festivals make the space of cultural negotiation possible: they clear terrain where the competing agendas of geopolitics and the human spirit can operate. Lagos of 1977 with its flamboyance, delays, and euphoria is one such terrain where these negotiations are rendered sharply visible by the excesses and contradictions of Nigeria’s oil boom. The result is a festival whose participants are keenly aware that they are living through history as they attend an extraordinary event. In “Festac . . . Memories of Lagos” readers encounter a poem that is a window into a historical moment that is witness to the flowering of culture entangled with petroleum and power.

NOTES

1. The Lagos International Airport was named for the former president and brigadier general Murtala Mohammed, who was assassinated in a failed coup attempt in 1976; it still bears this name.

2. Léopold Sédar Senghor—poet, philosopher, and Senegal’s first president—transformed negritude from a philosophical manifesto into state policy that served as the cornerstone of FESMAN and a founding tenet of the École de Dakar. See Harney.

3. The meetings in question are the Pan-African Conference of 1900 in London; the First Pan-African Congress, held in Paris in 1919; the Second Pan-African Congress, which met in

Brussels, London, and Paris in 1921; and the Third Pan-African Congress, which met in Lisbon and London in 1923.

4. On diasporic iterations of this political and intellectual conversation, see Gilroy; Edwards.

5. FESTAC’s emblem, the seventeenth-century Benin ivory mask of Queen Idia, was an aesthetic and political choice that effectively discarded the symbol of FESMAN ’66, a modernist take on a totem-like figure that embodied the aesthetic dictums of negritude. Sidelining this symbol, and the suggestion of its adoption by francophone nations, was another instance of geopolitical muscle-flexing on Nigeria’s part that was made possible by its economic dominance in the lead-up to the festival.

6. See Fanon’s remarks in chapter 4 of *The Wretched of the Earth*. Of note in this context is the Nigerian president Yakubu Gowon’s speech following the end of the war in January 1970. Seeking to reunite a fragmented nation, Gowon proclaimed a “victory for national unity” and a “glorious dawn of national reconciliation” (460).

7. See also the article “Oil Boom Is ‘Killing’ Nigeria.”

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