The power behind black culture

The significance of Festac '77—the black and African cultural festival—for Nigeria and the black world is being questioned even before it draws to an end in Lagos on February 12.

The staggering cost alone puts at between £700 million and £1,000 million is enough to start the controversy. At the higher estimate it represents nearly 15 per cent of Nigeria's annual export earnings. But even the lower estimate would exceed the total gross national product of many of the 45 black African, Arab and Caribbean countries which are represented here.

Indeed the question of cost has jeopardised its chances of ever being held again in its present form. Ethiopia, the country chosen to host the next Festac in 1994, has not given a firm commitment. Festac '77, however, is too big an event in its cultural and political implications to be measured in financial terms alone.

Many black intellectuals describe its aims in highly emotional language. Put simply, Festac would perhaps be no more than another step towards African integration. But since there are as yet no conditions for a pan-African economic community, the trend is still in the stage of cultural exchanges. However, the pan-Africanist mood of Festac '77 towards such crucial issues as apartheid and Israel seems to herald important new trends in African politics.

The origins of Festac can be traced to the anti-colonialist ideas of the African Society for Culture which in 1956 and 1959 promoted the first and second congresses of black artists and writers in Paris and Rome respectively.

The aim of bringing together black intellectuals and Pan-Africanist sympathisers acquired a new momentum in the Sixties, the decade of African independence, when, after President Leopold Senghor of Senegal sponsored the first World Festival of black arts in Dakar in 1966.

To this day the black and African festival reflects the rather intellectual and literary approach of its earlier promoters. As early as 1969, when the Organisation of African Unity promoted its first pan-African cultural festival in Algiers, various black and Arab interests had begun to widen the political aims of what was to become a four-yearly gathering of black and African people from all over the world.

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It is significant that Senegal, which wanted to confine the festival to Africans and objected to Arab participation, did not join Festac '77 until last August. The joint black and Arab participation might again strengthen the anti-Israel and anti-South African pan-African policies.

As it turned out, Festac '77 was a further search for identity in which many discoveries were made and many doubts raised. For the cultural purposes of Festac, Afro-Arab unity was based upon a purely geographical criterion and, as such, exclude Arab countries east of Suez. But the participation of delegations from black communities in the United States, Brazil, the West Indies, Canada, the United Kingdom and the supposedly Afro-Aboorigines of Australia, seemed to emphasise the racial exclusiveness of this year's black festival which, alas, has no white or yellow counterparts.

Covering music, dance, cinema, drama, literature and popular dressing, Festac '77 was simultaneously like the Welsh annual international folklore gathering, the Cannes film festival, the world theatre season plus a literary congress and an international fashion show all rolled into one.

The popular arts include a retiefs in Lagos and horse racing at Kaduna, the northern city which was also the venue for many other promotions. The central event was an intellectual gathering of some of the world's outstanding black academics who mingled with internationally renowned jazz musicians, singers, actors, painters and sculptors from Africa and the black diaspora.

It was in fact so big an enterprise that no single individual can claim to have seen more than a part of what went on. But while the most naive artists danced and academicians divorced from the vigour of primitive African arts and customs, there were many indications that Festac '77 might well be remembered as a turning point in modern African politics.

The periodical gathering of Africans and blacks has always proved to be an emotional occasion. In so far as Nigeria is concerned, it showed that the old image in the making which is already the headquarters of Ecowas—the economic community of West African states—is now as dominant a power in the trend towards African integration as France or West Germany in the European equivalent.

But in a wider African context, Festac and the role of Nigeria will certainly have far-reaching consequences in the immediate future. In their search for identity and unity, Africans have long discovered that all their individual countries if not cities and regions inside each country are still turned more towards Europe and America than towards the mainland.

The foreign-built switchboard of fast connections is still serviceable—most African countries enjoy better telecommunications with their former coloniser nations than between themselves.

Festac was thus a considerable step towards pan-Africanism and prompted the promotion of a number of publicised, financed activities in individual developing countries in preparation for this cultural Olympiad, national prestige and racial achievement.

One could not help but sense, however, that this seemingly innocent and superficial reported festival provided the backdrop for important political decisions.

As old-style colonialism has ceased to act as a common denominator for African and black unity, the white-dominated South Africa and Rhodesia is now acting as a common point for a new unity crushed.

Some cynical observers say that this is because, if apartheid did not exist it would have to be invented. In fact when one studies the obsessive concern with apartheid displayed both in Festac proceedings as well as by the media in black Africa, one realises the manifold internal and pan-African political uses made of the campaign against apartheid.

In daily news reports, more publicity is given to killings of Africans by racists in Southern Africa than to pressing internal problems within each developing and militarily-ruled African country.

It is significant also that President Kaunda's increasingly militant stand against Rhodesia and South Africa prior to this week's crucial OAU meeting in Lusaka was preceded by personal talks with both the Nigerian President and the Ghanaian Governments at Festac's inaugural ceremonies.

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There can be no doubt that the use of Festac '77 by the Protocol of African Unity is
There can be no doubt that the upsurge of African unity in a mood of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism has led to increasing friction between tribes, separated by Arab and African lines, and with its own internal and international disputes, will probably lead to a fresh gang against apartheid in the fore-runners.

The Chinese who are anyway temporarily beset by internal problems were conspicuously absent when the United Nations met and the political agitating that animated most of the Festac proceedings. But the Russians were indirectly represented by the outstanding Cuban delegation and the militancy of the participant delegations reflected the brutal realities of the newly independent and Communist inclined states of Ethiopia, Angola, Mozambique.

The Americans, who have sent their first-appointed UN ambassador, Mr. Armstrong Young, to Lagos leading a fresh contingent of American participants to show their support for the new leaders of the new nations, and threats emerging on the African political scene.

But they are hopelessly hand-clapped in a situation where a number of African Americans have seen it necessary to warn the well as the mayor that all US delegations visitors or agents as Cubans, Americans, and some Mexican and other all delegations seem to receive a warm welcome.

Mr. Young, son of the late Martin Luther King Jr., is being quoted here as stating that there is a direct relationship between the struggle of African Americans and black power in America and black power in Africa, in much the same way as the economic and political relationship between America and Nigeria has had an overwhelming effect on what Washington does in the Middle East.

Before going to war, Africans always liked to warm up by beating drums and singing songs.

Which asked if it is prudent for this bloc to become involved in southern Africa, Mr. Young is reported to have replied: “The quote too is a vital one, over whether we are going to be involved. We are the question is how and what I thought the answer was.

Africa seems indeed “to have come of age” as the head of state Lieutenant-General Obasanjo. Indeed, Nigeria has been a long-standing address and Nigeria certainly realises its growing economic power in the Continental, but American, British, French, West German, and Japanese firms might find it increasingly difficult to trade simultaneously in South Africa and with black Africa. In some cases the balance of interests has shifted towards the more numerous and developing black block of nations.

South Africa might be sufficiently strong and obstinate to resist black Africans with the rallying cry of being short of resources, but it will require some time to come.

But at any rate the feelings of the African states towards the new events in southern Africa seem not to be what is becoming tomorrow’s crusade against the last bastion of white supremacy on the black continent.