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Chapter Title: The Legacy of Festac '77 The challenge of the Nigerian National Theatre at Iganmu

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Book Title: African Theatre 11: Festivals

Book Editor(s): James Gibbs, Martin Banham

Published by: Boydell & Brewer, James Currey. (2012)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7722/j.ctt1r2gvs.7>

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The Legacy of Festac '77

The challenge of the Nigerian National Theatre at Iganmu

AHMED YERIMA

'Nothing is more appropriate at this time in Black and African history than a re-discovery of those cultural and spiritual ties which bind together all Black and African peoples of the world over.' (Lt-General Olusegun Obasanjo, Head of State of Nigeria and Patron, 'Festac '77)

'This is indeed a moment when Black and African Peoples must intensify their efforts to posit their true identity in the contemporary world. This Festival represents an effort on our collective part to come together as a people so as to set in motion a new cultural awakening and cultural awareness in the Black and African world.' (Commander O.P. Fingsi, President of the International Festival Committee)

'My conclusion therefore, is as follows: if we wish the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture to be a success, as I do, we should consider its colloquium as the most important point which should define and illustrate black civilization and above all its spirit; that is, its culture, which is today the most powerful force in the universal civilization.' (H.E. President Leopold S. Senghor, President of Senegal)

The three statements quoted above were used to justify the organisation and the celebration of African culture and civilisation in a festival held in Nigeria during January/February 1977. The festival was known formally as 'The Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture,' and informally as 'Festac '77'. Apart from the justifications given above, political reasons lay behind Nigeria's hosting of the festival. First, the 1970s was a decade of exploitation of resources that had resulted in Nigeria emerging as a major oil-producing nation. The government was benefitting from a huge increase in oil revenues at the time and the years were popularly referred to as the period of 'oil boom'. Second, Nigeria had recently emerged from a civil war, and had experienced a series of military coups and counter-coups which had shaken loyalties to Nigeria as a nation. Festac '77 gave the Military government, headed by Lt-General Olusegun Obasanjo, an opportunity to spend money on a cause that would make the country feel like a single political entity.

Third, Nigeria, having participated in the Dakar Festival of 1966, had

observed the wider international benefits that could be derived from a cultural festival and was determined to live up to her reputation as the 'Giant of Africa'. The country wanted to celebrate through a festival that would be wider in scope, bigger, and reach deeper in terms of collective experience than the Dakar Festival. Since 1977, there has been no other festival of comparable size in Africa.

This chapter is concerned with one of the major legacies of Festac to the Nigerian people and the Nigerian nation – the National Theatre building. In 1977, Lagos was still the capital of Nigeria and because of this and its accessibility by air, sea and road, it was chosen as the venue for the Festival. A swampy area known as 'Iganmu' was selected as the site for the National Theatre because it was equidistant from Victoria Island and mainland Lagos.

The National Theatre building covers an area of 23,000 square metres and stands well over 31 metres high. Its shape has been compared to a saddle or, partly because of the Nigerian coat of arms over the main entrance, to a General's cap. Its design is based on a Bulgarian sports centre, but it is twice as big as the original. Rumour has it that the Minister of Information, Anthony Enahoro, saw the original on a visit to Bulgaria, liked the design, and requested that a much bigger version be built in Nigeria.

It must be made clear that at the time of the Festival, the building added to the grandeur of the event:

- It contained suitable public spaces, including the main Auditorium, which could seat 5,000, a large Conference/ Banquet Hall; two Cinemas, Exhibition Halls, and a variety of other rooms. In other words, it could accommodate several events and provide offices in the same building.
- There was space around the theatre for tents, and makeshift venues for outdoor programmes.
- The National Theatre also accommodated radio and television studios and recording facilities.
- The National Theatre car parks had space for 5,000 vehicles.
- There was an on-site police station to ensure a high level of security.
- There were rehearsal spaces.
- The whole building was embellished throughout with Nigerian artworks that transformed an architectural masterpiece into a museum and art gallery. The collection included works by some of Nigeria's foremost visual artists including Erhabor Emopkae, Yusuf Grillo, Lamidi Fakeye, and Bruce Onabrakpeya.

As a building, the National Theatre contributed to the success of Festac '77, but the real test was whether it would be a legacy of the festival. During Festac, the performances by the different nations reawakened old performance cultures and traditions among the Nigerian population, with their meanings and definitions of culture rediscovered. There was a new spirit abroad, a creative urge to perform, and the National Theatre became the ideal building for performances. This was clearly seen in relation to

film-makers such as Ola Balogun, Ade Afolayan ('Ade Love'), Moses Olaiya ('Baba Sala') and Hubert Ogunde. The plush cinemas in the National Theatre proved ideal venues for premieres and short runs of the 35mm films they directed and produced

Stage performances also boomed. The Nigerian drama entry for Festac, *Langbodo*, drew on the skills and experience of a carefully marshalled team and was properly funded. Its example inspired both established playwrights such as Rasheed Gbadamosi, and Bode Osayin, and new ones, including Ben Tomolaju, Bassey Effiong, and Fred Agbeyegebe, all to set up their own drama groups and perform their works at the National Theatre. They were particularly encouraged by the National Theatre's Open Theatre Programme which ran from 1979 to 1990. For example Bode Osayin formed the Bode Osayin Arts Troupe and Akuro Theatre (which played *The Flood* and *Ogedengbe*); likewise, Ben Tomolaju, Kakaaki Production (*Jankariwo*, *Budiso* and *Mujemuje*); Fred Agbeyegebe, Ajo Productions (*The King Must Dance Naked*) and Bassey Effiong, Anansa Playhouse (*Things Fall Apart*).

The National Theatre was used as a venue for conferences, seminars and exhibitions, and it also provided office space for government parastatals that contributed to the cultural life of the nation. These included the National Gallery of Art (NGA), the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC) and the Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization (CBAAC).

The significance of the National Theatre to the development of the art community was emphasised by Frank Aig-Imoukhuede, at one time the Federal Director of Culture, who wrote of the importance of the National Theatre to the development of creative and cultural activities in *A Handbook of Nigerian Culture* (1991). He pointed out that:

Justification for this monumental undertaking by Nigeria (the National Theatre) goes beyond the immediate requirements of venues for FESTAC '77 to a long-felt need of providing a vigorous national base to the rich variety of artistic expressions both traditional and modern in Nigeria.

The National Theatre now stands as an important rallying point for artists within Nigeria and a meeting point through bilateral exchange for artists from all parts of this globe to share and exchange experience with their Nigerian counterparts (119: 62).

Given this enthusiastic endorsement, it is necessary to examine why the position of the National Theatre as the main venue for theatrical activities in Nigeria was challenged in the years following Festac '77 and why it came to an end. There were, I think, five main reasons:

- Councils for Arts and Culture were established in each state and the National Festival for Arts and Culture (NAFEST) that rotated around the states was inaugurated. As a result, each state endeavoured to construct its own Cultural Centre and once these came into existence, less attention was paid to the National Theatre building in Lagos.

- The movement of the nation's capital from Lagos to Abuja meant that the attention of the government shifted. Because of this, funds voted for maintenance of and for activities at the National Theatre were drastically reduced.
- Other theatre venues were built or came back into use in Lagos. These included the MUSON Centre that was funded and constructed by the Music Society of Nigeria and the Glover Memorial Hall that was refurbished by the Lagos State Government. These venues offered alternatives to the National Theatre which suffered neglect.
- Fourthly, as the years passed, the sheer size and complexity of the National Theatre building created an increasing number of problems for both the users and administrators. A building that had been ideal for Festac could not be used to its full capacity in the period that followed. To tackle the situation the government set up a Management Committee headed by the Director-General of the Supervising Ministry, and including the Director of Culture and a Theatre Manager. The committee failed because the building could only function properly under the guidance of a group of professionals, theatre people who knew how to manage such a venture. They needed to plan programmes, maintain the building, prepare budgets, and attract potential investors. Without a team capable of performing all those tasks, the National Theatre as a venue lost its appeal and as a building started to decay.
- The fifth reason takes us back to Wole Soyinka's seminal thoughts on what constitutes a National Theatre and his observations about the mistakes made by African countries at the initial stage of wanting to build a National Theatre. Of the National Theatre in Kampala, in 1962, he wrote:

The building itself is an embodiment of the general misconception of the word 'theatre'. Theatre, and especially a 'National Theatre', is never the lump of wood and mortar which architects splash on the landscape. We heard of the existence of a National Theatre (in Kampala) and ran to it full of joy and anticipation. We discovered that there was no theatre, there was nothing beyond a precious, attractive building in the town centre. But even within that narrow definition of the word, we had expected an architectural adventurousness - Kampala is, after all, a cosmopolis - so we felt justified in expecting from the theatre, not only a sense of local, but of international developments in the theatrical field. What we found was a doll's house, twin-brother to our own National Museum. There were cushioned spring-back seats - I approved this, having nothing against comfort - but it was disconcerting to find a miniature replica of a British provincial theatre... (Soyinka 1988: 3)

Despite this warning, Nigeria, like other African countries such as Ghana, made the mistake of replicating foreign monuments without thought to the African environment, the testing climate and the fallible maintenance culture.

Not sure how to run the National Theatre as a theatre, the Ministry of

Culture and Social Welfare – between 1975 and 1990 – moved in and used it as an administrative office block. At one point, the office of the minister, Mamman Anka, was actually in the building! The movement through the its spaces of large numbers of people who had no sense of the cultural and historical significance of the place soon took its toll on the fabric.

By 1991, fourteen years after it had come into use, no routine maintenance had been carried out on the building by the Bulgarians responsible or by anyone else – and it gradually ceased to function. The roof of the main auditorium was the first to crack, literally: water began to seep into the hall, and began to destroy the stage, the seats, the lighting equipment and the amplification system, even the priceless art works. Soon the crack in the auditorium roof spread to the other wings. The floor of the National Theatre became saturated, and a safety hazard. To prevent anyone being electrocuted, the mains supply lines were sealed off. Soon the central air-conditioning failed. This meant that the building – designed to operate in a temperate climate – became unbearably hot. Users described it as an ‘oven’, and there were no possibilities for adaptation: no openings could be made to allow for cross ventilation. The ‘architectural masterpiece’, the ‘major legacy of Festac ’77’, was gradually becoming a structural nightmare, a millstone around the necks of the theatre-lovers.

In 1991, in a bid to ameliorate the situation and ‘save’ the National Theatre, the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Social Welfare established the National Theatre and the National Troupe of Nigeria as separate parastatals. They were allocated distinct budgets and charged to run the National Theatre as a semi-professional state outfit. A management team of five was appointed, led by Jimmy Atte, a senior television producer, who became the first independent General Manager. However, the damage had been done and the theatre building was in a very sorry state.

In 1999, the return to power of Olusegun Obasanjo, who had opened the building and who I quoted at the beginning of this paper, was a turning point in the history of the National Theatre. When he had handed over to a civilian government in 1979, the Nigerian economy had been thriving and the infrastructure of the country was largely intact. For example, oil was flowing, the telephone system and the electricity generating system were operating, and the National Theatre was still ‘new’. But by 1999 all had changed for the worse; the situation had deteriorated very seriously. In anger, Obasanjo adopted a ‘privatisation’ policy and put the National Theatre at the top of the ‘For Sale’ list – followed, it is interesting to note, by Tafawa Balewa Square, and the International Trade Fair Complex. To manage the sell-off Obasanjo set up the Bureau of Public Enterprises (BPE).

At about the same time, the relevant ministry appointed Femi Osofisan as the new General Manager of the National Theatre. The constraints on Osofisan were very limiting: he inherited Atte’s management team, and a run-down theatre building filled with obsolete and broken equipment. There were no funds for repairs, and the frequent changes of ministers

prevented Osofisan from taking decisive action. He was not even able to remove the National Theatre from the list in the hands of the Bureau of Public Enlightenment (BPE) – who lined up interested buyers. At the end of his four-year tenure of office, Osofisan returned to the University of Ibadan.

That the National Theatre of Nigeria exists today as a government building is due to two positive interventions. One was the singular effort of the Honourable Minister of Culture and Tourism, Frank Nchita Ogbuewu who broke protocol and challenged the decision to sell off the National Theatre. He refused to sign off the Power of Attorney that would have given BPE the power to ‘concession’ the National Theatre to the highest bidder. Instead, he demanded funds to make immediate repairs to the roof, to the panelled walls, to electrical fittings and equipment, and he undertook to recruit a new management team that would run the theatre at a profit. With the approval of the President in Council, he merged the National Theatre with the National Troupe of Nigeria, and, in 2006, he appointed the present writer Director-General of both companies.

The second positive intervention followed the coming to power of Umaru Yar’adua in 2007. His accession to the presidency coincided with a clamour for the cancellation of Obasanjo’s privatisation policy. When he found that the National Theatre had been ‘concessioned’ to a company for the sum of N35 billion naira, he promptly stopped the process, had the circumstances investigated and found that the documentation was improper. Although the process has been stalled for some time, the National Theatre has not been delisted from the Federal Government list of properties to be ‘concessioned by BPE.’

This action gave the relevant authorities in the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and National Orientation, the opportunity to further rehabilitate the building. Importantly, the Ministry and the Theatre management team won the confidence of the general artists’ body, the stakeholders in the arts and culture sector, who were led by the veteran choir master Steve Rhodes. Other interested individuals included:

- Ejike Asiegbu of the Actors’ Guild of Nigeria
- Greg Odutayo of the National Association of Nigerian Theatre Arts Practitioners (NANTAP)
- Hussein Shuaibu of the Dance Guild of Nigerian Dancers (GOND)
- Prince Jide Kosoko of the Association of Nigerian Theatre Arts Practitioners (ANTAP)
- Tolu Ajayi of the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA)

Through anti-government marches, they called for a total cancellation of the concession order. The management then started on the repair and rehabilitation of the National Theatre building. The House of Assembly and Senate Committees on Culture and Tourism, then toured the National

Theatre and were persuaded that its rehabilitation required the provision of a larger budget and of funds to cover running costs. The present writer's management team was able to attract interested multi-nationals, including Coca Cola, Nigerian Breweries and Mr. Biggs (UTC) to identify with the efforts to restore the National Theatre and by 2009 most of the repair work required had been undertaken. Internally, within the merged structure of the National Theatre and National Troupe, the years between 2006 and 2009 were most productive in terms of theatrical productions for both organizations. Being a playwright/director, I was able to make facilities of the National Theatre available to the National Troupe. Staff worked together as a single production unit, and the new equipment and refurbished halls were made available for theatrical productions. Theatre groups were encouraged to show their productions at the National Theatre at reduced rental rates. Guest directors, such as Femi Osofisan (*Women of Owo*, 2007), Ben Tomoloju (2009) and Niji Akani (*A'etu*, 2008) were invited to direct plays.

At this point, I completed my tenure as Director-General and returned to university teaching. During his time as the relevant minister, Senator Jubril Bello Gada separated the National Theatre and National Troupe and appointed Mallam Kabir Yusuf and Martins Adaji to run the two organisations.

Conclusion

In looking back over the period covered here, the effect of the dilapidated state of what was once the 'pride of Nigeria' can, I think, be said to have affected the development of theatrical activities in Lagos and, more generally, of Nigeria in various ways. There were, however, other factors, including:

- The emergence of the Nollywood movie tradition in the late '80s, that served as a distraction and a source of income for artists who might have used the National Theatre for productions. The quick turn-around of shooting movies – often within two to four weeks – and the substantial payment to the artists offered advantages over the slower pace of theatrical productions, with auditions, casting, rehearsals, performances, and the lower financial rewards. Because of the challenge of Nollywood, there were fewer theatrical productions in Lagos.
- Insecurity in the country, especially in Lagos where armed robbery and kidnapping were on the increase, and contributed to the slowdown in the development of theatre during the late '70s and after. Because they felt threatened, prospective audiences stayed at home to watch television programmes or videos.
- Theatrical producers and drama groups were also inhibited by the escalating costs of putting on plays. The costs of renting rehearsal space, paying actors, making costumes and doing PR all increased dramatically

- partly, because of the levels set by Nollywood producers who were in competition for the same services.
- Venues such as the MUSON Center, Terrakulture, The Law School Hall, and the J.K. Randle Hall which emerged as alternatives to the National Theatre were purely commercial endeavours. Some did not have rehearsal spaces or facilities for technical run-throughs. Their rental rates were very high, and the producers could not guarantee breaking even after well-attended runs. The management teams at the National Theatre by contrast, and, as part of their responsibility to the society, had effectively subsidised theatre groups by charging less than the ‘going-rate’. When the National Theatre was unavailable because it was in a dilapidated and unsafe state, groups incurred high costs or simply went out of business. There were fewer productions.

Outcomes

The National Theatre building constitutes an ambiguous part of our national heritage. First of all, it was a major legacy of Festac '77, it became an ‘icon’, ‘a brand’ and an ‘inspiration’ to generate creative development in the immediate post-Festac period. It became a symbol of excellence and pride.

Sadly, it is difficult to separate the later, ‘dark’ period of the National Theatre from the slow-down in the development of theatre in Lagos. The hope is that the government and the people of Nigeria will realise the need for the National Theatre and continue to restore it to full operation.

Every country must have a National Theatre, a house of culture, which celebrates the heritage of its owners and shares their national creative heritage with the new globalised world. It is then that African countries, who are always quick to build or replicate National Theatres, will know that maintenance and good administration of such structures will serve generations yet unborn.

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