

PAN-AFRICAN FESTIVAL

Alex La Guma*

TO the South the Atlas mountains sprawl in rugged, blue-grey ramparts that have divided the coast of northern Africa from the rest of the continent since time immemorial. Today these mountains are no longer a barrier, and when more than 30 national delegations from independent African states crossed them to gather in Algiers for the first Pan-African Cultural Festival the feeling was that the dream of a unified Africa should not be seen as a mere mirage of the Sahara. As the planes swept over the Atlas range to dispatch their hosts of delegates and participants at Dar El Beida airport outside Algiers, there was the confidence that all the diversities which make up Africa had something to offer each other and so create yet another step towards unity in many spheres.

For two weeks the theatres, public places and sports stadium throbbed nightly with the drums, flutes and songs of Africa. Ballet from Guinea, the folk-dancing from Morocco, Togo, Dahomey; the instrumental ensembles from Algeria, Zambia, Ghana; modern jazz orchestras from Libya, Zimbabwe, Mauretania and Congo-Brazzaville; these were only a few of the events from scores of items which were the cultural and artistic contributions from every part of the continent. The only states not represented on a governmental level were those of the racist dominated South—these were represented by contingents from the liberation movements, the ANC (South Africa), FRELIMO (Mozambique), MPLA (Angola) and PAIGC ('Portuguese' Guinea).

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In the words of Mr. Diallo Telli, Secretary General of the Organisation of African Unity which sponsored the festival:

It was with the knowledge of the importance of culture to the Pan-African goals in mind that the men who signed the OAU Charter placed high among the principles and objectives of the Organisation the desire to strengthen the ties between the peoples of Africa by means of education and cultural exchanges as the best way to overcome linguistic barriers and establish mutual understanding and efficient co-operation between the peoples of the continent.

During the first two sessions of the OAU's Education and Cultural Commission held in 1964 and 1965, the recommendation was made that a pan-African cultural festival be organised. In February 1968 the generous invitation from the Algerian Government to hold the first pan-African Cultural Festival in Algiers was unanimously accepted and it was agreed that it would take place in July 1969.

The importance given to the total social phenomenon of the Algiers festival was such that it could not be reduced to a mere stock-taking of African culture in all its aspects, but had to involve also a public recognition by the continent of the role of culture in its development and progress. The Algiers festival was meant to help confirm the self-awareness and expression of the African cultural phenomenon, to assist in creating the outlines of a culture able to serve in the future as an instrument of social and economic change.

Thus during the course of the festival a symposium met each day to discuss the theme: 'African culture, its reality, its role in the liberation struggle, in the consolidation of African unity and the economic and social development of Africa.'

The symposium brought together a host of African personalities, most of them responsible for cultural affairs in their countries, and a great number of scientists, ethnologists, anthropologists and sociologists whose work had contributed to knowledge of African culture. In addition a great number of personalities from the world cultural scene were invited, broadening the scope of the assembly to cover the whole of the world and providing a wider audience to the exchanges which Africa wishes to effect with other regions.

The spirit governing both the symposium and the festival therefore was linked to the proposition that cultural phenomena can no longer be dissociated from history and the development of social groups to which they give expression; that no culture can exist apart from other cultures. Thus the festival gave the opportunities to African nations to get to know each other and also to let the world know what Africa is, and what she means to make of her future.

The symposium, held at the Palace of Nations at the Club de Pins on the coast, was naturally the scene of lively and high level discus-

sions on what is good and worthwhile in culture and for progress, and what constituted cultural deadwood to be discarded.

Inevitably there were debates on 'Negritude', on the influence of imperialism and colonialism, on the economic direction Africa should take, apart from contributions on particular aspects of culture such as music, folklore, literature.

A final statement called the 'Manifesto of African Culture' was adopted at the end of the festival and symposium, formulating the general lines of all opinions submitted. Obviously there could be no hard and fast resolution, but the important aspect which emerged out of all the diversities of the contributions, diversities characteristic of Africa, was the synthesis which might be illustrated in the words of the delegate from Guinea:

The cultural and technical aspects of a society are a part of the whole revolutionary cause. Revolutionary culture is a powerful fighting weapon and a material force for the people. Before the revolution it constitutes an indispensable part of the battlefield of total revolution. Science and culture fit perfectly into the general mechanism of the struggle, as weapons of unity and education for the destruction of the enemy with one heart and one will.



"I KNOW WE WOULDN'T BE IN POWER WITHOUT YOUR HELP
BUT IM NOT SURE WE SHOULD FLY THAT FROM THE ACROPOLIS."