

Volume 10, Issues 2 & 3  
Fall 2008

**The Pan-African Nation: Oil and the Spectacle of Culture in Nigeria. Andrew Apter.**  
Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005. 334 pp.



Print/Download PDF Version  
[Instructions: Print/Download PDF]

FESTAC 1977 and indeed, the entire gamut of Pan-Africanism or Negritude stem from the experience of slave trade, slavery and colonialism. Apter's book could be viewed from the historiographical tradition of a-historical Africa (Afro-pessimism) that re-affirms the influential notion of a dark continent bereft of a history except the activities of the Europeans, civilizing mission of colonial rule and the failure of the post-colonial state.

Divided into eight chapters, this book is an account of the author's frustration with African (Nigerian) condition which he described as his ten year odyssey "personal note." It's a fascinating combination of autobiography and odyssey "in search of the primitive (?)...the deeper into the bush one went, the more authentic the culture one found" (p. 2). To Apter, FESTAC 1977 represented not the celebration of African culture but the appropriation of a colonial tradition. He discusses afresh a Nigeria steeped in savagery but civilized by colonialism.

According to Apter, "Nigeria's black and African world was clearly an imagined community, national in idiom yet Pan-African in proportion. Artistic directors and cultural officers invented traditions with pre-colonial pedigree" (p. 6). Apter notes that FESTAC was a mere reproduction of colonial culture which incorporated African...to indirect rule. FESTAC denotes the appropriation of colonial culture and the failure of postcolonial state capitalism. FESTAC's commodification of culture masked ethnic cleavages and the lack of indigenous production of indigenous culture.

Apter explains the paradigm of failed state-predatory violence, endemic corruption, lack of interest articulation and a national bourgeoisie. To him, FESTAC was "directed from above and dispersed from the center-it became a model of mystification and false historical consciousness."

Regatta and Durbar were indigenous as claimed by the Nigerian leaders and communities, historically it emerged as central mechanisms of colonial interaction. Apter demonstrates that Regatta developed between European traders and Africans on the coast and up the inland waterways while Durbar emerged as a form of power relations between British officials and northern Emirs during the consolidation of the northern protectorate. In his analysis, the Benin sculptures were described as 'fetishes' of colonial knowledge, power and desire. The colonial roots of traditional costume exhibition were emphasized and FESTAC was described as the expansion of colonial precedent.

In a constructivist episteme, FESTAC was explained not in terms of innovation but replication of colonial culture. The genealogy of FESTAC was colonial exhibitions and commemorations. On the contrary, in order to ensure loyalty, colonial authorities maintained certain institutions

beneficial to the traditional rulers and the imperial power. It was an effective cooptation technique employed by the colonial state. The continuation of Durban was to legitimize colonial order through traditional institutions.

FESTAC illuminates how the state produced culture and locality from above. To Apter, FESTAC was a demonstration of state failure and corruption rather than a celebration of African culture and heritage. Apter uncritically absorbed the first generation of colonial civil servants trained by the British from the emerging corruption of the post-colonial state when in reality they instituted corruption and nepotism in public service. In terms of chronology, he attributes the phenomenon of corruption to post-coloniality.

According to him, the aim of FESTAC was the remapping of blackness and the African world. Its ambition was to seek "common generic and genetic origin in Africa." But more than the question of origin, the collective memory slavery and colonialism brought blacks together within the matrix of cultural consciousness and renaissance. The logic of FESTAC converted differences into expressions of common heritage and identity. On page 79, he stretches that "FESTAC's narratives of black unity and heritage, it converted Nigerian oil into black culture and blood, and transformed the nation into a privileged homeland."

He underscores the social distance between the state created national culture and the people. He documents ethnic imbalance, the near exclusion of some groups and over-representation of others in the process of "ethnic substitution." Apter explains structural tension between federal and state levels of cultural politics and administration. FESTAC, as Apter notes, valorize ethnic division and alignments in the post-civil war era.

He identifies key processes of cultural commodification and denunciation of the festival by renowned politicians, intellectuals, musicians and dramatists. There was equally the question of power struggle and ideological tussle between Nigeria and Senegal over the cultural project; and tension between succession and usurpation.

In a profound way, Apter demonstrates that FESTAC was characterized by fiscal recklessness and corrupt enrichment. Oil money gave rise to patronage networks and distribution rather than production within the national economy. FESTAC was a 'festival of awards and contracts'. It should be noted that the 'spending spree' itself was a legacy of political patronage and social distribution under colonial economy, access to markets was controlled and determined by the state.

With highly selective information, especially the impact of Structural Adjustment Programme on socio-economic lives, Apter explains the emergence of the economics of greed as a mode of survival without considering the international dimension of financial crimes and corruption. The Great Nigerian scam, predatory regimes of fraud and financial dissimulations of the 1990s, occurred in different economic context of neo-liberal reforms, capitalist tendencies and massive impoverishment of the masses.

Using failed state paradigm, the dislocations of neoliberal reform attracts less attention in Apter's book. There is undue emphasis on unstable identities, misleading images, failed elections, tragic pipeline explosions, petro-shortages military coups and cultural phenomenology of the 419 scam. There are printing errors, Dogorai (Dogarai) on page 194 and Ugoji (Udoji) on page 202. These shortcomings notwithstanding, the book is an excellent example of indepth fieldwork. It's recommended to students interested in African cultural

issues, challenges of development and oil politics.

Rasheed Olaniyi  
*Department of History, University of Ibadan*

UNIVERSITY OF IBADAN LIBRARY