

## CULTURE AS AN INSTRUMENT OF NIGERIA'S AFROCENTRIC FOREIGN POLICY: THE FESTAC 77 EXAMPLE

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### ABSTRACT

*Adopting the FESTA77 as its case study, this paper looks at culture as an instrument of Nigeria's foreign policy. It discusses the country's hosting of the Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC77), as a foreign policy instrument for the promotion and preservation of African culture within the parameters of Nigeria's Afrocentric foreign policy principles, and her general efforts to shield Africa from the imperialistic intimidations of the West. Using secondary method of data collection, the paper argues that though the place of culture in international relations and foreign policy calculations is not in doubt, but its application in Nigeria's FESTAC77 case is fraught with problems. Inter alia, the paper finds that the hosting of FESTAC77 and its attendant huge financial spending was done without any target to benefit Nigeria and its citizens economically. The paper concludes that such unprofitable Afrocentric foreign policy pursuit does not worth Nigeria's financial commitment.*

### INTRODUCTION

Nigeria did not only realize the imperative of ridding the African continent of colonialism, and of being committed to efforts at securing Africa's political freedom, as has had been shown in her spirited efforts to rid South Africa of apartheid and White minority rule; Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia etc, of every scintilla of colonialism by the Western imperialists, she equally became concerned about cultural subjugation of the African and black race within and outside the continent, by the same imperialists. Therefore, pursuant to her Africa-centered foreign policy stance, and angered by the realization that the immense contributions of Africa and the black man to world civilization have been deliberately undermined and underrated over the centuries, Nigeria, under the military rulership of Olusegun Obasanjo resolved to host the Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in 1977, committing her oil resources to the huge financial expenditure which the festival required. The aim, *inter alia*, was to accord Africa's culture its rightful place in the globe.

It is within this context of the pursuit of Nigeria's Afrocentric foreign policy principles and the accompanying understanding of the imperative of cultural security that Nigeria spearheaded and hosted the Festival of Arts and Culture in 1977. While Africa-

centered foreign policy places the defence of African affairs, including her culture, at the center of Nigeria's foreign policy concern and international relations, cultural security provokes the consciousness that defends the inalienable right of a people (in this case, Africa), to cherish and protect those elements and features of their culture that are dear to them, without molestation, or intimidation. The projection of the African continent in socio-cultural terms was regarded by the Nigerian leadership at the time, as a logical derivative of Nigeria's foreign policy objectives and her desire to assume leadership role on the continent. In sum therefore, the hosting in 1977 of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77), was a manifest expression of Nigeria's commitment to promoting and advancing the cause of Africa and the blacks in diaspora, in a bid to fulfill the demands of her Afrocentric foreign policy objectives.

### **AFROCENTRIC FOREIGN POLICY**

Afrocentric Nigeria's foreign policy is a foreign policy stance that situates Africa at the fulcrum of Nigeria's preoccupation, and around which rotate other spokes of its dealings and relations with other countries. Since her attainment of political independence, Nigeria has given Africa and African affairs pride of place in her foreign policy goals and pursuits. In his address to the United Nations General Assembly, and before the Federal House of Representatives, Nigeria's Prime Minister, Alhaji Tafawa Balewa enunciated the general principles which would guide Nigeria's foreign policy. He stated that Nigeria would adopt clear and practical policies regarding Africa, with a view to assisting African countries to find solutions to their problems. This Afrocentric or Africa-centered ideology presupposes that Africa lies at the core of Nigeria's foreign policy concerns and calculations, and will receive priority in its engagement with the rest of the world (Euka 2017). As Tafawa Balewa, said, "...Africa must claim first attention in our external affairs" (Akindele and Ate 2000: 104). Since then, Nigeria's foreign policy commitment towards Africa has exhibited remarkable consistency. Successive Nigerian governments, both civilian and military, have kept so much faith with it that Africa is widely acclaimed as the centerpiece of Nigeria's foreign policy (Ukeje 1999). Beyond the different speeches of the Prime Minister and other Nigerian leaders serving as bases for Nigeria's foreign policy concern on Africa, this sentiment has also found expression in documents like the 1976 Adedeji Adebayo Report on Review of Nigeria's foreign policy, and the 1979 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Nigeria's African policy has been justified on the basis of Nigeria's location within Africa, her vast size, large black population, substantial resources and the need for her to assume the continental leadership role which destiny is presumed to have placed on her. Joe Garba, one time Nigeria Minister for Foreign Affairs, shares the opinion that "Nigeria's size and resources made it imperative for her to provide leadership for Africa" (Garba 1976). Other foreign affairs ministers, in their times, were not different. Tom Ikimi believes that "With a population of over 100 million, with every fourth African and every fifth black person on the planet a Nigerian, we are fully conscious of the implications of our population which makes us the largest black nation on earth. The material resources...bestow upon us not only privileges, but responsibilities...we owe it to our brothers in Africa to continue to place our resources at their disposal...our

brothers and sisters in Africa...are looking up to Nigeria to fulfill her destiny” (Ukeje 1999: 93).

The adoption of Africa as the centerpiece of Nigeria’s foreign policy and the assumption of a self-imposed continental leadership role has spawned certain courses of action, involving enormous national sacrifices, and which revolve around the finding of solutions to the cultural, social, political and economic problems which besiege Africa. Among such problems is that of cultural intimidation by the Western imperialists, and to which Nigeria decided to respond, by championing the revival of African and the Black man’s culture, through the historic FESTAC 77.

### **CONCEPTUAL ISSUES: CULTURE AND FOREIGN POLICY**

Foreign policy encompasses the plans, actions and inactions of a state in the conduct of its external relations (Eneka 2020). It is best understood when situated within the context of a state’s set of articulated goals and aims, otherwise called national interests. As the practice of international relations among states allows, every state, in their interaction with others in the global system, comes to the interaction theatre with defined set of goals or national interests, which she will want to push through to the point of actualization. To realize these interests, will require a plan, and some sort of vehicle (a measure) to carry it through to success. The conscious plans and measures designed and put in place by state, for the attainment of specific goals in the international system, defines what in International Relations, we call foreign policy. Chibundu captures it as a state’s behavior which is external to her (Chibundu 2001), and Olu Adeniji interprets it as a projection of a country’s national interests into the transnational arena (Adeniji 2000).

The notion of foreign policy embraces a deliberately constructed design to fit a country properly into the international system. It is a carefully planned cause of action which informs the behavioural pattern of a country towards other countries in the international system, and which is designed to facilitate the attainment of the objectives of a state in its relationship with other members of the international community (Afinotan 2015). In the light of the above understanding of foreign policy, sovereign nations acting on the international stage, set for themselves, and pursue certain core objectives in their diplomatic interactions. These objectives are formed or dictated by national interests which are in turn a reflection of domestic policies, circumstances and values of the state.

Foreign policy is essentially state-centric. It is what states do. Therefore, every state has a foreign policy. As a state interacting with other states in the international environment, the Nigerian state, on the basis of its various international needs and gratifications, deliberately formulates foreign policy goals and objectives which she seeks to achieve in her relations with other countries. One of the fabrics of Nigeria’s foreign policy is the adoption of Africa as the centerpiece of her foreign policy. Nigeria’s enduring big brother role in Africa and numerous of its avowed commitments to the economic, political and socio-cultural good of the continent, is underscored by this Africa-centered foreign policy stance. The consideration of Nigeria’s sponsorship and hosting of the FESTAC 77, is in this study, presented within the context of Nigeria’s Afrocentric foreign policy manifestations.

In its most simple presentation, culture is the totality of a people's way of life. Omeruah avers that the above definition enjoys a near universal acceptance, as it encapsulates the intrinsic meaning of the concept (Omeruah 2005). As the totality of a people's way of life, culture represents such attributes of man and nativity as language, religion, art, dance, masquerade etc. the Festival of Arts and Culture hosted in Nigeria in 1977 was nothing short of a global display and celebration of the culture of a people, the Africans and the Black race.

Culture shares links with foreign policy. Given that foreign policy formulation and implementation is anchored on, and determined by the goals or interests of a state, it makes sense that a state makes use of instruments for the transportation and realization of its set interests. Put differently, states do not only set foreign policy goals, they also architect means to achieve the goals. Such means at the disposal of states to realize their foreign policy objectives, constitute the instruments of foreign policy. Prominent among such instruments is cultural instrument, among other instruments of foreign policy like war, aid, military etc. Alluding to this, Akinboye and Basiru (2014) insisted that culture has been, and will continue to be, an indispensable instrument of foreign policy.

## **THE FESTIVAL OF ARTS AND CULTURE (FESTAC 77)**

### **History and Aims of the Festival**

Though the festival held in 1977, but its history stretched to a time beyond that date. The idea of the Black Arts Festivals was mooted and endorsed at the Second Congress of Black Writers and Arts which was held in Rome, from 26 March to April 1, 1959, to discuss the resurgence of the Black man's culture (Fingesi 1975, Babawale 2014). The Congress resolved that such festivals should be held every four years in different African countries, and should be supported by the various African governments. Consequently, there was in 1966, in Dakar, Senegal, a festival titled the World Festival of Negro Arts. In this way, the idea of staging the World Black and African Festivals of Arts and Culture, was born.

The Festival was originally scheduled for 1970. But it had to be postponed due to the 1967-70 Civil War in Nigeria. A probable date was proposed for the festival to hold between November and December 1975, but on the discovery that the infrastructures required for the success of the festival weren't going to be ready by that date, and owing to the change in government in Nigeria which occurred in July 1975, it was shifted to 1977, precisely 15th January to 12th February (Oyediran 1980).

This very remarkable initiative by Nigeria drew delegates from Black and African countries and communities globally. It featured performances, exhibitions, and colloquium. Babawale describes it as "...a universal assembly of Black and African artistes, scholars, and experts to interact ...and appreciate the similarities and differences in their creativity, opinions and postulations on African culture" (Babawale 2014: 245). At its end, it was adjudged to have recorded a lot of achievements that left Africa with a lot of socio-cultural gains that fitted into Nigeria's foreign policy concerns for the continent.

The aims of the FESTAC 77 were: to ensure the revival, resurgence, propagation and promotion of Black and African culture and Black cultural values and civilization; to present Black and African culture in its highest and widest conception; to bring to light the diverse contributions of Black and African peoples to the universal currents of thoughts and arts; to promote better international and inter-racial understanding, *inter alia*.

### **Uses and Benefits of the Festival**

Scholars and policy makers in Africa affirm that the festival was a rare historic opportunity that significantly marked Africa's cultural renaissance, enhanced the appreciation and projection of Black culture and civilization. It fostered global consciousness and visibility of African culture, with renewed interest in African studies. Speaking on the importance of the FESTAC 77, Fingsi presented that: "In an age when the black man has unashamedly been copying other cultures, the Black festivals are more than necessary to enable the black man to realize and re-establish his identity by being made to see, hear and appreciate the achievements of his forefathers, as well as the present generation of black men, in the realm of culture, science, history, literature, etc" (Oyediran 1980: 182).

The festival was all about Africa's very being and existence as the black community of the world, for there can be no pride of race, lineage and self, without knowledge of those who came before. It was this awareness and the determination to preserve Africa's cultural heritage and values, that led Nigeria and other Africans to the preparations for the second World Black and African Festivals of Arts and Culture. The Festival of Arts and Culture promoted international friendship in Africa. It was one universal assembly that brought all Black and African artists, artistes, scholars, and intellectuals together. A report on the festival had it that 59 countries participated in the festival, with some of them coming with as many as 600 delegates.

In his defense of the uses and benefits of the festival at the 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the National Union of Nigerian Students (NUNS), Fingsi's eloquent argument was that "If the aims of and aspirations of the festival can be realized, if world attention can be positively and constructively focused on Nigeria from now till the end of the festival; if we can stimulate the development of our arts and culture through the festival, we shall not only be re-establishing and confirming our leadership role in Africa and the Black World, but whatever efforts and reasonable financial sacrifices Nigeria has been called upon to make will have been worthwhile" (Oyediran 1980: 185).

FESTAC 77 significantly marked Africa's cultural renaissance. The festival served as a timely and collective response to cultural imperialism which seemed to have replaced political dominance taken away by the attainment of political independence. It demonstrated that Africa and the Black world have traditions and cultures that continue to make contributions to world civilization. The planning and successful execution of the festival, reenacted the sovereign determination of the continental Africans and the Africans in diaspora to unite and take a common position on issues affecting them. That the event was massively attended, is an attestation to this very fact.

The cultural festival brought to the fore, those dying values and practices that define the uniqueness of Black and African peoples around the world. Babawale noted that the hosting of FESTAC 77 helped to put Africa and the entire Black race on global consciousness, and decisively addressed the pervasive and erroneous Eurocentric belief that Africa had no culture prior to its contact with Europe. Thenceforth, Black and African issues became more prominent in international discourses, and the views on Africans and African culture were treated with less antagonism.

The FESTAC 77 was a proof of the success of cultural diplomacy. It demonstrated how to use culture for diplomacy within and outside the African continent. The whole idea of the festival as a platform to bring all the participating countries together, was nothing short of the triumph of cultural diplomacy. Observably, relations and diplomatic interactions increased significantly among the countries after the festival.

### **CRITICISMS AND DISCREDITS OF FESTAC 77**

Besides its wide condemnation from the Christian circles, especially the Pentecostal Nigerians, who decry the festival as a demons' Pentecost, the festival had been roundly criticized by International Relation scholars and Foreign Policy experts (Obi 2006, Ukeje 1999). The brand of Nigeria's foreign policy that favours such rendezvous cannot escape the description of being a foreign policy of waste. It has been discovered that the pursuit of Afrocentric foreign has not been without huge costs, with a drying-up effect on Nigeria's purse. The gains of Nigeria's Afrocentric foreign policy, if any, have been eclipsed by the losses. "The achievements of Afrocentric foreign policy pursuits have been at the expense of the nation's economic interests" (Euka 2020). Money which is urgently required for rapid economic development in Nigeria and to enhance the material welfare of Nigerians, have been expended on uneconomic ventures like the Festival of Arts and Culture. The rationale which Nigerian successive governments have proffered for the spending lavishly on African projects creates the impression that such is obligatory. Therefore, no serious efforts are made to relate such spending to the enhancement of Nigeria's national economic interests.

The hosting of FESTAC by Nigeria in 1977 was not with any target for economic profit for the country or its citizens. The festival was based essentially on prestige, rather than rational cost-benefit considerations. The amount of money which was spent on the festival exceeded the budgets of some African states (Ofoegbu 1979). Moved by the desire to culturally emancipate Africa and the Black race from what it called 'cultural intimidation' of the West, Nigeria invoked her assumed African Big Power position and her Africa-centered foreign policy, to organize and host the entire African states represented by their numerous delegates, in wild merriments, festivals of drums, dancing and masquerading nicknamed FESTAC 77. In a bid to satisfy its Big Brother appetite, Nigeria under General Obasanjo organized the FESTAC, and frittered away more than two billion naira of the nation's oil wealth. This was in addition to other wasteful festival expenditures.

By this and similar spending that have involved enormous national sacrifice, Nigerian leaders and the different Nigerian governments forgot that "Respect from abroad acquired through the prodigal disbursement of scarce national resources in favour of

external forces, cannot act as a sovereign elixir for such a nation whose internal survival is at stake” (Ukeje 1999: 137).

### **CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATION**

The place of culture in international relations generally, and foreign policy in particular, is not. Such has been demonstrated by this study. As a tool or an instrument of foreign policy, culture can be, and has been used to project a country’s national objectives and interests as she relates with other states in the comity of states in the international system. Viewing suppression of African culture as an integral and extension of the West’s colonization agenda, Nigeria saw cultural festival as a robust avenue to vent her Afrocentric foreign policy objective, which targets the emancipation of the continent from colonialism, and therefore, exploited the FESTAC77 opportunity. However good and noble culture may be in foreign policy pursuits, its application and use in Nigeria’s own case has been found to be fraught with problems. Among other things, the hosting of FESTAC 77 was not with any target to benefit Nigeria and its citizens economically. It is therefore, adjudged a foreign policy of waste. Contrary to this elementary truth of international politics, that “Every favour done ideally is targeted at a future benefit, which as at then might not be known to the recipient” (Obi 2006: 141), Nigeria lavishly spends on African projects and gives out free lunch.

Nigeria needs a foreign policy that seeks to remove the Father Christmas posture and take Nigeria out of the culture of assisting other countries without deriving benefits from such assistance. Olu Adeniji warned that “We should not repeat the mistakes of the past, of the failure to take domestic economic advantage of the opportunities created during and after our costly interventions...” (Adeniji 2005: 43). Though economic considerations have not been the motivation behind Nigeria’s international relations in Africa, but nothing stops her from benefiting from such efforts as some countries are known to be doing at the moment. While there is always a place for charity in the affairs of nations, but generosity without an eye for the national interest, amounts to a pursuit of illusions.

Having made the above presentation in this study, we conclude that unprofitable Afrocentric foreign policy pursuit does not worth Nigeria’s financial commitment.

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