

Performing
Pan-Africanism



Ntone Edjabe
in Conversation with
David Morris

DAVID MORRIS On one wall of Chimurenga's headquarters in Cape Town, among shelves of books and artwork from past magazines, there are two quotations. The first is: "In Africa, when an old person dies, it is a library that burns." The second is: "[T]he boss of Credit Gone West doesn't like ready-made phrases like 'in Africa, when an old person dies, a library burns,' every time he hears that worn-out cliché he gets mad, he'll say 'depends which old person, don't talk crap, I only trust what's written down'..."¹ The former is attributed to Malian author Amadou Hampate Ba, speaking at a 1962 UNESCO assembly (and widely referenced as an old African proverb); the latter, spoken by the eponymous protagonist of Alain Mabanckou's novel *Broken Glass* (2009), a man tasked with writing the life stories of the clientele of a Congolese bar called Credit Gone West. Their call and response is an invitation into the thinking of Chimurenga, founded by Ntone Edjabe in 2002. From its beginnings as a print journal of Pan-African culture and politics, it has become a complex intellectual ecosystem: from quarterly gazette *the Chronic*, to the online broadcasts and pop-up radio studios of the Pan-African Space Station (PASS), to the research platform and public installations of the Chimurenga Library, to the heavily cross-linked web archive of these and other ongoing explorations. The present conversation occurs during the process of developing a co-publication, uniting the Chimurenga Library series and Afterall's Exhibition Histories books, in continuation of Chimurenga's long-term research into FESTAC '77, the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture held in Lagos in 1977.² Where did FESTAC come from—how did it enter your consciousness?

NTONE EDJABE I've had so many different entry points that I can no longer recall which came first. When I learned that Sun Ra had

1 Amadou Hampate Ba, UNESCO General Assembly, 1962; and Alain Mabanckou, *Broken Glass* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2009). These quotations accompanied the Chimurenga Library installation at Cape Town Central Library in 2009.

2 The FESTAC book is the second in the Chimurenga Library series and the tenth in Afterall's Exhibition Histories series, which is produced in partnership with Asia Art Archive and the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College. It is made possible through partnership with Raw Material Company.

met Fela [Kuti] in Lagos, I had to find out about the context that would make such a thing possible. I mean, these two are so radical and so radically different from each other—literally at opposite ends of the black masculinist scale, one almost asexual, the other, well, the other married 27 women in one ceremony! I think that’s when I first realized the scope of FESTAC; a context that brings together these two mythmakers must be huge. Now, Fela and Sun Ra produce and project wildly different images of themselves as men and leaders, but they are actually much closer in the world of sound. A careful listener might keep their records on the same shelf, which could be labeled: “The impossible attracts me because everything possible has been done and the world didn’t change.”

DM And so naturally this impossible meeting has to happen at an impossible event, FESTAC! And there are other entry points?

NE I think it was Mark Gevisser’s biography of Thabo Mbeki that triggered my interest, specifically the part that covers his time in Lagos.³ That book reveals how Mbeki engineered the first major collaboration between factions of the South African liberation movement in exile, and I mean people who could barely stand each other—PAC’s Pan-Africanists, ANC’s nationalists, black consciousness activists from BCM, and student leaders from SSRC.⁴ After speaking with some of the protagonists I found out that the collaboration took the form of a play about June 16 at FESTAC; a play that was artistically directed by Keorapetse Kgotsitsile and Jonas Gwangwa. Now imagine Kgotsitsile, the soft-spoken poet who left South Africa for exile in the US during the early 1960s, directing the young firebrand Tsietshi Mashinini, who had just led the Soweto uprisings a few months earlier—and was leader of a generation of activists who were most dismissive of the older guard. Imagine how heated the rehearsals must have been... We know the core of the South African delegation at FESTAC went on to lead the famed ANC Department of Information and Propaganda, the intellectual center of the movement.

Or it could have been when I interviewed Miriam Makeba about her many lives on the continent. As a guest of honor in



fig 1

fig 1 Festac '77, Lagos, Nigeria 1977

3 Mark Gevisser, *Thabo Mbeki: The Dream Deferred* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 2007).

4 PAC stands for Pan Africanist Congress, ANC for African National Congress, BCM for Black Consciousness Movement, and SSRC for Soweto Students Representative Council.



fig 2

fig 2 Festac '77, Lagos, Nigeria 1977

Sékou Touré's Guinea, Miriam had been incorporated into his Marxist, OAU-ready, state-run version of trans-Saharan Pan-Africanism.⁵ But before moving to Guinea, she had lived in the US and the West Indies and connected with their struggles, so her personal trajectory was more complicated. And she told me FESTAC was the event that brought those paths together most powerfully. Now that's huge: because she's probably one of very few artists who participated in all those Pan-African festivals from Dakar onward. She was in Algiers with Stokely Carmichael and Nina Simone and the Black Panthers; she was in Kinshasa in 1974, surrounded by drunk, bored men, and ended up running that festival. And by the time she got to FESTAC she was the unofficial bard of OAU, performing at all their events. By the time she got to Lagos, she was already a citizen of eight African countries and carried diplomatic passports from each of them.

Another entry point could be FESTAC Town, which I encountered as a student living in Lagos in the early 1990s. It was an urbanist project of the Nigerian state in the mid-1970s, oil boom and bust, and was where all the *bad* stuff comes from—bad stuff from a Nigerian middle-class perspective: corruption, 419 email scams, Nollywood, Naija Pop... But again, to me at the time FESTAC Town was just a neighborhood, like SICAP in Dakar, or SIC in Douala, all remnants of post-independence optimism. It didn't connect directly to the festival.

Whatever the trigger was, my interest in FESTAC crystallized through conversations with Dominique Malaquais and Akin Adesokan. Dominique wrote a fascinating essay on Zaire '74 and Akin had that beautiful short story titled "FESTAC '77," both in *Chimurenga*. We wouldn't be researching this event and other Pan-African festivals without them. I just don't know how FESTAC entered my consciousness anymore. But one thing is sure, now I hear and see it everywhere!

DM It's almost like a rumor. But I love how the Fela/Sun Ra myth collides two longstanding Chimurenga credos—*Who no know go know*, and *There are other worlds out there they never told you about*. Both of those records, by Fela Kuti and Sun Ra respectively, came out within a few years after FESTAC. And these refrains, these philosophies, allow a bigger affinity to be heard; between all of these elements and the way you're working through them. As you say, the research on FESTAC also

5 OAU stands for Organisation of African Unity.

clearly emerged through your and Chimurenga's other activities—the Chimurenga Library most obviously, as well as through the publications, through the radio broadcasts, in writing, in sound...

NE In fact, most of the research happens through our ongoing activities such as *the Chronic* newspaper, or PASS radio. For example, one of the main controversies of FESTAC was around the inclusion of North African countries, which is a longstanding debate among Pan-Africanists. So when we were invited to participate in the Sharjah Biennial in 2015, we used the opportunity to produce an Arabic edition of *the Chronic* on real and imagined divides between North and sub-Saharan Africa, as a way to investigate this issue deeper—in the context of FESTAC, and beyond. To understand how a revolution that took place mainly on the African continent in 2011 came to be known as “The Arab Spring.” In 2015 we also used an installation of the Chimurenga Library at The Showroom in London to research the UK participation in the event, and more broadly, the emergence of a black consciousness movement among UK-based artists in the years leading up to FESTAC. Previously we'd installed the Library inside the Public Library of San Francisco, to read documentation on the US Black Arts Movement's involvement in FESTAC.

And one edition of the biennial *African Cities Reader*, which we published in collaboration with the University of Cape Town, was devoted to re-imaginings of the Lagos National Arts Theatre, which was the main venue of FESTAC, purposely built by a Bulgarian company to look like an army general's cap (Gowon, Murtala Muhammed and Obasanjo all presided over its construction). It is a monument, a concrete ghost, a space haunted by the specter of political visions long considered unrealizable, forgotten. But what is haunting the theater is not only the past itself, but the unfulfilled utopian desires of those who conceived it.

The first piece we published on FESTAC was the short story I mentioned by Akin Adekoso, “FESTAC '77,” in an issue of *Chimurenga* titled “We're All Nigerian!” (2005). It's a speculative fiction on Nigeria's decline in the aftermath of FESTAC—in fact, some charismatic evangelists, such as Pastor Chris Okafor and others, explain the country's woes through the ‘un-Christian’ decision to make the famous mask of Queen Idia the emblem of FESTAC.

The mask of Queen Idia was another major controversy, which developed into a diplomatic row between Nigeria and Britain—the mask is part of British colonial loot and held at the

British Museum. In short, Nigeria made a formal request for the mask to be returned in time for FESTAC, and the UK government said “No, but we can lend it to you for millions of pounds.” So, imagine! *Shakara* ensued, as we say in Lagos. Nigerians ended up producing replicas of the mask for the festival—and I think this official embrace of a ‘fake’ is something that hasn't been looked at enough by art historians. The story of that mask alone is an epic that deserves 50 documentary films! And indeed FESTAC triggered, or at least poured oil on the debate on the restitution of stolen classic African art, and that debate just won't go away—these objects carry plenty *wah-ala o!* Now the West doesn't know what to do with them—they've been hiding them in basements of ethnographic museums, but the masks just won't let them sleep peacefully. In his memoir *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2009), Wole Soyinka tells how he tried to steal—I think ‘recover’ was his word—a Yoruba mask from the collection of the anthropologist Pierre Verger in Brazil.⁶ Dramatic stuff! We've collaborated with groups like Anti-Humboldt Forum in Berlin, and others, to document these debates on restitution. But mainly I am interested in mapping the imaginary field produced by FESTAC and the festivals that preceded it.

DM It's this momentous event, that thousands upon thousands went to, on a scale that's hard to comprehend today—a *world* Black festival with an Olympic budget. And at the same time, it's barely known. It's an explosion, hugely complex, that just as quickly vanishes.

NE FESTAC is so grand that you cannot make sense of it and it remains invisible, or more accurately, unwritten. Its traces are heard everywhere in the black world, but the only full-length analysis I've seen is Andrew Apter's book, which of course has its own anthropological agenda.⁷ The opacity is partly due to its size and the too-muchness of Nigerian ostentatiousness, but also because, at least on the surface, it lacks a philosophical or ideological through-line in the way that one can associate FESMAN '66 with negritude and art for its own sake, or PANAF '69 with a particular brand of Pan-Africanism

6 Wole Soyinka, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn: A Memoir* (New York, NY: Random House, 2006).

7 Andrew Apter, *The Pan-African Nation. Oil and the spectacle of culture in Nigeria* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005).



fig 3

fig 3 Festac '77, Lagos, Nigeria 1977

and art for liberation. Historians too easily explain the earlier festivals through iconic poet-philosophers such as Léopold Senghor (Dakar), Frantz Fanon (Algiers) or Julius Nyerere (Dar el Salam), whereas in Lagos the main intellectuals, from Soyinka to Fela or Chinua Achebe, were all dissidents. In fact, a number of black intellectuals boycotted the event; partly because of the military involvement and levels of corruption in the planning, but also its perceived lack of intellectual rigor. There's an important group we can call Counter-FESTAC, with Pan-African stalwarts such as Allioune Diop, Carlos Moore and many others, who eventually walked out of or were fired from organizing committees. FESTAC is messy and seemingly incoherent, and this is also what draws me to it.

One of the aims of the Chimurenga Library was to figure out ways to write histories in the absence of official archives. So much of the writing on Africa, as well as from Africa, is punctuated by the constant lament about lack of this or that. We're constantly reminded of what we don't have or what we have lost. The Library is an attempt to take seriously the idea of people as knowledge and infrastructure—its first iteration was as a collection of personal memories about publications we love. We invited contributors and friends to write and make films about the publications that shaped them, and organized these very personal narratives into an archive. Tracey Rose and Jean-Pierre Bekolo made films about *Staffrider* and *Écrans d'Afrique*; Sean O'Toole and Akin Adesokan wrote about *Revue Noire* and *Glendora Review*, and so on. Since we couldn't collect the print publications themselves—they're locked in the vaults of the Euro-American academy and the Internet does not know about them—we collected and circulated our memories and imaginations about them. As my friend Wendell Marsh puts it, history is the science of the state while memory is the art of the stateless. This distinction between history and memory—and its constant blurring—have become the research methodology for all the projects of the Chimurenga Library.

I think FESTAC poses an interesting problem: instead of absence—the usual rhetoric of lack through which Africa is interpreted—here you have way too much. There isn't *one* official film such as William Greaves's film on Dakar, or William Klein's film on Algiers, but there are dozens of independent videos on YouTube. And our research has yielded an eclectic repository of stories and anecdotes, digital copies of documents, artworks, images, sound and film footage, as well as books, magazines and albums. There are no books about FESTAC, but I can count over 40 albums by African musicians—from

King Sunny Ade and Super Boiro, to T.P. Poly-Rhythmo and Tabu Ley Rochereau—which announce, praise, promote, critique or just merely document the event. This is remarkable, considering these are independent initiatives and produced by the artists themselves. So FESTAC might not be something you can read, but you can listen to it. Its archive exists primarily in the world of sound. And so, at various stages of the research I would produce a mixtape that sounds out some of the key issues that I pick up. In some ways the mixtape is the appropriate form of writing here—you collect these bits from personal archives and bring them into a sort of affective proximity. Overall our research methodology is often closer to detective work, replete with entirely unexpected fortuitous coincidences, even encounters with ghosts, allegorical and otherwise.

DM The Chimurenga Library itself first entered a physical space at the Cape Town Central Library in 2009...

NE Yes. We wanted to extend the survey beyond our contributors and friends and ‘find ourselves’ inside the massive collection of the Cape Town Central Library. It is also a genuinely public space in the city, one of the few spaces in Cape Town where strangers can meet. So we spent some months reading and listening through the collection of the Central Library, and we did this on site for a few hours every day, while the library operated normally. We were noting references, pulling or highlighting quotes that related to the material in the Chimurenga Library and our publishing work. Then we drew lines and installed a parallel classification system that would draw library users to this material. So a section of the library might, for instance, be branded “African Fiction,” but we’d add signage in the space to indicate “Beership”—literature produced from or in bars—or “Bureaucracy” or “Bullets”—war writings. Like an index system running parallel to the classic Dewey Decimal Classification the library uses, to provide multiple entry points to this material, but also recognizing the library as a space that does not only store knowledge, but produces it too.

DM I think it’s worth saying more about spaces you’re occupying at that moment. Growing out of print culture of Chimurenga, there’s the online and the public library, the broadcasts of Pan-African Space Station, the bar Tagore’s, in Cape Town—it seems important that these are the spaces this material is transmitted through.

NE: I mean these are all spaces that we already consider libraries. If people are knowledge and infrastructure, then markets, bars, etc., are our biggest libraries. And in these spaces knowledge circulates primarily through sound, so we needed an instrument to gather this information and recirculate it, which is what the Pan-African Space Station is—it can land wherever we need it or are invited. But the point is not to move into ‘alternative’ spaces, an idea I find really irritating. I mean, we *also* consider formal archives. The Cape Town Central Library, for instance, is the city’s largest library and constituted of several archives. The place is used by some parents as an unofficial crèche, because they can leave their children in the children section for a few hours; the homeless can hang in there all day, so it’s also a shelter. And so on. So through these multiple uses, it’s a library *beyond* the material that’s on the shelf and that’s cataloged there. There’s the stories of the people who meet there, and that’s really an important element for me for what constitutes a library.

DM And so, as the FESTAC project has gathered steam, it’s starting to do that work—to classify and collectivize those memories, the stories of the people at this very particular gathering—to bring together these very personal archives of this very sprawling thing. It could go on for the next hundred years...

NE You bet it could! Especially if one is concerned with producing a definitive history of this event. Fortunately that isn’t my interest, and I think the event itself resists that kind of telling. This might be a story that is bigger than storytelling—it has so many thousands of centers!

DM But I’m amazed, still, that whenever I speak to someone who was there, they tell me “you’re the first person to ask about this in forty years...”

NE Part of it is how intensely private the memory of it is. People like Jayne Cortez, Audre Lorde and a few others wrote poems about it. You’ll find a personal essay or home video here and there. And, of course, there’s the massive sonic archive I mentioned earlier. But mostly, FESTAC is spoken about like a private experience that hundreds of thousands of people share. It is weird. You might encounter some artists’ notebooks, personal diaries and so on—the word ‘personal’ is often attached to these projects. The FESTAC photographs of



fig 4



fig 5



fig 5

fig 4,5,6 Performance at Tagore's, Cape Town

J.D. Okhai Ojeikere, Marylin Nance, Akinbode Adebisi, and many others are still unpublished. Even people like Soyinka, who were involved on so many levels (often reluctantly), have only recently begun to write about it. At the same time, the moment you begin to speak of FESTAC, someone in the room will raise their hand and say, "I was there!" This has happened to me in Haiti, Brazil, Egypt and a few other unlikely places.

You know, the idea of diaspora is often connected to the possibility of return, and this is one of the main engines of Pan-Africanism—and probably why so many Pan-Africanist thinkers are theorists of circulation, of mobility. Now, imagine that for one month, a full month, thousands of black artists and intellectuals from all over the world *actually* lived together in the FESTAC Village. This is the kind of experience we have no language for. And this becomes possible because the construction of the FESTAC Village is not completed at the time of the festival, without the kind of fencing or walling that would be required for each delegation to be autonomous. So everyone meets in unsegregated yards to rehearse and eat and drink together. And they speak various broken languages to communicate. This is not the product of the Plan (capital P); it is circumstances. And I think people remember them differently, like personal stories.

FESTAC also sits in a constellation of global cultural gatherings that took place on the continent in the decade following independence, bracketed by Dakar in 1966 and Lagos in 1977. In between you have Algiers in 1969, and, to some extent, Kinshasa and Dar el Salam in 1974. Each of these festivals is remembered as a singular moment in the history of the country where it took place. Always the first of its kind and ideologically dissonant—where Dakar '66 manifested as a platform for Negritude's ideals of black culture, and the OAU-mandated PANAFAF '69 looked to culture as tool of liberation and development, the organizers of FESTAC '77 sought a middle-ground between those positions.

Yet, as much as they were individual moments, these festivals were tied to one another in terms of structure, form and goals. They were conceived, each in their own way, as a celebration of an Africa yet to come. Individually, and as a cluster, they functioned as laboratories for the development of new, continent-wide politics and cultures. In some way, they can be viewed as *one* periodic event, an itinerant quinquennial of sorts, which constantly changed country as well as political and artistic direction. You know, Mobutu wanted to host the 2nd PANAFAF in Kinshasa to give visibility to his



Fig 7



Fig 8



Fig 9

fig 7,8,9 Chimurenga Library at Cape Town Central Library, 2009

Authenticité program. When the OAU snubbed him, he decided to host the so-called “Rumble in the Jungle” in 1974. There’s also a scene in Klein’s brilliant film on Algiers ’69, when the great saxophonist Archie Shepp appears on stage wearing the official garb of Dakar ’66, a boubou with the logo of *that* festival. Of course, Shepp wasn’t in Dakar, so must have gotten the shirt from someone who was there. Whether it was intended or not, it was powerful poetry. I mean, Algiers was set up as a critique of Dakar!

And periodically, each of these events asks: What is Africa’s place in the world? What is Pan-Africanism? And the form this query takes is each time mediated by inherent tensions: one, what happens when the poet-philosopher becomes the poet-philosopher-president, as in the case of Senghor, Neto, Nkrumah, Nyerere and many of the so-called founding fathers? And two, now that the poet-philosopher runs a state and that state happens to be on a continent bound by geography and history, what form does state-run Pan-Africanism take? How does it shift colonial notions of citizenship? These questions emerge out of the Pan-African Congress of 1945 in Manchester, as Africa-born thinkers take over the intellectual and political leadership of the Pan-African movement from W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, George Padmore and others. And they only intensify in the post-independence era. They are at the center of FESTAC and the festivals that preceded it. And I think they’re still relevant today.

DM That beautifully sets up my final question, which is to ask about the ‘pan’ in Pan-African. FESTAC produced its own community through the ‘passports’ issued to all visitors—for that month, they were all members of the FESTAC nation—as well as consolidating identities such as Black British, which, according to conversations with various participants, gained currency in the UK only later. We have a sense of the Pan-Africanisms that were circulating by the 1970s, but what is its scope now—what does it mean today and for the future?

NE Well, I see Pan-Africanism as future-oriented, it is a utopia. And I am glad you bring up the passport and the question of citizenship, because they touch on related research paths, such as our work on new cartographic representations of Africa, and they all lead us to the question of The Border—who is inside or out, who is allowed to move, and under which conditions. And we know that Western liberal democracies have failed to produce inclusive conceptions of citizenship—what we have is free circulation of everything except people,

at least not all people. Classic liberal thought by the way, including advocates of free movement and cosmopolitan thinkers, and much of which shaped the policies of postcolonial African states, which is partly why we haven’t been able to eradicate the colonial borders. This thinking is still trapped in the dichotomy of free movement versus order and security. It’s in this context that the trans-territoriality and trans-temporality of Pan-Africanism interest me: as an imagination of a borderless world. A sort of non-universal universalism—or perhaps one that is truly universal. Its project isn’t separatism, but a poetics of relation, as Édouard Glissant would call it. Especially when one begins to consider older, pre-colonial African archives, we can see conceptions of territory beyond the enclosure, and borders as places that *facilitate* circulation rather than the opposite. And then there is the archive that Fred Moten calls Black Studies, which is how black people creatively refuse that which was refused to them; so a critique of Western modernity. The forms that this refusal takes are the art of the stateless. And even though bureaucratic norms make it seem otherwise, I see FESTAC primarily as a festival of such an art.