
**ORAL TRADITION
AND ORAL HISTORY
IN AFRICA
AND THE DIASPORA:
THEORY AND PRACTICE**

Edited by E.J. ALAGOA

**CENTRE FOR BLACK AND AFRICAN ARTS AND CIVILIZATION, LAGOS
for NIGERIAN ASSOCIATION FOR ORAL HISTORY AND TRADITION**

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Chapter 33

THE PLACE OF ORAL HISTORY IN THE CENTRE FOR BLACK AND AFRICAN ARTS AND CIVILIZATION

A. C. Onwumah

In the scope of participation and by the variety of materials used the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) was both impressive and unique. This was because, for the first time, materials and participants drawn from as many as 59 countries came together for the sole purpose of promoting and propagating Black and African Arts and Culture. At the end of the festival, the need arose to keep the spirit of the festival alive by preserving the rare and invaluable materials brought together during the festival. The Federal Military Government of Nigeria declared its intention to set up a centre that would hold the rare materials in trust for the participating countries. In fulfilment of this pledge, the Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization was established and given legal status by decree No. 69 of 1979 which declared it a statutory institution.

Objectives

According to the Decree "the Centre shall have responsibility for the promotion of public interest in Black and African Arts and Civilization and the preservation of such creative works of value:—

- (a) of each participating country during the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture or similar cultural manifestation; or
- (b) of any other country or individual where such creative work has emanated from or pertains to the 1977 festival or similar cultural manifestation, donated to the Centre either directly or through the International Festival Committee of the 1977 Festival or hereinafter donated to the Centre by any person or organisation."

Functions

"It shall be the duty of the Centre:—

- (a) to locate, identify and assemble for better preservation all recorded matter, published materials, and museum artefacts relating to the 1977 Festival and to prepare an inventory of these works;
- (b) to promote understanding and appreciation of Black and African Arts and Culture by involving the general public in its activities through lectures, discussions, symposia, exhibitions, performances and demonstrations of arts and crafts;
- (c) to acquire from zonal secretariates of the 1977 Festival arts and culture of relevance to Black and African Arts and Civilization;
- (d) to produce guides, catalogues, bibliographies, abstracts and indices to facilitate the use of the materials preserved at the centre:
- (e). to make the facilities of the Centre available to members of the public on such terms as the Board may with the approval of the ministry determine;
- (f) to organise exhibitions, displays and such other manifestations as are calculated to achieve the objects of the Centre;
- (g) to make appropriate arrangements for the exchange either by way of lending or gifts of materials held at the Centre;
- (h) to supplement the materials held at the Centre by acquiring copies of materials relating to past and future world, regional or national festivals of arts and culture of relevance to Black and African Arts and Civilization;
- (i) to safeguard the property of the Centre and;
- (j) to provide such services as are usually provided by cultural resource Centres."

Activities

Since Festac, the Centre has been involved in a number of activities. In 1984, it organised, with the University of Lagos Centre for Cultural Studies, a Seminar on the Cultural Foundations of African Unity. Recently, it organised a symposium on the *Harlem Renaissance* with the United States Information Service (USIS). Since its inception, it has held a number of exhibitions. To

update and enrich the vast cultural materials which it holds, the Centre has relationship with a number of international bodies, such as the Smithsonian Institute, Unesco, and the United States Information Service (USIS). To effectively perform its statutory functions, the Centre created the following specialized departments:

Library Division

The Library division has a collection of fifteen thousand volumes of books which cuts across all fields of knowledge relating to Black and African peoples. To supplement the existing stock, the Centre also acquires books especially in the area of Black and African Arts and Culture. Recently, it was declared a UNESCO depository Centre by which all UNESCO publications in the field of Black and African Culture would be deposited in the Centre. The books in the library were contributed by all the countries which participated in Festac, and some of these countries have continued to donate books to the Centre. The Library Division has two units, the Readers Services Unit and the Technical Services Unit. It is a purely reference library for researchers and members of the public above the age of sixteen years.

Archives Division

The main collections in this division include Festac colloquium papers, proceedings of the meeting of the International Festival Committee and documents available in the International and National Secretariats of Festac, microfilm tapes containing studies of academic importance, seminar papers and papers which have been found useful in editing some publications.

Museum Division

It is the Museum Division which preserves all the arts and crafts which were acquired from Festac 1977. These have been supplemented with donations from international organisations such as Unesco and some countries such as ZIMBABWE, EGYPT, CUBA, U.S.A., GAMBIA, AUSTRALIA. Only recently the Cuban government donated some musical instruments, such as Arara drums, Bata drums, Abakua. From the materials donated the cultural affinity between the Yoruba of Nigeria and the Cubans could be easily appreciated. For each country that donated materials to the Centre, a "HOUSE" was established. For instance, there is the Cuban House, Zimbabwe House, Australian House. Each of these "houses" contains materials that are of importance to researchers into specific areas of the cultures of the countries concerned.

A very prominent feature of the Museum Division is the exhibition on "Africa and The Origin of Man". The African Architectural Technology section of the Museum Division is a testimony of the level of architectural advancement of Africa before colonialism, it demonstrates in a practical manner, creativity and ingenuity.

Audio-Visual Division

The Audio Visual division contains very rich cultural materials on Black and African peoples. It has the unique advantage of combining sight and sound. The materials so far documented in this division are:

- (i) A comprehensive Audio-tape recording of all Festac activities.
- (ii) Original and duplicate copies of Festac video cassettes representing 100% coverage of the input of all the participating countries.
- (iii) Festac Video Tapes.
- (iv) Gramophone records donated by some participating countries.
- (v) Tapes on colloquium proceedings.
- (vi) Festac Film (i.e. *The Black Heritage, Light on the Dark Continent*).
- (vii) Special film on Nigerian culture and, *Towards Tomorrow*.

The materials in the Audio-Visual Division cover virtually all aspects of Black and African culture such as dances, drama, songs, architecture etc.

The Centre and Oral History

From the foregoing it may be seen that the Centre is involved in the comprehensive documentation of materials relating to Black and African culture. The Centre is involved in material documentation as shown by the artefacts in the Museum Division, pictorial, oral and sound documentation by the Audio-Visual Division, and written documentation as shown by materials in the Library and Archives Divisions. The Centre's complementary role to the oral historian may be appreciated from the exhibition on African Architectural Technology. In the absence of written records and with the exception of a few relics, much of what is known about traditional African Architecture are products of oral history. In this regard the Centre has made it possible for people to see and appreciate intimately what the oral historian talks about. The same is applicable to most of the other materials in the Centre. Such are the carving of an Ifa priest from Kwara State, the Nmaji Ormaaji Festival of Imo State and the replica of the Ashanti Golden Stool. Initial information about these artefacts were from oral sources and their preservation in the Centre engenders an appreciation of the materials even in a place remote from their original historical milieu.

Finally, the Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilization serves not only as a bridge between Black and African people scattered all over the world; it reinforces and complements the role of the oral historian.