

## Notes and News

### *The Dakar Festival Colloquium on Negro Arts, April 1966*

Most of those who attended the First World Festival of Negro Arts, held at Dakar under the high, but deeply interested, patronage of President Léopold Sédar Senghor, from 1 to 24 April, would agree that it was both a magnificent conception and a resounding success. For two decades past almost all the news out of Africa has been in the field of politics, or of 'the extension of politics by other means'. But, meanwhile, African tribal art and culture were arousing ever greater interest among Europeans and Americans, many of whom were studying them in the field in Africa. Now for the first time, at an international gathering under African inspiration and leadership, the whole subject has been brought firmly within the universe of discourse of African intellectual life, with particular emphasis upon the indigenous or tribal arts, which in the past have sometimes seemed to constitute almost a taboo subject among educated Africans.

That this was indeed the serious purpose of the Festival—for all the excellent entertainments provided by many of the participating countries—was made plain by the prominence given in its scheme to the Colloquium on 'The Significance and Function of Negro Art in the Life of the People and for the People'. This was, in fact, ceremonially opened on 30 March, two days before the Festival itself, by President Senghor and the French Minister of Cultural Affairs, M. André Malraux, in the chamber of the Assemblée Nationale, and continued until 7 April.

A team of thirty experts from Africa, Europe, and America had been selected by the Société Africaine de Culture in consultation with U.N.E.S.C.O.; between them they provided a remarkable coverage of the many aspects of African artistic achievement, including tribal and contemporary sculpture, painting, music and dance, literature both oral and written, drama, and even cinema. In addition, a larger number of 'observers' were permitted to contribute, and there was also a substantial audience in attendance. Simultaneous translation arranged by U.N.E.S.C.O.—an indispensable part of such a bilingual meeting—was unfortunately available only to the thirty and not to the observers and audience, among whom were a surprisingly large number of English-speaking West Africans. It is most important that wide-ranging conferences such as this—a kind of parliament of the African arts—should play an equally central part in future Festivals.

In the interests of future gatherings, a sympathetic but candid account of the Colloquium should not ignore certain avoidable organizational obstacles which impeded its effective work. The thirty experts, who had travelled hundreds or thousands of miles in order to pool their very varied knowledge and opinions, found themselves, to their amazement, divided into three commissions (meeting without benefit of simultaneous translation) whose terms of reference were to a great extent mutually inclusive, so that each participant was uncomfortably aware that discussions relevant to his own were proceeding collaterally elsewhere. This curiously perverse arrangement fortunately broke down after two or three days and gave way to plenary sessions, which elicited many valuable contributions both prepared and unprepared.

Again, written papers (*rapports*) had been assiduously collected from the thirty and from many others during the preceding months and copies of these both in original and in translation were available to those who knew where and when to secure them. With certain heavily inflated exceptions they represented an important corpus of fact and opinion on all aspects of the Negro arts and a suitable basis for the deliberations of the Colloquium.

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But the organizers, having rightly decided that these papers should not be read out, further decided that they should not be formally discussed either, and they were not, although they were occasionally quoted by speakers who happened to have read them. In the event, it would have been more logical to have commissioned the papers from experts who were not to attend the Colloquium. Yet, for all the oddity of this procedure, the result was greatly to increase the total output of the meeting, no doubt to the benefit of the publication which is to perpetuate its results. And in general it must be said that the goodwill which was evident on all sides, in the Colloquium and throughout the Festival, was sufficient to overcome all procedural and mechanical obstacles.

The content of such discussions is difficult, and indeed unprofitable, to summarize. It is not to be expected that they should push forward the frontiers of our knowledge (as might happen at much more specialized meetings of experts); their purpose is rather the consolidation, exchange, and propagation of existing knowledge, and the formulation of prognoses. Since the Colloquium included people concerned both with traditional arts and with modern developments, it was inevitable that the big question stalking the discussions, whether in the foreground or the background, was: what relationship exists, or ought to exist, between the tribal arts and the contemporary arts of Africa? As the Report adopted at the final session puts it: 'The Colloque has examined as a matter of priority a problem which seems to dominate the present situation of Negro arts: these have grown in a cultural environment governed by traditional values by which they have been marked in a direct and deep way. As this cultural whole is subjected today to quick transformations, it is important to keep the authenticity of Negro arts without freezing them so as to make them sterile and conservative, and to make them live in a modern society without deforming them.' M. Malraux, in his rhetorically effective opening speech, had suggested that the wellsprings of the tribal art had already dried up, so that we must henceforth regard the tribal sculptures, like those of ancient Greece, as the relics of an extinct art, holding within themselves all that we can ever know of their meaning. This pessimistic view (welcome enough to a few militant contemporary artists) was silently negated by the presence of many research workers who are actively engaged in revealing the still flowing wellsprings in several parts of Africa, as well as by many detailed recommendations in the final Report; to proclaim that they are already dry hardly encourages that sense of urgency in research which is needed if we are to make the most of their few remaining years of life.

The concept of *négritude* did not go entirely unmentioned in the Colloquium, but the many representatives from English-speaking West Africa—where *négritude* sometimes seems to have assumed the status of an awesome bogey, threatening the establishment of a francophone hegemony in the cultural field—must have come away feeling that its dangers and its aggressive potential had been greatly exaggerated. It appeared as an essentially friendly concept, roughly equivalent to 'Negro humanism', nebulous in character, but desirably so, since it admits of constant reinterpretation and of development according to what is put into it; it can subsume cultural diversity as easily as cultural unity, and if the anglophones are inclined to the dialogue, they have it in their power to influence its content, whether under its present name or another.

The considerable participation of American Negroes in the Festival and the Colloquium was most valuable and greatly to be welcomed, at this and future Festivals, all the more so because it decisively undermined any incipient tendency that there may have been to a racialistic, albeit benevolent, assumption of correlation between skin colour and culture. Although the American Negroes were genuinely interested in African culture, their artistic achievements as presented at Dakar were demonstrably a part of United States culture, seemingly uninfluenced by their African origins. *Négritude*, it would seem, might more aptly have been named *Afritude*.

Finally, it should be noted that this Colloquium should really be considered in conjunction with the two major exhibitions of the Festival, constantly referred to in the discussions, which regrettably could not for technical reasons be adequately illustrated by lantern slides. The great exhibition of the tribal sculpture at the fine new Musée Dynamique (planned by Professor Jean Gabus of Neuchâtel) displayed African art on an unprecedented scale both in historical depth and in geographical breadth, and perhaps provided the most concrete evidence of *négritude* yet seen. The exhibition of contemporary art at the Palais de Justice, on the other hand, was an almost uniformly embarrassing demonstration of the alienation of the contemporary artists as a result of excessive subservience to the International Style of Western Europe and America—pardonable enough so long as their patrons are almost exclusively non-Africans.

(Communicated by Mr. William Fagg, Chairman, United Kingdom Committee for the Festival)

### *The Third International Conference of Ethiopian Studies*

THE Third International Conference of Ethiopian Studies held at Addis Ababa, 3–8 April 1966, under the auspices of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies of the Haile Sellassie I University, was the first to take place in Ethiopia, the two previous gatherings having met in Rome and Manchester, in 1959 and 1963 respectively.

By far the largest of the series to date, it was attended by 116 participants. About half came from over a dozen countries, from the United States to the U.S.S.R. and from the Netherlands to Tanzania, the others being Ethiopians or other scholars resident in the country. No fewer than seventy papers were presented, ten by persons unable to attend. The largest number of papers, which geographically covered Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa, were in the fields of history and archaeology, linguistics, literature, and anthropology, other subjects including bibliography, economics, geography, law, political science, social medicine, music, and theology. The proceedings are to be published.

At the end of the proceedings it was decided to set up an International Committee for Ethiopian Studies composed of Professor Wolf Leslau of the University of California, Los Angeles; Professor Edward Ullendorff of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London; Professor J. Tubiana, of the École des Langues Orientales Vivantes, Paris; Professor E. Haberland of the University of Mainz; Professor L. Fusella of the University of Naples; Professor S. Strelcyn of the University of Warsaw; Dean Abraham Demoz of the Haile Sellassie I University's Faculty of Arts; and Professor Richard Pankhurst of the Haile Sellassie I University's Institute of Ethiopian Studies, who was also organizer of the Conference. The next Conference is to be held in Warsaw in 1969.

(Communicated by Professor Richard Pankhurst)

### *Conference on Research in the Western Indian Ocean Region*

A CONFERENCE on research in Madagascar, the Comoros, Mauritius, Réunion, and the Seychelles, sponsored by the African Research Committee, was held at the Minnowbrook Conference Center of Syracuse University from 30 October to 2 November 1965. Participants representing the disciplines of social and cultural anthropology, musicology, sociology, social psychology, political science, and history included Philip Allen (Department of State); Frederick Burke (Syracuse University); Remi Clignet (Northwestern University); L. Gray Cowan (Columbia University); Norma McCloud (Tulane University); John Middleton (Northwestern University); Allen Rawick (Library of Congress); Aidan Southall, Chairman (Syracuse University); and Peter Wilson (Yale University).