Theories and Methodologies

Bracketing the Possible: Mariama Bâ's FESTAC Memories

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Mariama Bâ's "Festac . . . Memories of Lagos" reflects on the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC), hosted in Lagos between 15 January and 12 February 1977. This context locates the festival and Bâ's reflections within the conventions of the experience economy. The Nigerian government—under Generals Yakubu Gowon and Olusegun Obasanjo—was keenly aware of the festival as an experience through which it could showcase a Pan-African vision of Nigeria, Africa, and the global Black world as firmly rooted in a proud Black civilization but poised to take its place on the capitalist global stage, propelled by Nigeria's oil wealth. A linear teleology aligned with the modernization theories of the time underpinned FESTAC '77's framing of the future, even as it celebrated Africa's past. The festival sought to direct attention to "the enormous richness and diversity of African contributions to world culture" and to "recapture the origins and authenticity of African heritage" (Southern 104; Apter 441).

If fiction works through readers' suspension of disbelief, then festivals operate by a similar logic, in the invitation for attendees to immerse themselves in the thematized experience, reveling in hopeful visions that might otherwise be contested in everyday life. In this piece, I read Bâ's "Festac . . . Memories of Lagos" as a poetic rendering of the Pan-African possibilities envisioned in FESTAC '77. Where readers' encounter of a fictional narrative world is often bracketed by real life—to which they return after reading, sometimes carrying the gifts of possibility offered by the imaginative realms of the narrative—I propose that Bâ's poem, too, dramatizes the festival's bracketing of Pan-African possibilities. Readers of the poem, like the speaker, step into the Pan-African possibilities celebrated by the

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festival before returning to global Black everyday realities that—similar to post–FESTAC '77 Lagos, Nigeria, and the Pan-African world—largely fall short of the festival's vision. This is what I term "bracketing the possible."

I am suggesting that the festival and the poem offer a bracketed set of possibilities, literally framed by the opening lines of the poem—which index a lethargic bureaucracy—and the promise anticipated by the closing line: "Lagos reinvigorates the seeds of the past to sow the future." Bâ's diction in the closing line inscribes movement toward a seemingly unstoppable future. But this future never quite arrives; it remains largely postponed. This postponement alerts readers to the multiple temporalities that frame the reading of both Bâ's poem and FESTAC '77, as I demonstrate below. Writing close to two decades after the festival, Andrew Apter describes the shift from a utopian dream to a dystopian nightmare, emblematized by the disintegrating National Theatre complex: "what was once a monument to a booming oil-economy is now crumbling and cracking at the seams, like the morally and economically bankrupt nation-state so thoroughly plundered by its ruling military clique" (443). How does Bâ's poem help illuminate the possibilities celebrated by FESTAC '77 but left unfulfilled thereafter? I suggest that Bâ's poem points to the seeds of both the crumbling of the monument and the nation-state's moral and economic bankruptcy as embedded in the everyday realities outside the FESTAC '77 bracket. To explore this reversal of possibilities, I start by examining how the poem immerses readers in the entrancing promise and pulsating excitement of FESTAC '77, transcribing its atmosphere with recurrent exclamation marks. I then explore what made this bracketed possibility impossible before turning to multiple temporalities as one way of interpreting the postponed possibilities.

Immersion is foundational to experiential activities like cultural festivals. Festivals invite participants into the spatiodiscursive enclave of a thematized experience that comes alive through a community of shared interest, the collective consumption of the experience, the coproduction of pleasure, and a deep sense of immersion (Sundbo and Sorensen). The term *immersion* refers to the emotional absorption produced by the experience at hand and its meaning-making processes (Hansen and Mossberg 210). Its synonyms—*absorption*, *engrossment*, *surrender*—evoke the literary concept of the suspension of disbelief. For Ann H. Hansen and Lena Mossberg, experiences that are "enclavised, secure and thematized" generate optimal immersion, as these factors facilitate participants' full surrender to the activity (215).

The physical settings of the festival—at the newly built National Theatre in Lagos, as well as Kaduna in the north—paired with the thematic focus on global Black cultural, intellectual, and artistic practices, formed a physical and discursive enclave into which participants were immersed. Bâ's poem marks this immersion with the shift in tone from initial exasperation at the slowness of the airport bureaucracy and traffic to the "fraternal and revitalizing handshakes" that welcome the speaker into the "atmosphere of Festac" that surrounds her. This atmosphere comes alive in Bâ's diction—colorful fabrics, gleaming bronze, fruits, flowering, feasts, frenzy—transcribing the intense energies at the festival. As Hansen and Mossberg write, the feeling of security in an experiential activity enables participants to suspend distractions and step into "a separate world of enhancement where all the worries and hardships that they face in their ordinary lives disappear" (215), and Bâ's poem depicts that same melting away of everyday knots, as delegates step into FESTAC '77's atmosphere. The Pan-African ethos produced a shared orientation toward Black affirmation embodied by the "fraternal and revitalizing handshakes." This spirit of affirmation and possibility was partly underwritten by Nigeria's oil money, which reportedly allowed the government to fund all seventeen hundred invited guests, in addition to major construction projects (Southern 105). As Bâ reports: "Finished public works and construction sites testify to large financial investments! / New: the buildings of the 'village,' new: the National Theatre in the shape of a kepi; / Perched high up, the new Tafawa Balewa Square!" The spirit of renewal is tangible in

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public works, brand-new buildings, and the state's largesse. However, this renewal's demise was already underway in Nigeria, even before the speaker's immersion into the FESTAC '77 enclave, as signaled by the sluggish bureaucracy at the airport, in the opening lines:

> Lagos airport . . .
> Slowness of administrative formalities; slowness of luggage arriving!
> Slowness again: the journey to the city . . .
> Finally, fraternal and revitalizing handshakes!

The speedy renewal promised by large financial investments from oil wealth—what Michael John Watts calls "fast capitalism" (Pred and Watts, ch. 2)—was already being slowed down by the apathetic moral and civic infrastructure described in these lines. To be sure, Bâ's poem nudges readers to overlook this sluggishness, as it is quickly outpaced by FESTAC '77. This nudge was persuasive at the time of publication of the poem in 1977. But reading the poem in 2024, I am compelled to revisit the two faces of Lagos in the opening and closing lines, and to consider the question of temporality for a 2024 reading of both FESTAC '77 and Bâ's poem.

There are three timelines at play in my engagement with Bâ's poem. First is the temporality of the festival and the poem's publication date, in February 1977. Second is the timeline of Nigerian nationalism and its anticipated petrofutures, since the festival "signaled Nigeria's emergence as a significant player in global capitalism" (Apter 442). The third is the timeline of recirculation of the English translation of Bâ's poem in 2023, when the futures anticipated by FESTAC '77 and the poem have been indefinitely postponed. The closing line—"Lagos reinvigorates the seeds of the past to sow the future"—nods to the first two timelines, while inviting reflection on the third timeline: How did those seeds, of both Nigerian petrofutures and reinvigorated Pan-Africanism, fare? As Apter notes, the seeds sown in Lagos did not quite grow as expected (443). I argue that the threat to their germination was right there from the beginning. But first, temporality.

I come to these three timelines from my positionality as a dual cultural citizen, subject to both Euro-American and East African conceptions of time. A decade ago, I discovered that the rest of the world does not read time the way East Africans of my generation do. A colleague with whom I was teaching a graduate class on East African writing had just returned from a visit to Ethiopia. She remarked on her delight at city clocks in Addis Ababa that displayed time the "East African" way, with the hour hand pointing at the "correct" hour. My colleague is Ugandan, and I am Kenyan, but I immediately understood what she meant. When she explained that the hour hand pointed at two when it was eight o'clock, at three when it was nine o'clock, and so on, our South African students were shocked.[1] On my part, what I found fascinating was that the Ethiopian clocks "spoke local," because in Kenya our clocks "speak" English. So, at six in the evening, our clocks point at the number six, but when we are speaking or thinking in Kiswahili and some Kenyan languages, we read it as the twelfth hour (*ni saa kumi na mbili*). Like most East Africans of my generation, I toggle between two registers of time. In Kiswahili, the language of everyday life for many East Africans, the day starts at seven in the morning, which is read as the first hour (*saa moja ya asubuhi*), and ends at six in the evening, which is read as the twelfth hour (*saa kumi na mbili za jioni*), and then we start counting nighttime from seven o'clock as the first hour of the night (*saa moja ya usiku*).

As I think about the Pan-African liberation and solidarity imagined by FESTAC '77, it occurs to me that the rituals of formally handing back power to Africans in British colonies happened at midnight. In Euro-American time, the new day starts at midnight, and therefore liberated African futures started in Euro-American time, at midnight, not at dawn. In these rituals, indigenous understandings of time were largely set aside, even as ordinary people continued to toggle between the two time frames. Alongside my double reading of clocks,

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there is also the cyclic understanding of time that frames human existence in many African cultures. Again, I have a Euro-American understanding of life as running from birth to death, and an African understanding of life as cyclic, weaving back and forth between the unborn, the living, and the ancestral existences. Sometimes this understanding is encoded in our names—I am named after my paternal grandmother, and my parents know me as both their daughter and a manifestation of their mother and mother-in-law. These understandings of time are illegible to the modernizing chronopolitics of capitalism, which are decidedly linear.

Returning to FESTAC '77 and Bâ's poem: despite the celebration of Black civilizations, the festival embraced the teleology of modernization and progress, implicit in the conveners' "utopian vision of economic growth and modernization" (Apter 443). This Euro-American capitalist temporality—which is also the temporality of statecraft—partly explains the onset of Nigeria's moral and economic bankruptcy. Here I find Peter Ekeh's theorization of two publics in Africa and their moral logics instructive. Ekeh's essay "Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa," published in 1975, proposes that in postcolonial Nigeria, there are two publics—the primordial and the civic publics—toward which citizens adopt different moral orientations. Primordial publics, such as ethnic associations, are handled with utmost moral diligence, even though their rewards largely take the form of psychological security. Civic publics—primarily government institutions—are handled amorally, with minimum accountability and maximum extraction of material benefits (Ekeh 107).

Ekeh's perspectives are useful in reading the contrast between the sluggish airport bureaucracy, and the "fraternal and revitalizing handshakes" in the FESTAC '77 enclave. Airport bureaucracy is located in the civic public, while the FESTAC '77 enclave operated as a primordial public, as signaled by Bâ's choice of the word "fraternal." While the moral dictates of the primordial public applied to FESTAC '77, this was an enclave, bracketed off from Lagos and Nigeria at large. If Ekeh is correct, then at the end of the festival, participants left the fraternal enclave and stepped into a Lagos, a Nigeria, and an Africa where they had a largely amoral relationship toward the civic public. Crucially, the parastatals managing the oil wealth meant to power Nigeria's utopian futures were located in the civic public, making them prone to amorality. In no time, plunder and moral decay cannibalized the FESTAC '77 vision of Nigeria's oil-fueled future. Ironically, FESTAC '77's alignment with the Euro-American capitalist temporality of progress located its dreams of freedom outside the moral accountability that, at the time, protected the primordial public from plunder.[2] This is one way in which the seeds of decay lay at the core of FESTAC '77.

At a second level, the seeds of degeneration were in the bricks and mortar of the National Theatre. The theater, commissioned for completion in time to serve as a festival venue, was designed by the Bulgarian architect Stefan Kolchev and built by a Bulgarian construction company, Techno Exporstroy LTD, which was registered in Nigeria in July 1976. This company had two Nigerian directors, one of whom, Alhaji Sule Katagum, had served as the chairperson of the Federal Civil Service Commission between 1959 and 1973. The National Theatre was designed as a replica of the Bulgarian Palace of Culture and Sports. Wole Soyinka ponders whether the "supracultural monstrosity" is the National Theatre of Nigeria "[o]r of Bulgaria, where the concrete carbuncle was lifted, then grafted onto Lagos marshlands" (110). Soyinka further writes that he and others had to wage a fierce battle "with the Festac moguls before a Nigerian architect could be provided a few miserable naira to set up an exhibition of African indigenous architecture" at the National Theatre (111). Upon completion, it was immediately obvious that the theater looked like a general's cap—which Bâ nods to in the word "kepi."

The threat of the National Theatre's disintegration lay in its concrete. The edifice was ill suited to the tropical climate of Lagos. It was poorly ventilated, with limited natural lighting, and therefore energy intensive to keep it cool and well lit. These must have been minor concerns in 1977, with

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Nigeria's abundant oil wealth, but even if Nigeria had stayed liquid, oil wealth would be hard put to address the poor choice of building materials for Lagos's climate. Opeyemi Adeola Asaju and her coauthors write that the cement and roofing material started cracking under the intense tropical sun, and rain leaked through the roof (124–25). Soon, the building started to literally sink, while its interior and the surrounding area fell into disrepair, since a proper maintenance plan was never implemented (Bons et al. 60–62). In 2020, the Nigerian government signed a private-public partnership to rehabilitate the theater complex. The theater was reopened on 12 July 2024. The complex that Soyinka called "that general's cap or Christmas cake of a structure" now bears his name (110): President Bola Ahmed Tinubu renamed it the Wole Soyinka Centre for Culture and the Creative Arts in honor of Soyinka's ninetieth birthday, which was on 13 July 2024.

Thinking about the Bulgarian transplant alongside Ayala Levin's reflections on modern architecture's encounters with hot climates offers other insights. Levin notes colonial architecture's enmeshment with discourses about the tropics as lethargic, diseased, and degenerate: "tropicality was the reason for the backwardness of tropical people," and so progress necessitated alienating the local elite-in-the-making from their environments, whether climatic or social. Thus, "[t]ropical architecture would remedy reclothed subjects by rebuilding their environment" (25). While Bulgaria had no colonial role in Africa, the Bulgarian architect's disregard for Lagos's climate and appropriate building materials for the region mirrors colonial architecture's aspirational reprogramming of natives and nature alike. But the sun, soil, and rain reprogrammed the Bulgarian building.

Given the National Theatre's standing as the spectacular symbol of the renewal imagined by FESTAC '77, its degeneration uncannily mirrors the degeneration of that aspiration, in Nigeria and the Pan-African world at large. In her poem, Bâ nods to her compatriot David Diop's poem "Call," in the lines, "I hear your accompanying progressions, not 'the veiled tom-tom of Black despair' / But the 'thousand choirs of negritude rediscovered.'" Reading the poem at this temporal juncture, the ambiguity in another of Diop's poems, "Africa," from the same 1962 collection, comes to mind. The poem maps Africa's tragic history of subjection, and for a moment the speaker seems resigned to an Africa surrendered to violation, before a voice interjects:

> Impetuous child that tree, young and strong
> That tree over there
> Splendidly alone amidst white and faded flowers
> That is your Africa springing up anew
> Springing up patiently, obstinately
> Whose fruit bit by bit acquires
> The bitter taste of liberty.

Revisiting Bâ's closing lines in 2024, I am reminded of the ambiguity in Diop's closing lines, particularly his reference to "the bitter taste of liberty." These lines are often read as referencing the traumas of Black violation, which would be a bitter memory for the social body of the liberated nation. My discussion on the amoral relationship to the civic public prompts me to read these traumas as active wounds that continue to compromise the taste of freedom. It is from this vantage point that I understand the postponed futurity of the seeds sown in Bâ's closing lines.

Lest my reading appear surrendered to defeat like the speaker in Diop's poem, I return to Apter's summation of what FESTAC enabled:

> Seeing itself in the mirror of cultural production, at once a reflection of forgotten achievement and a self-styled "programme" for a brighter future, Festac produced a collective body in ecstasy. At its best, it demonstrated that a postcolonial African subject (whatever and wherever he or she may be) could acknowledge and celebrate its own ambivalence—its multicultural, transnational, historically "hybrid" and unstable identities—in that global language of commodification which only oil-money could afford. (461)

With the failure of capitalist logics to deliver livable futures, we nonetheless hope for renewal from the residues of previous conceptualizations of freedom.

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As Arif Dirlik reminds us, "in an ideological situation where the future has been all but totally colonised by the ideology of capital, we can ill afford to overlook critical perspectives afforded by past alternatives that have been suppressed by the history of capital" (2). The task of the present remains drawing lessons from past possibilities and replanting seeds of Pan-African futurity.

Notes

1. East African clock time is Swahili-based time. There is a six-hour difference between East African clock time and European clock time. East African clock time is calibrated to the fairly consistent sunrise and sunset times in East Africa, at 6:00 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. As such, 7:00 a.m. is read as the first hour of the day, and time is counted sequentially from 7:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m., which is the twelfth hour of daytime, before transitioning to the first hour of nighttime, 7:00 p.m., counting again sequentially up to 6:00 a.m. as the twelfth hour of the night. This clock time is not to be confused with Islamic time, which is framed around prayer time, with the evening prayer roughly at sunset, being the first prayer of the day. See Hirji 69–72 for a detailed discussion of East African time.

2. I say "at the time" because, arguably, the primordial public has largely disintegrated since the time of Ekeh's writing, loosening some of the moral edicts that previously protected it. I explore this disintegration in more detail in my forthcoming article "Ujanja and Kenyan Moral Commons," with reference to the trickster figure in relation to Kenyan moral commons.

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