

# Performing the Cold War in the Postcolonial World

Theatre, Film, Literature and Things

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## 4 Theatre for Influence

### American Cultural and Philanthropic Missions in West Africa during the Early Cold War

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### American Cultural and Philanthropic Missions in West Africa during the Early Cold War

*Gideon Ime Morison*<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

The Cold War era, often said to have dominated the sphere of international politics, economics, military, and cultural relations for almost half a century from 1945 to 1991, has been and continues to be a productive field of research decades after its end following the dissolution of the USSR. The reason for this intellectual appeal is closely connected to the geopolitical landscape and unconventional methods employed by the major actors throughout a conflict that marked it out from other wars in human history. Rather than engaging in a ‘Hot War’ of direct, full-scale military confrontation, the primary combatants and their allies resorted to indirect methods, often targeted at curtailing, undermining, or countering the political, economic, territorial, and ideological influence of each other, hence the term ‘Cold War’ (Arnold and Wiener 2012, ix).

Not only did the conflict spur global transformations such as European integration and decolonization in Africa, but it also provided a platform for unwarranted interference in the domestic politics of dependent nations. It engendered unprecedented scientific and technological advancement, especially the acquisition and stockpiling of military hardware, and thus bequeathed a legacy of deep and lasting consequences for the configuration and structure of contemporary political, economic, and military alliances that still exist today (Kalinovsky and Daigle 2014; Mastny 2014). Beginning as an ideological stand-off between hitherto wartime partners – the United States and USSR – over the future of occupied Germany, the direction of the post-war world system, the Soviet/Poland boundary issue, and the nature of wartime reparations among others, the disagreement quickly gained an intense level of animosity where both sides increasingly perceived each other as the ‘enemy number one’ (Magnusdottir 2018, 4). The central point of contention was the competition for world domination across the two ‘power poles’, namely capitalism and communism. While one bloc projected a liberal (democratic) capitalist vision and values, the

other bloc championed communism as the ‘messianic’ route to global economic and political emancipation (Del Pero 2014; Falode and Yakubu 2019). Although the hostility manifested itself within a fragile but effective ‘peace impossible, war unlikely’ framework, proxy wars became a major feature of the Cold War as liberation forces and countries aligned their interests and agendas with the objectives of the main gladiators. As such, many countries across Africa and Asia were caught up in the ensuing confrontations as their territories, inadvertently, became sites for the staging of this US–Soviet theatre of influence.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to conventional forms of political and economic influence, public diplomacy and culture were also appropriated and deployed as strategic ‘soft power’ weapons to court the loyalties and curb the influence of oppositional ideologies in specific territories of interest. In West Africa, former British colonies such as Ghana and Nigeria were adopted as epicentres of Western cultural, philanthropic, and modernisation ‘missions’, particularly in the years before and immediately after independence in 1957 and 1960, respectively. As a preventive-cum-reactive measure to Soviet overtures, British and, specifically, American agencies and private cultural organisations were heavily involved in the funding of educational, cultural institutions and artists as well as the organisation, sponsorship, and hosting of collaborative artistic events ranging from drama, music, and dance to art exhibitions among others. This chapter shall discuss selected American-sponsored philanthropic missions and cultural events in these countries as examples of Cold War ‘charm offensives’ directed not just at ‘winning hearts and minds’ but also towards institutionalising liberal values in these societies. Events such as AMSAC’s 1961 Lagos Festival of Negro Art and Culture in Africa and America and the 1967 Ghana Festival of Arts shall be examined to ascertain their underlying structures of collaboration, organisation, and reception. Specifically, this chapter shall attempt to unravel the imbricated targets of these events, the choice of collaborators or lack thereof, and other organizational exigencies. Central to the argument here is an awareness that the webs of influence between the Cold War warriors and their proxies were not as straightforward and acquiescent as was earlier assumed but rather ebbed and flowed, with momentous highs and lows as well as reactionary phases.

### **American Cold War Policy and Cultural-Philanthropic Missions in (West) Africa**

It is well established in Cold War scholarship that the competition for influence between the United States and Soviet Union was conceived, framed, and implemented via programmes aimed at courting African (nationalist) leaders towards adopting their ideologies. Faced with the option of

choosing between the capitalism of the United States/Western Europe and the communism of the USSR and its eastern bloc, emerging African leaders of the 1940s and 1950s were increasingly aware that neither superpowers could be counted on to deliver on their principles for the colonial world owing to previous betrayals. This prompted the adoption of a 'non-aligned' position across Africa, which aimed at preserving the political and economic independence of the continent against neo-colonial/imperialistic influence. Although this posturing yielded differing results as could be seen in the cases of Egypt, Congo, and Ghana, non-alignment became the officially adopted position of many Third World countries following the Bandung Conference in 1955.

Non-alignment notwithstanding, the balance of sustained interactions between Africa and the competing powers meant that the continent was historically linked to the West even though these linkages were steeped in complicated pasts – slavery – and uncertain (neo)colonialist futures. In specific terms, the genealogy of United States–West African relations could be dated far beyond the Global Wars to the era of transatlantic slavery when over 13 million enslaved Africans were shipped to various parts of the New World including the United States, Brazil, and the Caribbean. Although these early interactions resulted in a collaborative 'system of slavery' described as 'an unsurpassed holocaust, larger, longer and more deeply damaging than any other the world has ever known' (Harris 2008, 175), a period of 'erratic' but informal interactions emerged following the abolition of the slave trade. This in turn led to the development and growth of 'legitimate trade' along the West African coast as well as the founding of the colony of Liberia in 1822 by the American Colonisation Society (ACS) as a contested legacy of emancipation and colonisation (Warnock, Falola, and Jalloh 2008). Nevertheless, America's relationship with the continent was mostly ambivalent as it dissociated itself from the plight of Africans through the adoption of a 'noninterventionist policy' towards the continent even as European capitalists initiated the territorial scramble for the continent. As noted by Peter Dumbuya (2008, 237), US relations with Africa during this time were characterised by a 'dual strategy'. This strategy entailed both a 'tacit recognition of Europe's colonial interest and pursuit of economic, cultural and strategic interests in key areas of the continent', especially during crises (237).

During the early waves of decolonisation, the support of the United States was predominantly tilted towards its European allies due to its 'differential policy' (see Dumbuya 2008, 242). This changed when the Soviet Union became directly involved in Africa by seeking to exploit the growing anti-colonial and nationalistic sentiments of the African people. The ensuing recalibration of the US foreign policy focus in Africa marked a shift from indifference to containment as development was deployed within the

subtle power dynamics of the Cold War to bring the continent, particularly West Africa, into the strategic orbit of the United States in both military and economic terms. In the years before and after independence in most (West) African countries, an 'ideological scramble' for loyalty was initiated between the Western and Eastern camps (Gerit 2014, 4). The United States and Soviets viewed the emerging countries or republics as 'pawns to be won over to one or the other camp' in their competition for political, ideological, and economic influence (Warnock, Falola, and Jalloh 2008, 2). Hence, in consociation with Britain, the United States outlined a set of policy objectives for Africa which sought in principle to:

- Maintain the free world orientation of the leaders of the emergent nations in (West) Africa;
- Minimise the communist influence and deny the areas to communism as well as avoid any discord with colonial powers over the process of decolonisation, given the wider implications for the NATO alliance;
- Support orderly economic development and political progress of the area through aid and assistance by former colonial powers and the free world and;
- Support the formation of federations and other larger political and economic groupings of nations in West Africa (Miller 1981, 50–105).

These policy objectives show that America's primary interest in Africa was aimed at counteracting the threat of communist incursion into the continent by using development and economic aid as an exchange mechanism for the promotion of its socio-cultural agenda through organisations such as the United States Information Service, Peace Corps as well as philanthropic institutions like the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations.

As noted in David Ekbladh's (2010) *The Great American Mission: Modernisation and the Construction of an American World Order*, the issue of rapid development was of particular relevance to decolonized Third World countries. Since the concept of development inherently 'reflects the political milieu from which it springs', development and modernisation were framed as the primary means through which these societies could 'catch up with the future' (Ekbladh 2010, 2; Citino 2014, 118). While certain development projects might claim dispassionate or objective origins, Ekbladh argues that the larger ideological framework for the delivery of these projects cannot be ignored. It was within the vortex of such ideological frameworks that American cultural and philanthropic missions in (West) Africa during the Cold War were circumscribed. Humanitarian aid, modernisation schemes, philanthropic projects, and programmes were conceived and constructed to target specific countries and regions of interest as a strategy of winning hearts and minds. Although most of these projects were

industrial in nature and technology-based, such as the provision of loans, grants, and technical supports for massive developmental projects such as the Kanji Dam in Nigeria, the Upper Volta Project in Ghana, or the Agricultural Extension Project in Guinea among others, government agents and private organisations were frequently deployed on these ‘missions’ to serve as agents for the propagation, institutionalisation, and exchange of influence.<sup>3</sup>

Apart from technological, economic, and political competition, the cultural field was also appropriated by the leading actors as an ‘arena of rivalry’ (Balme and Szymanski-Düll 2017, 2). Cultural entertainments, particularly, theatrical performances, were mobilised on a grand scale in the ideological contest. Individual artists, theatre groups, or companies were actively employed by governments, institutions, and private organisations to function as icons for the marketing of certain ideologies or lifestyles to other communities/territories. In Frances Stonor Saunders’ study (1999), *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, the importance of culture in the service of the Cold War struggle could be seen in the extent to which government agencies such as the CIA, frontline private organisations, business corporations, philanthropic foundations, and highly connected individuals were co-opted into ‘secret missions’ to propagate and institute not only the American way of life but also its version of democratic values through their cultural networks and developmental projects in the Global South. It is, therefore, not coincidental that American philanthropic foundations, especially Ford and Rockefeller, were heavily involved in the funding of educational and cultural institutions such as the School of Drama at the University of Ibadan as well as networks of elite artists such as Wole Soyinka, Derek Walcott, Efua Sutherland, Hubert Ogunde, Joel Adedeji among others (Balme 2019). Furthermore, Karen Bell (2008) claims that there was a direct correlation between US multilateral investments in propaganda (via the provision of different shades of information and psychological activities such as films, news stories, and broadcast), educational scholarship and exchange as well as other indirect cultural programmes with the two-fold goal of limiting communist influence and, at the same time, propagating American values of democracy, freedom, and the free market in Africa during the Cold War period.

### **AMSAC and the 1961 ‘Gift of Arts’**

The American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) was founded in 1957 as an affiliate of the Société Africaine de Culture (SAC) of France (Adi 2018). As an organisation committed to the promotion of African culture, AMSAC sought to create pathways of linkages between African-American writers, scholars, artists, scholars, and cultural workers with

their counterparts in Africa. The primary aim of this platform of cultural connection was to 'provide an understanding of the validity of African and Negro cultural contributions' as well as stimulate a basis for 'mutual respect between Americans and Africans, and indeed between Africans and other citizens of the world' (Geerlings 2018, 2; Adi 2018, 5).

Primarily based in New York and drawing funds secretly from the CIA, AMSAC became one of the front-line organisations for Black artistic expression and cultural promotion across America, sponsoring and hosting lectures, conferences, exhibitions, and other related events and attracted membership/patronage from the *crème de la crème* of African-American, African, and international scholars, artists, and writers.<sup>4</sup> In line with the emerging shift from diaspora-led to African-based initiatives across the broad spectrum of movements associated with Pan-Africanism, Afrocentricity, and the decolonisation project in Africa, especially from the late 1950s onwards, the yearning to host a grand celebratory event in Africa began to slowly take root within AMSAC itself. This led to the conception and hosting of the 1961 Lagos Festival in Nigeria.

Tagged a 'Festival of Negro Art and Culture in Africa and America', the festival was organised with the specific aim of bringing African-Americans and Nigerians together to explore their shared African heritage and of creating and exchanging cultural linkages or contacts for creative collaborations as well as centre-staging the influence of American educational and cultural ideals in Africa. To this end, the event was presented as a 'Gift of Arts' from the Americans to celebrate the first anniversary of the country's independence as well as the triumph of liberalism and democratic values over the forces of political-cum-cultural totalitarianism (Parker 2009). The outline of events for the festival (Table 4.1) shows that of a nine-day itinerary drawn up by Calvin Rullerson, the liaison officer for AMSAC in Lagos, albeit with no consultation or input from their counterparts in the Nigerian Society of African Culture (NIGERSAC), only two days were reserved for public musical performances, conferences, and the commissioning of AMSAC's West African Cultural Centre. The other seven days consisted of activities such as press interviews, art exhibitions, sight-seeing, private receptions, parties, and farewell gatherings which were exclusively staged for the American delegates and select Nigerian elites. It was at these mainly private events that the transnational networks, connections, and diplomatic 'lobbying' and influence were staged and reinforced (Geerlings 2018, 5–8).

At the festival itself, leading American artists/stars such as Nina Simone, Randy Weston, Natalie Hinderas, Odetta, Al Minns and Leone James, Geoffrey Holder, Brock Peters, Martha Flowers, Lionel Hampton as well as Langston Hughes presented some of their most illustrious works to the largely Nigerian audience that fluctuated from 3,000 to 5,000.<sup>5</sup> In addition

*Table 4.1* An outline of activities for American contingent at the 1961 Lagos Festival

<i>Date</i>	<i>Activities and Sessions</i>	
	<i>Morning/Afternoon</i>	<i>Evening</i>
13th December		Farewell gathering at AMSAC office, New York.
14th December		Arrival at Lagos and press interviews
15th December	Sightseeing Lagos area/press interviews	Reception at Godfrey Amachree's (Nigeria's Minister for Justice) home
16th December	Art exhibition	Evening at Kool Cats Inn, Caban Bamboo, Papingo
17th December		Dinner/Address by Governor-General Nnamdi Azikiwe
18th December	Commissioning of West African Cultural Centre/Conference Sessions	Festival
19th December	Conference Sessions	Festival
20th December		Reception at Dr John Noon and Party
21st December		Return flight to New York via Rome

*Source:* Geerlings (2018)

to performances from the 'American Negro Stars', a group of 'Nigerian Guest Stars' featuring Michael Olatunji (an American-based drummer), Olu Sowande, Femi Bucknor, Wole Soyinka, Francesca Pereire among others also performed at the festival.<sup>6</sup> However, a combination of organisational lapses meant that the reception and review of the festival were, apart from a smattering of praise here and there for a few notable artists, widely negative, especially, from the critical Nigerian press. The mainly negative commentary on the festival seems to have diminished the (hi) story and significance of the festival within the broad discourse of African-American transnational networks of relationships, influence, and solidarity with continental Africans. The obvious lack of consultation with and involvement of NIGERSAC in the organisation of the event; the disparate classification, treatment, and support for/between American 'Negro Stars' and their Nigerian 'Guest' counterparts; as well as the paternalistic notion that African-Americans could 'gift' arts to continental Africans as if it were something lacking in Africa fuelled the interpretation of the festival within the Nigerian press as a 'flop', 'faking of African culture', 'downright



insult', and 'showpiece of American neo-colonialism' (Back-Drop 1961, 3; Africanus 1962, 2; Soyinka 1962, 3). Even in his belated attempt to defend the festival from what he described as the deluge of 'singularly inordinate' criticisms that have completely ignored the positive achievements of the event, Soyinka (1962, 3) acknowledged that some aspects of the organisation and delivery of the festival were reminiscence of 'Uncle Tomish antics'. Across the spectrum of critical comments from Soyinka, Back-Drop, Ulli Beier, and Frances Onipede to mention a few, the consensus highlighted or referenced not only the organisational structure of the festival, the ordering of the performing artists, but also the performances of specific artists and groups as unworthy of the festival occasion.<sup>7</sup> According to Soyinka, the hierarchical placement of the artists via performance time allotment and introductory rites was an 'insult' to the audiences' sense of value:

I still find it incredible that Odetta, Nina Simone, Geoffrey Holder, Natalie Hinderas, etc. etc. etc. etc. should lead up to Mr Showman Hampton. This was an insult to the audience's sense of values. The man you have all been waiting for! The great, the fabulous, the one and only. Who the hell gave that man leave to presume so much on our preference!  
(Soyinka 1962, 3)

However, unlike the other critics, Soyinka leveraged his 'insider' status of featuring as one of the 'Nigerian Guest Stars' in the festival to address some of the bad press the event generated within the country. The thrust of his intervention revolved around the fact that beyond the obvious organisational lapses as evidenced in the overt attempt to centre-stage American influence and/or launder its image and relationship with Blacks as a part of Cold War diplomatic enterprise, AMSAC had broken new ground in Nigeria by demonstrating the vibrancy of 'Negro' artistry as well as a sense of commitment towards initiating and maintaining transnational linkages between African-Americans and African artists through both the festival and the inaugurated cultural centre in Lagos.<sup>8</sup>

Soyinka's defence notwithstanding, the circulation of these reviews as well as the controversies and unease they generated in Nigeria and the United States, especially, within AMSAC (and the CIA who was its secret sponsor), provided a novel scenario of non-acquiescence and resistance to imperial cultural overtures during the early Cold War period in Africa.

### **USIS and the Ghana Festival of Arts, 1967**

It has been observed by scholars that the United States Information Agency (USIA), known overseas as the United States Information Service

(USIS), played an important role in the dissemination of American cultural values as an imprint of its foreign policy during Cold War (Dizard 2004; Cull 2008). The USIA was officially inaugurated in August 1953 under the directorship of Ted Streibert.<sup>9</sup> The organisation was tasked with the grand ‘mission’ of submitting ‘evidence to peoples of other nations using communication techniques that the objectives and policies of the United States of America are in harmony with and will advance their legitimate aspirations for freedom, progress and peace’ (Cull 2008, 100). According to Nicholas Cull (101–2), these core tasks or missions were to be carried out by:

- Explaining and interpreting to foreign peoples the objectives and policies of the United States government;
- Depicting imaginatively the correlation between US policies and the legitimate aspirations of other peoples in the world;
- Unmasking and countering hostile attempts to distort or frustrate the objectives and policies of the United States;
- Delineating those important aspects of the life and culture of the people of the United States, which facilitate understanding of the policies and objectives of the government of the United States.

The organisation’s operational mission was streamlined over time in line with broader US foreign policy objectives which tried to advance or uphold the ‘freedoms’ of American society, institutions, and culture as a model of reference for other nations and cultures.<sup>10</sup> As a part of its cultural promotions mandate, the USIA developed and signed memorandums with various nations for educational and cultural exchange; facilitated major tours for major American musicians, performance groups, and artists; and sponsored the organisation or hosting of cultural festivals across various nations, especially, Africa.

One such festival – the Ghana Festival of Arts – was exclusively financed by the USIS in Ghana in 1967. Initially planned to be held sometime in 1966, the festival was shifted due to the unrest that resulted in the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah’s government.<sup>11</sup> To avoid a direct reprisal or perhaps learn from the experience of AMSAC in Nigeria, the USIS approached the Department of Art and Culture in Ghana to help organise the festival on its behalf. The festival organising committee was composed of and drew inputs from leading Ghanaian cultural icons, art aficionados, and representatives from the diplomatic corps as well as the USIS including Efuia Sutherland, A. M. Opoku, Saka Acquaye, Oku Ampofo, A. M. Bamford, Warren Brown, F. Morisseau-Leroy, K. I. McCullum, and Atta

Aman Mensah among others.<sup>12</sup> The purpose of the festival, as outlined by organisers, was as follows:

- To serve as a suitable prelude to the Ghana International Trade Fair;
- To draw attention to the high quality of creative art in Ghana by bringing together artists and craftsmen (painters, potters, sculptures, smiths and weavers, and performers in dance, drama, drumming and music);
- To set new perspectives for establishing the importance of arts and their appreciation by Ghanaians;
- To inspire the youth to develop their talents in the creative arts;
- To obtain a blueprint for a festival of arts to be held periodically on a national scale.<sup>13</sup>

Apart from the specific purposes highlighted before, a central, albeit unstated, goal of the festival was the celebration of what has been referred to as the 'freedom of artistic creation and interpretation' which was considered suppressed in previous regimes. In his opening speech at the festival, Oku Ampopo averred that:

Without this freedom true art is impossible to achieve. Time was when artists stood in grave peril: they have to be careful what they represented lest an untutored but powerful eye should see in their handiwork some abstruse form of subversion or misguided ideology. This is probably an aspect of the February Revolution which has not struck many of us, but I would like to assure Mr Deku that this blessing is real and that our appreciation is profound.<sup>14</sup>

According to the breakdown of events (Table 4.2), the festival offered a platform for the exhibition of diverse cultural entertainments and artefacts comprising art exhibitions and traditional craft demonstrations, puppetry, drama, traditional cum modern dances, and music not only to Ghanaians but also to the many international business people and tourists who visited Accra for the trade fair. These performances, offered in the form of concerts, featured both established and emerging cultural groups across selected regions including the Ghana National Orchestra and Choir, the Ghana Dance Ensemble, the Arts Centre Drama Group, the Workers Brigade Drama Troupe, the Accra Chamber Musical Group, etc.<sup>15</sup> The array of traditional Ghanaian/African cultural displays exhibited in performance, especially in dance, covered a broad range of movement aesthetics from Sikyi, Kundum, Adowa, Atsiagbekor, Gahu, Sohu, to Ijaw, and Dahomey dances and were supplemented by the performance of Randy Weston as the

Table 4.2 A breakdown of events at the Ghana Festival of Art, 1967

Date	Performances/Groups		Drama	Exhibition/Demonstration	Venue	Time
	Dance	Music				
25th and 26th January	Concert of African dances (Ghana Dance Ensemble)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Art exhibition (12–6 pm)</li> <li>• Demonstration in Kente weaving, pottery, and carving (2–6 pm)</li> </ul>	Arts Centre	8:30 pm
27th and 28th January			<i>Awo Ye</i> (The Workers Brigade Drama Troupe)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Art exhibition (12–6pm)</li> <li>• Demonstration in Kente weaving, pottery, and carving (2–6 pm)</li> <li>• Art exhibition (12–6 pm)</li> <li>• Demonstration in Kente weaving, pottery, and carving (2–6 pm)</li> </ul>	Arts Centre	8:30 pm
29th January						
30th January	Concert of traditional music and dances by (a) the James Town Ga Adowa; (b) the Damas Choir; and (c) the Badu Atta Mmenson			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Art exhibition (12–6 pm)</li> <li>• Demonstration in Kente weaving, pottery, and carving (2–6 pm)</li> </ul>	Arts Centre	8:30 pm
31st January	Concert of Music: Coleridge Taylor's <i>HIAWATHA</i> and African Airs by the Ghana National Choir			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Art exhibition (12–6 pm)</li> <li>• Demonstration in Kente weaving, pottery, and carving (2–6 pm)</li> </ul>	Arts Centre	8:30 pm
1st February	Concert of traditional music by (a) Akpalu Group; (b) Saparewa; and (c) Accra Chamber Music Group			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Art exhibition (12–6 pm)</li> <li>• Demonstration in Kente weaving, pottery, and carving</li> </ul>	Arts Centre	8:30 pm

2nd February	Concert of traditional music by (a) Duringa; (b) Nenyio Choir; and (c) xylophone music by Kakraba Dagarti	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Art exhibition (12–6 pm)</li> <li>• Demonstration in Kente weaving, pottery, and carving (2–6 pm)</li> </ul>	Arts Centre	8:30 pm
3rd and 4th February	<i>Sons and Daughters</i> (Arts Centre Drama Troupe)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Art exhibition (12–6 pm)</li> <li>• Demonstration in Kente weaving, pottery, and carving</li> </ul>	Arts Centre	8:30 pm
5th February		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Art exhibition (12–6 pm)</li> <li>• Demonstration in Kente weaving, pottery, and carving (2–6 pm)</li> </ul>	Arts Centre	8:30 pm
6th February	Jazz Concert by Randy Weston	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Art exhibition (12–6 pm)</li> <li>• Demonstration in Kente weaving, pottery, and carving (2–6 pm)</li> </ul>	Arts Centre	8:30 pm
7th February	Concert of African dances by the Ghanaian Dance Ensemble	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Art exhibition (12–6 pm)</li> <li>• Demonstration in Kente weaving, pottery, and carving (2–6 pm)</li> </ul>	Arts Centre	8:30 pm

Source: Official Programme for Ghana Festival of Arts. PRAAD/GFA/1967/145

headlined guest artist for the festival. Although the festival was widely publicised, no official numbers of spectators were released as a measurement of its reception. However, available details in the statement of accounts rendered by the festival organising committee show that the total amount realised from the sales of tickets for the festival at the rate of 1 Cedi and 50 Pence stood at 747.08 Cedis which, therefore, implies that about 498 people acquired tickets for the event.<sup>16</sup> While this may seem a low figure – a strict reading which could suggest that the event did not generate as much interest as the sponsor and organisers would have wished, such a reading may not, however, tell the full story. This is because theatrical events of this nature, especially in Africa – whether organised and/or sponsored by governments or private entities – generally tend to attract a huge number of ‘special guests’ (government officials, diplomats, military officials, senior politicians, and business executives) who are often issued complimentary tickets that include free entry to major entertainment events not only for the holders but also for family members plus entourage (including security details, colleagues, and sometimes friends). Given this, it is quite likely that the total number of people who attended the festival was larger than what was captured from the event’s box office.

The overwhelming nationalistic outlook of the festival in terms of the outline of events and the number of local experts-cum-artists involved in its organisation and eventual delivery as well as the fact that it was presented within an ambience of the boisterous economic activities of the trade fair would suggest a lack of external influence or control. Nevertheless, the moderating influence and power of America remained palpable. For instance apart from the fact that all expenses for the festival were covered by the USIS including accommodating festival organisers at its offices throughout the planning phase as well as the obvious but unstated agenda of ‘freedom’, the festival almost coincided with the first anniversary of the February Revolution that led to the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah (missing the actual date by a few weeks).<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the artists selected for the event and the contents of their presentations were often direct or thinly veiled attacks on the former regime and critiques of dictatorship, authoritarianism or totalitarianism in general.<sup>18</sup>

### **Betwixt the Festivities: A Concluding Insight**

In the final examination of these festivals, it is conspicuous that both convergences and divergences exist in their process of organisation, performance, and reception. While it could be argued that the festivals belong to the same broad historical period, namely, the early Cold War, and were conceived in line with the dominant ideas within the rubrics of the major actors’ foreign policy agendas, the fact that they were organised

by different organisations, in different calendar years, under differing contextual circumstances and in different territories with a different mix of targets, organisers, actors, participants, and audiences presents an uneven landscape for the formulation of generalisations. Nevertheless, there are shared characteristics on which a comparative overview of these events could be supported.

The events were directly organised, presented, and bankrolled by American organisations – AMSAC in 1961 and USIS in 1967 – one a private organisation later revealed to be a conduit for CIA funds and the other an outright government agency for the propagation and curation of American values, interests, and image abroad. The American influence/agenda remained unmistakably predominant at these events. For instance, the Lagos ‘Gift of Art’ Festival was presented as a showcase of American contributions and connections to Nigeria’s nascent democracy via ‘Western’ education as eminently symbolised by the then Governor-General Nnamdi Azikiwe’s linkage to Howard University and alumni Langston Hughes, Andrew Mann Bond etc. Even though AMSAC may have overreached in its ostensible ‘Americanisation’ of an event supposedly hosted to commemorate Nigeria, the rather subtle approach adopted by the USIS (perhaps learning from the AMSAC experience) was not enough to disguise the American grip on the Ghana Festival of Arts. Organised mostly by Ghanaians to celebrate and promote Ghanaian national culture and arts, and featuring mostly Ghanaian artists/groups, the Ghana Festival of Arts could be interpreted as a cultural event that was organised in support of the pro-American National Liberation Council (which replaced Kwame Nkrumah’s loosely pro-Soviet government) and an avenue to woo public acceptance of American values and worldview while also strengthening America’s presence in Anglophone West Africa. Although there are no direct official parameters with which to measure the extent of the public reception of these post-Nkrumah diplomatic overtures, the absence of reactionary voices against it in comparison to the Lagos event tends to suggest that the USIS earned a modest victory via a strategic deployment of the subtle-participatory approach by relying on the administrative and creative capabilities of Ghanaian experts, art aficionados, and artists in the planning and delivery of the festival unlike the overtly unilateral approach utilised by AMSAC in the Lagos Festival.

Furthermore, as could be deduced from the above, the reception of the theatrical events under consideration, especially within the elite community in these countries, was not only marginally shaped by the nature of relational currents between the influential powers but also by the level of involvement of local actors in the organisational and delivery process. Although there is no archival evidence from the American side to substantiate this claim, it is not farfetched to assert that the bad press that trailed

the AMSAC event in Lagos may have spurred or necessitated a change in approach within the USIS for the organisation and delivery of the Ghana Festival of Arts. This is because the prevailing circumstances, timing and season for the staging of the event in Ghana were not amendable to an overt celebration of American influence, but the projection and engendering of national sentiments via cultural and economic prospects to shore up the bases of support for the new government. The constellation of these forces seems to have provided the perfect atmosphere for the deployment of the American ‘soft power’ arsenal to deflect the potential impact of its hard power (Nkrumah’s overthrow) on the emergent ‘free’ society on the continent.

## Notes

- 1 The research for this chapter received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme (Grant Agreement No. 694559 – Developing Theatre).
- 2 Territories like Vietnam and the Korean Peninsula in Asia as well as Congo, Mozambique, Angola, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Ghana, etc., in Africa were sites for the staging of US–Soviet ‘Theatre of Influence’ as forced political changes, coups, and wars were fought with the United States and Soviet Union backing opposite sides either covertly or overtly. See Shubin (2008) and Westad (2007).
- 3 For details of American investment in the dam projects in Nigeria, see Wagland (1969). For the sources of funding for the Volta River Project, see Noer (1984) and Directorate of Intelligence, “Ghana’s Volta River Project: A Limited Success,” *Declassified CIA Intelligence Memorandum*, accessed September 15, 2019, [www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T00875R001700010003-6.pdf](http://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP85T00875R001700010003-6.pdf). For Soviet investments in Guinea, see: Iandolo (2012).
- 4 Before the revelation of CIA’s involvement in AMSAC became common knowledge in the late 1960s causing a mass desertion and dissociation from the organization, AMSAC had broad-based support and patronage, boasting in excess of 400 members including both African-Americans and Europeans. Among its prominent European members were Rosa E. Pool, Paul Bremen, and P.J. Idenburg. See Geerlings (2018).
- 5 The exact number of audiences at the festival across the two nights cannot be ascertained. As shown by Geerlings, while one estimate holds that there were about 5,000 people in attendance on the first night of the festival, a local reporter puts the number at 3,000. See Geerlings (2018, 9).
- 6 Apart from the individuals mentioned, there were also performances from Nigerian-based groups. The groups that featured in the festival included a Tiv Women dance group, Atilogwu Dancers, and the Alum War Dancers, whose performance became not just infamous but one of the centrepieces of ridicule as well as source of harsh criticism and reviews to the festival, especially within the Nigerian elite and popular media. Critical comments about the festival appeared severally on prominent newspapers across the country including but not limited to *Daily Times*, *Daily Express*, *Morning Post*, etc.



- 7 The performances of Geoffrey Holder, Lionel Hampton, and the Alum War Dancers were particularly dismissed as frivolous, insulting, and lacking in quality cultural artistry. See Back-Drop (1961) and Soyinka (1962).
- 8 The AMSAC Cultural Centre was located at #4/6 Oil Mill Street, Lagos.
- 9 The work done by several committees and organizations provided the basis and laid the groundwork for the establishment of USIS as a federal agency. See Cull (2008, 100).
- 10 The core of America's values and democracy is tied to the 'four freedoms' – freedom of speech and expression, freedom of every person to worship God in his own way, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. See Franklin D. Roosevelt Annual Message to Congress, January 6, 1941, *Records of the United States Senate SEN77A-H1*, Record Group 46, National Archives, [www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=flash&doc=70#](http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=flash&doc=70#); see also McVety (2014).
- 11 It is widely held that the United States via the CIA played a crucial role in the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah's government in 1966. See Mwakikagile (2015).
- 12 An analysis of the minutes of the festival organising committee show that the following were involved in the planning and delivery of the event: Dr Oku Ampo (Chairman, Mampong-Akwapim), Dr Warren Brown (Cultural Affairs Officer, USIS), Dr E. Amu (African Studies, University of Ghana), Mr A.M. Opoku (African Studies, University of Ghana), Mr Atta Annan Mensah (African Studies, University of Ghana), Mr N.Z. Nayo (African Studies, University of Ghana), Mrs Efua Sutherland (African Studies, University of Ghana), Mrs Esther Ocloo (National Food and Nutrition Board), Mrs Doris Davis (P. O. Box 4335, Accra), Mr A.M. Bamford (Arts and Culture), Mr R.A. Ayitee (Arts and Culture), Mr Frank Parkes (P. O. Box 4335, Accra), Mr Guy Warren (Achimota), Mr Joe N.O. Armah (Radio Ghana), and Mr John K. Fosu (Secretary, USIS). See Public Records Administration and Archives Department (PRAAD), Minutes of the 7th Meeting of the Arts Festival Committee, PRAAD/GFA/1967/36.
- 13 Press and Broadcast Release, Department of Art and Culture. PRAAD/GFA/1967/171; Official Programme, Ghana Festival of Art. PRAAD/GFA/1967/145.
- 14 Speech delivered by Dr Oku Ampo at the opening of the Ghana Festival of Art 1967 on 29 January 1967. PRAAD/GFA/1967/142.
- 15 Some of the regional artistic groups selected to perform at the festival included Akpalu Group (Volta Region), Saperewa (Ashanti), Duringa (Upper East Region), Nenyio Choir (South Dayi District, Volta Region), and Kakraba Dagarti (Legon, Greater Accra).
- 16 Statement of Account in connection with the Arts Festival. PRAAD/GFA/1967/229.
- 17 For details of events that led to the overthrow of Kwame Nkrumah, see Gocking (2005, 148), Berry (1995, 26).
- 18 Songs from specific artists/groups contained overt criticism of Nkrumah's regime. The most notable in this regard were those written and presented by the Akpalu Group (Anyako). For example 'Dzidudua ye dzim Nkrumah wonyea nyeme lolo ge o' (The government demands that I come to perform; if it had been Nkrumah's government I would not have come). 'Nkpulo gome do da ne menyene nenema o, Ghana gbagba ge' (Sweep him away, lest Ghana be ruined). 'Dzata menyena bena anyononoe le gbea dzi o' (The lion did not know a killer was on the way). See Programme for A Concert of Ghanaian Music (Art and Traditional). PRAAD/GFA/1967/180.

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