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**Dakar 66: Chronicles of a Pan-African Festival**  
**Quai Branly Museum, Paris**  
**16 February-15 May 2016**

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Accepted for publication in *African Arts* (2017) 50 (1), pp. 80-82 published by MIT Press for the Regents of the University of California. The original publication is available at: [https://doi.org/10.1162/AFAR\\_r\\_00333](https://doi.org/10.1162/AFAR_r_00333)

In April 1966, thousands of artists, musicians, performers and writers from across Africa and its diaspora—including Duke Ellington, Wole Soyinka and Aimé Césaire—gathered in the Senegalese capital, Dakar, to take part in the First World Festival of Negro Arts (Figure 1). Held against the backdrop of African decolonization and the push for Civil Rights in the United States, the event was widely hailed as the inaugural cultural gathering of the black world. The brainchild of Senegalese poet and president Léopold Sédar Senghor (Figure 2), the festival was organized by the *Société Africaine de Culture*, an offshoot of the *Présence Africaine* publishing house, piloted by Senghor's compatriot, Alioune Diop.

An exhibition at the Quai Branly Museum in Paris, *Dakar 66: Chronicles of a Pan-African Festival* (Feb-May 2016) marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the event. The exhibition led the visitor through the organizers' vision, the preparations for the festival, and the complex range of responses it elicited from visitors. Using many previously unseen photographs, rarely seen documentary films, newly filmed interviews with participants, and memorabilia produced to accompany the event, it captured the festival's idealism and practical successes but did not shy away from its entanglement in Cold War politics, or the later rejection of its cultural politics at the more radical Pan-African festival held in Algiers (1969). Much of the material exhibited was collected by scholars working on the PANAFEST Archive project, which seeks to construct an archive of four major Pan-African festivals of the 1960s-70s (Dakar 66, Algiers 69, Kinshasa 74, Lagos 77). The museum also organised two separate events with the exhibition curators, the first centred on the Dakar festival, the second placing the festival within the wider context of decolonization and the evolution of Third Worldism in the period from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s.

Unfortunately, the exhibition space, the Atelier Martine Aublet, was small, cramped and rather inflexible with the exhibition having to work round its limited number of fixed TV monitors and display cases. However, the exhibition's many strengths allowed it to overcome these practical obstacles, and the three curators, Sarah Frioux-Salgas, Dominique Malaquais and Cédric Vincent (the latter two are co-directors of PANFEST Archive) are to be congratulated for the breadth of their vision in their presentation of the festival to their audience.

A key story told by the exhibition was that of the participation of the US delegation. In 1930s Paris, Senghor had been inspired by the Harlem Renaissance and the jazz age to develop the concept of Negritude, which promoted black pride amongst France's colonial subjects. US participants were thus amongst the most eagerly anticipated guests in Dakar: Duke Ellington, the legendary jazz man (Figure 3); Langston Hughes, the elder statesman of African-American literature; and an ageing Josephine Baker, the 'black Venus' from Missouri, who had wowed Paris in the 1920s. For Senghor, these figures embodied the cultural bond between Africa and people of African descent.

It did not go unnoticed, however, that participants were largely drawn from an older generation, viewed as politically and aesthetically conservative by younger, more militant figures. The exhibition revealed through an interview with African American scholar Harold Weaver that the US delegation was infiltrated by the CIA, while the participation of Ellington's orchestra was funded by the State Department. The festival thus found itself caught in the Cold War struggle for 'influence' in West

Africa between the US and the Soviet Union. The US saw the moderate Senghor as a key ally and the festival offered the chance for some useful cultural diplomacy. Without a black diaspora, the Soviets could not play a formal role in the festival but they did help the beleaguered hosts, desperate for hotel accommodation, by lending them a cruise ship.

The complexity of this Cold War engagement was made most evident through the exhibition organizers' decision to screen in their entirety two of the great documentaries about the event, one American, one Soviet: William Greaves' *First World Festival of Negro Arts*; and *African Rhythms*, directed by Irina Venzher and Leonid Makhnatch. Greaves' film was commissioned by the United States Information Agency (USIA), a body created in 1953 to promote US interests overseas. Shot in black and white with a poetic, gravely intoned voiceover in Greaves' best Actor's Studio-trained tones, the film presents the festival as an epic event. It focuses on the US delegation, opening with images of Langston Hughes strolling along the fisherman's beach at Soumbédioune Bay, chatting and joking with locals, while in the voiceover, we hear Greaves reciting Hughes's famous poem, 'The Negro Speaks of Rivers'. This American focus is reinforced when the film gradually segues from the images of Hughes, via an image of a Benin bronze, to shots of Duke Ellington's orchestra in concert at the national stadium. If the film clearly emphasizes the role of American participants in the festival, it also ensures that the slave trade is never directly evoked: tellingly, it contains no footage of the *son et lumière* show on the island of Gorée, a centrepiece of the festival, which included tableaux recounting the island's role in the slave trade.

*African Rhythms* was made by a team from the influential Central United Film Studio. Shot in colour, unusual for documentaries of the time, the film has a vibrancy and immediacy that is perhaps lacking in the more stately Greaves film. Where Greaves stresses the historical and ideological importance of the event, the Soviet film manages to capture some of the glamour and excitement of thousands of performers descending on what was then a relatively small African city. The film also presents a wider array of performances than its US counterpart. In particular, it contains scenes from the *son et lumière* show on Gorée, thereby underlining the history of slavery in a fashion deliberately occluded by the USIA. However, despite its status as a piece of propaganda designed to present the Soviet Union as Africa's true friend, the film is significantly undermined by a commentary that rehearses a series of racist clichés about the continent (e.g. all Africans have rhythm, etc.).

For Senghor, 'the real heart of the Festival' was a vast exhibition of 'classical' African artworks, *Negro Art*, at the newly built Musée Dynamique, a monumental Classical structure, perched on a promontory overlooking the sea (Figure 4). *Negro Art* assembled some of the finest examples of 'traditional' African art, almost 600 pieces, borrowed from over 50 museums and private collectors from around the world. These were exhibited alongside a selection of works by Picasso, Léger and Modigliani, borrowed from the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, in a fascinating contrast between traditional sources and the modern masterpieces inspired by them. (Who could imagine Western museums lending such priceless items to African partners today?) The photographs of the Musée Dynamique exhibition—shown as part of a 'diaporama' of stunning images from the event—were amongst the

highlights of the exhibition, as they brought home the sheer scale of the organizers' achievements in bringing together the treasures of the 'black world'.

The exhibition concluded with three short films, focusing on the Tricontinental Conference held in Havana in January 1966 and the birth of the Black Panthers that same year, which indicated that black/Third World politics was already taking a more radical turn. This emerging radicalism cast the Dakar Festival as the conservative cousin to the revolutionary forces now coming to the fore, which would reach their apogee at the First Pan-African Cultural festival in Algiers in July 1969.

*Dakar 66: Chronicle of a Pan-African Festival* guided the visitor through these stories of the event's successes and failures with great panache, giving a clear sense of the cultural and political context in which the festival unfolded. And, in so doing, it helped to rescue the memory of an event that marked one of the highpoints of black modernism in the twentieth century.