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Performances in the theatre of the Cold War: the American Society of African Culture and the 1961 Lagos Festival

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In December 1961 the American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) organised a large music festival in Lagos, Nigeria. American celebrities such as Nina Simone, Langston Hughes, and Lionel Hampton went on AMSAC's fully sponsored trip to strengthen African-American/African connections. The performances and AMSAC's image-building will be examined through photographs of the Lagos festival. These photographs are records of staged acts – acts that were meant to generate positive images of Black America *and* to reinforce (unequal) power relations between Nigerians and (Black) Americans. The visit of the group provides an interesting case study on the intersecting histories of the Cold War, the American Civil Rights Movement, and the decolonisation of the African continent.

Keywords: African-American History; Nigeria; Cold War; Decolonisation; Performance

At 2 am on Friday, 14 December 1961, a plane landed at Lagos International Airport. On it were 38 delegates of AMSAC, the American Society of African Culture. American celebrities such as Nina Simone, Odetta, Randy Weston, Michael Olatunji, Langston Hughes, and Lionel Hampton had joined the fully sponsored trip to perform at a two-day musical festival that marked the beginning of an exchange programme for African and African-American performers, symbolised by the opening of the West African Cultural Center in Lagos.[1] The concerts, however, were the focal point of the festival. Cultural festivals such as these are often seen by historians as not 'serious' enough and are thereby often rendered virtually invisible.[2] However, the 1961 Lagos Festival offers an interesting insight into the intersection of the Cold War, decolonisation, and the Civil Rights Movement, and the role of an African-American elite in this.

Historical context: African-American/African relations

The American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) was an organisation of African-American writers, artists, and scholars. It was founded in June 1957 as a subdivision of the French Société Africaine de Culture (SAC). The majority of its 400 members were

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African American, but there were also members from abroad.[3] One of AMSAC's primary goals was to bring African Americans into contact with their African heritage. In their own words, their aim was 'to provide an understanding of the validity of African and Negro cultural contributions in order to provide a basis for mutual respect between Americans and Africans, and indeed between Africans and other citizens of the world'.[4] After 1967, membership rates sharply declined after AMSAC was exposed as an organisation that was secretly funded by the CIA.[5] It ceased to operate in 1969.

The 1961 'Festival of Negro Art and Culture in Africa and America' was meant to explore the 'relationship between the culture and art of Africa and the Americas',[6] revealing AMSAC's intellectual connection with the Négritude movement. Poet Langston Hughes, both a presenter at the Lagos Festival and a committed representative of AMSAC, thought the festival's 'effects will be long lasting'.[7] And for many of the 38 delegates, it was indeed a life-changing experience. But the festival also aroused controversy. The Nigerian press described it as a 'failure', a 'flop', and even a 'downright insult' to the Nigerian audience. Moreover, the French SAC worried that the opening of the cultural centre in Lagos was a 'rebirth to cultural colonialism'.[8]

Without doubt, the festival had both explicit and implicit political implications. Previously AMSAC had only operated from its New York office, where they organised lectures and conferences on Black culture. Slowly the attention of AMSAC moved more towards Africa itself. Between AMSAC's founding in June 1957 and the Lagos Festival in December 1961 an astonishing number of African countries, twenty in total, gained independence. The year 1960 – nicknamed the 'Year of Africa' – became a watershed in the decolonisation of the continent, and Africa became a source of inspiration to activists in the American Civil Rights Movement.[9]

As a result, a public debate arose within the United States on the relationships between African Americans and Africans, a debate that the AMSAC organisers followed with great interest. In May 1961 AMSAC held an in-house 'Special Meeting' where the concern was expressed that Africans 'look down on' African Americans. The AMSAC officials mainly blamed this on 'misleading information about American systems and institutions' in the African press, who they argued manifested a 'complete ignorance of American Negro history and contributions'.[10] They concluded that Black Americans and Africans were alienated from each other. AMSAC therefore made plans to improve the relationships, for they regarded that Black Americans and Africans shared a 'natural bond'.

This 'natural bond' manifested itself in multiple ways. On the one hand, Africa was seen as a positive example: 'In many ways African Negroes as far south as the Congo, are making more rapid progress now than American Negroes in the four hardcore, bitterly racist states (Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina and Louisiana)', AMSAC director John A. Davis wrote in 1961.[11] On the other hand, there was a somewhat paternalistic 'desire to help the new African nations', both economically and politically.

The participants of the Special Meeting of May 1961 discussed ways to improve African-American/African relations, such as realising personal contacts. The cultural centre in Lagos and the accompanying festival were not yet discussed. But as AMSAC had gained federal tax exemption the year before, large grants became available for specific projects from various entities (later revealed as CIA pass-throughs[12]). It was this financial backing that opened up the possibility for a large festival like this,

abroad. Around June or July 1961, a few months before the event, AMSAC New York decided to organise the enormous Lagos Festival at the King George V Stadium, an outdoor amphitheatre with 5100 seats, situated on the outskirts of Lagos city centre.

With their first international event, AMSAC clearly became active in what has been called the 'Ideological Scramble for Africa' of the late 1950s and early 1960s.[13] And often AMSAC was quite blunt in its anti-communism: 'If we fail', John A. Davis wrote, 'the world has taken one more step toward disorder and destruction'.[14] This 'disorder and destruction' undeniably referred to the fear that new independent nations, such as Nigeria, would fall prey to communism, a concern AMSAC shared with the British government.[15] The choice of Nigeria made sense, as it was often seen as 'the most important country in Africa'. Nigeria's large population and economy made the former colony a strategically important country in the Cold War. The vacuum that was left behind by the British administration made AMSAC's aims even more urgent. In this transitional period, the American government considered helping postcolonial Nigeria an 'excellent opportunity (…) to demonstrate to the newly independent African nations that the best way to achieve their economic and political aspirations lies in developing institutions and cooperation with the Free World'.[16]

The way to achieve these political goals was through cultural means. John A. Davis thought that 'free cultural development' in Africa was 'not possible without political freedom'.[17] Democratic principles *and* African-American achievements would both be presented in an appealing manner: a musical performance of African-American superstars. It was hardly a coincidence that the festival coincided with the one-year anniversary of Nigerian independence, which gave the event extra symbolic meaning.

AMSAC did little to cooperate with NIGERSAC, the local chapter of SAC. After a number of meetings with Raullerson, AMSAC's man on the ground in Lagos, it was concluded that cooperation was impossible because 'NIGERSAC has not yet matured'.[18] Although this somewhat paternalistic suggestion might have been true,[19] AMSAC's vigour to establish a cultural centre in Nigeria made it look arrogant, and so uncomfortably *American*. This was an 'insult' that was difficult to overcome.

'Kodak moments' in the theatre of the Cold War

The significance of 'acting' and 'theatricality' in the Cold War has been stressed by historian Tony Perucci. He argued that theatricality was a 'key weapon' during the Cold War, both in the public space and the media, used by anti-Communists *and* (radical) leftists.[20] The festival will therefore be analysed as a *performance* in the theatre of the Cold War, promoting capitalist democracy through events and photographs.

Through their immediacy and seemingly unmediated character, photographs seem to offer a more 'objective' account of history than subjective, written accounts. But of course, as Susan Sontag pointed out, photography is a 'tool of power': 'cameras arm vision in the service of power (…)'.[21] By putting these pictures into context, power relations become visible. As I will argue, the photographs of the Lagos Festival are repeatedly records of *staged* acts,[22] *performed* with a political purpose: to provide positive images of Black America *and* to reinforce power relations between Nigerians and African Americans.

A great deal of the festival was clearly designed to create press material. 'Time is short, but if possible you might have Langston Hughes visit a school and read his poetry', an internal memo stated. 'Or you might have some of the women visit a hospital. *Constant attendance at every turn* of reporters and photographers would be great if your time and contacts permit.'[23] (emphasis added) As a result, a range of 'pseudo-events'[24] were organised in Lagos, including a symbolic ribbon-cutting. These provided photo opportunities (or, to stay in the spirit of the times, 'Kodak moments') that were specifically aimed at both the Nigerian and (African-)American journalists and photographers.[25] These photographs were meant to write history, and this article is one of the first attempts to actually get this history down on paper.[26]

'Leading Africans and Americans participate in historic festival'

The festival consisted of two musical evenings that included major American stars. There were performances by Odetta, Al Minns and Leon James, Brock Peters, Nina Simone, Randy Weston, Natalie Hinderas, Martha Flowers, Geoffrey Holder, Lionel Hampton, and Michael Olatunji, amongst others, with Langston Hughes as narrator.[27] Many of the 38 invitees had never visited Africa before, and they looked forward to going to 'our ancestral *home*', as Langston Hughes put it, 'back to the roots of our culture'.[28]

When the AMSAC delegation got off the plane at Lagos International Airport at two o'clock in the morning, they were greeted by a group of Nigerian dancers and drummers. One Nigerian man came up to jazz musician Randy Weston and said: 'Well, you finally decided to come back home, you [*sic*] been gone four hundred years, what took you so long!' Weston remarked in his autobiography: 'Man, the tears were streaming down my face I was so overjoyed.'[29] Some of the delegates got down on their knees and kissed the ground.

The unlikely moment and location of the dance recital were criticised by playwright William B. Branch. Initially, he even thought it was a 'practical joke': '(…) we knew full well that people in Africa don't customarily sit around beating the drums all night'.[30] Yet, AMSAC's Calvin H. Raullerson assured the group 'it was strictly on the level': the dancers and musicians 'had been waiting at the airfield for nearly three hours to give us a proper welcome'.[31] In their newsletter, AMSAC described the music and dance as part of the 'welcoming ceremonies', suggesting it was a Nigerian initiative.[32] A majority of the delegates recalled the ceremony as one of the highlights of their visit.

In reality, these dancers and musicians, who made the participants feel incredibly welcome, were primarily booked 'for the entertaining of the Press', to prevent the journalists from leaving early.[33] This demonstrates that the programme of the participants was staged to every detail by AMSAC and all (pseudo-)events were meant to be recorded. Nevertheless, pictures of the event only appeared in the *AMSAC Newsletter*, and not in other media. In short, the dancers failed to achieve significant media attention, but were quite successful in heightening the 'Africa experience' for many of the delegates (Figure 1).

'Off-stage' performances

The carefully picked delegates were treated by AMSAC as 'guests'. Although they never received an official assignment, they were silently envisioned as 'ambassadors'

Figure 1. Press photo of the Tiv Women Dancers. Courtesy of Moorland–Spingarn Research Center (MSRC), Howard University, American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) Manuscript Collection, Box 41.

and were wined and dined accordingly. The concerts were the only obligation the delegates had to fulfil. Their nine-day programme included a farewell party in New York before departure, a sightseeing tour of the Lagos area, a number of receptions and dinners with officials, and a day off. The majority of the programme surrounding the festival was only accessible to the American delegates and a limited number of Nigerian invitees (Table 1). 'Off-stage', largely outside of the eye of the press and locals, a large part of the AMSAC trip was spent on visits that were used to (re-)establish American/African relations, and probably also on lobbying.

Trinidadian-American dancer and choreographer Geoffrey Holder (1930–2014) complained that festivals such as these contained 'more official receptions than rehearsals': 'Lagos was like Trinidad when Princess Margaret is in town: dignitaries elbowing their way around to meet the entertainers and entertainers climbing over one another to meet the dignitaries.'[34]

The first day after the festival, the group visited John Noon of the United States Information Service (USIS), an American agency devoted to public diplomacy abroad. In African countries such as the Gold Coast (Ghana), Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria, USIS used radio broadcasts, films, and publications to counter the negative media coverage of American segregation by presenting positive images of American life.[35] The boundaries between 'public diplomacy' and 'propaganda' were thus often blurry.

Another purpose of AMSAC was to renew existing African-American/African contacts. Existing connections from Lincoln University (Pennsylvania) were of key importance in this. A picture taken at the Opening Dinner on Sunday 17th December, 1961 (Figure 2) offers us a glimpse of a Lincoln graduates' reunion: AMSAC director John A. Davis, the Nigerian Governor-General Nnamdi Azikiwe, the historian

Table 1. The full programme of the Lagos Festival for AMSAC delegates from Wednesday 13 December to Thursday 21 December 1961.

	Morning & afternoon		*Evening*
Wed.13 Dec			Farewell gathering at AMSAC office New York (15 East 40 Street)
Thu.14 Dec			10 pm Arrival at Ikeja Airport [Lagos International Airport] + **Press interviews**
Fri.15 Dec	Sightseeing Lagos area **+ Press interviews**		*7.30 pm:* Reception at home of solicitor-general Godfrey Amachree
Sat.16 Dec	*4 pm:* Opening Art Exhibition		Evening at Kool Cats Inn, Caban Bamboo, Papingo
Sun.17 Dec			*8.30 pm:* Dinner, address by Governor-General Nnamdi Azikiwe
Mon.18 Dec	*9 am*: Opening West African Cultural Center	9 am. to 10.20 am: **Conference Sessions**	*8.30 pm:***Festival**
Tue.19 Dec		*9 am to 10.20 am:* **Conference Sessions**	*8.30 pm:***Festival**
Wed.20 Dec			*6.30 pm:* Reception at Dr John Noon *9.30 pm:* Supper & Party
Thu.21 Dec			*11.10 pm:* Flight back to New York, via Rome

Note: The festival and conference (both on December 18 and 19, 1961) were the only public events that were communicated to the general public. Information derived from: Howard University, American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) Manuscript Collection.

Horace Mann Bond, and the poet Langston Hughes. (Hughes and Azikiwe, incidentally, were classmates at the university in the 1920s). A year earlier, in November 1960, Azikiwe's inauguration had been attended by 30 former Lincoln schoolmates, including both Davis and Hughes.[36] Azikiwe even read one of Hughes's poems at his inauguration.[37] Transnational networks were thus at the core of this trip. Since the event coincided with the one-year independence of Nigeria, it can perhaps even be seen as a gentle reminder from these Americans that Nigeria's struggle for independence had somewhat been fuelled by the United States. On a diplomatic level, American education was used to promote democracy across Africa.[38] I do not consider it a coincidence that these Lincoln alumni were seated close to each other: this meeting was consciously used to reinforce old contacts.

Azikiwe continued to play a central role in establishing African-American/African connections. The staged photograph of the entire AMSAC delegation with him (Figure 3), taken shortly before the group's departure, was not a neutral 'souvenir photo' as *Ebony* magazine liked to call it.[39] In early memos, AMSAC had described the importance of US-trained African leaders in order to improve African views of Black Americans. '[M]isleading information about American systems', it was concluded at the Special Meeting, has 'been mitigated in the education and training of those African leaders who studied in [the United States] in Negro and other institutions'.[40]

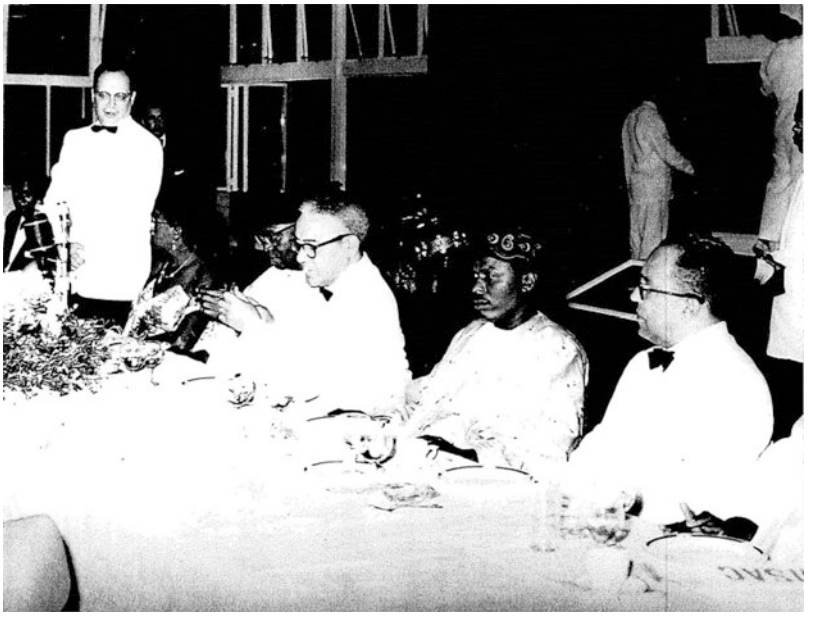

Figure 2. Picture taken at the Opening Dinner in the Independence Hall at the Federal Palace Hotel on the evening of Sunday, 17 December 1961. From left to right: AMSAC director John A. Davis (standing), Lady Abayomi (head of the Nigerian Girl Guides and founder of the Nigerian Women's Party), Governor-General Nnamdi Azikiwe, AMSAC founder Horace Mann Bond, T.O.S. Benson, (the Nigerian Minister of Information), poet and AMSAC member Langston Hughes. Davis, Azikiwe, Bond, and Hughes had all been trained at Lincoln University, Pennsylvania. Courtesy of Moorland–Spingarn Research Center (MSRC), Howard University, American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) Manuscript Collection, Box 41.

As Azikiwe was trained at an American university, historian Obi Iwuanyanwu has argued that his inauguration was seen as a 'triumph of American liberalism over Soviet socialism throughout the African continent'.[41] The photo with Azikiwe can thus be seen as an anti-Communist statement. Amongst neat suits and fancy dresses, Azikiwe's neo-African white clothes stand out.[42] He is surrounded by the same AMSAC main organisers we saw in the previous picture. The arrangement shows the social space[43] and reveals that the AMSAC board members were continuously closely gathered around the Governor-General, who was almost presented as a 'trophy' for the photographers.

Some aspects of the 'off-stage' programme displayed the propagandist purpose of the visit more overtly. One clear example of a staged 'pseudo-event' is the picture of the Nigerian modernist artist Ben Enwonwu (1917–1994) cutting the ribbon at the opening of the cultural centre (Figure 4).

This photograph also had political undertones. Although it was not officially stated, the AMSAC cultural centre in Lagos was in effect an African-American embassy on African soil. Located at 4/6 Oil Mill Street, it was situated in the embassy area of Lagos, with the American Embassy just around the corner. Moreover, Enwonwu was trained at art schools in England. Historian Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie recently argued that Enwonwu was a 'protégé of the British colonial

Figure 3. The AMSAC delegation with Governor-General Nnamdi Azikiwe (in the centre, dressed in white), Lagos, 1961. Source: Randy Weston, *African Rhythms. The Autobiography of Randy Weston* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 148. Courtesy of Moorland–Spingarn Research Center (MSRC), Howard University, American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) Manuscript Collection, Box 41.

government', as the British actively stimulated his career in the 1940s.[44] In 1953 he was even commissioned to make a sculpture of the British Queen, clearly revealing that he was accepted by the British (art) establishment. He therefore remained a somewhat conservative artist, especially in the eyes of younger generations.[45] As with the previous photographs, Raullerson, Davis, and Bond stand at the front. It is as if they almost refuse to be put in the background. Yet, their neat suits (and the lighter tone of their skin), clearly distinguishes them from the locals. The AMSAC organisers stand permissively around Enwonwu, and seemingly *allow* him to cut the ribbon. Although he is the one performing the action, Enwonwu has little individual agency here.

Photographs such as these show that the Lagos trip had a clear propagandist goal. The organisation was careful with whom they aligned in Nigeria. This photograph also reveals how AMSAC tried to stage its power on the Nigerian platform of the theatre of the Cold War. Power was given to conservative liberals that had cooperated with the former British administration, while more radical Nigerians were left out of the picture, often quite literally.

'A downright insult'

The clear focal points of the programme were the two musical evenings. AMSAC took great care in making a good impression with the invitees. An internal memo said: 'since most of these people will be professional performers, we want the best possible

Figure 4. Performance of ribbon-cutting by Nigerian artist Ben Enwonwu on Monday, 18 December 1961. From left to right: Calvin H. Raullerson, John A. Davis, Enwonwu, journalist of the Nigerian Broadcasting Company (with microphone), and Horace Mann Bond. Source: 'African-American Cultural Exchange. Nigerian and U.S. Negro Artists Blend Talents at AMSAC Festival in Lagos', *Ebony. A Johnson Publication*, 17, no. 5 (1962), 87–94:90.

facilities rigged up'.[46] The two 'star-packed nights' were widely advertised, and appeared to be the only part of the festival that was open to the Nigerian public.[47] Additional radio advertisements, posters, and leaflets were ordered last minute in order to get a full stadium.[48] According to Geoffrey Holder, there were about 5000 visitors on the first evening, while a Nigerian reporter estimated 3000 visitors.[49] Overall, the number of visitors varied because of the low entrance fee (5 shilling) and because some people left when the programme started late.

As with the daytime conference, the goal of the music festival was to exchange cultures and find common ground. American reporters were quite positive about this aim: 'Nigerian and U.S. Negro artists blend talents at AMSAC Festival in Lagos', the American magazine *Ebony* reported.[50] But the advertisement (Figure 5) for the show reveals that a true African-American/African convergence was not achieved. A distinction was made between Americans 'stars' and Nigerian 'guest stars', revealing an unequal stance.

The unequal relationship between American 'stars' and the Nigerian 'guest stars' was clearly visible in the performances. Al Minns and Leone James appeared in sporting jackets and fawn trousers (Figure 8). Musical support was provided by star musicians Randy Weston on the piano, Abdul Malik on the double bass, and Clarence Stroman on the drums. The performance was very much appreciated: 'These two dancers were just a picture of perfection and precision', one reviewer wrote.[51] One critic tried to dismiss it as 'tap dancing', but the reviews were overwhelmingly positive

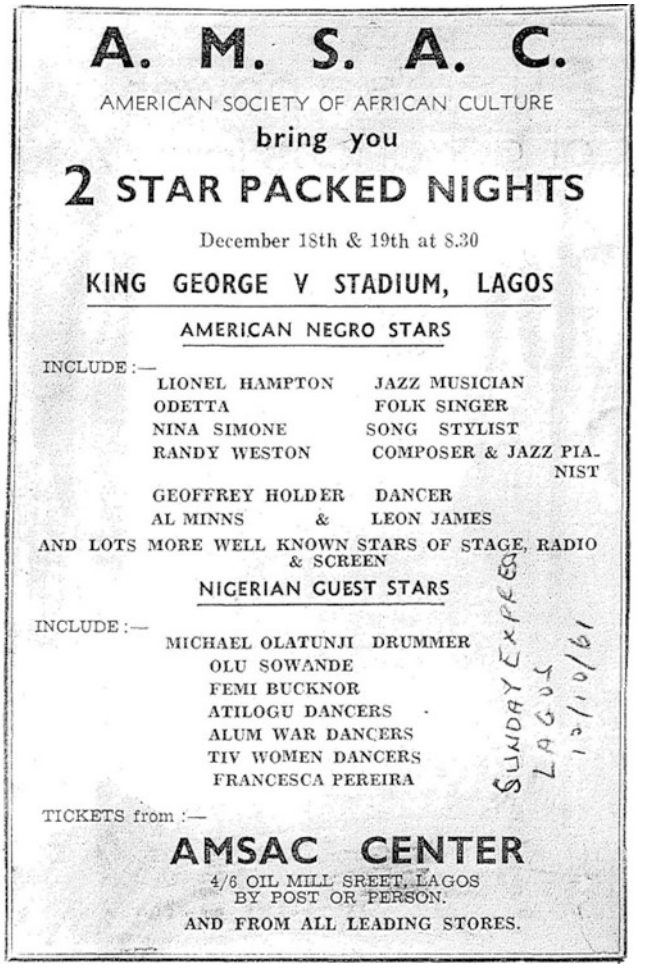

Figure 5. Local newspaper announcement for the musical programme of the festival. *Sunday Express* [Lagos], 12 October 1961. Courtesy of Moorland–Spingarn Research Center (MSRC), Howard University, American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) Manuscript Collection.

about 'Al & Leon'. Their jazz dance performance was seen as relevant, because 'Negroes in America are reputed for their jazz music which is said to have its origin in Africa.'[52] Perhaps that was exactly the reason why their African 'counterparts', the Alum War Dancers, were criticised so severely.

The Alum War Dancers (Figure 6) were described as 'a most ludicrous group'.[53] 'Dressed up in monkey skins and skulls', one reviewer wrote, 'these fellows hopped about the stage (…) like a horde of mad boy scouts'.[54] One critic wrote that they were 'not only poor in taste but a downright insult' towards Nigerians who truly represented the cultural artistry of the country.[55] This performance obviously resonated with backward, primitivistic conceptions of Africa. It was clear that an *American* vision of Africa was presented, rather than a truly 'African' image. The insult was made even worse by a performance of Geoffrey Holder, who appeared on stage in a 'typical African costume' (Figure 7). He was dismissed as a 'fellow' who 'was billed

Figure 6. The Alum War Dancers, members of the All-Nigerian Dance and Music Association, performing on the first night. Their act infuriated many Nigerian critics. Source: 'American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) Presents A Stupendous Display', *Africa*, February 1962, 11–14:14. Courtesy of Moorland–Spingarn Research Center (MSRC), Howard University, AMSAC Collection, Box 41.

to do some voodoo dance or some other rubbish like that'.[56] Moreover, the Nigerian scholar, playwright, and critic Wole Soyinka (who also performed on the first night of the festival) described the 'jazz clowning' as 'Uncle Tommish'. He especially criticised Lionel Hampton, whose performance he regarded as artificial and arrogant: 'He arrived on stage with an artificial "gone-ness" the physical manifestation of which was truly revolting.'[57]

As a result, the festival was regarded by many local journalists as a showpiece of American neo-colonialism. Although some favourable reviews appeared in the Nigerian press, negative press coverage dominated. Captions such as 'That Failure Of A Show', 'The Shortcoming of AMSAC Show' (both *Morning Post*), and 'Why AMSAC Festival Was A Flop' (*Daily Express*) speak for themselves. Instead of reinforcing Black diasporic bonds, these fierce Nigerian critics were aware that their city was being used as a 'battlefield' in the Cold War.

The severest attack came from the *Lagos Times*: 'Stop Faking African Culture'.[58] Both the American as well as the Nigerian artists were judged as 'not worth two pence a show – BY AFRICAN STANDARDS!' The bad reviews revealed the unease of the audience, who felt that mediocre artists were 'being pushed down our throats'. That included the Nigerian-born musician Michael Olatunji, who moved to the United States in 1950 and had become famous for bringing African music to America. A Nigerian critic described his performance as a 'sad spectacle'.[59] Another reviewer wrote he was merely an American 'curiosity', but '10th-grade stuff' by Nigerian standards.[60] Many newspapers also displayed an undertone that Olatunji was regarded as a betrayer of his own country. 'Who gives a damn about Olatunji here?' one journalist

Figure 7. Geoffrey Holder performing on the second night, 'dressed in a typical African costume' according to AMSAC. Source: 'American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) Presents A Stupendous Display', *Africa*, February 1962, 11–14:13. Courtesy of Moorland–Spingarn Research Center (MSRC), Howard University, American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) Manuscript Collection, Box 41.

asked.[61] If we look at the picture below, it is clear that neither of these musicians were too pleased when Olatunji enthusiastically 'joined' them (Figure 9). To the Nigerian musicians, it appeared that Olatunji had hijacked their performance. The festival was seen and presented as a primarily *American* occasion – or even an invasion.

These newspaper articles also reached African-American newspapers, which worried AMSAC. An internal memo advised to '[i]gnore the whole thing'.[62] In an attempt to smother further criticism they sent a letter to *Ebony* magazine saying that the American artists 'gave their services free (…) before their African brothers'.[63] Obviously, AMSAC was not amused about these bad reviews. Geoffrey Holder wrote to AMSAC about the bad reviews: 'The attempts of persons of African descent to elevate themselves by playing the role of secret weapon, or key role, in US-African relations, is to me presumptious [*sic*] in their view.'[64] This reveals that both Holder *and* the Nigerian audience were very much aware that the festival was not just an innocent festivity, but rather a cultural imperialist performance. 'The idea of putting on a gala performance in the King George V Stadium smells too much of American BIG Business', one critic wrote, 'and defeats its own object by making it impossible for everyone present in the audience to really hear and see ALL.'[65] So far from being passive spectators, Nigerians claimed their voice in newspapers. After all, they were the ones that had been liberated from their former colonisers, at a time when African Americans still suffered racial segregation.

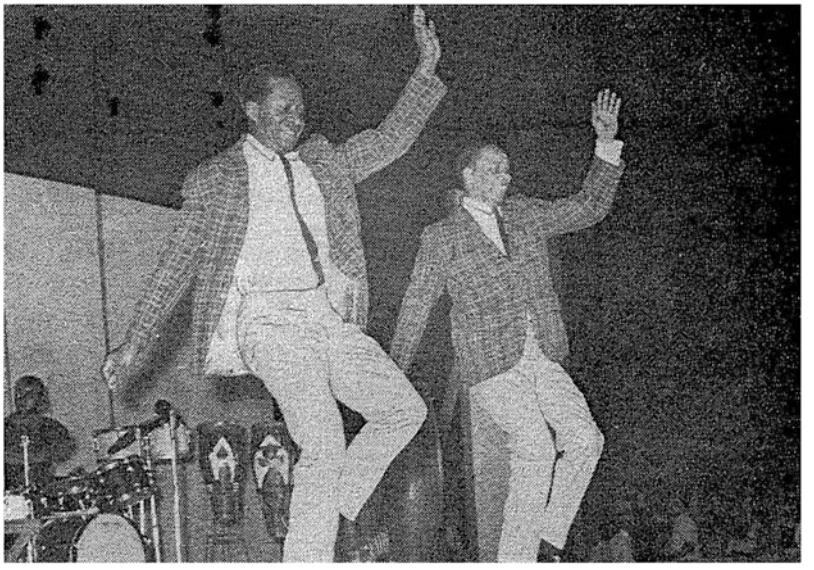

Figure 8. American dancers Leone James and Al Minns demonstrate various styles of dances on the first night. Source: 'American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) Presents A Stupendous Display', *Africa*, February 1962, 11–14:13. Courtesy of Moorland–Spingarn Research Center (MSRC), Howard University, American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) Manuscript Collection, Box 41.

Figure 9. Original caption: 'Michael Olatunji, Nigerian drummer now living in the U.S., tries the percussion instruments used by the musicians accompanying the Tiv Women Dancers of Nigeria.' Source: 'Scenes from the Lagos Cultural Festival, December 18–19, 1961', AMSAC Newsletter, 4, no. 5 (1962), 3–4:3.

Figure 10. 'Singer Nina Simone and host shake hands while other luncheon guests look on. U.S. university-trained Dr Azikiwe was Nigeria's foremost leader during his country's fight for independence, is first African to hold the post of Nigerian governor-general.' Source: 'African-American Cultural Exchange. Nigerian and U.S. Negro Artists Blend Talents at AMSAC Festival in Lagos', *Ebony. A Johnson Publication*, 17, no. 5 (March 1962), 87–94:92.

Conclusions

The Lagos festival was an attempt to create a sense of 'natural bonding' between African Americans and Africans. However, most of the Nigerian visitors were completely unaware of AMSAC's goal to explore the 'relationship between the culture and art of Africa and the Americas'.[66] The Nigerian reviews reveal that perhaps quite the opposite was achieved: the African-American visitors were still primarily seen as *Americans.* The hostility of many Nigerians towards American 'cultural imperialism' was certainly not unfounded. AMSAC did not include NIGERSAC or other local organisations in the organisation, which enraged the French SAC. Nigerians were merely envisioned as passive spectators, as democratic billboards in scripted 'Kodak moments', or, at best, as 'guest stars'.

However, despite these remarks and the negative reviews, the *symbolic* long-term significance of the festival should not be underestimated. Festivals such as these often served to strengthen the means of communication among African peoples and contributed to elevating their level of pride.[67] The Lagos Festival of 1961 is thereby a very early example of a postcolonial festival organised by (diasporic) Blacks, years before the famous World Festival of Negro Arts (Dakar, 1966) and its second

edition, held in Lagos in 1977 (also known as Festac '77). The latter even appeared to have been a slight repetition of the 1961 AMSAC festival, as it established a Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilisation in Lagos, which still exists today.

Throughout the twentieth century, African Americans played a significant role in African independence movements, both symbolically and in reality.[68] This forces us to look at the festival from a more positive viewpoint. It then becomes apparent that the festival had unintentional outcomes. Geoffrey Holder, for example, proposed to continue the American/African exchange by performing a play by Bertolt Brecht in Nigeria, 'a dead German Communist', as he referred to him.[69] Such political activism was hardly a goal of AMSAC (and the CIA who operated in the background), but it did occur. Far from being solely anti-Communist 'Cold Warriors' (secretly) financed by the CIA, the 38 participants of the festival often had their own reasons to go to Lagos with AMSAC. The invitation of people who had been involved in radical communist networks before the war, such as Langston Hughes and Rosey E. Pool,[70] requires further research.

To many, the festival proved a genuinely life-changing event. For Nina Simone, it was a significant inspiration for her political activism: 'I started to think about myself as a black person in a country run by white people and a woman in a world run by men', she wrote in her autobiography.[71] It was after Lagos that Simone celebrated her natural hair and started performing in neo-African dresses (Figure 10).

To many the African-American/African connection was not just theoretical but a reality they lived through. Meetings with officials such as Azikiwe were a source of great pride for many AMSAC guests. When jazz musician Lionel Hampton finished his performance, he walked passed Azikiwe and spontaneously put his arms around him.[72] In general, AMSAC did succeed in providing the participants – significant members of the African-American cultural elite – with a positive impression of Africa. Lionel Hampton remarked that he regarded the festival as '[t]he long-needed therapy of pride in our own African heritage'.[73]

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Notes

1. Howard University, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Washington, DC [hereafter MSRC], AMSAC Collection, Box 30, Folder 7: Lagos Festival Participants. This delegation included four members of the AMSAC organisation: Dr Horace Mann Bond, Mr and Mrs John A. Davis, and Yvonne O. Walker. The other 34 participants were: William B. Branch, Lawrence Burgan, Alex Cambrellan, Martha Flowers, Amella Goodman, Dave Gonzalez, Lionel Hampton, Laline Harris, Natalie Hinderas, Professor Willis James, Geoffrey

Holder, Langston Hughes, Booker T. Erwin, Oliver Jackson, Leon James, Virgil Jones, Bruce Langhorne, Ahmed Abdul-Malik, Al Minns, Leo Moore, Michael Olatunji, Odetta, Edward Pazant, Brock Peters, Rosey E. Pool, Al Schackman, John Sellers, Nina Simone, Clarence Stroman, James Wall, Randy Weston, Hale Woodruff, and photographer of *Ebony* magazine G. Marshall Wilson. See also '33 Americans Going to Negro Art Fete', *The New York Times*, December 3, 1961, 87.

2. Stephen Greenblatt, *Cultural Mobility. A Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 251.
3. MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 1, Folder 55; Box 35, Folder 6; Box 25, Folder 39. Interestingly, there were three Dutch members: anthologist and poet Rosey E. Pool, anthologist Paul Breman, and the Leiden African Studies Centre director P.J. Idenburg.
4. University of Sussex, Brighton, UK, The Keep Special Collections, Rosey Pool Collection, SxMs19/10/1/6: Scrapbook 1961–1963 AMSAC, n.p. 'A Statement on the American Society of African Culture and Its Purposes and Activities', 1.
5. Alistair Cooke, 'More Organisations Find They Are On CIA's Fund List', *The Guardian*, February 18, 1967, 9; Neil Sheehan, '5 New Groups Tied To C.I.A. Conduits', *The New York Times*, February 17, 1967, 1, 16; Richard Harwood, '8 More Groups Linked to CIA's Fund Activities', *The Washington Post*, *Times Herald*, February 21, 1967, A6. See also Hugh Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Hugh Wilford, 'The American Society of African Culture: The CIA and Transnational Networks of African Diaspora Intellectuals in the Cold War', in *Transnational Anti-Communism and the Cold War. Agents, Activities, and Networks*, ed. Luc van Dongen et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, Houndsmills, 2014), 23–34, 30.
6. 'Opening of AMSAC's West African Cultural Center in Lagos To Be Marked by International "Gifts of Art" Celebration', *AMSAC Newsletter*, 4, no. 2 (1961): 1–2, 1.
7. MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 4, Folder 5: Questionnaires. Langston Hughes, 2.
8. MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 6, Folder 2: Letter Alioune Diop to John Davis, December 4, 1961.
9. James Meriwether, *Proudly We Can Be Africans. Black Americans and Africa, 1935–1961* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press 2002); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire. Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer*; Ronald Aminzade, *Race, Nation, and Citizenship in Post-colonial Africa. The Case of Tanzania* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013) especially the chapter 'Foreigners and Nation-Building', 60–105; Gerald Horne, 'Who Lost the Cold War? Africans and African Americans', *Diplomatic History* 20, no. 4 (1996): 613–26; John Munro, 'Imperial Anticommunism and the African American Freedom Movement in the Early Cold War', *History Workshop Journal* 79, no. 1 (2015): 52–75; Inderjeet Parmar, *Foundations of the American Century: The Ford, Carnegie, and Rockefeller Foundations and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), especially the chapter 'Promoting Americanism, Combating Anti-Americanism, and Developing A Cold War American Studies Network', 97–179.
10. MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 6, folder 3, 'Report on African attitudes Towards the American Negro and the American Negro Attitude towards Africa. (Adopted by the Special Meeting called by AMSAC, May 27, 1961). Part III', 1–6, 2.
11. MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 11, Folder 33, Letter John A. Davis to Alioune Diop, October 3, 1961.
12. Wilford, 'The American Society of African Culture', 24–8.
13. Frank Gerits, 'The Ideological Scramble for Africa. The US, Ghanaian, French and British Competition for Africa's Future, 1953–1963' (PhD diss., European University Institute, Florence, 2014).
14. John A. Davis, 'Keynote Address: Pan-Africanism: Nascent and Mature', in *Pan-Africanism Reconsidered*, ed. John A. Davis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), 29–34, 30.
15. Hakeem Ibikunle Tijani, 'Britain and the Foundation of Anti-Communist Policies in Nigeria, 1945–1960', *African and Asian Studies* 8, no. 1/2 (2009), 47–66, 63.

16. Larry Grubbs, *Secular Missionaries. Americans and African Development in the 1960s* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2009), 106.
17. John A. Davis, 'An Editorial Statement', *African Forum* 1, no. 2 (1965): 3–6, 4.
18. MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 2, Folder 6: Misc. Lagos. 'Memo No. 9', October 11, 1961, Calvin H. Raullerson to John A. Davis.
19. Even in October 1962, NIGERSAC still had not formalised itself, which made cooperation between AMSAC and NIGERSAC difficult. See MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 11, Folder 33: 'Memorandum: NIGERSAC', from John A. Davis to Calvin H. Raullerson, October 9, 1962.
20. Tony Perucci, *Paul Robeson and the Cold War Performance Complex. Race, Madness, Activism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 5.
21. Susan Sontag, 'The Image-World', in *Visual Culture. The Reader*, ed. Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1999), 80–94, 92.
22. Susan Legêne. *Spiegelreflex. Culturele sporen van de koloniale ervaring* (Amsterdam: Bakker, 2010), 83–118.
23. MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 2, Folder 41: Lagos Correspondence. '[untitled]', n.d.
24. John E. O'Connor, 'History in Images/Images in History: Reflections on the Importance of Film and Television Study for an Understanding of the Past', *The American Historical Review* 93, no. 5 (1988): 1200–09, 1202.
25. George Shepperson, 'Notes on Negro American Influences on the Emergence of African Nationalism', *The Journal of African History* 1, no. 2 (1960): 299–312, 312.
26. Recently, AMSAC has become a topic of interest amongst historians. See, for example, Edward Brooks Marmon, 'The American Society of African Culture and Southern Africa's Struggle for Liberation (1957–1967): A Policy of Pragmatic Protest' (unpublished MA thesis, n.d.); and Wilford, 'The American Society of African Culture'.
27. On the first evening, there were performances by Michael Olatunji, Clarence Stroman, Olu Sowande (baritone), Odetta, Francesca Pereira, and Wole Soyinka (folk), Al Minns and Leon James (jazz dance), the Atilogu Dancers, Brother John Seller (gospel) with Bruce Langhorne on guitar, the Alum War Dancers, Brock Peters (baritone), Nina Simone and the Randy Weston Quartet. On the second evening, Michael Olatunji and Clarence Stroman performed again shortly. Others were Femi Bucknor (piano), Natalie Hinderas (piano), Christoper Oyeshiku (bass), Martha Flowers, the Tiv Women Dancers, Geoffrey Holder (dance) with Alex Cambrellan, and Lionel Hampton. The evening was concluded by a best of: Francesca Pereira together with the Bob Fowler Combo; Nina Simone together with Al Schackman (guitar), Abdul Malik (bass fiddle), and Clarence Stroman (drums); and a grand finale was a 'Jazz Blend' with the Lionel Hampton Quintet, the Randy Weston Quartet, Michael Olatunji, Bobby Benson, Zeal Onyia, Bill Friday, and Mike Falani.
28. Arnold Rampersad,*The Life of Langston Hughes. Volume II: 1914-1967, I Dream a World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 348. Italics in original text.
29. Randy Weston, *African Rhythms. The Autobiography of Randy Weston* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 104.
30. William Branch, 'Festival in Nigeria', *AMSAC Newsletter*, 4, no. 4 [supplement] (1962): 4–6, 4.
31. Ibid.
32. 'Scenes from the Lagos Cultural Festival, December 18–19, 1961', *AMSAC Newsletter*, 4, no. 5 (1962): 3–4, 3.
33. MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 2, Folder 44: Lagos Correspondence. Letter D.T. Chadwick [Cecil Turner, Ltd.] to C.H. Raullerson, AMSAC Center, Lagos, August 2, 1962.
34. Geoffrey Holder, 'Barefoot in Lagos. An American Cultural Platoon Finds Nigerian Tastes, Manners and Critical Skills Far from Underdeveloped', *Show. The Magazine of the Arts*, 2 (1962): 86–8, 88.
35. Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire. Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 128.
36. James Campbell, *Middle Passages: African American Journeys to Africa, 1787–2005* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2006), 222–3; 'AMSAC Director Guest of Nigerian Government for Inauguration of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe as Governor General', *AMSAC Newsletter*,

3, no. 3 (November 30, 1960): 1. Other African Americans that attended the inauguration included Dr William T. Fontaine, Dr Leo Hansberry, Ms Poppy Cannon White, Mr J. Newton Hill, Mr Clarence Holte, and Mr George S. Schuyler.
37. Rampersad, *Life of Langston Hughes. Volume 2*, 324–5.
38. AMSAC stressed American influence in their newsletter, see, for example, George Shepperson, 'Notes on Negro American Influences on the Emergence of African Nationalism', *The Journal of African History* 1, no. 2 (1960): 299–312, 311–12. Reprinted in: *AMSAC Newsletter* 3, no. 10 [supplement no. 20] (1961): 4–6. Historians have stressed these relations as well: Levi A. Nwachuku, 'Nnamdi Azikiwe and Lincoln University: An Analysis of a Symbiotic Relationship', *Lincoln Journal of Social and Political Thought* 1, no. 1 (2002): 27–36; Jason C. Parker, '"Made-in-America Revolutions"? The "Black University" and the American Role in the Decolonization of the Black Atlantic', *The Journal of American History* 96, no. 3 (2009): 727–50.
39. 'African-American Cultural Exchange. Nigerian and U.S. Negro Artists Blend Talents at AMSAC Festival in Lagos', *Ebony. A Johnson Publication* 17, no. 5 (1962): 87–94, 94.
40. MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 6, Folder 3: 'Report on African Attitudes Towards the American Negro and the American Negro Attitude Towards Africa. (Adopted by the Special Meeting called by AMSAC, May 27, 1961). Part III', 1–6, 2.
41. Obiwu [Obi Iwuanyanwu], 'The Pan-African Brotherhood of Langston Hughes and Nnamdi Azikiwe', *Dialectical Anthropology* 31, no. 1/3 (2007): 143–65, 144.
42. James S. Coleman, 'Nationalism in Tropical Africa', *The American Political Science Review* 48, no. 2 (1954): 404–26, 409.
43. Ellen Tops, *Foto's met gezag. Een semiotisch perspectief op priesterbeelden 1930-1990* (Nijmegen: Vantilt, 2001), 46.
44. Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2008), 76.
45. Wouter Welling, 'African Art After Independence: A New Chapter', in *The Sixties. A Worldwide Happening*, ed. Mirjam Shatanawi and Wayne Modest (Amsterdam: Tropenmuseum, 2015), 90–5, 94.
46. MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 2, Folder 44: Lagos Correspondence. 'Tape Sent by Dr. Bond from CHR [Calvin H. Raullerson], November 27, 1961', 1–7.
47. MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 4, Folder 13: Lagos Festival Program. 'Proposed Celebration for Official Opening of AMSAC's West African Cultural Center in Lagos, Nigeria. December 18–19, 1961' [dated October 10, 1961].
48. MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 2, Folder 44: Lagos Correspondence. Letter D.T. Chadwick [Cecil Turner, Ltd.] to C.H. Raullerson, AMSASC Center, Lagos, August 2, 1962.
49. Geoffrey Holder, 'Barefoot in Lagos', 88; Peter Pan, 'Stop Faking African Culture. An African Editor Warns American Negroes … ', *Negro Digest*, 12, no. 1 (1962): 16–20.
50. 'African-American Cultural Exchange. Nigerian and U.S. Negro Artists Blend Talents at AMSAC Festival in Lagos', *Ebony. A Johnson Publication* 17, no. 5 (1962): 87–94, 87.
51. MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 19, Folder 12: Press Lagos. All following newspaper articles are from this folder, unless stated otherwise. 'American Society of African Culture (AMSAC) Presents A Stupendous Display', *Africa*, February 1962, 11–14, 11.
52. Sango Africanus [Abiodun Aloba], 'The Shortcomings of AMSAC Show', *Morning Post*, January 2, 1962, 13.
53. Peter Pan [Peter Anaharo], 'Odetta Had Me in Tears', *Daily Times*, December 22, 1961, 5.
54. Lateef Jakande, [no title], *Daily Express*, December 28, 1961, 3.
55. Quoted in: 'African-American Cultural Exchange. Nigerian and U.S. Negro Artists Blend Talents at AMSAC Festival in Lagos', *Ebony. A Johnson Publication* 17, no. 5 (1962): 87–94, 88.
56. Pan, 'Stop Faking African Culture', 18.
57. Wole Soyinka, 'The Very Last Sir! It Is Amsac Again as Wole Soyinka Pleads', *Daily Express*, January 31, 1962.
58. Pan, 'Stop Faking African Culture', 16–20.
59. Lateef Jakande, [no title], *Daily Express*, December 28, 1961, 3.
60. Pan, 'Stop Faking African Culture', 18.
61. 'Nigerians Ridicule AMSAC Production', *N.Y. Amsterdam News*, February 10, 1962, 2.

62. MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 2, Folder 41: Lagos Correspondence. 'Memorandum: Reviews of Lagos Festival in the American Negro Press', February 1, 1962.
63. MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 2, Folder 41: Lagos Correspondence. Letter John A. Davis to William A. Boone [*Ebony* magazine], March 15, 1962.
64. MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 4, Folder 5: Questionnaires. Geoffrey Holder, 1.
65. Steve Rhodes, 'That Failure Of A Show', *Morning Post*, December 28, 1961, 13.
66. 'Opening of AMSAC's West African Cultural Center in Lagos To Be Marked by International "Gifts of Art" Celebration', *AMSAC Newsletter*, 4, no. 2 (1961), 1–2, 1; Ulli Beier, 'Negro and Afro Art', *Sunday Express*, December 31, 1961, 15.
67. Joseph Harris and Slimane Zeghidour, 'Africa and Its Diaspora since 1935', in *General History of Africa. Vol. 8: Africa since 1935*, ed. Ali A. Mazrui (Oxford: Heinemann, 1993), 705–23, 718.
68. Alioune Diop, *Africa Seen by American Negroes* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1958), XII.
69. MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 4, Folder 5: Questionnaires. Geoffrey Holder, 2.
70. Langston Hughes was questioned in 1953 by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Rosey E. Pool had also been involved in communist activities before and shortly after WWII. After the Lagos Festival Pool went to Accra, Ghana, to visit her friends W.E.B. Du Bois and Shirley Graham Du Bois. HUAC suspected that they were both communists.
71. Ruth Feldstein, '"I Don't Trust You Anymore": Nina Simone, Culture, and Black Activism in the 1960s', *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1349–79, 1375; *What Happened, Miss Simone?* Directed by Liz Garbus. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix, 2015.
72. 'Hampton at Nigerian Fete', *The New York Times*, December 21, 1961, 32.
73. MSRC, AMSAC Collection, Box 4, Folder 1: Letter Gladys Hampton and Lionel Hampton to Edward C. Mazique, M.D. (The U.S.-Nigerian Foundation for the Ojike Memorial Medical Center, Washington DC), January 11, 1962.

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