

Kongi's Harvest in tails

Unique moments
among
disappointments
at the
Dakar Festival

JOHN NAGENDA



Mali Dancers



Top Katherine Dunham Below (left) Aimé Césaire

Photos by Johan Rienstra

THE TOWN OF DAKAR is beautiful, and its people also. Seldom does one meet such piquant females. I arrived in the evening, at that nostalgic time when twilight gives way to darkness. The heat of an African day was rising off the earth and the coolness setting in. And in the distance the sea was roaring into the land. When we stepped off the plane, there was a welcoming party of Mali drummers and dancers, and behind them the new airport was seething with excitement, filled to bursting with festive crowds. In some ways, the festival was for me to start with its climax.

Time, as it always does, has now settled and mellowed the feelings of frustration and fury which were to be my constant companions in the days that followed. Bluntly, there were too many occasions when the festival became an organisational nightmare. At times, indeed, it seemed as if there was a conspiracy to keep people away from the performances, and many of these people had travelled great distances. The Press (especially those from countries other than France) had a particularly hard time of it. Even today I would willingly do damage to the despot who was in charge of press arrangements.

More seriously, there was the atmosphere in which the festival was run. The purpose of the festival was "to present for the first time, as a cultural entity, the powerful and vivid contribution of the Negro to our life and times".

But if you came expecting fireworks, if you thought that there at last was going to be a translation into action of all that is most urgent and enthralling in Negritude, you were going to suffer disappointment on many occasions; and when this happened it was rarely the fault of the active participants.

There should have been at the festival, a passion, even a torment, which accompanies birth and rebirth. Instead there was well-bred geniality, tolerant smiles flickered on the urbane faces of the audiences, and surrounding all there hung the smell of

impotency. Those participants who strained to give all they had, were viewed in the same light in which a roaring lion behind bars in a zoo is viewed. Symbolically, we who had come to witness Black discoveries, were asked to attend *Kongi's Harvest in tails* (I appreciate the pun), and when these proved scarce, the order was changed to dinner jackets. I treasure the pitying looks which were bestowed on those who turned up in native costume. I had not quite realised to what an extent much of Senghor's poetry is self-activated, simulated, passion.

I disagree profoundly with those, mostly foreigners, who see Negritude as a dead issue, who would have us believe that its day has drawn to a close. To me it seems, and Dakar is merely one of numberless examples, that the fight which Negritude fights has gone underground, become more subtle and therefore much more dangerous. It is as true as it has ever been that Negritude is not an end, but we do not even begin to use it if we mouth its name and do not put it to practice. By now we should be weary of our lies.

Taking all this into consideration, the active participants gave amazingly of their best, in spite of many occasions when they were incensed by their reception. It was good to be reminded of the tradition in Africa of pricking the pomposity of the mighty. The satire was always present, whether in the plays or in the singing or in the dancing or in the art exhibitions. In some of our modern African situations, it has become difficult to remember that weapons have always been open to us in the past, with which to control excessive greed for power, and that ridicule is high on the list. What made it particularly poignant, was the wholehearted participation in this sport by the audiences, and especially when the ordinary man-in-the-street was allowed into the shows.

The actors, whether they were talking or singing or dancing, afforded us some unique moments on stage: The quality of delight is perhaps the most elusive in acting — actors might laugh and suggest happiness, but delight is something beyond this; it is a moment which comes from far inside and can never be feigned. It feeds on conviction — those who have ceased to believe cannot be delighted. And here in Dakar we witnessed such delight.

JOHN NAGENDA, former publishers' representative in East Africa, is a poet and radio journalist who has recently toured the United States on a commission for Life magazine.

Everyone commented on the power of the Traditional Art Exhibition, and it was one of the highest achievements of the entire festival. What amazes me is that nobody passed comment on the fact that practically all the pieces were owned by foreign museums, and that a very strong case can, and must, be made for returning them to their countries of origin, since the manner in which they were acquired can be questioned. As for the exhibition of modern art work, it is true that there was much there that belonged to the foyers of air terminals to tempt tourists, but there were a number of pieces which convinced, especially from Nigeria. And the eye was drawn to some amusing pop, especially from Ivory Coast.

OF THE FESTIVAL AS A WHOLE, perhaps there was too much that was similar, and not enough variety. I think that a future festival will have to see that different countries are encouraged not to

duplicate the efforts of their fellow states. And I did hear mutterings that there was too much dancing altogether. I must say that many of the most meaningful moments were attained during these sessions.

The conclusion must be that, in spite of everything, it was worthwhile. Apart from what this Dakar Festival offered during the talks and discussions, and during the performances and exhibitions, it gave artists a chance to meet. Some were old friends separated by huge distances, others were strangers meeting for the first time, who, again and again, found themselves talking the same language of creativity. And it was the first festival of its kind. The fact that it happened at all, and that even then people were already talking about a second one, tells a lot about its achievement. And I will not quickly forget the sight of the ordinary people of Dakar dancing in the streets.

3. Sita and Sewgolum

Open Championship but this decision was rescinded principally, I think, because he was holder at the time of the championship trophy and even these men did not want to grab it from him without his losing it himself. And much to their comfort, he has now lost it to Gary Player.

Papwa was also banned and, at the last minute, permitted on appeal to take part in the South African Open "this year and in any other tournament in which he has previously played up to the end of last year." It is apparent that this will be his last participation in "white" golf in South Africa, his fatherland.

Mr. Sewgolum does not cry out against this injustice although there can be no doubt he is, like almost all of us, a living bundle of discontent. His resilient courage, his good golf, his brilliant sportmanship — all earn him complete rejection. And there is no doubt, too, that all this unassuming, self-effacing man needs is assimilation into the golfing world, no matter how strenuous the circumstances are.

Twice when he participated in the Natal Open, that is, when he won it and when he lost it recently, he received his purse in the open because by South African law there would have been a violation of social apartheid if he were invited into the nearby white club house. And as if to comment on the ugliness of human relations here, it rained on both occasions, which means that he actually stood twice in the rain to receive his purse.

I HAVE A FEELING that golf means more to Papwa than it does to any other golfer of repute anywhere in the world. The facts are simply that Papwa is poor and, as an unskilled worker, knows no other job. No doubt he could work as a waiter or street cleaner or a messenger. Or he could make some living from golf by becoming a caddy, for no one is in any hurry to stop non-Whites from humping White players' clubs around the courses.

The treatment of the Indian golfer, which can be summed up as "now you see him, now you don't," ought certainly to be abhorred by golfers the world over. In South Africa, however, fellow golfers remain silent. No one has protested against his bannings. Everybody seems to agree to his being tossed about.

A Johannesburg daily which commented editorially on Papwa put it this way: "No sportman ever asked for less than Papwa. But to the politicians this self-effacing little man who is hardly literate and aspires to nothing except professional golf, became a symbol — the symbol of a party's determination to have its way. His very appearance on a "White" course became a "threat" — to the separate identity of the White man. So he has had to go, aided by the majesty of the law and the vast panoply of power the State wields.

"With his going an era ends. There has never really been any mixed sport in South Africa. The little there has been has not been noticeable. Now this has been stopped. But the world must still be "satisfied" and the White man's games go on; so the tortuous search continues for a formula whereby White and non-White sportsmen can be separate but together. All Back teams can become All White and athletes run together (elsewhere) as long as they travel separately.

"To the vast majority of White South Africans this doubtless makes sense. To the rest of mankind it is stark, staring lunacy."



Johannesburg,
May 1966

BY SOME STRANGE CHANCE I find myself thinking about Nana Sita each time I want to think about Papwa Sewgolum. The two Indians live in somewhat different worlds even though they, like all non-Whites, suffer a common injustice. Mr. Nana Sita of Pretoria, Transvaal, is a businessman-philosopher of the Gandhian tradition and Mr. Papwa Sewgolum of Durban, Natal, a modest golfer of world class.

Mr. Sita, determined, high-principled and 70 years old, is the kind of person who would rather suffer for what he believes in than allow evil to triumph. For almost three years he has been fighting, single-handed, against the Group Areas Act, the law under which white South Africa determines which kind of people should live where.

Twice he has been brought before court, twice convicted, and each time sent to jail for refusing to get out of his house and business premises which lie in an area now proclaimed "white." Another court action is pending against him as he still occupies the premises. To him, as it ought to be to all right-thinking people, the order to get him out of the premises where he has lived almost all his life, is more than mere nonsense.

His defiance is sustained, by his belief that evil can never overcome good and he has bluntly told his persecutors: "I will resist to the end." On the other hand Mr. Papwa Sewgolum seems to be saying that he will do anything, right or wrong, and without complaining, as the Government decides.

AND TO BE MR. PAPWA SEWGOLUM is like being in the dark, not knowing exactly where you stand. Although a professional golfer, he has in the past few years been banned and unbanned and banned on several occasions from participating in the money game. First he was banned from the Professional Golf Association's recent tourney in Johannesburg but later permitted on condition there would be no black spectators around during the game. The Western Cape Open turned out not to be so open to him, as he was barred from participating. Somehow without the usual, customary moanings, he was allowed to play in the Port Elizabeth tournament. He was later banned from the Natal