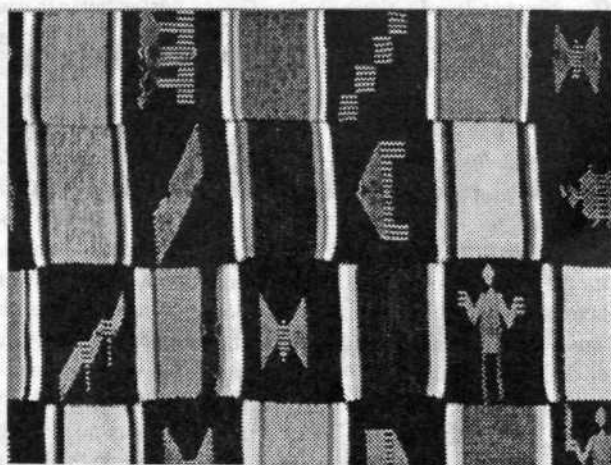


# ACCRA A STOP OVER IN ART'S PLACE

AKIN TAIWO



We ascended the stairs of the sky as if we would penetrate the very heavens of God. But we reached an altitude where we stabilized our flight. Lagos receded into clusters of landmass and water as the smoke of her industries mixed with the greyness of the clouds.

The sun had come up close to mid-day and corrugated iron sheets glitter from below. I looked down on the city, pretending to play God. It was 45 minutes and we soon descended in Accra, the ancient gold rush city. But the houses we saw were neither odd nor aged. New and modern buildings have taken over the old landscape.

Wide footpaths have also made way for well-paved roads. Modern Accra is a neat story of sustainable development in terms of infrastructure. There was a modest compactness all about town. We could not find the unwieldy architectural clusters well known in Lagos.

A cab brought me to Accra Central and I alighted at the imposing National Theatre of Ghana which looked like a congregation of speed boats in a cultured water. But Kate no more works there as receptionist. In fact the little Information Office has now become a mini-market of assorted *kente* materials.

Four sculptured works greet the visitor

at the entrances. We walked around the lawns and pavements, observing movements of patrons. It was a busy hour as the **Amazing Six**, a sophisticated group of six young male Ghanaians - in blue *adire* tops and pairs of jeans - tuned their guitars and drums in rehearsals for PANAFEST '94. They were in the open air theatre appropriately called Theatre Folks Place.

Beside the Folks' Place was the Theatre Garden having a bar and restaurants, complete with rest rooms upstairs. Art and craft works were displayed at the entrance, giving it an aesthetic appeal. Shoes, bags, caps, waist coats, etc., all male forms and *kente* materials adorned the place. A monthly magazine of events and places called **Around Ghana** and **Uhuru** magazine with the leading *The Born-Again: A Threat to Society?* were on the paper stand. It was an airy, very orderly place.

There was the exhibition hall which displayed glassed pictures of actors in their performances. There was a rehearsal hall and changing rooms on the first and second floors which we could not enter. But we did enter the main auditorium and stumbled on a meeting of the Musicians' Union of Ghana, MUSIGA, presided over by the popular highlife musician, Joe Mensah.

'If your belly is full, you can sing. But

that doesn't mean you should sell yourselves short,' we caught Mrs Koko Armotefio, an executive director at the Commission of Culture saying. She was advising artistes to draw up contracts before performing for an organisation or groups of persons. Such a contract, she said, must specify incentives, facilities provided, publicity and promotion arrangements, time, payment terms and insurance schemes.

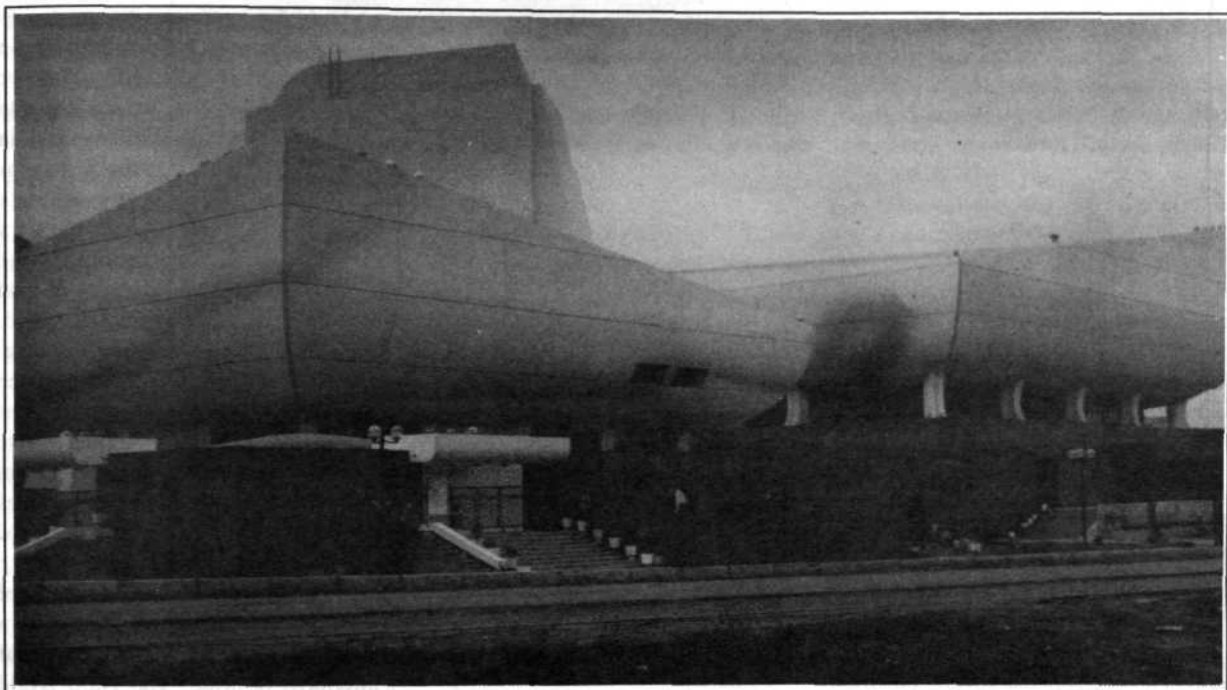
She said PANAFEST was to bring all African peoples together to share their expertise instead of depending on Europe for musical standards.

'We only grow when we see what other people are doing,' she said.

Her speech was punctuated with applause. Taking over from her and speaking in a local language with a generous dose of the English language, Joe Mensah canvassed for friendships among musicians and a feeling of brotherhood.

'When I fall we fall together,' he said, emphasizing the inter-relationship among artistes.

He proposed a meeting of African musicians under an umbrella body to be known as Federation of African Musicians. 'We shall not die poor. And we shall not sweep the toilets of pirates to survive,' he confidently declared as if



National Theatre, Accra

making a vow.

PANAFEST '94 to him was a relaxed event which all musicians should participate in as one unit. He hopes that music promoters would be present to openly scout for, and sign on, agreeable talents in a cordial, informal set-up.

'Show what you can do to the world.' He counselled his members; pointing out the possibility of their playing in all African states.

'How is Ras Kimono?' a bearded, dreadlocked reggae musician who goes by the improbable name, Khex Pongo, asked me. He just observed that I came from Nigeria. He also had lived in Surulere, Lagos with 'Jah Brother Ras'. He loved Nigeria, he said, chuckling. He extended his regards also to Evi Edna Ogholi, hoping I would be around for the Dec. 9-18 PANAFEST.

Time to go to the Arts Centre, not too far away from the Liberia Link Road area where the theatre was. The well-lit, 1500-seater auditorium had well-laid top-to-bottom wine curtains. Peaceful

and hallowed like the abode of angels, it also had a gallery. Built between October, 1989 and December, 1993 by COMPLANT, a Chinese construction company, it had a central control room manned by five Ghanaians.

The arts gallery was at the Centre for National Culture in the Greater-Accra Region. Housing the Department of National Lotteries (DNL), the Arts Centre had many restaurants, craft shops and a major market of assorted *kente* creations, traditional attires, sculptures, drums and all the paraphernalia of culture.

But outside the expansive wall of this centre sat many people, hushed and frowning like school children reviewing their last examination paper. What they were doing was studying lotto papers. Like all gamblers of fortune, they live on hope.

The big bill-board in front screamed 'Help yourself and your nation, stake National Weekly Lotto for development.' In Ghana, lotto playing is an art as well as a way of life. It

seemed to have made many gamblers out of men and much revenue for government.

Paintings and drawings of notable Ghanaian artists adorned the galleries. K.A. Gyedu, W.K. Aperkoh, Borsah Tanueh, Adu Danso, Belle Hodasi, M. Buku and Victor Odoi were among the artists exhibited.

Dr. H.M. Maulana's historical art on the theft of emblems of African civilization and migration routes from ancient homelands of the Akans, Dagbambas, Ewes and Gas into modern Ghana was self-explanatory. Tony Enebeli's 1992 painting *Igbe Worshippers* was also among the various works. Mr George Oppong, the manager of the gallery informed us that the gallery takes a 15% commission from every artwork sold. And right on the noticeboard was the poster of Ola Rotimi's play *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again*. Directed by Martin Owu and performed by the **Free-Lancers Players**. It just opened at the Arts Centre where reviewers described it as, 'well received'. **GR**