The Cold War from the Margins

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In September 1980, in the city of Kano, the capital of the State of Kano in North-Central Nigeria, Bulgarian representatives opened a photo exhibition organized around three distinct themes: 1300 Years Bulgaria to mark the upcoming jubilee; Bulgaria-Africa: Solidarity, Friendship, Cooperation, to express support for the African states in search of political and economic independence after decolonization; and Bulgarian Agriculture, the Bulgarian Chemical Industry, and Children in Bulgaria, to showcase the successes of the Bulgarian state in raising its citizens’ living standard through economic and social policy. At the event, the state minister of health, Sadik Vali, who had recently visited Bulgaria, spoke about Bulgarian hospitality and Bulgarian achievements in the spheres of economics, science, culture, and, especially, medicine. At the end of the week-long exhibition, the Bulgarian diplomats planned to donate children’s books and vinyl records to the local library. Such exhibitions occurred with some regularity in Nigeria in 1980 and 1981: in those two years, Bulgarian diplomats traveled to the states of Ogun, Oyo, Kwara, Ondo, Edo, Imo, and Rivers, all within a day’s drive from the capital Lagos, but they also ventured to more distant destinations such as Benue, Plateau, Bauchi, Kaduna, Niger, Kano, and Sokoto, which required days of intense travel (the distance between Lagos and Kano is over 660 miles). These exhibitions inevitably combined economic and cultural messages, in addition to the compulsory boilerplate reassurances about
Bulgaria’s commitment to the struggle against imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism, and racism. According to Bulgarian records, they resonated among their intended Nigerian audiences, who were eager to learn about the rapid transformation of small Bulgaria over the last thirty-five years. In 1980, the governor of the state of Imo enthusiastically agreed that “a people should value and preserve its historical monuments.” The same year, during a visit to the state of Rivers, which produced half of Nigeria’s oil, Ambassador Ivan Atanasov met with Governor Milford Okilo, who had visited Bulgaria in 1975, had “good impressions of the successes of socialist Bulgaria,” and had joined the Nigerian National Celebration Committee for Bulgaria’s 1300th anniversary. After the two officials paid tribute to the jubilee, the talks focused on possible Bulgarian contributions to electrification, water supply management, public transportation, and housing projects in the booming oil state. A similar merging of cultural and economic objectives was evident during a visit to the state of Ogun in November 1981, when Bulgarian diplomats distributed pins marking the 1300th anniversary to all attendees during talks regarding the possibility that Bulgarian specialists would get involved in procuring water supplies, building a glass factory, and starting an agricultural processing plant in the state.

This chapter continues the analysis of the multiple geographies of global contacts and exchange of ideas that communist power elites actively pursued with a range of actors during the 1970s. Charting Bulgaria’s presence in Nigeria, I explore the distinctive state socialist notions of development—which combined economic and cultural elements in a holistic understanding of modernization—that underpinned small Bulgaria’s projects in the large African state. Undeniably, the Bulgarian priorities in Nigeria had to do with economic opportunities in the booming petro-state, which had been implementing an ambitious program of economic and educational reforms since the early 1970s. Yet, instead of presenting a straightforward narrative of state-led economic modernization as the alternative to the Western free market model, Bulgarian officials also talked about ancient khans, Thracian treasures, and medieval fortresses during their travels in Nigeria, while they also sought to celebrate the 1300th anniversary of the Bulgarian state with jubilee events. Partly, this persistent combination of cultural and economic messages followed the general logic of Bulgarian international projects of this time, which contained obligatory cultural components—exhibitions, concerts, film screenings, book presentations, academic conferences, or cultural exchange visits—linked to the celebration of the 1300-year jubilee of the establishment of the Bulgarian state in 681. “Jubilee plans,” “complex events,” and national celebration committees were the focus of Bulgarian
diplomats everywhere. Yet, unlike the extravagant cultural efforts in India and Mexico, the programs in Nigeria had particular characteristics because the resources available to officials were extremely limited, unlike in the other two states, which saw the best of Bulgaria’s cultural products. Thus, diplomats used different cultural forms adapted to local conditions—such as the traveling photo exhibition—to recruit Nigerian audiences. Talking about history and culture in tandem with modernization and development dominated the Bulgarian projects in Nigeria. This convergence had parallels in the programs of other socialist states that wished to promote progressive ideas of state- and nation-building at home or help the consolidation of world socialism abroad and emphasized the existence of uniquely state-socialist notions of cooperation and development infused with cultural ideas. Importantly, such alternative visions of global integration between the East and the Global South were vibrant well into the 1980s, demonstrating that communist elites continued to actively pursue diverse global models of cooperation outside of East-West relations throughout the Cold War.

As in the case of India and Mexico, only research in Nigerian archives could fully illuminate the motivations of Nigerian elites for becoming involved in these cultural events. Therefore, I continue with the “pericentric” approach that puts the perspective of “peripheral,” small Bulgaria at the center. Three observations help us frame the logic of Bulgarian economic and cultural cooperation with Nigeria. First, official Bulgarian rhetoric adopted the language of anti-imperialism and condemned Western racism and neocolonialism as a legacy of imperialism. Yet, Bulgarian diplomats often exhibited paternalistic and condescending attitudes toward the Nigerian population. In subtle references to “unusual” cultural habits, a “peculiar” work ethic, and unique “local conditions,” the Bulgarians perceived themselves as civilized Europeans whose goal was to help develop and ultimately civilize a population that lagged behind. Even though Bulgarian representatives stressed that their country had never pursued colonial expansion, a claim that was meant to legitimize their efforts in Nigeria, they adopted a note of superiority that was no doubt connected to racialized perceptions of their new partners.

Second, even though ideological justifications were always a part of the Bulgarian rationale for expanding contacts with Africa, in the case of Nigeria, as with the general Bulgarian objectives in the developing world since the 1960s, “pragmatism, not ideology” dictated the Bulgarian choices. This attitude was encouraged by similar Soviet pragmatism in West Africa, well documented in the cases of Ghana, Guinea, and Nigeria: a socialist model of development was not a requirement for Soviet aid in Africa after the mid-1960s. “Peaceful coexistence between different socioeconomic systems”
became the rhetorical cornerstone of Bulgarian foreign policy in the 1970s, allowing tremendous ideological flexibility in contacts with the developing world, and leading to unlikely alliances with authoritarian states, as seen in the case of India and Mexico.

Finally, and most importantly here, referencing history and culture made sense, because like the situation in Eastern Europe after the end of empires in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, claiming and exalting the past became a natural part of the project of nation- and state-building in Nigeria after its independence in 1960. Andrew Apter highlights the fact that African elites framed modernization projects with narratives of historical unity as they built new states and new nations. In Nigeria, after the civil war of 1967–1970, a focus on national traditions and cultural products became an indispensable element of rebuilding the country. As Łukasz Stanek shows, in neighboring Ghana, Eastern European architects proved their credentials to work in postcolonial Africa by emphasizing their experience in both state-led modernization after World War II and nation-building against foreign, “colonial” powers in the late nineteenth century. In 1961, a Ghanaian journalist had argued that after “five hundred years . . . under Turkish rule,” the Bulgarians of today “understand the African and are sympathetic with her struggle for the liberation of [the] continent from foreign domination.” The choice of history to frame current modernization plans therefore fit the logic of both Eastern European specialists and their African hosts.

Ultimately, a study of Bulgarian cultural and economic cooperation in Nigeria highlights the value of the pericentric approach and contributes to debates about the multiplicity of global interconnections during the Cold War. Multiple networks of “knowledge specialists” facilitated the exchange of a range of ideas between the Second and the Third Worlds well into the 1980s. In his research on Eastern European architects working outside of Europe, Łukasz Stanek documents the overlapping networks of specialists from different political contexts working in postcolonial Africa and the Middle East; these specialists both competed and collaborated on different projects, creating a cosmopolitan milieu that brought together experts from Eastern Europe, the West, and the rest of the world. Yet, Eastern European specialists, as representatives of non-colonial small states, often had the upper hand. A pericentric approach that emphasizes the role of actors on the margins thus pays off. Kristen Ghodsee has shown how Bulgarian and Zambian women’s rights activists designed common strategies for social and political mobilization that were specifically articulated in opposition to the West. In her analysis, these unlikely yet logical communication channels “had a real impact on the global discourse of women’s rights as debated at the United Nations.” In Nigeria, too, Bulgarian representatives were trying
to cultivate new economic and cultural connections with local elites, using appeals to culture and history to make their development projects attractive to their hosts.

To follow Bulgaria’s tortuous steps in Nigeria, I first outline the general logic of Bulgarian outreach to a number of countries in Africa and the new production of knowledge about the continent in the 1970s that shaped the understanding of Bulgarian development projects. Next, I chart the political, economic, and national factors in Nigeria, informed by the need to rebuild after a bloody civil war, that allowed the development of a closer relationship with Bulgaria in the long 1970s. Official culture in the two states played a critical role in cementing this relationship, as both Bulgaria and Nigeria organized impactful international events and celebrated important anniversaries. Thus, when Bulgarian officials staged their cultural events in Nigeria, they found an audience that could relate to why historical topics framed the presentation of Bulgarian economic projects. Considering the overall logic of Bulgarian cultural endeavors in the Third World, it is clear that for Bulgarian elites, the use of culture helped project an image of progress and independence on the global scene.

**Bulgaria in Africa: Confronting Backwardness with Cooperation**

To understand the logic of the Bulgarian merging of history and culture with ideas of development and modernization in Nigeria, it is necessary to address broader issues of Bulgarian attitudes toward Africa and developing countries as a whole. Bulgaria was in many ways a newcomer in Africa. Bulgarian contacts with North Africa (Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya) dated from earlier times (linked to the existence of Ottoman-era networks between the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa) but grew with the Soviet adoption of policies of internationalism after 1956. Throughout the 1960s, Bulgarian trade with the newly independent countries in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East increased steadily: while statistics are imperfect, Bulgarian exports to developing states grew from 23.4 million leva in 1960 to 117.0 million leva in 1968. But subequatorial Africa was an entirely new phenomenon in Bulgarian diplomacy from the early 1960s on when the process of decolonization was in full swing. Bulgaria opened embassies in a plethora of African states—Ghana, Mali, Ethiopia, Tanzania—soon after their declared independence. In the 1970s, Bulgaria continued to build ideological and political coalitions with a number of African states with socialist credentials, including Mozambique and Angola. But in line with the pragmatic Bulgarian approach to the developing world, the range of allies was much wider.
Western diplomats closely watched these Bulgarian endeavors, too. In the opinion of British officials, Africa was “increasingly a preoccupation” of Bulgarian foreign policy from the mid-1970s on when a string of African delegations visited Bulgaria: in 1976 alone, Bulgaria hosted state visits by the leaders of Ethiopia, Tanzania, Somalia, Angola, Mozambique, and Egypt.  

Bulgaria’s expansion of economic and political relations with African countries generated the systematic production of new knowledge about Africa, which captures attitudes about the African continent in academic and policy-oriented circles. In 1966, the African Institute at the Soviet Academy of Sciences organized a conference of specialists from socialist states in Moscow to coordinate the advancement of African studies in the Soviet bloc. In 1967, the Bulgarian Scientific-Research Center on Africa and Asia (NITsAA), affiliated with the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAN), opened on a Soviet model. The NITsAA started publishing monographs, mainly on economic and theoretical issues related to the nature of “capitalist exploitation” and “class formation” in developing states. These studies focused on the key question, “how to overcome economic backwardness,” but also tackled issues related to “industrialization, social and demographic [dynamics], and cultural development,” taking a comprehensive approach to generating knowledge and development ideas about Africa.

An almanac of Africa prepared by the NITsAA for a general educated audience in 1973 compiled geographic, demographic, historical, political, social, economic, and cultural information on each African state. Based on the close reading of this book, I would argue that Bulgarian specialists saw the African continent through the prism of “economic and social backwardness [izostanalost]” which was “the result of their long colonial existence.” Intertwining historical and contemporary experiences, the essays analyzed Western intervention, usually dated to the beginning of the slave trade in the sixteenth century, as the key reason for current African problems. The Bulgarian Africanists used the terms colonialism and imperialism interchangeably to describe the fateful role of capitalism and to chart a long-term process of Western exploitation in Africa. Curiously, to translate that experience in terms comprehensible to the Bulgarians from their own history, scholars used the vocabulary of “slavery” (robstvo) and “oppression” (gnet)—a direct reference to the “five-century Ottoman yoke” interpretation of Bulgarian history—drawing parallels between the “multi-century foreign domination” in both areas. Based on those interpretations, what Africa needed was “rapid [uskoreno] economic and cultural development [emphasis mine] . . . [which] required tangible and selfless help from the industrially developed countries, including the capitalist ones.” In this quotation,
economics and culture went hand in hand, while Bulgaria was one of the industrially developed countries that offered selfless help. Africans were perceived as being “on a very different level of political, economic, and cultural development,” which was often described by the idiosyncratic Bulgarian term “remnants from the past” or “atavisms” (отхивелисти). In the end, only the combined state-led development of the “national economy, education, and culture” could help “overcome backwardness.”

To facilitate the process of modernization in Africa, a growing number of Bulgarian specialists worked on the continent under agreements for scientific-technical cooperation. The goal of these programs was to advance “progress” and to help developing states “to gradually end their lagging behind in the spheres of science, technology, and manufacturing; . . . to organize the rational extraction of their national resources; to implement the advantages of social-economic progress in science, culture, education, [and] medicine; to enhance their economic potential; and to increase the living standards of their workers.” In the early 1970s, there were more than a thousand Bulgarian specialists in Africa. These experts “organized Tunisia’s state policies in construction and public works, created the basis of public health policies in Guinea, established the first musical high school in Ethiopia and the first technical high school in Mali, helped Sudan to spray its cotton fields with chemicals using airplanes supplied by Bulgaria, [and] assisted the development of agriculture in Tunisia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Mali, and Tanzania.” At the same time, about 360 African students came to Bulgaria each year on scholarships administered by their own states, bringing the number of Africans who pursued Bulgarian education in the period 1955–1970 to several thousand. Overall, “cooperation” (сътрудничество) was understood to be helping African states develop their own resources and achieve self-sufficiency, in contrast to Western “aid” (помощ), which involved African states in capitalist schemes and was inherently exploitative; further, Western aid programs funded “propaganda campaigns” directed against socialist states working on the continent, which necessitated the commitment of resources on the cultural front, too. This holistic definition of cooperation explains the central role of culture in development programs: the choice of an economic model was a civilizational choice as well.

Bulgaria in Nigeria: “The Odd Man” in Bulgaria’s “Jungle Offensive”

In 1978, Todor Zhivkov embarked on a highly publicized tour of Nigeria, Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, and South Yemen (North and South Yemen
unified in 1990) to convey support for the post-independence development of these states. As advertised at home and abroad, Zhivkov’s visit demonstrated the essence of Bulgarian foreign policy, “aimed at strengthening world peace and security, at creating friendship among the people, [and expressing] solidarity and support for the peoples fighting against imperialism, colonialism, neocolonialism, [and] for freedom, independence, and social progress.”26 Given the socialist credentials of the governments of Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, and Yemen, commitment to “proletarian internationalism” justified these contacts as Bulgaria had promised help to “safeguard and widen the socioeconomic achievements of their peoples” based on treaties of friendship and cooperation.27 Yet, following the Soviet example of more a pragmatic attitude in Africa since the late 1960s, Zhivkov also wanted to show that “there is an element of flexible development possible even on ‘the road to Socialism.’” In the words of British diplomats, “Bulgaria has been carrying a banner (and a pick and shovel).”28 This pragmatic approach was most evident in the Bulgarian presence in Nigeria, “the odd man out” during Zhivkov’s African tour of 1978, once again according to British diplomats; while the rest of the trip could be interpreted as the return of visits by left-leaning African leaders to Bulgaria in 1974–1977, Nigeria was “tacked on because of its growing economic importance.”29 The British were so unnerved by Bulgaria’s African program that in 1980 they mockingly spoke about Zhivkov’s “jungle offensive,” making it clear that condescending, racialized attitudes were rampant among diplomats at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO).30

What brought Bulgaria and Nigeria together? In my interpretation, converging visions of state- and nation-building priorities allowed the development of this new global entanglement. When Nigeria, once a British colony, declared independence in 1960, the elites in charge of the country adopted a federal structure whose goal was to bridge regional and ethnic divisions among the more than 250 ethnic groups that constituted the population of the country. They divided up the country into twelve states, with the intention of distributing economic resources more equitably, but this political arrangement failed to create national unity because of the rampant regional economic disparity. The civil war between the federal government and the secessionist Biafran state in the east in 1967–1970 demonstrated the precariousness of this postcolonial arrangement.31 After the civil war, like other postcolonial states, Nigeria pursued new global partnerships outside of its old colonial connections to seek knowledge about alternative state-building models.

Bulgaria established relations with Nigeria in 1964, four years after its independence.32 Based on an agreement on economic, scientific, and technical
cooperation, Bulgaria participated in construction projects and technical training of Nigerian students, but these forms of cooperation were initially limited. The civil war of 1967–1970 opened up a fresh economic opportunity, however. Because of the refusal of Great Britain and the United States to offer military support to either side during the war, the federal government in Lagos turned for help to the Soviet Union, which in turn involved Bulgaria.33 The connections established by Nigerian and Bulgarian elites in the military sector paved the way for further expansion of economic cooperation, but relations between the two countries were not particularly robust until the mid-1970s. To understand the changing nature of those new relations along an East-South line, it is necessary to chart the developments in Nigeria in the post–civil war decade and to outline how Bulgarian diplomats adjusted to the shifting political realities in the country.

After the civil war ended in 1970, the military regime of General Yakubu Gowon (1966–1975) introduced new economic policies that sought to develop Nigeria’s vast petroleum reserves and industrialize the country. By 1974, oil accounted for 82 percent of its revenue, and Nigeria became a vast petro-state that dispensed prosperity through kickbacks and the old patronage networks (a “spigot state,” according to Frederick Cooper).34 In the mid-1970s Nigeria was both the most populous and the wealthiest African country, with a population of 80 million and a rapidly expanding economy thanks to international demand for oil. Oil revenues allowed General Gowon and his political allies to supervise a huge state investment in vast infrastructure projects, the building of new educational facilities, and preparations for the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77) to project Nigeria’s new role among its African peers.35

In the early 1970s, political relations between Bulgaria and Nigeria were tenuous because the military regime had eliminated all political parties, mass organizations, and parliament, making it difficult to establish contacts, while the governing elites pursued a foreign policy focused mainly on Africa.36 The confident and assertive demeanor of Nigeria’s leaders caused a lot of concern for the Soviets, too. In 1974, General Gowon visited the Soviet Union to convey his gratitude for Soviet help during the civil war, yet he defiantly stated, “I did not go to Moscow to be ideologized. I only visited the place to see what I can make use of in their system for the betterment of my country.” Instead of intensifying his links with the Soviets, he was pursuing an “African style” of development that was difficult to predict.37 In this context, pragmatism was the only way forward. The Nigerian elites’ focus on modernization opened the door for specialists from Eastern Europe, who came from Bulgaria as well as the GDR, Poland, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union.38
In 1972, following the visit of a Nigerian federal delegation, the Bulgarian state construction firm, Technoexportstroy, was chosen to build the new National Theatre in Lagos, on the model of the Palace of Culture and Sports in Varna, to host FESTAC 77. Completed in only two years, this monumental building at the heart of the Nigerian capital was a major accomplishment for a small state that wished to position itself as a development model for the newly independent African states.  

In 1975, Gowon’s military regime was removed by General Murtala Mohammed who promised to transition the country to civilian rule. Following his assassination, General Olusegun Obasanjo came to power in 1976 and promoted three goals: eliminating corruption, encouraging national unity, and transitioning to democratic rule. While still maintaining military control, General Obasanjo purged corrupt officials from the civil service, police, and judiciary. A special commission worked to draft a new constitution and to prepare the country for state and federal elections in 1979. As part of his attempt to create a stronger national identity, General Obasanjo instituted the National Youth Service Corps and mandated that students perform one year of government service after graduation to aid in the development of a shared sense of patriotism among young people. He embraced plans to move the federal capital from Lagos to a new site in Abuja, in the center of the country, and created seven more states (bringing the number of federal states
to nineteen) to improve access to state-managed resources for the entire population. This desire to project national unity culminated in the organization of FESTAC in 1977. This reinvigorated nationalism certainly looked familiar to the Bulgarians who were pursuing their own “patriotic” projects at home during the same time. Global connections thus led to unlikely convergences in the ideas of state promoted by Bulgarian and Nigerian elites.

From the pericentric perspective of Bulgaria, General Obasanjo’s reforms were a positive development. The Bulgarians considered the generals in charge of Nigeria to be of the “nationalist” and “patriotic” variety, whose “anti-imperialist” agenda made them good potential allies. The Nigerian economy continued to be based on oil production: 93 percent of its exports involved petroleum. However, 80 per cent of the Nigerian population worked in agriculture, and that sector emerged as the priority during General Obasanjo’s “green revolution.” State oil income had already increased the role of the state in the development of infrastructure and industry; it also allowed the execution of social projects, such as the expansion of education and health services and investment in affordable housing. The transfer of the capital from Lagos to Abuja also promised to be a lucrative economic enterprise for those who secured contracts. This situation created hope that the socialist states would carve out a new niche in the Nigerian economy, and especially in the area of new infrastructure projects. The Bulgarians’ prior experience with the National Theatre in Lagos formed a solid basis for further collaboration.

The behavior of the Bulgarian leadership in the Global South demonstrates how the small Eastern European states actively inserted themselves into the global scene of the 1970s. General Secretary Todor Zhivkov traveled to Nigeria on a state visit in October 1978, during a year that also saw visits to Lagos by U.S. president Jimmy Carter and FRG chancellor Helmut Schmidt. During his meeting with General Obasanjo, the Bulgarian leader expressed his support for the “national liberation struggles of the African peoples fighting against colonial masters” and emphasized that his country stood behind Nigerian condemnation of the apartheid regime in South Africa, the absolute priority in Nigeria’s African agenda. Nigerian foreign policy presented few problems for Bulgaria because the country was “unaligned, with an anticolonial and anti-imperialist agenda” while “a central place in her foreign policy is occupied by the situation in Africa,” a platform that presented no ideological risks from the perspective of Bulgarian diplomats. During his visit, Zhivkov stuck to broad but powerful and appealing political pronouncements, condemning imperialism and neocolonialism. But he also addressed the situation in Nigeria by assuring General Obasanjo that the
Bulgarian people fully supported "unitary, modern, and sovereign Nigeria" and its "dynamic socioeconomic development" with its goal of "increasing the prosperity of the Nigerian people." Cooperation required finding common rhetorical ground and recognizing the national choices made by the new Nigerian elites in charge of the country. Shared understandings of the role of the nation and the people provided that desired common ground between Bulgarian and Nigerian elites.

Despite such political pronouncements, economic possibilities were doubtless the prime motivation for expanding contacts with Nigeria, especially in the spheres of construction, machine building, and agriculture. In 1978 the Nigerians were experiencing an acute lack of skilled personnel and sought to diversify the education of their elites, who had traditionally studied in Great Britain. In that year, 320 Nigerians pursued their higher education in Bulgarian institutions. This number compared well to the 580 Nigerians studying in the Soviet Union during the same year. Bulgaria exported heavy machinery, agricultural equipment, radios, batteries, pharmaceuticals, tomato puree, and frozen fish to Nigeria, and imported mainly cocoa. The Bulgarians were also interested in Nigerian oil, but they wanted to barter rather than to pay hard currency for the resource, something the Nigerians were reluctant to accept. About ninety Bulgarian specialists, mainly physicians, engineers, architects, and agronomists, worked in Nigeria; their number grew to 150 by the end of 1978. Instructors in the engineering fields were particularly sought after since Nigeria wanted to increase the number of higher education technical schools.

It is important to place the Bulgarian economic presence in Nigeria within the broader context of overlapping visions of modernity and progress during the global 1970s. During the mid-1970s, Nigeria’s focus on economic development brought new opportunities for cooperation with the socialist states. Nigerian leaders, firm supporters of the reorganization of economic relations between the prosperous North and poor South in the context of global discussions about the New International Economic Order (NIEO), wanted to decrease the influence of their traditional economic partners in the West and diversify their economic contacts. This Nigerian propensity to discuss the world order in terms of "the poor south and the rich north" without making distinctions between capitalist and socialist countries created a new mental geography that facilitated the attempts of the small socialist states of Eastern Europe to chart new international agendas. There were clear signs
that Nigeria was moving in an independent direction. To undercut foreign influences, in 1976 General Obasanjo enacted policies of Nigerization that mandated Nigerian participation in each international enterprise operating in the country. In 1979, Nigerian elites turned to the Soviet Union to build the Ajaokuta steel plant, which was seen as the “ultimate symbolic representation of true independence in the postcolonial age.” Most radically in 1979 Nigeria nationalized Shell-British Petroleum due to its sale of oil to Pretoria. In the opinion of British diplomats, who closely watched their former colony, Nigerian elites were pragmatic: “Nigeria would seek the friendship of any country that was prepared to assist her development.”

Even though the United States, Great Britain, the FRG, and Japan continued to account for most of the economic activity in Nigeria, the role of socialist countries in the economy grew: in 1980, socialist states accounted for 3.5 to 4 percent of Nigerian foreign trade. These states, such as Poland, Bulgaria, and the GDR, developed their relationships with Nigeria at a time when the Soviet Union struggled to maintain its position in this important African country. As shown by Maxim Matusevich, in addition to their political misgivings in regard to the Soviet Union, the Nigerians harbored doubts about whether the Soviets would be able to provide the most modern equipment and up-to-date technology. At the Ajaokuta steel plant, delays and inferior technology dampened Nigerian enthusiasm about collaboration with the Soviets. These shifting Nigerian attitudes to the Soviet Union may explain why Nigerian elites increasingly sought development help, especially in technology and higher education, from the smaller socialist states. While in the context of overall Nigerian development the share of Eastern European states might seem miniscule, their presence in large Nigeria brought tangible economic results for them, as evidenced in the continuation of specialist exchange throughout the Cold War. New East-South global economic linkages were now actively and profitably in the making.

By the late 1970s, the political situation in Nigeria stabilized as political parties were resurrected on the eve of the state and federal elections of 1979, providing new avenues of contact for Bulgarian diplomats. A democratically elected civilian administration took control of the country in October 1979, proclaiming the birth of the Second Republic. Nigeria now had a new constitution, a National Assembly, a president and vice president with broad federal powers, and state governors with extensive local control. President Shehu Shagari continued to promote national policies to forge a unified country and people. He promised to elevate the standard of living of the population by focusing on agriculture, infrastructure, and education, in addition to industrialization. Another priority was the continued construction
of the new capital Abuja, “a colossal site” heavily financed by the federal government. Thus, the Second Republic saw another wave of large federal housing projects, the building of federal universities and colleges, and attempts to establish federal television and radio stations in each state. Bulgarian diplomats held high hopes for future construction contracts, given their prior experience with the National Theatre in Lagos. Despite Nigeria’s capitalist orientation, President Shagari wished to develop contacts with all countries because Nigerian elites wished to emphasize their neutrality in the Cold War while using the socialist countries’ presence as a strategy to renegotiate better contracts with their traditional economic partners in the West.

In many ways, the period 1979–1982 marked the high point of Bulgaria’s presence in Nigeria, which seemed to have benefited both the leaders of Nigeria’s Second Republic and Zhivkov’s prestige-making and hard currency–generating efforts abroad, demonstrating the viability of East-South global visions in this particular juncture of the Cold War. While Bulgaria was just one small state operating in Nigeria, its presence in this large African state brought tangible economic results to both sides. When an oil glut hit the world markets in 1981 and oil prices dropped, Nigeria entered an economic recession and gradually turned to international borrowing, mainly from the International Monetary Fund and Saudi Arabia. This economic crisis destabilized the civilian government and led to the end of the Second Republic in 1983. Yet, the Bulgarian state construction firm, Technoexportstroy, continued its involvement in governmental and public building projects throughout the 1980s, demonstrating the successful forging of lasting global contacts along an East-South axis. Eastern European power elites continued exploring alternative global models through the end of the Cold War.

In this volatile situation in Nigeria during the long 1970s, Bulgarian representatives designed elaborate schemes to secure a new niche in the modernization plans of Nigerian elites, actively inserting their voices into a global network of development ideas. Diplomats saw Nigeria as an “economically promising and strategically important African state” with “enormous potential” to become the leading force in the African continent, which explained their persistent endeavors to intensify contact with the country. Yet, difficulties abounded due to “the inefficiency of the state apparatus, bad organization, and lack of cadres.” Most frustratingly for Bulgarian diplomats—whose condescending tone is plainly visible in their correspondence—all projects were accomplished “very slowly” (мъдно). A fitting example of this sense of superiority are reports from 1978 that described Lagos as a “city of millions, very dirty, with long distances not covered by public transport,
no possibility for foreigners to walk, [and] lack of culture or other entertain-
ment.” These were “specific conditions completely unlike those in Europe,”
which “affected one’s nerves and psyche [and] one’s general health,” creating
special challenges for the Bulgarian mission in Nigeria.68 One strategy for
overcoming these limitations was to combine economic and cultural goals,
and to launch “informational-propaganda work” explaining why Bulgaria
was a good choice for Nigerian development plans. Culture now became
one more strategy for pursuing contacts—and contracts—in Nigeria.

From Contracts to Culture: 
From FESTAC 77 to 1300 Years Bulgaria

Given the constantly shifting political climate in Nigeria and the nascent state
of relations between the two states, Bulgaria’s attempts to create a cultural
presence might appear as overkill. Bulgaria’s efforts to marry economic and
cultural endeavors in Nigeria dated at least to 1972 when Bulgarian archi-
tects and engineers took charge of the construction of the new National
Theatre in Lagos. Ultimately completed in 1976, the theater contained an
auditorium for 5,000, a conference hall for 160, two exhibition halls, two cin-
emas with 800 seats each, dressing rooms for 600 actors, and eighty offices.
As the Bulgarian architect in charge of the project, Stefan Kolchev, saw it,
the building—which exceeded the size of its Varna prototype by six times—
represented “the symbols of a new life” and “the spirit and vitality of the
African people in pursuit of modernity and free expression.”69 During the
opening of the theater, Bulgaria participated in the Second World Black and
African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77), which Nigeria hosted in
winter 1977. This development highlights the connection between economic
and cultural contacts.70 Massive federal funds financed this celebration of
Nigerian and African culture, which centered on the National Theatre and
the FESTAC Village and included theatrical and dance performances, con-
ferences of Black scholars, and exhibitions of archaeological artifacts and
contemporary art in the presence of delegates from the African states, the
African diaspora, and select friendly countries. As Apter argues, FESTAC was
an event of enormous importance for Nigeria, which used it as an occasion
to emphasize its preeminent role in Africa, showcase the prosperity of the
new petro-state, and promote visions of national unity after the civil war.
FESTAC was “a spectacle of development” that advertised “the magic of
Nigeria’s oil-fueled modernity” while it also created a national master nar-
rative based on the presumption of a common, indigenous, cultural essence
of the Nigerian nation.71
In many ways, this cultural project, even though based on ideas of Pan-Africanism and Blackness, shared commonalities with Bulgaria’s 1300-year jubilee in its attempt to use culture as political capital domestically and internationally. Apter’s analysis is particularly helpful here, as it is based on fieldwork conducted in Nigeria during and after FESTAC 77. Like Bulgaria’s state-sponsored celebrations of the establishment of the Bulgarian state in 681, FESTAC was a “national campaign” orchestrated by “an ideological state apparatus” led by “specialists” whose job was to promote “a cultured appreciation of national culture among the masses.”  

Just as Bulgarian officials emphasized the ancient past, Nigerian officials sought to highlight “the rich and ancient heritage which has produced our complex nation,” as head of state General Mohammed declared in 1975. Bulgaria’s preoccupation with “representative exhibitions” was echoed by Nigerian cultural experts, who put together a spectacular exhibition, 2000 Years of Nigerian Art, which toured internationally to showcase the unity of the Nigerian nation. The director of the Nigerian National Museum, Ekpo Eyo, explicitly used arts, archaeology, and culture as a tool for building a common national identity and conveying to the public the “underlying philosophical and psychological basis providing a common root” for all Nigerians. This emphasis on
state- and nation-building thus brought the two countries together in their common use of culture and history for larger political goals.

As shown by Sarah Van Beurden in her work on Congo/Zaire, the concept of “cultural guardianship”—or “a common set of strategies that legitimate political power through the stewardship of cultural heritage”—carried special significance for African nations after independence. This was particularly true in Nigeria because the civil war of 1967–1970 had exposed the regional and ethnic fissures in the country, so the creation of a unified national identity through culture was an important priority for the Nigerian regimes both domestically and internationally. Apter notes that “the state’s production of national culture took its place within a larger scheme of directed development and national renewal” after the civil war. Using culture as an international tool further projected Nigeria’s “growing influence as the elder statesman of Africa” while also promoting the New International Economic Order and the possibility of preferential treatment for developing countries in international trade. Lastly, this understanding of culture colored notions of development promoted in Nigeria. In the words of Flora Edouwaye S. Kaplan, Nigerian officials believed that local, “African’ cultural components can be made part of decisions for national economic and political development, taking into account what is indigenous and useful, and discarding what is not.”

Culture also operated in similar ways in Nigeria and Bulgaria. With the creation of the Department of Antiquities and the National Museum in Lagos, whose mission was to collect “representative” national culture from each state, the government monopolized control over cultural production. In its attempts to control the dissemination of cultural and national ideas, on the eve of FESTAC in 1977 the Nigerian government bought the largest share of the two most influential Nigerian newspapers and placed television and radio under state control. Culture thus was not a trivial matter in Nigeria as it served broader national and international agendas. The Bulgarians’ own preoccupation with culture thus found an understanding audience in Nigeria in the late 1970s. Nigeria was preparing to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of its independence in 1980, so Bulgarians’ obsession with the 1300-year jubilee in 1981 resonated with Nigerian representatives. The fact that Bulgarian diplomats combined economic and cultural talks during their tours of Nigerian states came as no surprise to their hosts because many of the states’ governors were already involved in FESTAC, and invitations to participate in the 1300-year Bulgarian “jubilee events” made sense to Nigerian officials. Culture therefore became a logical core element of the greater Bulgarian
mission to assist the process of nation-building and economic modernization in Nigeria. The common understanding of the role of culture in the master political and national narratives of the two states led to a surprising yet logical and productive relationship between ruling elites.

Despite these convergences, the Bulgarians struggled to determine how to approach their cultural missions in Nigeria. In 1979, the Bulgarian ambassador spoke of the “special cultural conditions” in Nigeria due to the “reserved attitude to any foreign ideological and cultural influence.”80 Adopting a paternalistic tone once more, he explained that the “great difficulties in the process of formation of a Nigerian nation and the lack of consolidated national Nigerian culture, a direct result of the many centuries of a colonial yoke, are the main reasons for the negativism and reserved attitude to foreign cultural events.”81 From the Bulgarian perspective, the lack of “progressive political parties to work as Bulgarian allies” and the “vast corruption of the political and journalistic circles” further complicated expanding cultural cooperation.82 Given “the high illiteracy in the country, the weak social activism and political apathy of the masses, the bad communications, long distances, lack of exhibition spaces, high cost of living, and difficult climatic conditions,” the ambassador recommended “highly selective planning of cultural events.” Such events, organized around anniversaries and national holidays, would mainly involve educated young people and the mass media and pursue the broader goal of advertising “the success of real socialism.”83 The ultimate goal was to convince the Nigerians that Bulgaria could provide a model of economic and cultural development suited for their particular demands. Culture, in this view, would be an element of Bulgaria’s greater mission to assist the process of nation-building and modernization in Nigeria.

Staging Culture under Special Conditions

With these assumptions about Nigerian culture in mind and based on a series of cultural cooperation agreements signed in the late 1970s, Bulgarian diplomats embarked on a cultural program tailored to Nigeria’s “special” cultural conditions. They worked to establish contacts with the media, trying to secure the publication of materials and broadcast of radio and television programs about their country. They attempted to show films, a trusted and effective tool of cultural diplomacy, but found it difficult to secure appropriate content that would capture the attention of the audience. In the end, they settled for short documentaries about tourism and key economic sectors in Bulgaria. Due to the “temperament” of the Nigerians who “get bored quickly”—another not so subtle condescending, racialized
reference—diplomats recommended the organization of pop music concerts rather than folk ensemble visits, a staple of Bulgarian cultural diplomacy elsewhere. Diplomats wished to distribute more “propaganda materials” showcasing Bulgarian progress, but the lack of appropriate English-language printed materials remained a chronic problem. Following Todor Zhivkov’s visit in 1978, Ambassador Atanasov suggested the possibility of opening a Bulgarian Cultural-Informational Center in the capital of the largest African state to coordinate activities elsewhere in the region. Yet, Nigeria was never a priority for the Bulgarian cultural bureaucracy in the way India and Mexico were, which explains why Bulgarian cultural resources were allocated to the country unevenly. For example, while negotiating with the director of the National Museum, the Bulgarian ambassador asked that a “prestigious” exhibition like *Thracian Treasures* or *1000 Years of Bulgarian Icons* (both of which had successfully toured India and Mexico) be dispatched to Lagos, but the Committee for Culture declined his request due to the “difficult climate” and the exhibitions’ commitments elsewhere. It was clear that the “special” conditions in Nigeria would require the creative adaptation of the usual Bulgarian international cultural practices for the African context.

To facilitate these evolving cultural contacts, Bulgarian representatives persistently recruited local allies among “progressive” public figures, trying to expand the circle of Bulgaria’s friends. Based on Bulgarian records, which likely skewed the importance and impact of such events, there was a clear momentum in the development of Bulgarian-Nigerian “friendship.” In September 1979, a Nigeria-Bulgaria Friendship Society was established in Lagos, attracting 300 visitors to the opening reception. Former Nigerian students in Bulgaria were invited to celebrate the 1300-year jubilee at the embassy so that diplomats could cultivate relations with people with direct knowledge of the country. During a Lagos event in August 1980, titled *Children in Bulgaria*, the sale of Bulgarian folk objects benefited the Handicapped Children of Nigeria Fund, an organization created by Nigerian women’s movement activists who were also in contact with the Bulgarian Committee for Women. Nigerian children, who had visited Bulgaria as delegates of the Assembly of Peace meeting in Sofia in 1979, were invited to celebrate New Year’s at the embassy in 1980 and given small gifts by an embassy official dressed as Santa Claus. In early 1980, Nigerian trade union members, on their way to a forty-five-day seminar in Bulgaria, spoke about “the success of real socialism” and “the social equality typical for socialism” at another embassy reception. Diplomats lent a hand to the Nigerian Labour Congress, another trade union that organized a celebration of 1 May for the first time in the history of Nigeria. At the opening of the exhibition
of Bulgarian artists at the Island Club in Lagos in April 1980, dedicated to the 1300th anniversary, Ambassador Atanasov appeared in a folk costume, rather than the obligatory diplomatic suit, to match the elaborate attire of his African hosts. Charting new paths for Bulgaria required being creative in “special” local conditions. All proceeds from selling prints of the artwork were allocated to help “victims in the oil spillage areas of Nigeria,” an (in)direct critique of Shell policies. Following an art exhibit by Stoian Stoianov, secretary of the Union of Bulgarian Artists, at the National Theatre in Lagos in May 1980, the Society of Nigerian Artists signed an agreement for cooperation, which included exchange of delegations and exhibitions. These events combined ideological and cultural elements to build up alliances with a range of Nigerian actors who were believed to have a positive attitude to the socialist states.

Given the chronic lack of resources, the bulk of Bulgarian cultural activities involved the organization of traveling photography exhibitions—consisting of photo panels prepared by the Bulgarian international press agency, Sofia Press—usually combined with trips of an economic nature. The goal of these endeavors was to portray Bulgaria “as a stable and worthy partner in trade and economic cooperation” and to “present the famous historical past of our people.” The exhibitions combined different messages, depending on the audience and availability of materials during a specific time, but consistently portrayed a picture of triumphant—if somewhat linear—economic and cultural development in Bulgaria over the centuries and especially during the years of developed socialism. In May 1980, for example, at the Polytechnic School in Lagos Bulgarian diplomats presented a combined exhibition: 1300 Years Bulgaria, Bulgarian Electronics, and Bulgaria-Africa: Solidarity, Friendship, Cooperation. In line with endeavors to organize “complex events,” the two hundred students present at the event also saw a short movie about Bulgaria’s Black Sea resorts and received folk art souvenirs. The exhibition in Ibadan in the state of Oyo in July featured Bulgarian folk music and Bulgarian monasteries, in addition to showcasing the accomplishments of Bulgarian agriculture and electronics. During a visit in the city of Akure in the state of Ondo in November, the guests were presented with an exhibition of Bulgarian folk objects, including ceramics, wood carvings, copper objects, and textiles, and shown films about Bulgarian ski resorts, Black Sea hotels, and the rose oil industry. As envisioned by the Bulgarian organizers, all displays conveyed pride in the rich historical heritage and recent economic transformations of the country, invoking a preferred model of “development” (razvitie) that merged economic and cultural factors to emphasize the active involvement of the Bulgarian state in the welfare of its citizens.
It should be noted that Bulgarian representatives in Nigeria did not harbor a uniformly positive attitude about this extended cultural program, and conflicting ideas emerged regarding how to present Bulgaria’s potential role in Nigerian development projects. Ambassador Atanasov expressed dissatisfaction with the materials dispatched by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MVnR), lamenting the lack of “a calm, information-based documentary film about Bulgaria, which in thirty minutes would depict the 1300-year history of our country in simple visual ways.” In a memo to the vice minister of foreign affairs for cultural cooperation, Maria Zaharieva, he insisted that “in Nigeria they show no interest in our kings and khans, but in real socialism . . . [which] should be represented in a dignified manner.” The ambassador criticized “the emphasis on Bulgarian history, unnecessary for African conditions,” and considered removing the historical part of the exhibitions to emphasize the contemporary period. He also criticized the sluggishness of the state apparatus in sending appropriate printed materials to Nigeria. One delivery from Sofia Press, for example, contained “propaganda literature” in French and German; another delivery of books arrived six months late. Despite this pushback, the embassy had a cultural plan to fulfill; while the
paper trail is silent, most likely higher-ups in the MVnR decided to follow the plans for Nigeria that had already been approved.

As it did elsewhere, 1981 emerged as the key year for Bulgarian cultural endeavors in Nigeria, as the embassy in Lagos had a “jubilee plan” to follow. In February, diplomats organized the National Celebration Committee for the 1300th anniversary, which included Nigerian politicians at the federal and state levels. Ambassador Atanasov approached President Shagari personally, requesting that he take over the committee as “an expression of goodwill and a token for the future flourishing of the extensive relations between our two friendly nations in all spheres of life.” Ultimately, Dr. Olusoka Saraki became its chairperson. The speaker of the Senate and the rumored next president, he often spoke about the “rich accomplishments of the Bulgarian state in the spheres of economics and culture” and assured his audiences that relations between Bulgaria and Nigeria would continue to grow in the future. In March, the Days of Bulgaria in Nigeria dedicated to the 1300-year jubilee opened at the cultural center of the Soviet embassy in Lagos; the use of Soviet facilities reflected the spirit of socialist internationalism that continued to inform cultural relations between socialist states. At the reception, diplomats distributed materials for the highly anticipated competition “Do You Know Bulgaria?” The prizes included free airfare on the Bulgarian national carrier, Balkan Airlines, and full board for a one-week Black Sea vacation, awards that particularly excited Nigerian university students, a key target group for the Bulgarians. In December 1981, a regional branch of the Nigeria-Bulgaria Friendship Society opened in the city of Benin in the state of Bendel to prepare for celebrations of the 1300th anniversary.

Various other initiatives also brought Nigerian culture to Bulgaria. In summer 1980, Nigerian artists arrived in Bulgaria for a retreat. Later that year, the Nigerian minister of social development, youth, sports, and culture, the director for culture, and the director of the National Museum visited Bulgaria, accompanied by Nigerian journalists. In 1980, a Bulgarian television crew came to Nigeria to shoot a documentary about the twentieth anniversary of the country while a Nigerian crew visited Bulgaria and filmed A View on Bulgaria on the eve of the 1300-year jubilee. In 1981, Bulgarian lecturers at the University of Nigeria in Nsuka began work on an anthology of Nigerian short stories, including the works of Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Kole Omotoso, Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, and others. To the enormous delight of the ambassador, the director of the National Museum in Lagos confirmed the commitment of his government to send the famous exhibition, 2000 Years of Nigerian Art, to Bulgaria in 1982, after it concluded its tours of the United States and the Soviet Union.
preoccupation of the two countries with deep history and national culture at this particular time allowed the unlikely convergence of the cultural efforts of two states with little prior contact.

In the early 1980s, Bulgarian diplomats continued to energetically traverse the large country, staging various events explicitly dedicated to the 1300th anniversary. Typically, these included the opening of a photo exhibit, accompanied by a brief speech, the screening of a film, and the distribution of printed materials, which presented a mix of information on Bulgarian history, famous historical monuments, the industrial and agricultural accomplishments of modern Bulgaria, and Bulgarian solidarity with the peoples of Africa. During these events, diplomats—often dressed in folk costumes—conveyed specific Bulgarian notions of how the country could serve as a model of development for Nigeria. During his visit to the state of Sokoto in September 1981, Ambassador Atanasov tried to appeal to the key Nigerian focus on South Africa: “We condemn all imperialist forces who support the policy of international terrorism of the white racists [in Pretoria] . . . [and] we are rendering real, serious assistance in different forms and different means to the oppressed and fighting people [of South Africa].” Engaging in negotiations over technical and educational cooperation, including the building of a tomato puree factory in the state of Sokoto, the ambassador—who seemed to vacillate between embracing and dismissing the cultural message—explained to his audience: “Bulgaria is an ancient country, but at the same time also a young, recently developed state. We are old because this year we mark thirteen centuries since the foundation of the Bulgarian state. We are young because the real growth of our country began thirty-seven years ago after the victory of the people’s revolution.” In this interpretation, similar to Nigeria whose cultural traditions went back millennia, Bulgaria was only able to fulfill its true historical mission recently, after the implementation of ambitious development plans by its progressive government. The reality of a rich cultural heritage and the possibility for rapid economic development clearly converged.

Cultural and economic goals continued to go hand in hand in Bulgarian endeavors as diplomats projected the possible role of their country in Nigerian development. According to Bulgarian records, this message resonated among Nigerians who wished to see improvements in standard of living through investment in agriculture, infrastructure, and education and welcomed the help of specialists from the socialist states. During a visit to the city of Ilorin in the state of Kwara in January 1981, the economic talks were accompanied by photo exhibits dedicated to the 1300th anniversary and invitations to Nigerian officials to join the National Celebration Committee.
for the Bulgarian 1300-year jubilee. The directors of the local newspaper and radio and television stations, as well as a number of state ministers, expressed their willingness to participate. Governor Ata, already a member of the committee, spoke about “the success of your people, especially during the last thirty-six years of your centuries-long history.” Satisfied with the work of the 150 Bulgarian specialists who had built the sports facility in the city, he appealed for more cooperation in the spheres of agriculture, construction, tourism, and the exchange of university lecturers. In February 1981, the embassy organized Days of Bulgaria in the state of Niger. Ambassador Atanasov gave a speech during his visit with the governor, Alhadji Ibrahim, also a member of the National Celebration Committee, which highlighted Bulgaria’s “thirteen-century history, which reached the pinnacle of development in the last thirty-six years [since 1944].” The following day, five hundred students at the Mina Teachers’ Institute listened to a lecture titled “Bulgaria during the Centuries,” which was illustrated with a rich photo exhibit.

In March, the ambassador visited Abuja to see the construction site that was projected to move 900,000 people to the new capital by 1983. The project overseer, Mr. Rufai, was already a member of the National Celebration Committee for the 1300th anniversary and the Bulgarian-Nigerian Friendship Society, so the hope was to secure participation of Bulgarian specialists in this “massive project” of economic development.
In the early 1980s, Bulgarian representatives in Nigeria constantly referred to history and culture as a justification for why their ideas of development and cooperation should be taken seriously in this modernizing African state that was building national unity and economic prosperity after its civil war. Thus, together with engineers, doctors, and university lecturers, the Bulgarians also brought to Nigeria books, folk objects, and photo exhibitions to show that history and culture could complement state- and nation-building projects. Like in India and Mexico, soft power approaches often pursued hard power goals: as mentioned previously, the state construction firm Technoexportstroy built a number of impressive buildings in Abuja, Benin, Lagos, and Kano throughout the 1970s and 1980s, generating hard currency for the regime. In the end, efforts to marry economic and cultural arguments made sense to the ruling elites in both countries and ultimately allowed for the creation of vibrant East-South connections between small Bulgaria and large Nigeria, emphasizing the value of the pericentric approach that highlights the role of the global periphery.

**East-South Visions of Development**

In the 1970s, Bulgarian officials actively promoted the role of culture in international affairs, believing it could serve as the basis of new diplomatic overtures while also increasing the prestige of their country and asserting its independence on the global scene. While this larger objective is important, Bulgaria’s intense cultural involvement in the developing world—and the vast amount of money and personnel committed to it—was in many ways astonishing during the precarious 1970s. What was the logic of Bulgaria’s contacts with the Global South? No single solid, clear-cut criterion existed in determining the nature of these new relationships: ideological, economic, national(ist), prestige-making, and cultural factors all shaped Bulgarian choices. In some cases, such as Nigeria, economic motivations drove the urge for contact. In the case of India, economic and cultural factors were closely intertwined. Yet, in others, such as Mexico, high-profile cultural events were the only thing that provided substance in the new encounters.

A convoluted logic shaped these global entanglements; Bulgarian officials constantly sought to resolve the many contradictions in the policies they pursued. In all of these partnerships, anti-imperialist, anti-racist, and anti-neocolonial language was used to explain why Bulgaria saw its role as “the natural ally of the developing states.” However, as seen in Nigeria, Bulgarians became involved in the Third World for a mixture of ideological and pragmatic reasons. While in some cases the promise of political influence
was appealing, the possibility of establishing an economic presence and seeking alternative markets for Bulgarian goods was a strong motivation during the 1970s. Yet, despite the pragmatic attitude to such contacts, the holistic understanding of development outlined previously mandated the concurrent preoccupation with cultural programs. This might seem to be a stretch, but it is consistent with the Bulgarian civilizational objectives in India and Mexico analyzed previously. In Nigeria, Bulgarian representatives were even more willing to assert their Europeanness and their image as a “grand civilization.” Thus, it is not surprising that while the anti-imperialist and anti-racist rhetoric persisted, officials often nurtured condescending, racialized attitudes toward their new partners in Africa, Asia, and Latin America because they saw the Bulgarian developmental model as superior to what they found in the Global South.

Civilizational rhetoric combined with the language of development thus infused the cultural programs that Bulgarian elites pursued in the developing world. Here, the integrated understanding of development typical of state socialist regimes that merged economic and cultural notions to pursue “a total transformation of social relations” explains the preoccupation with culture, as Artemy M. Kalinovsky had shown in the case of the Soviet Union. Yet, as Frederick Cooper and David Engerman have argued, the language of development could also serve claims-making objectives. This observation is typically examined from the perspective of those receiving development assistance, and not those providing it. However, there was much at stake for a small state such as Bulgaria in its participation in international development projects. Bulgarian officials had certain assumptions about what they were pursuing out in the world: their ideas of development fit a standard, one might even say a Western understanding of modernization that followed a linear, inevitable model based on Enlightenment ideas of standardization and rationalization. The model was of course understood to be socialist, as it followed the mandates of state planning, but development was also seen as basically European. Most importantly, the entire interaction between Bulgaria and the developing states was based on the assumption that Bulgaria actually constituted a developed state. This assumption of development explains the importance of discourse—and culture—in Bulgaria’s global interactions. For a country to be considered developed, it had to be “generally recognized to be developed.” Therefore, discourse had to create reality. This logic explains the importance of culture as a strategy to assert a superior development model that the Bulgarians could offer.

In short, when Bulgarian officials went to Nigeria, India, and Mexico, and spoke about these countries as developing states in need of assistance—whether
economic, military, political, or cultural—and when they offered their own experience as a template for a successful modern transformation, they tried to create perceptions of Bulgaria as a developed state that could provide that assistance. The language of development, based on notions of the inevitable convergence between the developed and developing states, allowed a small Eastern European state to claim superiority vis-à-vis both the Global South and the West. In this East-South logic, culture enabled the active global role of a small state on the margins.