
From the West African Games to the ECOWAS Games: a Phoenix of Sports Diplomacy between West African Unity and Regional Integration (1976–2012)

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Résumé

The West African Games were created in March 1976 in Lagos, Nigeria, during a meeting of the Ministers of Sport and Youth of the fifteen member states of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Just before the 1977 Games, the second edition of the World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, known as FESTAC, was held in Nigeria. This festival brought together the diaspora and African countries to celebrate African culture, art and identity, promoting unity and pan-Africanism. The Games were part of these two dynamics, offering sporting visibility to regional economic cooperation and African unity. After the edition in Lagos, a second one was planned for 1979 (Cotonou, Benin), but it was postponed to 1983 and then cancelled. However, the competition was revived in 2010 (Abuja, Nigeria) and 2012 (Accra, Ghana) under the official name of ECOWAS Games (Economic Community of West African States). While remaining a multi-sport event, it now focuses on the education and development of young athletes (U-23).

The creation of these Games in the 1970s reflects a dynamic of West African unity faced with numerous challenges: coups d'état, electoral crises, terrorist threats and institutional fragility. There were multiple issues at stake: harmonising democratic rules to stabilise regimes, strengthening community institutions, clarifying the division of powers and moving towards political integration beyond economic cooperation, while securing the region.

The central issue remained the balance between national sovereignty and regional authority, as well as Nigeria's leading role between 1976 and 2012. Using archives from ECOWAS, the CIO, the states concerned and the press, we will seek to understand why the event was short-lived and whether its revival in the 2000s reflects a renewal of sports diplomacy or a resurgence of regional integration.

Mots-Clés: Sport, Regional Games, West Africa, Panafricanism, Diplomacy

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