

Research in Afro Literature

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**Senghor,  
Negritude  
and  
Francophonie  
on the  
Threshold  
of the  
Twenty-first  
Century**

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**W**hen Léopold Sédar Senghor's thought process is defined in terms of negritude and francophonie, it is extremely difficult to express an opinion about it. The terms themselves are already so tendentious and carry so precise an ideological stamp that there is hardly need to do more than point out the implicit paradox. Yet I have never seen any real contradiction between these two poles of Senghor's thought. Depending on the moment and the need, the poet takes up one trumpet or the other; he is a black among blacks or a French-speaking person among francophones, rather like being Roman among the Romans. But history must be kept in mind. It is after all Senghor who, with Aimé Césaire and Alioune Diop created the concept of negritude before 1945, giving the term a precise cultural and racial context that continues to amplify "the thought behind the action," the theoretical basis of Senghor's politics.

From the beginning, negritude was largely Senghor's "thing"; he was at the same time its herald and its emblem, its artist and its professor. Senghor was the one who laid out the benchmarks and parameters of negritude, whether in his poetic work (see his prefaces), in a scene or a mask, in a dance or a piece



of furniture (oh, asymmetric parallelism!). From book to book, he developed the tentacles of negritude and gave it the dimension of an ideology. In short, if there is a philosopher of negritude, it is above all Léopold Sédar Senghor. He held in thrall a whole generation of African intellectuals who only tore themselves from his mesmerizing words with effort, and sometimes with violence and insults: Marcien Towa, Noureini Tidjani-Serpos, Stanislas Adotevi.

Senghor's discourse on negritude was certainly the best known and most developed aspect of his thought. Beneath it, much more discreetly, more secretly, was the way he lived. Many would claim that he did not live negritude. Others accused him of manipulating words and ideas to embellish or hide a European lifestyle. Yet to uncover the African in Senghor, one needs only to look a little deeper, into the role of the imagination in his poems, at the play of sounds, the cultural references.<sup>1</sup> To have seen him reign over Senegal for twenty years, to have seen him with an almost faultless ease submit friends as well as adversaries to the pleasure of his purposes was to realize how well he knew African psychology, how well he understood it from within.

What astonishes the uninitiated is the enormous distance between the words and the lived experience. Senghor's discourse idealized the nature of African cultures, emphasizing only their positive aspects. The everyday Senghor, in contrast, reasoned and negotiated with extraordinary realism over the broad range of his countrymen's most contradictory and doubtful instincts. Senghor developed then in the angelic waters of an abstract negritude, as well as in the troubled waters of local political bargaining, with an ease that can only be explained by his profound adherence to that African civilization to which he rigidly lays claim. Today, however, his monopoly of the discourse on negritude is over, and a more cultural concept, that of the African personality, is increasingly taking its place.

As for francophonie, it was initially an invention of General de Gaulle. Senghor soon made use of it to accord legitimacy to African literature. He saw francophonie as a Trojan horse that could introduce African literature into the French universities. The francophone chairs at Grenoble, Limoges, Paris and Bordeaux are the only ones where this literature truly has a legitimate place today. Elsewhere it was dependent on the forcefulness, the interest, or the good will of a particular professor. If he or she left, the course disappeared, as happened at Aix-en-Provence with the departure of Jacqueline Leiner.

Later, francophonie proved useful to Senghor in the political realm. As a "francophone" state, Senegal became, in his hands, a French satellite, but in the same way that Canada, Belgium, and Switzerland—independent countries with more economic clout—were satellites with which Senegal now existed on an equal footing in organizations like AUPFL (Association des Universités Partiellement ou Entièrement de Langue Française), ACCT (Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique), CILF (Conseil International de Langue



Française), APLF (Association Palynologues de Langue Française), etc. Finally, in the later years, francophonie seems to have become Senghor's war horse, in as much as he in turn became subject to requests and entreaties by these foreign entities.

Let's examine the circumstances. Having retired from his African political duties, Senghor found himself thrust once again into international organizations, like the Socialist International, or hyper-French ones like the Academy. Having been asked to deliver a great many official presentations defining francophonie, he lent himself to the task willingly, for he remains a man of communication. Upon request, therefore, he theorizes on francophonie, calling upon his Greek and Latin to do so. But if he is left to unwind the spindle of his ideas, the weaver-president points out the differences between agglutinative African languages and flexional European languages as opposed to Egyptian languages, which have an affinity to that of the Senegalese tongues or to the plain-song invented by Berbers, Negroes, and others. And it doesn't take much encouragement before he begins to beat out the accents of a Serer song.

Strange as it may seem, Senghor never seems to have experienced negritude and francophonie in terms of alienation, or even in opposition to each other. So incomprehensible is this to his contemporaries that he has been accused of either assimilation or hypocrisy, depending upon whether he was being considered a victim of an accomplice in the process of cultural alienation. No one wants to believe in the comfortable ease that Senghor maintains between his African roots and his love of the French language, trusting rather in another poet, the Haitian Léon Laleau, who long ago wrote:

... Sentez-vous cette souffrance  
et ce désespoir à nul autre égal  
D'apprivoiser, avec des mots de France,  
Ce coeur qui m'est venu du Sénégal?

[Do you feel my pain  
this anguish like none other  
from taming with the words of France,  
this heart that came to me from Senegal?]<sup>2</sup>

No one seems to realize that these well-known lines may simply have a literary ring and that it's possible for two languages to co-exist in happiness. And why not?

It's true that African writing has been deeply marked by the anguish and frustration of certain authors. Cheikh Hamidou Kane's single beautiful novel, *Ambiguous Adventure*, gave thematic voice to the hybrid black personality that resulted from a foreign school, a foreign language, a foreign culture. The aggressiveness of other Negritude writers did the rest, from Guy Tirolien, whose little black boy prayed "Seigneur, je ne veux plus aller à l'école," [Lord, I don't



want to go to school anymore] to David Diop, who poked fun at his "Pauvre frère. . . . Piaillant et sussurant dans les salons de la condescendance" [poor brother. . . . Whining and whispering in condescending drawing rooms]<sup>3</sup> Not to mention Léon Damas, who mocked:

"Vous ai-je ou non dit qu'il vous fallait parler français  
le français de France  
le français du français  
le français français"  
[Haven't I told you to speak French?  
The French of France,  
The French of Frenchmen,  
French French]<sup>4</sup>

Western language and culture presented as factors of uprooting and alienation constitute one of the leitmotifs of the Negritude Poets. For twenty years it was fashionable to insult the former colonizer in his own language. There was a romantic nostalgia for the African language sacrificed, suppressed in favor of the French that our (perfectly bi-lingual) writers lamented long and loud. Yet even after the departure of the hated master, these writers continued to write in French, as did members of the next generation as well. The latter, we see, are much less at ease in French, a second language they have assimilated less well, leaving them cleft-tongued rather than bilingual. There are many more "hybrid" writers today than twenty years ago, and the problem is far from resolved, since there is a stubborn refusal to give any scholarly, academic, or cultural status to indigenous African languages. For writers in this category, the obvious solution is to write in those splendid languages and, by means of such writings, to reestablish their importance.

But let us return to Senghor and those who helped establish African literature in French. Doesn't the revolutionary Mongo Beti claim, without any complex, that he writes in French because he loves the language, and that he has never seriously considered writing in Ewondo, a Camerounian tongue? Aren't Joseph Zobel and Olympe Bhély Quenum successful French stylists? And why is it that Bernard Dadié hasn't written a single one of his plays in Baoulé? Is French perhaps sufficient for the expression of his very personal sense of humor? And what about the late Tchikaya U Tamsi, who used to send packing anyone who asked him this sort of question? More recently aren't William Sassine, Emmanuel Dongala, Alioum Fantouré, Tierno Monenembo, and Ibrahim Ly also successful writers in French? Nothing prevents them from writing in their own languages. Further examples abound, like those of Cheikh Ndao or Saxiir Thiam. And then there are writers whose work shows linguistic synthesis like Ahmadou Kourouma or M.M. Diabaté. And hasn't even Diabaté acknowledged that he too "loves" to write in French?

If the phenomenon still seems surprising, one need only look outside the context of colonialism or cultural constraint to a novelist like the American-



born Julien Green, who writes his novels in French and then translates them into English! Or even to the Lebanese but French-speaking poet, Khalil Gibran. Or the Danish writer Karen Blixen, who wrote all her work in English. Or finally, the Algerian Kateb Yacine. No one has ever understood why he did not switch to Arabic during the cultural arabisation that occurred after his country became independent. We are forced then to recognize that it must be possible "to express in the words of France a heart that comes to [one] from Senegal" or from anywhere else. And to acknowledge more generally that a bilingual writer may become attached to a language that is not his mother tongue and that he may prefer to express himself in it.

Senghor's case seems less exceptional when one surrounds it with examples drawn from other latitudes. Indeed, why should a black poet alone be confined to his original language? If he calls for freedom, it may also be the freedom to write in the language of his choice. Although it is generally the norm, isn't it an ideological imposition to ask poets from a particular country to remain fixed in the language of that country? And if this norm is no longer respected, there are surely cultural problems that need resolution at other levels: opportunities for publication, audience development, education, the official legal status of languages. When it comes to individual persons, however, should each not be guaranteed the basic freedom of being able to use the language of his choice when he has the good fortune to have more than one? I do mean good fortune. To speak several languages can not be considered alienation or mutilation; it is immensely fortunate. Perhaps now is the time to acknowledge this.

Senghor in fact has never said anything else. His love of the French language "sung on three tonal levels, woven of the alliterations of gentle implosive consonants and words with similar ending sounds, punctuated with glottal stops as by a weaver's shuttle" has always coexisted with his faith in black African values. His present and oft-repeated position on francophonie was really only the political expression of a linguistic fact harking back to his graduate school choice of many years ago—a choice to prepare his dissertation on the subject of French grammar. Can one take possession of a language, embrace it any more closely than by becoming a specialist in it through one's studies, becoming a professor of that language, and finally a poet in that language? It is due to such longstanding intimacy that Senghor so logically "defends and illustrates" the French language, just as he has illustrated and defended negritude.

For French also is his thing. In this language, he shapes the fluid matter of his poems, expresses the suppleness of his thoughts, the thousand nuances of his sensations. He has made the words of France his docile instrument. Rather than constraining his heart, they are tamed by the poet, who thereby discovers another way of vanquishing, of taking possession. Here the poet is the winner, and the language submitting to his will is, from that moment on,



his trophy wrested from a colonial adversary still rather surprised to see these foreigners, these blacks, these Arabs, expressing themselves in his language with such subtlety. Under such circumstances, the colonizer is always astonished, flattered, and at the same time irritated, because somehow, vaguely, he feels that something has been stolen from him in his turn—a rare and intimate piece of wealth that he thought belonged to him and his people alone.

Apart from this, the French attitude toward francophone literature remains ambiguous, gently scornful, since “the only good French is Parisian French” as the Malian Diabaté mockingly reminds us. But such attitudes do not prevent francophone literatures from growing stronger, from becoming more and more distant from the Metropole. No one thinks any longer of including a Canadian writer like Anne Hébert, an African like Aminata Sow Fall, or even Maryse Condé from the French West Indies as part of metropolitan French literature. Differences in the originating cultures are openly acknowledged, and it is accepted that these origins are profound determinants of the literary product, that the mere exercise of language is no longer enough to assimilate them, to integrate them into the European bosom. All this could hardly have been foreseen in 1960. Yet the French-speaking community functions in a curious way. At the center, it is a tool of restoration; at the periphery, it is a tool for establishing distance. Its movement is analogous to those of galaxies expanding, planets inexorably moving away from the center. And no one will be able to make them return.

What will become of Negritude and the French-speaking community in the twenty-first century? Senghor and Alioune Diop would certainly reply: they will answer present at the meeting place where cultures give and receive. At the risk of being denounced by tomorrow’s Anglo-Saxon or the next day’s Sino-Japanese civilization, we might add that, rather than struggle against each other, negritude and francophonie should stand shoulder-to-shoulder. For the dialogue between cultures is only possible on a footing of respect, or better still, of mutual recognition.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a development of this idea, see, for example, my *Comprendre les Poèmes de L. S. Senghor*.

<sup>2</sup> This poem, “Trahision,” can be found in Laleau’s *Musique Nègre*. The translation was first published in my *Black Writers in French*.

<sup>3</sup> The Tirolien citation is from “Prière d’un petit enfant nègre” in *Balles d’Or*, and translated in Kennedy, *op. cit.* 33. The Diop passage is from “Le Rénégat” in *Coups de Pilon*, 23. Both translations are by Ellen Conroy Kennedy. The former can be found in her *The Negritude Poets*.

<sup>4</sup> These lines are taken from the poem “Hoquet,” in *Pigments*, p. 35.



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