

A Philosophical Reflection on what negritude meant for Senghor

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Abstract— *This work is not meant to carry out a general study on the concept of 'negritude'. It concentrates on Senghor's understanding and explanation of negritude. With this we will try to establish a basic epistemological foundation for the Negro-African. From this basic ground, other truth and ingenuity about his personality can be established for the singular purpose of affirming his identity. Hence, by understanding the nature and meaning of negritude as Senghor explains, it can serve as the basis of African enquiry into the wider world in line with the epistemological theory of foundationalism which seeks for the most basic beliefs that are infallible which can serve as foundation for all other knowledge. Thus, with the truth of negritude as foundation the Negro- African can have a basic epistemological ground upon which he can rest to assert other truths about himself and in this manner could affirm his identity and meaningful contribution to the global existence so much as other races in this multi-raced world. This work will adopt three methodologies in line with the theme under discussion. It employs expository, analytic and hermeneutic approaches. First of all, the Senghor's Negritude Movement and its ideology will be exposed. There will be an analysis of Senghor's negritude for a better comprehension. Finally the Negritude Movement will be interpreted hermeneutically in the light of the foundation lists theory.*

Keywords— *Exposition; Negritude; Means; Philosophical; Reflection.*

I. LITERATURE REVIEW

Negritude is an African conception of man as being-with, the belonging-ness that is the basis of African identity. An individual's existence makes sense only in relation with others. Hence, the existence of the others is an assurance, a secure foundationalism to justify my own existence. The reality of the individual person's existence is assured by the existence of the others. The proponents of Negritude, therefore, found solidarity in a common black identity as a way of rejecting French racism. They had the understanding that the shared black heritage of members of the African Diaspora would serve as the best and lasting tool in fighting against French political and intellectual hegemony and domination. In their chosen literary style which was realistic, the verily cherished Marxist idea. Notwithstanding the fact that each of the father founders had his own particular idea about the aim, objective and style of Negritude, what was doubtlessly and practically outstanding is that the movement was generally characterized by their determined opposition

to colonialism with its attendant abhorred lack of humanity and blatant rejection of western domination and ideas. Consequently they resorted to the acceptance of and pride in being black. Hence, African history, tradition and beliefs must be upheld and proclaimed with pride. Also important was the acceptance of and pride in being black and a valorization of African history, traditions, and beliefs. It was Senghor who capitalized on Negritude and used it to work toward a universal valuation of African people. He meaningfully advocated a modern incorporation of the expression and celebration of traditional African customs and ideas.

Jean-Paul Sartre sargastically analyzed the negritude movement in an essay called '*Orphée Noir*' (Black Orpheus). In 'Black Orpheus', Sartre characterizes negritude as the polar opposite of colonial racism in a Hegelian dialectic and with it he helped to introduce Negritude issues to French intellectuals. From Sartre's point of view, negritude was an

'anti-racist racism' necessary to the final goal of racial unity. According to him:

Negritude ... is the low ebb in a dialectical progression: the theoretical and practical assertion of white supremacy is the thesis; negritude's role as an antithetical value in the negative stage. But this negative stage will not satisfy the Negroes who are using it, and they are well aware of this. They know that they are aiming for a human synthesis or fulfillment in a raceless society. Negritude is destined to destroy itself; it is the path and not the goal, the means and not the end(Sartre; 1948).

This text of Sartre produced the effect of a bombshell. It gave the first impetus to launch the next positive stage in the dialectical process. But first it produced a feeling of shock and betrayal among a number of African intellectuals. As Ruch & Anyanwu admit:

Just as they seemed to have found their dignity, one of their most famous and conditional supporters tells them that they are only in a transitory phase. Just when they thought they had arrived at the goal, they are told that they are in the wrong track (Ruch & Anyanwu; 1981).

Thus Franz Fanon, one of the key African socio-political theorists has this to say with regard to Sartre's assertion:

When I read that page, I felt that I had been robbed of my last chance. I said to my friends: 'The generation of the younger black poets has just suffered a blow that can never be forgiven.' Help had been sought from a friend of the colored peoples, and that friend had found no better response than to point out the relativity of what we were doing... Jean Paul Sartre, in this work has destroyed black zeal... I needed to lose myself in negritude(Fanon; 1967).

However, Ruch & Anyanwu rightly observe that Sartre was right. This is because for them, "a negative attitude of

rejection is a juvenile but necessary rite of passage to a more mature discovery and acceptance of oneself and of others as they are"(Ruch & Anyanwu; 1981).

According to Egbeke Ajah, "Negritude is a philosophy of social action. It is not only a process; it is a product" (Ifesieh; 1990). For Okolo, Negritude originated as a resistance to the politics of assimilation and agrees with Sartre in negritude as an anti-racist- racism. However, Okolo sees this notion of negritude as a negative phase of the movement. As he made it clear; "out of the negation will emerge the affirmation of black essence, black pride, black civilization which is the positive aspect of negritude as a philosophy" (Ifesieh; 1990). For Okolo, negritude is the affirmation of being. It is the affirmation of the black man, his world and the full resource of his civilization. As Egbeke Ajah points out in his Essay:

Okolo...sees the movements as a call for a collective return to roots and sources of blackness and whatever it represents. He sees it as the sum total of the cultural heritage, the values and above all, the spirit of black African civilization. In short, a denial of the white man's burden and of the Negro situation. With this denial, the black man ought to become proud of what he is and his achievements as a being in the world (Ifesieh; 1990).

This meant for Okolo that negritude is seen as a 'no' to oppression and degradation and a 'yes' to life and whatever begets life. It is the uniqueness and irreplaceability of the African personality as well as African's unmistakable presence in the world. For Okolo, negritude was designed to retrace the erstwhile falsified cultural portrait of Africa and the Africans on the cultural landscape of the entire world. Okolo, as Egbeke Ajah reports sees negritude as praxis. This is because according to him, what was important to the founders was humanity. Hence he contends that the movement was both that of reflection and action and is the provider of the impetus to independence struggle. Thus Egbeke Ajah explains that the

Black man's revolts against colonialism are a prime proof of negritude in action or negritude as praxis. The aim and objectives of the black African: rooting one's self in one's world, the

confirmation and assertion of one's being as pursued by negritude are according to Okolo, the same as 'African personality', 'African pride', 'Black or African power', 'Black dignity', 'Black authenticity', etc. used by contemporary African leaders (Ifesieh; 1990).

As much as there are many thinkers who appreciate Senghor's negritude movement, there are also some who detest it in so many ways and have leveled several criticisms to it.

The Nigerian dramatist, poet, and novelist Wole Soyinka objected to Negritude. For him, the issue of Africans purposely and outspokenly taking pride in their colour, would automatically put the black people on the defensive. As Egbeke Ajah reminds us:

In 1962, Soyinka explained in Kampala: 'I said: A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces'. In other words, Soyinka is saying that a tiger does not stand in the forest and say: 'I am a tiger' rather when one passes where a tiger passed by, from the skeletons of its prey, one realizes that tigritude has been active there. Soyinka explained that he was trying to distinguish between propaganda and true poetic creativity. For Soyinka, what the negritudians presented as poetry were no intrinsic poetry but rather mere name-dropping (Ifesieh; 1990).

Sekou Toure of Guinea sees negritude as being fatal to Pan-Africanism and so should be destroyed and Nkrumah criticized it as a "mere literary affectation and style which pile up word upon word and image upon image with occasional reference to Africa and things African (Ifesieh; 1990). Nkrumah objected to the term "African socialism" and instead called for a turn toward socialism focusing on the particular conditions facing particular countries, recognizing that "there is only one nature, subject in all its manifestations to natural laws and that human society is, in this sense, part of nature and subject to its own laws of development." Thus, negritude meant for him mere apologetic and is non-dynamic.

Still further, Paul Niger in his book *'Je n'aime pas l'afrique'* differs with Senghor as he argues:

We had lived an unreal Negritude, made out of the theories of ethnologists, sociologists, and other scholars who studied man under glass. They have injected the Negriod with formaldehyde and pretended it was a type of happy man" (Niger; 1981).

In a similar vein, The South African writer, Ezekiel Mphahlele, among all others of his books, specifically leveled criticisms on Senghor with regard to his idea of negritude. Thus he strongly disagrees with the concept of negritude. In short, he maintains that what Senghor propagates is simply an inferiority complex.

Franz Fanon, for his part shows that Negritude in spite of all its glorification of cultural African values overlooked the socio-economic realities which are far from the romanticized ideal. Despite his initial appraisal of Senghor for his ingenuity, he never relented in leveling his criticisms to the ideas of Senghor. Thus he metaphorically writes: "All the proof of a wonderful Songhai civilized will not change the fact that today the Songhais are underfed and illiterate, thrown between sky and water with empty heads and empty eyes" (Fanon; 1968). What this meant for him is that negritude stays within the domain of ideas and theories, but forgets the necessary revolutionary praxis which alone can change the situation. Thus he asserts:

It is around the people's struggle that African-negro culture takes on substance and not around songs, poems, or folklore... I say again that no speech-making and no proclamation concerning culture will turn us from our fundamental task: the liberation of the national territory; a continual struggle against colonialism in its new form; and an obstinate refusal to enter the charmed circle of mutual admiration at the summit (Fanon; 1968).

A simple look at this shows us that it implies that even the most politically committed poetry and literature remains nothing but literature. It only talks but does not act. Such as this is what he takes negritude to be. Fanon as well criticized

the concept of *negritude* as espoused by Senghor in particular as it concerns the idea of returning to a pristine past. He insists that it is of no use to dig into the people's past in order to find concrete examples to counter colonialism's endeavours. Fanon instead called for the creation of a new national culture based on a collective consciousness arrived at through the mobilization and sensitisation of the masses to flush out the "useless and harmful bourgeoisie". Invariably Fanon was unmistakably advocating for revolutionary theory and practice.

II. AN EXPOSITION OF WHAT NEGTRITUDE MEANS TO SENGHOR

A situation in which a man or a society finds themselves alienated from the life force of their existence cannot last forever. As an individual as well as a member of a society, man cannot survive for long without his identity. While the individual may find a satisfactory substitute in playing a role and becoming effectively another person, by absorbing another's character and personality, a society as a whole cannot perform this acting trick for any length of time without vanishing as a distinct society. History is a witness to the many examples of cultures which have disappeared as living entities and remain only in a few museum pieces. On the cultural level, the first form of rebellion took the shape of the early stages of *negritude* philosophy. Thus Senghor admits; "that indeed it has been, at the beginning of its elaboration, an 'anti- racist racism', as Sartre defined it in *Black Orpheus*...."(Senghor; 1961). As Senghor writes:

Very early on we had attested in ourselves the failure of assimilation: we had been able to assimilate the French language and mathematics, but we were not able to slough off either our black skin or our black soul. Thus we were led in search of a passionate quest for a Holy Grail: our collective soul.... We threw ourselves like unleashed swords into an assault on European values that we summed up by the trilogy: discursive reason, technique, market economy, i.e. capitalism.... We delighted in a radical opposition to western civilization(Senghor; 1961).

Senghor's General Idea of Negritude

Senghor looks at *negritude* from a double perspective: objectively and subjectively. Objectively, *negritude* is a worldview that corresponds to what European ethnologists and sociologists called 'African civilization' or the 'black soul'. Thus when considered objectively, *negritude* is formed by the structures and values of civilization. Nevertheless, these structures and values derive from a certain state of mind, a kind of feeling. It is from this feeling, the psychology of Negro-African that one finds the key to Negro philosophy and art of which literature is an aspect. Subjectively, *negritude* is the project for action in the student circle, which Senghor and his fellow students formed in the Latin Quarter in Paris in the years 1931-1935. *Negritude* is a project for action in so far as these students based themselves on traditional *negritude*, that is, on black cultural awareness. Their main reason is to effectively contribute to universal civilization. They hoped to make contribution in all domains but particularly in the areas of literature and fine arts. Hence, according to Senghor, *negritude* is "the sum of the cultural values of the black world; that is, a certain active presence in the world, or better, in the universe" (Senghor; 1970). In reconstructing the truth about himself, the African takes on as well the macro-task of reconstructing and reasserting the truth in his world, his history the various works of art, his civilization, etc. this wider task of the African personality is what *negritude* is all about. In its ontological dimension, *negritude* makes an affirmation of the black man himself, his world and the roots of his culture and the full resources of his civilization. In a more elaborate manner, Senghor gives the definition of *negritude* thus:

Negritude is the whole of the values of civilization – cultural, economic, social, and political – which characterize the black peoples, more exactly the Negro-African world. It is essentially instinctive reason, which pervades all these values, because it is reason of the impressions, reason that is 'seized'. It is expressed in the emotions, through the myth, I mean by images – archetypes of the collective soul, especially by the myth primordial accorded to those of the cosmos. In other terms, the sense of communion, the gift of imagination, the gift of rhythm – these are the traits of *negritude* that we find like an indelible

seal on the works and activities of the black man(Senghor; 1970).

Thus, negritude makes the African not only proud of his person, for instance, but also of his colour, heritage and his various contributions and responsibilities to history. It is an acceptance of and responsibility for one's destiny and pride as a black man or as Senghor himself once expressed that it is the sum total of the cultural heritage, the values and above all the spirit of black African civilization. Hence, Senghor further writes: "In sum, we asserted that our Negro heritage was worthy of respect, and that this heritage was not relegated to the past, that its values were values that could still make an important contribution to the world" (Okolo; 1989). What this implies is that negritude was a means to recover the values and past glories of the black man, a kind of a gateway to a new self or rather a key to black civilization.

Negritude as Philosophy

Senghor contributed to this project more especially as it regards the theory of knowledge, ontology and African socialism. Let us take them one after another beginning with the first.

Negritude as a Theory of Knowledge

Senghor roots knowledge to archetypal images which go back to more than two million years to the prehumanoid period when animals and plants and even the element of nature were interwoven and intermingling with man's life and were very familiar to him in an environment which is impressed on our consciousness. This pristine environment, according to Senghor, is responsible for this feeling which is typical of the negro- African. Thus the Negro is open to all contacts and the smallest invitations. He feels before seeing and reacts immediately at contact with the object, or even at contact with the waves that the object emits from the invisible. He knows the object by the power of his emotion. Hence, from his definition of negritude, Senghor attributed to the black man those mental qualities which contemporary philosophy, was beginning to extol in opposition to the exaggerated emphasis on scientific and rationalistic endeavours, which is evident in the existentialist philosophers like Kierkegaard, Sartre, Heidegger and others. Senghor, therefore, solidly maintains that emotion is Negro and reason Greek and for this, he has received several criticisms. In his words;

I have often written that emotion is Negro. I have been reproved for this. Wrongly. I don't see how else to account for our specific quality, that negritude which is the sum total of the cultural values of the black world(Senghor; 1964).

Furthermore, Senghor recounts that the young people have challenged him for reducing negro- African knowledge to pure emotion, and for denying that there is an African "reason" or "African technique"(Senghor; 2001). In response to this accusations, Senghor writes:

Thus I explain myself. However paradoxical it may seem, the vital force of the negro- African, his surrender to the object, is animated by reason. Let us understand each other clearly; it is not the reasoning-eye of Europe, it is the reason of the touch, better still, the reason of the embrace, the sympathetic reason, more closely related to the Greek logos than the Latin ratio. For logos, before Aristotle meant at once reason and speech(Senghor; 2001).

According to Senghor, the European holds the object at a distance. He views it, analysis it, kills it, and finally domesticates or tames it in order to use it. On the contrary, the negro- African presses the object before ever he fills it. He is wadded to its waves and contours, and then in an act of love, he assimilates it in order to know it more deeply. Hence, while discursive reasoning of the white stops at the appearance of the object, the intuitive reason of the black goes beyond the visible to the underlying reality of the object to capture the reality beneath the sign. From the above it becomes clear that Senghor does not mean that the negro- African does not reason, rather, he was contrasting two worldviews: African worldview and European worldview. These two different kinds of worldview are informed by two approaches to knowing. The intuitive reason of the negro- African which after discovering synthesizes, and the discursive reasoning of the white European which analyses in view of the practical utilization of that which is discovered; respectively. In other words, the white European mode of knowing does not attain the innermost nature of things. In

the opinion of Senghor, the future of the world civilization requires these two modes of knowing to maintain a balance. Senghor is however careful and to point out that this does not mean,

That the Negro – Africa lacks discursive reason, that he never used any. I have never said so. In truth, every ethnic group posses different aspects of reason and all the virtues of man, but each has stressed only one aspect of reason, only certain virtues. No civilization can be built without using discursive reason and without techniques. Negro- African civilization is no exception to this rule(Senghor; 1965).

Senghor finds fault with Descartes well known assertion, ‘I think, therefore I am’. For Senghor, one always thinks something. Therefore, he insists that the conjunction ‘therefore’ is redundant. Senghor maintains that negro-African logic recognizes that Descartes' "*cogito ergo sum*" is unnecessary and, therefore the negro- African could say: “I feel I dance the other; I am”(Senghor; 1962). In order to elaborate this more, Senghor writes: “To dance is to discover and to recreate, especially when it is dance of love. In any event it is the best way to know. Just as knowledge is once re- creation and recreation, after the model of God”(Senghor; 1962). As Senghor opines further, “more significantly, knowledge coincides with the essence of a thing in its innate and original reality, in its discontinuous and undetermined reality: in its life”(Senghor; 1962). Here, one can see that Senghor is emphasizing that the Negro – African theory of knowledge grasps the relation between ontology and ethics. Thus Negro- African method of knowing being primarily intuitive is directed to the ethical, for the negro- African views reality fundamentally as a given possibility of reality to be actualized. Hence, Senghor accepts that negro- African method of knowledge is “participation and communion”(Senghor; 1962).

Negritude as an Assertion of Being.

Senghor also contributed to this project as it regards African ontology. According to Senghor, the negro- African sees every object, a symbol of an underlying reality which constitutes a veritable meaning of the sign which is immediately given to us. Every form, every surface and line,

every colour and shade, every smell and odour, every sound, every pitch has its meaning. Because the negro- African is primarily intuitive; intuitive reasoning is at the base of the negro- ontology and worldview. Hence, Senghor maintains that the different sensible appearances constituted by the animal, vegetative and mineral kingdoms are only material manifestations of one fundamental reality which is the universe, the network of diverse forces, which are the expression of possibilities contained in God, the only real force. With regard to this, one confirms that the negro-ontology is unitary. The unity of the universe is realized in God and by the convergence of forces arising from God and ordained towards God. Thus, Senghor maintains that the negro, compared to the white European, has a more developed sense of the solidarity of men and their co-operation, and this explains the Negro- African’s spirit of dialogue. As a result of this, Senghor does not hold the white man primarily responsible for the Negro’s loss of identity, but the black man himself. Hence, he says:

The Negro- African sympathizes, abandons his personality to become identified with the Other. He dies to be reborn in the Other. He does not assimilate, he is assimilated. He lives a common life with the other; he lives in symbiosis.... ‘I think therefore I am’ Descartes writes.... The Negro- African could say: ‘I feel, I dance, the other; I am....’(Senghor; 1965).

It is therefore, for Senghor, part of the African’s constitutive character to lose his identity. By abandoning his personality to the collective personality of the extended family or clan in the mythical world- view, the African does not have the experience of living with and by an individual, isolated personality, he is not used to stand on his own feet and therefore all too easily falls prey to any social structure or personality capable of leading him.

Negritude as African Socialism

Senghor yet contributed to this project as it concerns African socialism. Senghor views Negro- African philosophy as existentialist philosophy but which integrates with spiritual values. Thus, Senghor asserts that everything is based on “vital force” (Senghor; 2001). This vital force pre-exists being and brings being about. God gives vital force to all levels of being: minerals, plants, animals and men. This force

is ordained to increase. Thus, existence bases itself on pre-existence to expand to greater existence. For the African, vital force constitute the tissue of the world and a dialectical movement that animates this world. Senghor also maintains that African society is collectivistic or more exactly communalistic, because it a product of a communion of minds rather than from aggregation of individuals. Thus, Senghor believes, and further upholds that Africa had already realized socialism even before the European presence. He believes that he has the vocation to renew that socialism while helping to give back to it its spiritual dimensions.

Negritude as a Humanist Theory

The humanist aspect of negritude is clear in Senghor's work; "Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century." In this work, Senghor emphasized that Negritude has been proclaimed to the extent that it has become customary, more especially among the English-speaking critics, indicts them indict them of racism.. According to him, "in the language of Shakespeare, is it not in good company with the words humanism and socialism"? (Senghor; 1970). He observed Mphahleles who for Senghor have been sent about the world saying: 'Negritude is an inferiority complex'; but Senghor was quick to observe that the same word Negritude cannot mean racism and at the same time stand for 'inferiority complex' without contradiction. Senghor's Negritude was mostly attacked in Ghana. The government of Ghana commissioned a poem titled 'I hate Negritude' as if it is possible for one to hate oneself without ceasing to be.

Senghor in his essay, made it clear that negritude is none of these things. According to him:

It is neither racialism nor self-negation. Yet it is not just affirmation; it is rooting oneself in oneself, and self-confirmation: confirmation of one's *being*. Negritude is nothing more or less than what some English-speaking Africans have called the *African personality*. It is no different from the 'black personality' discovered and proclaimed by the American New Negro movement. As the American Negro poet, Langston Hughes wrote after the First World War: 'We, the creators of the new generation, want to give expression to our *black*

personality without shame or fear. ... We know we are handsome. Ugly as well. The drums weep and the drums laugh.' Perhaps our only originality, since it was the West Indian poet Aimé Césaire who coined the word *negritude*, is to have attempted to define the concept a little more closely; to have developed it as a weapon, as an instrument of liberation and as a contribution to the humanism of the twentieth century(Senghor; 1970).

In order to assert more deeply, the humanist nature of negritude Senghor went back to its definition to ask the question of the meaning of Negritude. Senghor, therefore, alluded to the fact that both Ethnologists and sociologists talk about the 'different civilizations,' which obvious implies that peoples vary in their ideas and their languages, in their philosophies and their religions, in their customs and as well as their institutions, in their literature and their art. Hence, Senghor questions:

Who would deny that Africans, too, have a certain way of conceiving life and of living it, a certain way of speaking, singing and dancing; of painting and sculpturing, and even of laughing and crying?(Senghor; 1970).

This is very obvious and as such, nobody can deny it. Thus Senghor defined Negritude as the sum of the cultural values of the black world. This definitely implies a certain and active presence in the world, or better put, a sure and active presence in the universe. Thus, Senghor gives the definition of negritude from what precedes as the sum of the cultural values of the black world; which for him implies, a certain active presence in the world, or better, in the universe. For Senghor, it is, as John Reed and Clive Wake call it, a certain way of relating oneself to the world and to others. Thus, he maintains that it is essentially relations with others, an opening out to the world, contact and participation with others. Hence, Senghor asserts; "Because of what it is, negritude is necessary in the world today: it is a humanism of the twentieth century"(Senghor; 1970). In order to expound this more, Senghor asserts:

The paradox is only apparent when I say that negritude, by its ontology (that

is, its philosophy of being), its moral law and its aesthetic, is a response to the modern humanism that European philosophers and scientists have been preparing since the end of the nineteenth century, and as Teilhard de Chardin and the writers and artists of the mid-twentieth century present it (Senghor; 1970).

III. CONCLUSION

What the great African leaders emphasize as Africa's original contribution to the world and its civilization is above all, this human factor in interpersonal relationship or the humane principle of cooperative living upheld highly in traditional Africa. This would mean all the qualities and values of being-with, characteristic of the traditional African. Consequently, in the world of today where man's inhumanity to man, wars, racialism, ethnic antagonism, violence, exploitation, and similar vices have greatly jeopardized man's community life, national and international, the world of humane inter-personal relationship, where brotherhood of man and altruism would remain the supreme law as in traditional Africa, would indeed be a return to sanity and true humanity. It may well be the lot of Africans to pave way to this new world where man will no longer be wolf to man, but will truly enjoy genuine brotherhood. One of the main reasons for the increased corruption in our Contemporary society today is the thriving of this individualistic, selfish and self-centered life and a relegation of the communal spirit, inter-personal relationship, the original brotherhood-of-all, which is traditional to the African due to the influence of the capitalist western culture.

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