



Negritude and the Quest for an African Identity

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT *The waves of slavery, racism and colonialism that swept across Africa left the identity of the African in disarray. In a bid to recapture the identity of the African, Senghor used the concept of Negritude to symbolize what the black man stands for. He defines negritude as the whole complex of civilized values, cultural, economic, social, political which characterize the black peoples, or more precisely, the Negro-African world. The focus of this paper is to highlight Senghor's concept of negritude and its dimensions: cultural, social negritude, economic negritude and political negritude. It also tries to evaluate how much of Africa's identity Senghor's idea of negritude is able to represent.*

Introduction

During the 19th century, the scramble for territories by European powers took a new turn as they began to make significant advances to tropical Africa. By 1913, European powers had divided the African continent into a patchwork that showed little or no regard for ethnic and linguistic boundaries. This opened the African version of colonialism (Kanu, 2012). The human and natural resources of Africa were exploited, independent African communities lost their political liberty, and Africa suffered a crisis of 'self-confidence', resulting in a lasting sense of inferiority and subjugation that builds a barrier to growth and innovation. In the face of these exploitative and ideological devaluation of the black race, emerged an interesting package to the development of African political ideology.

Many Africans began the search for an ideological project of self-affirmation and assertive cultural nationalism (Makumba, 2007). Among these were Nnamdi Azikiwe, the Pilot of Nigerian Independence (Nwoko, 2006), Kwame Nkrumah, a radical nationalist and a proponent of Pan-Africanism, Obafemi Awolowo, a socialist oriented nationalist, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Julius Nyerere, the father of Ujamaa Socialism. This notwithstanding, this work is streamlined to the philosophy of Leopold Senghor as regards negritude as a quest for an African community-based Identity.

The Man Leopold Sedar Senghor (1906-2001)

Leopold Sedar Senghor was born on 9th October, 1906 in the city of Joal, Senegal (Collins, 1990). He began his studies in Senegal at the age of eight in the Ngasobil boarding school of the Fathers of the Holy Spirit. He enrolled into a seminary in Dakar in the year 1922. He later attended a secular institution after he was told that the religious life was not for him. When he had completed his Baccalaureate, he was awarded a scholarship to continue his studies in France.

Senghor graduated from the University of Paris, where he received the Aggregation in French Grammar. He was subsequently designated professor at the Universities of Tours and Paris. In 1939, he was enrolled as a French army with the rank of private within the 59th Colonial Infantry division. After a year, during the German in France, he was taken prisoner by the German in la Charité-sur-Loire. He was interned in different camps, and finally at Front Stalag 230, in Poitiers. Front Stalag 230 was reserved for colonial

troops captured during the war. He was to be executed with the others whom were captured together with him on the same day they were captured, but they escaped this fate. In total, Senghor spent two years in different prison camps, there, he spent most of his time writing poems. He was released in 1942 on grounds of medical reasons. Senghor resumed his teaching career.

Once the war was over, Senghor was selected as Dean of the Linguistics Department with the Ecole Nationale de la France d'Outre-Mer, a position he would hold until Senegal's independence in 1960. While he was travelling on a research trip for his poetry, he got to meet the local socialist leader, Lamine Guèye, who advised him to run for election as a member of the Assemblée nationale française. In 1947, Senghor left the African Division of the French Section of the Workers International (SFIO), which had given enormous financial support to the social movement. Senghor, along with Mamadou Dia, founded the Bloc démocratique sénégalais (1948). They won the legislative elections of 1951, and Guèye lost his seat. He became the first President of the Republic of Senegal, elected on 5th September, 1960. Senghor is the author of the Senegalese National Anthem. Senghor survived an assassination attempt on 22 March, 1967. Moustapha Lô, the suspect, pointed his pistol towards the President after he had participated in the sermon of Tabaski, but the gun did not fire. Lô was sentenced to death for treason and was executed on 15 June 1967, even though it remained unclear if he had actually wanted to murder Senghor. By December 1980, Senghor tendered his resignation. He was replaced as head of the country by Abdou Diouf (Wikipedia, 2012). Senghor spent the last years of his life with his wife in Ver-sur-Mer, near the city of Caen in Normandy, where he died on 20 December 2001. His funeral was held on 29 December 2001 in Dakar.

The Problem of African Identity

The principle of identity according to Njoku (2002), is a value expressed by one of the first principles of being. It states that every being is determined in itself, is one with itself and is consistent in itself. Thus, every being is one with itself and divided from others. The qualities of matter, referred to in traditional metaphysics as accidents, such as size, colour, shape etc, distinguish one being from the other. If being does not have an identity, then everything would be everything, giving birth to one thing since nothing.

ing can be differentiated from the other. In this case, there would be no subject and object relationship. This would create a causal traffic in the order of being and knowledge.

Western philosophical tradition ascribes the invention of the idea of identity to John Locke. And for Locke (1999: 311), identity consists in:

When we see anything to be in any place in any instant of time, we are sure that it is that very thing, and not another which at that same time exists in another place, how like and undistinguishable so ever it may be in all other respects: and in this consists identity, when the ideas it is attributed vary not at all from what they were that moment wherein we consider their former existence, and to which we compare the present... when therefore we demand whether anything be the same or not, it refers always to something that existed such a time in such a place, which it was certain, at that instant, was the same with itself, and no other.

From the foregoing, Locke (1999) distinguishes between qualitative and numerical identity. On the one hand, a thing's qualitative identity comprises its defining properties: these are properties that one must mention in a full answer to the question "Who am I?" or "What is it?" Some authors refer to this identity as a synchronic identity (Oliver, 2011). On the other hand, the problem of identity is taken to mean a question of numerical identity over time: what makes X at one time the same person as Y at another? Philosophers like Oliver (2011), would also refer to it as diachronic identity: what makes a being the same person across time.

Within the parameters of African philosophy, questions bordering on African identity have arisen: what is Africa? What is African? Who qualifies as the African? How can an African be characterized? At face value, the answer seems obvious. Surely, everyone knows who the African is. But the answer becomes less obvious once other probing qualifiers are added to the question. How is the African identity constructed in the face of the mosaic of identities that people of African ancestry living within and beyond the continent bear? Do all categorised as Africans or as having an African pedigree perceive themselves as Africans? Are all who perceive themselves as Africans accepted as such? Are there levels of "Africanness", and are some more African than others? (Jideofor, 2009) In the past, the experience of slave trade and colonialism were the provenance of such an enquiry. However, in recent time, the researcher believes that with the intensification of globalisation the identity of the African would have to be defined from this experience, or else, she would run the risk of being a nameless actor in the world stage.

From Dialectical Materialism to African Socialism

Senghor accepted the relevance of socialism as a way to move Africa forward, but rejected the Marxists version of socialism which has atheistic tendencies. Thus the employment of Karl Marx and Engels' socialism would be grossly inadequate; they can only serve as secondary sources in the development of African socialism and not as primary sources. African socialism must be based on Negro-African cultural values. He criticised Marx's socialism as pitched on a materialistic foundation. He rejects Marx's dialectical materialism and proposes an African Socialism that should be a democratic socialism which integrates spiritual values. Furthermore, he observes that in Marxist communism, the suppression of the individual under the collectivity,

the person under the class and reality under ideology, is against African socialism. The formulation of African socialism, Senghor believes should be based on three steps:

1. Bringing to light the traditional civilization as the root of African socialism.
2. The study of the impact of colonialism on African civilization.
3. A synthesis of the African socialist root and the values assimilated from European civilization.

The Senghorian Negritude

The word *Negro* refers to a people of a designated colour: black. And this identity of the African has been a source of ridicule from the West; at one point everything dark was inferior and devilish. It was in response to this background that Senghor (1993) developed a colour based identity for the African. He maintains that the black colour of the Negro, rather than demean him, assigns him a unique place in the world community.

The early pressured western cultural superiority advocated by the colonialist and rationalists tradition awakened the consciousness of the blacks to assertive effort in articulating cultural rationalism among the French speaking Africans. The concept of negritude sprang up as the culmination of that desire earlier conceived as a celebration of the black endowment and drive for the restoration of the dignity of the black race. While Senghor studied and taught at the University of Paris, he met prominent social scientists such as Marcel Cohen, Marcel Mauss and Paul Rivet. Along with other intellectuals of the African Diaspora who had come to study in the colonial capital. Senghor coined the term "negritude", in response to the racism still prevalent in France. By so doing, the racial slur "nègre" was turned into a positively connoted celebration of African culture and character. The idea of negritude informed Senghor's cultural criticism and literary work, and also became a guiding principle for his political thought in his career as a statesman. According to Senghor (1993: 83), "Negritude is the whole complex of civilized values cultural, economic, social and political which characterize the black peoples, or more precisely, the Negro-Africa World".

Negritude as a concept sought to reverse the colonialist portrayal of things African as evil, subhuman, or at least inferior to all things European. In the contention of Teilhard (1959), Senghor believes that every African shares certain distinctive and innate characteristic, values and aesthetics. In the poem 'New York', Senghor (1965: 157) argues that the black community of Harlem should 'Listen to the far beating of your nocturnal heart, rhythm/ and blood of the drum' and 'let the black blood flow into your blood'. The word nocturnal is interesting because it refers to the image of night. By using the imagery of night, Senghor is asserting that one's African heritage (one's Blackness) is both inescapable and natural (like night-time). Negritude, for Senghor (1993) is the active rooting of a Black identity in this inescapable and natural African essence. According to Oyekan (2008), even in colour symbolism, negritude asserts that black is more beautiful than white and soft dark night is preferable to harsh daylight. For several years this movement exercises a powerful influence over franco-phone black literature. Senghor (cited by Abanuka, 2011: 85) avers that in the negro-African world,

Every Object is a symbol of an underlying reality that constitutes a veritable meaning of the sign which is immediately given to us. Every form, surface, and line, every col-

our and shade every smell and odour, sound and its has its meaning.

Senghor (1967: 96), in his poem *Black Woman* romanticizes the beauty of the black race,

Naked woman, black woman

Clothed with your colour which is life, with your form which is beauty!

In your shadow I have grown up; the gentleness of your hands was laid over my eyes.

And now, high in the sun-baked pass, at the hearts of summer, at the heart of noon, I come upon you, my promised land, and your beauty strikes me to the heart like the flash of an angle.

In his poem, "black", becomes life and beauty. This symbolizes what blacks stand for: beauty and life. He maintains that the work of the black has distinction, not in substance or subject matter but rather in a special approach, method and style. All these values Senghor (1967: 83) avers,...are essentially informed by intuitive reason.... In other words, the sense of communion, the gift of rhythm, such are the essential elements of negritude, which we find indelibly stamped on all the works and activities of the black man.

These distinctive black values, are not just meant for the African and his world, it is the contribution of the African to the civilization of the world. Thus, negritude is Africa's contribution to world civilization. It is not ideology, radicalism or a false myth. It is the whole man- body and spirit in its search for universal explanation and realization.

Teilhard (1959) avers that negritude is thus a philosophy of rediscovery and cultural reawakening, a philosophy of cultural emancipation aimed at giving the African people a sense of pride and dignity in their identity as Africans, by making them appreciate the value of their culture as distinct from the French culture and identity.

Senghor (cited by Nwoko, 1988) points out four dimensions of negritude:

1. Cultural negritude which highlights the role of emotion as dominating the entire Negro-African cultural system. He emphasizes that religion is deeply part of Negritude and cannot be removed from it. Senghor (1975: 35) states that, "it is their emotive attitude towards the world which explains the cultural values of the African.... Their religion and social structure, their art and literature, above all, the genius of their languages". He believes that the reinforcement of man is at once the reinforcement of other created things and

the reinforcement of God form in whom all forces are accomplished. The ancestors are the oldest human expressions of God (Janet, 2008).

2. Social negritude, which sees the family as the centre of the social structure in negritude. Thus, man as a person realizes his being in the family structure, and the society has meaning from what the family is. The idea of family here according to Senghor (1959: 2), embraces "the sum of all persons living and dead, who acknowledge a common ancestor... the ancestral lineage contuse to God". The ancestors are dead, they no longer have bodies nor do they have vital breath. But, that they are not perfectly dead. They are made to participate in the reinforcement of the vital force to the Community. Thus, sacrifice offered to the ancestors constitutes the "Cult" of the negro. Thus religion occupies a significant place in his philosophy.
3. There is also economic negritude, which holds that in the African traditional society there is no personal property. He exemplifies this with the question of land which cannot be owned as wealth or property since it is considered a force or spirit. Labour in the Senghorian Negritude is collective and free, which does not diminish a person but rather fulfils the person (Nwoko, 2006).
4. There is also political negritude, which is developed in an active humanism and his federal democratic. He believes that the federal system of government is the only kind of democracy that would help Africa. Senghor (1964) believes that democracy is the traditional form of Negro-African societies and this he derives from the absence of classes in the traditional African societies before colonialism. The federal democracy which he advocates for is a unitary decentralized state. Individual states of the federation, with their assemblies and governments, will direct their local welfare according to the will of the people. He strongly believes that while the decentralization of power brings economic and political responsibilities closer to the people, the centralization of power brings about bureaucracy.

Conclusion

A cursory glance at the works of Senghor reveals that more than any other African philosopher, he focused serious attention on the great accomplishment and continuing energy of African art, underlining in his own poetry the beauty of image and rhythm that is so much a part of African literary inheritance. His whole philosophy of negritude was a reaction to the assimilation assumption of France that African culture was essentially inferior to the French. As a growing African elite, he responded by devoting himself to becoming a writer, student of history and language. He sought in this way to demonstrate that African culture was as valid and existing as any other.

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