Negritude: A Philosophy of Withdrawal or Protest?

Nkeonye Otakpor
University of Benin, Nigeria

Introduction

In the dying days of 1980, two events occurred which were of much import to the future of negritude. They are the voluntary retirement of Leopold Sedar Senghor from the presidency of the Republic of Senegal and the publication in Paris of Rene Depestre’s Bonjour et adieu, Négritude. The one, not merely because voluntary withdrawal from political power is a rare event on the African scene, but because for Senghor, politics and negritude are ontologically one and the same thing. Irving Markovitz’ book Senghor and the politics of Negritude has so demonstrated. One cannot therefore help asking: what is the future of negritude without Senghor—the politician? Senghor’s answer to such a question, if he were asked, is only too predictable. In 1979, he had affirmed that negritude is a permanent phenomenon, not bound by time. The title of an address he gave in Martinique in 1976 is even more emphatic: “La Négritude, comme la culture des peuples noirs, ne saurait être dépassée” Negritude, as the culture of black people, cannot be outdated.

Naturally, this view is contested by many critics. And this is where Rene Depestre’s recent publication is relevant. Bonjour et adieu, Négritude is now the latest in a series of anti-negritude writing that includes Stanislaus Adotévi’s Négritude et Nérogrologues (1972), Marcien Towa’s Négritude ou

Servitude (1976), Paulin Hountondji’s Sur la “philosophic africaine” (1977), to mention but a few, and a host of articles. Need we recall here Franz Fanon’s severe criticism of negritude in Peau noire masque blanc (1952) and Les Damnés de la Terre (1968) or Albert Memmi’s suggestion in “Judée et Négritude” (1967) that negritude was wanting in depth of meaning? Or does one need mention Anglophone criticism epitomized by Wole Soyinka’s question: does the tiger shout its tigritude?, and Ezekiel Mphalele’s rejection of the idyllic image of Africa that negritude paints? These latter critics belong to the 1960s, and if Soyinka and Mphalele have been dubbed “Negritude’s leading critics”, that was true only of the decade before last.

Despite continued defence of negritude by many, the 1970s witnessed a hardening of positions against Senghor’s thesis, this time particularly from French-speaking critics. In this paper, we propose to take a critical look at the debate of the last decade, to establish a sort of “score-board”, and attempt to project the future.

Negritude and its Critics

W.L. Butler’s article, “A philo-historical analysis of Negritude”, outlines three phases of negritude: “The Pre-Establishment Period” (1900-1932), the “Period of Recognition” (1932-1947) and the “Period of Independence” (“1947 to the present”). The “present” in Butler’s study was 1976, and his chronology of negritude reflects the situation as of the 1960s, the decade of independence in Africa; and so it was proper to consider negritude then as being in the “Period of Independence”. Today, nearly two decades later, negritude is still in the air, although hotly debated. But perhaps we should classify it now as “Negritude of the Post-Independence Period”, or to borrow an idea from Stanislaus Adotévi, “Negritude of Words”.

A more important distinction made by Butler is in the very nature of negritude. Recalling V.L. Thomas’ work on the subject, he writes: Negritude’s two basic perspectives are historical and philosophical. The historical perspective exemplifies the events and circumstances which engender the concept. It focuses on temporality and reflects the events and conditions that create Negritude-Situation. The philosophical view, Negritude-

Essence, explains the “innerness” and the spirituality of black race. It transcend time and space by reaching for the Universal.5

The chronological evolution of negritude has never been a bone of contention and critics do not question the historicity of the movement. But, particularly within the last decade, the philosophical concepts that negritude represents have engendered much controversy. Mudimbe, Hountondji, Towa, Adotévi, inspired by existentialist-marxist philosophies, reject the essentialist qualities claimed for the Black Man by the exponents of negritude. Their opposition to negritude assumes, therefore, a wider philosophical and ideological dimension. Negritude is, thus, not only anti-scientific, but derives from fantasy; supposing a rigid essence of the negro which time never extinguishes. Assuredly, this has never been confirmed by sociological, historical and geographical realities. Stanley Adotévi spells out his charges against negritude in these words: La thèse fixiste qui la (négritude) soutient est non seulement antiscientifique, mais procède de la fantaisie. Elle suppose une essence rigide du nègre que le temps n'attente pas. A cette permanence s'ajoute une spécificité que ni les déterminations sociologiques, ni les variations historiques, ni les réalités géographiques ne confirment. Elle fait des nègres des êtres semblables partout et dans le temps.6

For him and his fellow critics, the concepts “African personality”, the “African soul” (Senghor's cherished âme nègre”), are devoid of meaning; so also the much publicized negro emotionalism, rhythm and “intuitive reason”. They reject this “racial division of intellectual labour” which accords emotion to one race, reason to the other. Severely criticizing white ethnologists and missionaries (Levy-Bruhl and the Rev. Fr. Tempels, for example) who have been seen as precursors of negritude, Paulin Hountondji contests the validity of even such terms as “African religion” and “African philosophy”.7

A negritude enthusiast may say in answer to some of this criticism that, far from ignoring sociological, historical and geographical factors (as Adotévi thinks negritude does), negritude is founded on the notion that these socio-geographical and historical “realities” lead to racial differences; that the communities that make up the black race, despite their internal differences, still differ, as a group, from the white or the yellow races. It could further be argued, in defence of negritude, that its critics would want to see a “universal humanity” where race and colour do not exist, while the champions of negritude aspire to a Universal Civilization where different races and colours co-exist. The poem of the Cameroonian Rene Philombe, “L’homme que te ressemble”8 epitomizes the one line of thought, while Senghor’s injunction to the Blacks to “assimilate without being assimilated” is the key to the other. In the opinion of the present writer, while both positions seem far from being realistic, Senghor’s thinking here seems less so. About the concepts of “African religion” and “African philosophy”, one cannot help asking what is particularly African about ancestor worship, about being in harmony with the Cosmic forces. What did the ancient Greeks and Romans worship at a time when their gods and goddesses were anthropomorphic and begetters of men? How different is the religion of the North American Indian from that called “African”, or from that of the native peoples of Oceania? Senghor may use this argument to buttress his thesis that “Negritude is Humanism”, and that a “Civilization of the Universal” is possible; with it his critics may want to support their own argument that the Black Man is just a Man. The point here is that the so-called “innerness” and spirituality of the Negro are characteristics of all “primitive” societies. European Romantics were not entirely unaware of this when they grouped the Indians of North and South America, the Africans and the native populations of South-East Asia together under the one name “Savages”. A second point that needs be made is that these traits are fast disappearing, as “Civilization” bulldozes its way not only through African forests and jungles but also through the hearts of men. We shall come back to this.

In addition to its “philosophical inadequacies”, the critics object to negritude’s ideological conservatism and social inaction. To Adotévi, Senghor’s “African Socialism is nothing but “a legitimate child of neo-colonialist -compromises”. Negritude is seen as nothing less than propaganda, nothing less than a panacea for problems of government. On the level of the daily lives of Africans, negritude is vague. It bears no precise indication as to what action will lead to the eventual recovery of their dignity. He explains further: ... le Président ... doit savoir que sur le plan de la vie quotidienne de mes Africaines qui lutten contre la dé-réalisation, la négritude est tant que telle est vague, et ne contient aucune indication précise pour l'action qu'elles meneront un jour pour retrouver leur dignité.9

Negritude and its Failures

The failure of negritude to propose a “plan of action” for the masses is a disappointment which these critics would share not only with the author of Orphée Noir, their “maître à penser”, but probably also with Aimé Césaire,
the most militant and marxist of the Negritude Triumvirate. The only reservation a neutral observer may make here is that negritude failures should not be interpreted exclusively in the marxist sense, exclusively in the context of the class struggle. In other words, that a meaningful and successful “negritude ideology” does not necessarily have to be marxist.

Closely allied to this criticism of negritude as a neo-colonialist tool, is that of its failure as an instrument of decolonization. Earlier on, negritude was an effort on the part of certain intellectuals to establish a re-evaluation of the diverse African heritage. At that time, Negritude had a very precise significance and constituted an instrument for the decolonization struggle. Rene Depestre who thinks that negritude has now deviated totally from its earlier goal has this to say: La négritude a été, à moment déterminant de ce siècle, un effort de la part de certains intellectuels ... pour établir une révalorisation, à la fois morale, esthétique et politique de nos divers héritages Africains. A ce moment-là, la négritude avait une signification bien précise et s'intégrait dans la lutte pour la décolonisation. Naturellement, il y a beaucoup de gens par la suite ... qui ont fait de la négritude une idéologie politique au service d'État bien déterminé. La négritude cesse donc dès lors d'être un concept de décolonisation.10

One cannot help sympathizing with Rene Depestre on this point. Haitian, he knows that his home land, like Martinique, like Guadeloupe, have remained French colonies despite the independence enjoyed by nearly all Black Africa.

This is, however, not to say that if only Haiti had been independent, Depestre would have reacted differently. He also knows that in the 1930s, and 1940s, the author of negritude envisaged the total decolonization of the black race. In 1976, not long after Depestre gave the interview quoted above, Senghor visited his friend Césaire in Fort-de-France. Senghor at last in Martinique! What excitement! “A dream of forty years come true!” Césaire exclaimed.11 But what an anticlimax for Negritude? On that occasion, Senghor refrained from talking politics with Césaire, out of respect for the territorial integrity of France! — so it is not a case of Louis XIV’s “apress-moi le délie!” The topic of Senghor's address was the permanence of negritude as the culture of black people. Its high light was a lesson on French grammar: the formation of nouns. And the enthusiastic crowd was fed with neologisms: négritude, négrité, nigrillé, nigrerie.

Four years before then, Adotoévi had warned about Senghor’s “mystified and mystifying” language which did not reach the people; he had regretted what he termed “today's negritude, the negritude of words”.

That was the “negritude” the Martiniquais got from Senghor, first-hand. It is hard not to agree with Depestre that in the course of the years, the nearly-fifty-year old “movement” had been emasculated, had lost its sharp edge, had been deformed beyond recognition. And so, as his new book suggests, it is time to “adieu”.

Negritude advocates have not directly or appropriately responded to the issues raised by the critics despite, or perhaps because of, the added impetus gained by the latter over the past decade. It was not until 1976, that Senghor attempted to take up the challenge thrown by Albert Memmi nine years before: the challenge to deepen the meaning of negritude. In taking up the challenge, Senghor intended to, in his own words, “deal a death-blow to our enemies”.12 Unfortunately for the cause of negritude, all he succeeded in doing was to enrich the French language with the neologisms already cited. To the adverse critic, Senghor can proudly respond, as he had done long before: “culture before politics”. The snag here is that on that occasion, the French culture triumphed over the African.

Although not made on the occasion of Senghor’s visit, a definition of negritude by Césaire seems, to some extent, a befitting rejoinder to the critic. Césaire says: Negritude is simply the recognition of the fact of being black and the acceptance of this fact, of our destiny as Blacks, of our history and our culture.13

We do not doubt the validity and the appropriateness of this definition. But in its low and subdued tone, one can read the resigned attitude of a disillusioned fighter, of one whose hopes were once high. To his agitated country-men, Césaire could have addressed these “words of wisdom”, this unassuming, unambitious conception of negritude. For the negritude of the 1970s is no longer an effort towards decolonization, nor an impulsive reaction against white racism, nor an enthusiasm for marxism, nor indeed an attempt to impress upon the non-black world the beauties of traditional black-African culture.

Now, shedded of most of its earlier ambitions, negritude, is, at best, simply a state of mind: “recognition of the fact of being black ... acceptance of this fact ...”

However, coming from the more militant Césaire, this programme to reserve to the Black Man his self-esteem, to get him accept himself, “as-is”, is not as unambitious, as acquisitive, as it may appear at first sight; nor is it even desirable. For, on the one hand, for whosoever knows the dilemma, the internal conflict of a man at war with himself, self-acceptance has an invaluable price. And the Black Man has had the sad experience of

10 Quoted in Marc Rombaut, La poesie negro-africaine, p. 40.
11 Aimé Césaire, “Césaire reçoit Senghor”, in Hommage a Leopold Sedar Senghor, pp. 41-47.
12 See note 2.
doubting himself, of doubting his humanity, like the abandoned child in search of his roots, like Peter Abraham’s hero in Tell Freedom asking the simple but moving question: Aunt Liza, what am I? If only for teaching Africans that their ancestors were not Gauls, and if only it succeeds in making them and all Blacks accept and be proud of their own identity, negritude should well be commended.

But on the other hand, self-pride does not come automatically with self-knowledge. There is nothing elating in discovering that one is ugly and can do nothing about it. For negritude to be worthwhile, it should address itself to improving the “ugly” image of the Black Man, particularly the deplorable material conditions in which he lives. Both advocates and critics of negritude should bear in mind that on the one hand it is not enough to say to the Black Man “we are black, let’s remain so”, and on the other hand, it is impossible to tell him “we were once black, but now let’s forget that”.

Negritude as a Philosophy

From the foregoing, it appears that it is only as a philosophy that negritude is still alive, albeit barely so; that as a tool for political change, it is now blunt. For Senghor however, it is the cultural content of negritude that will give it eternal life. We recall his promise: “negritude, as the culture of black people, cannot be outdated”. It is the very concept, the very “philosophy” of negritude: that of racial difference, racial identity, which, as intimated above, cannot be dismissed with a wave of the hand, that confers on the cultural aspect of negritude its due importance. For a race without a culture of its own ceases to exist, as does a culture that is not constantly cultivated. It is however regrettable that even here negritude has become superficial, perfunctory. This superficiality is manifested in an interview Senghor granted to Victor Hountondji in 1979. Senghor’s central theme during the interview is that the cultural values of Black Africa are permanent, and that only the manner of expression of these values changes with the times.

Admitting however that the Church, the Mosque, the Temple, have taken the place of the “sacred woods” (these “inviolable woods” he recalls in “Prière de paix”) as places of worship, he notes, with apparent satisfaction, that the drum is now used at Mass in the African continent. The argument is that “negritude” continues to wax strong as long as negro-african rhythm

and melody accompany foreign religious worship on the African soil. Here the philosopher Senghor seems to have failed to distinguish the essence of African culture from the external expression of that essence. The sound of the drum at Mass does not confer upon the ceremonies a traditional African character. Where Angels and Saints sit in the places reserved for demi-gods and departed ancestors, and Christian baptism replace “pagan” initiation rites, what is left of “negritude”? And, drowned in Christian liturgy, the tam-tam music cannot but lose its traditional religious symbolism, its conjuring powers, its secret language.

The Festivals of African Arts and Culture have come and gone, in Dakar and Lagos, with much fanfare and little avail. The erosion of negro-African civilization continues. Claude Wauthier observes that francophone countries of Africa, including Senghor’s Senegal, have made no special effort to introduce the writing of the vernacular languages into the primary schools – this language which is the surest means of preserving culture and tradition, of appreciating the songs of griots, of penetrating the mysteries of the ancestors. Without rejecting the offer of “francophonie” made by France, (as did Guinea, Mauritania and Algeria), Senghor could at least have given the younger generation a good start into “cultural symbiosis” by ensuring they have a working knowledge of their mother tongue as well as of French. His contentment with hearing the tam-tam at Mass is an unconscious (or perhaps conscious) admission that the essence of Africanity has been buried forever under the rocks of Western civilization. Would Western philosophers consider their culture healthy if a white congregation were to invoke their ancestors and pour libations on a pagan shrine with the Tantum ergo in the background – this Tantum ergo which Senghor and his fellow seminarians chanted with pagan voices in the 1920s?

Let no one be deceived. There is a universal craze for European-type culture and civilization African mysticism and Cosmogony are fast disappearing. Senghor himself admits that every aged African dying is buried with his store of unimparted knowledge, like a library consumed by fire. Senghor’s message at “Symposium 80” held in Bonn in 1980, like many other recent pronouncements concerning negritude, is essentially a political one, and Helmut Schmidt did not miss the point. International cultural exchanges of the type called for in Bonn have been known in Africa since independence. But who has ever heard of Nigerian “Peace Corps” or Tanzanian “Volunteer Service Overseas” or Senegalese “Coéprants” charged with teaching African languages and traditional medicine, African melody and dance, or even the much vaunted mysticism and cosmology in the white

14 Not to be confused with his brother Paulin Hountondji, author of Sur la philosophie ... Unpublished MSS.


16 See the poem “Joal” of Chants d’Ombre.
man's primary and secondary schools? Who has ever thought of including wrestling, Okonkwo-Amalinze style, in the Olympic Games?

Conclusion

In conclusion, in the decade just past, the bitterest criticism of negritude has come from French-speaking Africans and West Indians. At the close of 1980, the critics seem to have the upper hand. No that the dream of some of them to have the Black Man seen just as a Man, to ignore his "blackness", is any more realistic that the ambition to make every Black Man another Senghor: a man of effective cultural symbiosis, an element in the "Civilization of the Universal".

The strongest arguments of the critics lie in the area of negritude's failure (that is negritude of Senghor's later days) as a tool for political change and social reform. In tune with their existentialist philosophy, they are concerned with Negritude-Situation and do not recognize Negritude-Essence. The main weakness of their arguments is their perhaps unwitting fulfillment of Jean-Paul Sartre's prediction that "it may be demanded of the coloured man and of him alone to give up pride in his colour". Loss of pride in one's colour is loss of pride in one's self. And for any man, that is moral death. Negritude as self-consciousness and self-acceptance is still the only realistic hope for the Black Man who, in the face of rapid technological and cultural invasion from "abroad", cannot but feel the dilemma in the sense of alienation, of "a man who lives in a world not made for him, whose own is slipping away, dying, being destroyed, beyond any recall".

What Blacks need is a new negritude, effective negritude; one that translates itself into greatly needed social reforms, into educational and political programmes that do honour to their race; negritude that is not just "political talk". W.L. Butler has well advised Blacks not to concern themselves with a universal humanity "until all other races and nationalities have reached that level of awareness".

One of the major arguments of the critics is that the politician in Senghor stifled the thinker, not the poet as the poem "Chaka" suggests; that the ambiguities and contradictions of Senghorian negritude arise from ideological commitment and neo-colonialist compromises.

Can it be hoped that, relieved of the straight-jacket of political office, Senghor will now pursue the call of negritude more rigourously, more logically? Will he now admit to the vagueness of the concept of a "Civilization of the Universal" or abandon it? Would he now be prepared to talk politics with nationals of the yet dependent black provinces of France? In his semi-retirement, Senghor proposes to pursue the cause of "international socialism". Will his "African socialism" now attempt to respond to the day-to-day life of the ordinary man in the Black World?

As many outraged Blacks, including some earlier enthusiasts like Rene Depestre, now understandably and perhaps justifiably turn round to throw stones at negritude, its very life is threatened. Perhaps Senghor and other negritude advocates can still inject new blood into it. In this period of negritude's agony, the next decade will be crucial, perhaps final.

18 Quoted by W.L. Butler in "A philo-historical analysis of Negritude".