
Negritude: A Universal Heritage; from the *Quartier Latin* in France to the City of Chicago in the United States of America

Abib Sene

Cheikh Anta Diop University

Department of Anglophone Studies

Laboratory of African and Postcolonial Studies

Dakar, Senegal

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Abstract: *Black is beautiful! Such words from Martin Luther King are much telling about the inner meaning of movements like that of Negritude. Born out of the wings of racism and exclusion, the Negritude movement voiced out the strong need to step out of any form of inferiority complex. With a vision that africanized the notion of Africanity, the movement crossed borders to find roots in the Western and Caribbean lands before fostering around the world. Thus, in this paper, it is targeted to show up how Léopol Sedar Senghor's and his likes' positions that splashed away the negative image stuck on the the Black man for centuries, through a cultural crusade. A re-reading of the Negritude is resorted to to update the other forms of negritude-oriented expressions the African Diaspora has been experiencing so far. Based on the theory of multiculturalism, our analysis has put forwards the challenging exercise to know oneself before any attempt to merge into the main stream of cultural identities.*

Keywords: negritude, racism, multiculturalism, colonialism, Africanity, global south

INTRODUCTION

Slavery! A crime against Humanity. For more than three hundred centuries, the African continent had been emptied of her valid and active human resources. In spite of the great figures of men, women and children who passed away in the Middle Passage, millions of African landed in the American continent as slaves. Jimcrolized beyond limits, Negroes managed, by all means, to survive and get their cultural features outlive to outlast through generations. Considered to be an individual who evolves in the fringe of civilization, the Black man would suffer from the slaving load of a blind complex of superiority as shown up and illustrated by the Western conquerors in Africa. Africans then would go through debasement and exploitation of all kinds. That imperium worsened with the advance of colonization which put Africans under the doormat of destitution and acculturation. Being conscious of the Westerners' overbearing and egocentric stance and deportment, young Africans and Pan-Africans committed themselves into a political and cultural movement of which objective was to reconvey dignity and humanity to the Black Man. That assignment of recapitalization of the Africans' humanity marked the starting point of a movement called Negritude

What was Negritude about?

Did the Negritude Movement achieve the point of cultural emancipation?

Was Negritude a timeless movement with different phases and facets spread throughout the world?

The aforementioned questions will lead to a reflexion that will be based on the theory of Multiculturalism. Defined in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* as “an ideal in which members of minority groups can maintain their distinctive collective identities and practices” (The *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* 2010, 24), the notion and meaning of Multiculturalism meets the objectives of Negritude as defined by its proponents in the *Quartier Latin* in Paris in the 1950s. Thus being, we aim at developing the points related to self-knowledge and the harmony of contrasts.

KNOWING THY SELF

Martyred and subjugated for centuries, the African people have always been the easy prey for the Western civilization. Indeed, designed and implemented by Westerners, the project of slavery marked a significant U-turn in Mankind's History by virtue of its vision and disastrous consequences on the African continent. Regarded as a beast of burden, the Black man could not but dream of dissoluteness and delinquency. He was moved out of his land and deported to other physical and social landscapes to sacrifice his strength, his intelligence, his dignity as a man on the altar of an egocentric and ‘*abhumanist*’ civilization. Humanity witnessed, in those years, a frightful *death* of the Negro's soul whose only sin was to have worn a black skin. The same superiority complex was as well at the origin of the colonial project that stripped Africa and Africans of the backbone of their existence. Actually, colonization was only an extension of a ravenousness carried by the levers of a civilization that brought to the surface its necessity to terrorize and fleece to survive. The duty to *civilize* the African people that the Whites intruders assigned themselves was only the agenda that could not hide the appetite for conquest and domination. Indeed, dispossessed of his lands and existential values, the Negro lost his identity. Aware of the weightiness of such a situation, some black intellectuals, under the leadership of Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Léon Gontran Damas and their Pan-Africanist pairs, shouldered the noble mission to resuscitate the black identity in all its nobility; hence the birth of Negritude. Their observations on a class society opened their eyes to a phagocytic universe that should not but be suppressed. Their confidence “in the resources of their race fecundated an ideal according to their truth” (C. Courage, 1977: 25) [My own translation]. Their political and cultural struggles have made it possible to make the dissident, but constructive voice of the Negro heard in the concert of nations. It has also facilitated the awareness of many Africans who have shared and defended, in a one way or another, the emergence of a new Negro in a different world.

Moved into the ferocity of humiliating racism, the advocates of Negritude became aware of their surrounding universe and pledged themselves to take their destiny in hand by breaking the guilty silence which kept them in a state of privation. Negritude then appeared as an act of commitment that affirmed the refusal of moral humiliation. It marked a period of estrangement with a debasing image, a mortifying past to restore the Black in “the light of a moving truth” (C. Courage, 1977: 25). [My own translation]. Gary Wilder has furthered the point in the following:

The ensemble of values of the civilization of the black world but, more concretely and above all, to ‘a black manner of living’ or ‘a way of living as Blacks’. He emphasized the existential rather than merely ideological valence of the term ‘Negro’—not just a ‘black being’ with a distinct way of thinking but a lived and embodied manner of ‘being black’ and ‘living black.’ Conjuring Heidegger's sense of *being* as a verb rather than an entity, he explained that ‘being is not only a state, an ensemble of objective situations, but also a concrete action, of the black individual and the black collectivity: of black peoples. It is not a simple condition, a being- there, a *Da- Sein*, an acted- upon-being; it is above all an acting (W. Gary, 2015: 50-51)

Stripped of their means to exist tediously, the Blacks were sequestered in a universe designed to deny their beings and personalities. The alienation of their religious and cultural roots fleeced them of their pride and self-confidence. The black man was then isolated in a world where he was tied to the others by bonds of subordination that bore the mark of odium and bigotry. Silenced and imprisoned in a functional pattern that reified their personalities, Blacks, found themselves in a social system in which they cannot but brood melancholy and distress.

The demons of colonization provoked a feeling of revolt in Senghor who, by the means of his pen, revealed himself as a spokesman of the black race. Senghor was the orator not only for a race, but also for a cause that went beyond the color of the skin. He pleaded for a mutual enrichment, a peaceful coexistence based on respect, tolerance and open-mindedness. And he confirmed this idea in these terms: “In short, it is in Paris that with Aimé Césaire, Louis Achille, and Léon Gontran Damas, I tried to take the arms from the hands of the colonizers for the defense and illustration of Negritude” (L.S. Senghor, 1980: 59). Through a “Poetry of Action” (L. S. Senghor, 1980 : 59) [My own translation], Senghor took the Negro out of this “ghost Africa” (M. Leris, 1934:39) to introduce him, in all his values, to the whole humanity. The Senegalese young intellectual made the panegyric of the Black through a “naked woman dressed in her color that is life and its form that is beauty” (L. S.Senghor, 1990: 16.) [My own translation]. The cultural struggle which, on the other hand, constituted the backdrop of his works, finally, on the other hand, took on a political appeal, in *Chant d'ombre, Hosties noires, Ethiopiques*, etc. Senghor believed Negritude to be an answer, a timezone that could indicate the jiffy of a racial revolution. In focusing on the umbilical link between nature, emotion and black soundness, the sentinel of the black consciousness movement churned over and over again the idea and the image of a people that refused and resisted against an “irretrievable loss!” (Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 2018: 78). In his perspective to redefine the relationship between Man and man, Senghor limned Negritude as a healing medicine effective to unravel the Eurocentric knot of arrogance and toploftiness. He *de-racialized* humanity and gave africanized contents to the philosophies of pluriversality and Ubutu. Senghor’s belief in the positive vital energy that gives ground to mankind’s positive thoughts and actions led him to vector a world to build on the foundation of brotherhood and personhood.

In his literary productions like *A Notebook of a Return to my Native Land, The Discourse on Colonialism*, Césaire dissented against the ones he called “the men of this or that”. (A. Césaire, 1955:29). Undeniably, Césaire refused the dictates of the Whiteman and condemned the Western self-centeredness. He campaigned for a society “rich in all the modern productive power, hot of all the ancient brotherhood” (A. Césaire, 1955:29). He described Africa as a dugout that can withstand the dangerous waves of a stormy ocean to dock the universal wharf of a civilization. Jacques Chevrier illustrates this position through the following words: “This fight obviously suggests the multitude of obstacles to overcome, before the effective recovery of the race takes place compared to the perilous landing of the canoe on the sand” (J. Chevrier, 1984: 72) [My own translation]. Césaire’s and Senghor’s reflexions upstretched the Negritude movement to a time lag that would end up into a mutual respect of differences. Césaire remained convinced that African cultures had not much to envy to the Western civilization and therefore, Africans had better content themselves with what made them different. He promoted the rejection of any form

of assimilation and called for an African identity deprived of any western and westernized cultural feature. While Senghor upheld a junction point between African and Western identities, Césaire, withheld any possible synergy and complementary between African Civilizations and European ways of lives. Both Senghor and Césaire belonged to the same movement, but did not have the same understanding and perspectives of Negritude. If Senghor's perception was based on "la raison est Hellène et l'émotion est nègre", (L. S.Senghor, 1964: 65) [My own translation] that of Césaire was about avoiding any form of mimicry in rejecting totally a western ebbing civilization. Dewey highlights:

Césaire's and Senghor's multiplex reflections on Negritude resonate in many ways with Chakrabarty's argument about the existence of incommensurable forms of being and thinking that are often ungraspable by the ratio-nalist protocols of modern historiography (J.Dewey, 1927: 202).

With the advent of African cinema, African filmmakers such as Ousmane Sembene, despite his criticism on Negritude through his film 'Guelwaar' vilified the subjugating politics of the West in Africa by calling on his fellow African citizens to cast-off the policy of outstretched hands. He admonished them not to remiss their moral and social duties in freeing themselves from the destructive shackles of dependency and misery. His vision on Africa was that of a maverick, a self-centered whose only objective would be to build the self into African values that gives base to the African personality.

In the 1960s puffed up, in the horn of Africa, an authorized voice that furthered Césaire's conception on Negritude. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, indeed, spurned the cultural and linguistic dictatorship of the West by calling upon his pairs to promote their local languages through their literary productions. In his essay, *Moving the Center*, he defends the existence of several cultural centers which, considered in their fair values, can benefit to the whole humanity. According to the Kenyan writer, Africa is an abode where evolved values that evoke a life-style spectacle forged by a specific environment. Thus, the dismissal of self-denial takes value in a self-reconsideration that underlies the emergence of a culture, a universal Negro culture:

I believe that the question of moving towards a pluralism of culture, literature and language is still important today as the world becomes increasingly one. [...]. The culture of Africa, Asia and South America, as much as those of Europe, are an integral part of the modern world. [...] There was a place for all at the rendez-vous of victory, human victory (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1993: 28).

Aware of this universality of Blackness, the Senegalese historian, Cheikh Anta Diop has fortified, in many of his writings, the cultural dimension of the Black man's philosophy and existence. In the purpose to put history back to its place, Cheikh underlined, beyond any shred

of doubt, the Africans' undeniable scientific contributions to the progress of humanity. This fight of deconstruction and construction was not only engaged in the cultural field. The torchlight was also carried into the political arena by some pioneers like Léopold Sedar Senghor, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by leaders like Thomas Sankara who declared in an OAU summit in Addis Ababa: "between the rich and the poor there is not the same morality [...] Accept to live African is the only way to live free and worthy" (Thomas Sankara.). Indeed, his dedicated revolutionary ideas paved the way for the regeneration of a martyred Africa, of a Negro jostled in a hateful inadequacy complex. In doing so, Sankara espoused Aimé Césaire's position who considered the European civilization as a moral pathology, which carries in itself the seeds of a systematized evil that led to the White man's cultural blindness. The latter, who exploited the Negro's sweat, described him as a baroque object without any 'civilizational' refinements. Césaire suggests:

Between colonizer and colonized there is room only for forced labor, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft, rape, compulsory crops, contempt, mistrust, arrogance, self-complacency, swinishness, brainless elites, degraded masses. No human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a class-room monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production. My turn to state an equation: colonization = thing-ification (A.Césaire, 1955:5).

Césaire's point of view on colonization echoed his roots as a slave decent in the Caribbean. His apprehension on the White man's land occupation and domination in Africa and the Caribbean is that of an individual who, in his flesh, suffered from the residues and relics of slavery. Hence his virulent and aggressive momentum against any form of colonial domination. His words churned over the so-called policy of civilization which was nothing but a commodification of the black race.

Harmonizing the Opposites: a Dream comes True

Deported to America in the context of the Slave Trade, the black slaves took along their cultures, which they adapted to the socio-political context in order to preserve their pedigrees. Their offspring, through emblematic figures such as Martin Luther King, assumed the legacy to get humanity vibrate to the rhythms of a confirmed Negritude.

As early as the 14th century, a former slave by the name of Frederik Douglas, providentially, embraced the profession of journalism, which he used as a springboard to get his community aware of the need to fight for the respect and integration of the Negro in the

political life of the American nation. His work was continued by Williams Du Bois, who founded the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People in Atlanta in 1909 to enable his fellows to take advantage of their rightful share of the *national cake* of the American state. He thought education to be the key that could open the doors of opportunities and therefore of emancipation. His opposition to the *Atlanta Compromise* as conceived and defined by Booker T. Washington, was a highlight of his commitment as an activist, and an advocate of the Blacks' rights in a segregated American society. Du Bois' standpoint would be enhanced by the Garveyism-based philosophy. Indeed, born and grew up in Jamaica, Marcus Mosiah Garvey, joined the Harlem Renaissance Movement in 1917 to bear the cross of the Negroes to the lands of origins. Garvey's struggle for the restoration of Negroes' dignity and humanity found a focus on the idea of *Back to Africa*. The land of origins was then the original source where all Blacks were to and could find salvation. Africa, in Garvey's eyes, was the motherland from where shone the non-dimmable light of wellness. For that reason, the Blacks in America could only live their being Negro in the land of their ancestors. With the Black Star Line Company, Marcus Garvey helped to ship back a lot of African Americans to the African continent. His Moses-like mission portrayed him as a *prophet* whose guiding words were not but 'let my people go.' His attachment to the Negro race and to the African continent labeled him as a pioneer of Pan Africanism and, to some extent, as a pathfinder of Negritude in its philosophical frontage that would focus on the lifting up of the Black people.

The struggle of the previous mentioned personalities took on a whole new reach when a Protestant minister appeared on stage. Martin Luther King, who, propelled by a providential enchantment in 1955, became the flag-bearer of a fight that resurrected the negritude-attitude dream as it was previously promoted by Senghor and his pairs in Paris.

King defined the nature of his struggle (he will fight peacefully). He determined his objectives which revolved around three points:

- a. *A psychological revolution (Black is beautiful)*
- b. *A fraternal revolution (Beloved community)*
- c. *A world revolution (World House)* (M. L. King, 1990: 35).

The psychological revolution that was based on the slogan *Black is beautiful* aimed at reconciling the Negro with himself. King then laid the groundwork for self-esteem and invited his community to be proud of being different from the Others. He initiated a vision to revalue and *make profitable the* black identity. The unglamorous past, the daily humiliation should no

longer be the only determinants of the existence of African Americans. The pastor, speaking for the sake of the Black man, put it this way: “Here I am. I am a human being, a worthy and honorable man. I have a noble and rich past behind me, even if it is made up of suffering and humiliation. I am black and beautiful” (M. L. King, 1990: 35) This love by the Self and for the Self, this pride to *wear* a black skin, embodying the cultural ancestries, evoked intrinsic values of the Negritude movement that targeted to erase shame and self-abjuration from the social and cultural dashboard of the black community. Louis Farahan, the leader of the State of the Black Union, furthered this idea in these terms: “We are universal people [...] we have to stop thinking like Negroes, Coloured people [...] and start thinking like free men and women who don’t want to live in a plantation no more.” (L. Farahan, 2006).

With his project to promote the emergence of a beloved community, King was the expression of a figurehead who, like Senghor and Césaire, reclaimed a dented dignity, a scorned humanity, and a defiled morality. His stand echoed a sort of baptism for the African- Americans and thus of Negritude. He attacked the symbols of the racial universe of a nation which fitted the Black in a social order that subjected him to a political and economic system, as in all over, by giving substance to a spiritual vision, portrayed the White man as a chosen individual and the Black as a condemned being. So the pastor’s perceptiveness of harmonizing the opposites that alienated the African Americans and gangrened the American society was an expression of generosity, a *Negritudian* commitment that heightened the Black man’s glory in a liberating victory. From Montgomery to Washington, D.C., the pastor preached the good news to undo a racist consciousness that was doing wrong to a people believed to be inferior. He let his inner thoughts ring like: “I dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the value of their personality” (M. L. King 1963). This dream of a fraternal revolution was expressed by his African predecessors in the quartier Latin in Paris. It was a step towards a ‘world house’ (M. L. King, 1990:14-15). ‘The World House’ which, moreover, indicated the place of the *Rendez-vous of Giving and Receiving* as defended and celebrated by Senghor. Thus, Martin Luther King appeared as a ‘peddler’ of Senghor’s Negritude, which both advocated rootedness and open-mindedness for a more fraternal world. The pastor highlights: “We have inherited a house, a huge ‘universal home’ in which we must learn to live together – Black and White, Western and Eastern, Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu” [23]. The legitimate aspirations of Blacks for social justice were echoed in the streets of Montgomery where King confessed:

This desire of the Negroes [...] to free themselves from all forms of oppression is the same deep desire that animates all the oppressed peoples of the world. The wave of dissatisfaction that is shaking Asia and Africa expresses the need for freedom, for human dignity, felt by peoples who have long suffered under colonialism. Thus, in a very concrete sense, the American racial crisis is part of the wider global crisis (M. L. King, 1990:14-15).

Thus being, the cause of Negritude became an international issue which wrote some pages in the history of humanity. This struggle to harmonize oppositions produced positive effects upon the destiny of an African American who, while espousing the values of Uncle SAM's country, grasped the fundamentals that underpinned the cause of the Reverent King's dream.

Furthermore, Obama's election as President was the answered prayers of the pioneers of the negritude movement. His successful political career has been a result of opposites rounded off and harmonized between peoples. A Negro in the White House as the President of the United States of America has remained an expression of an embodiment of transculturality, an intersection node of a country whose past was and still is a fractured page in her social history. Thus being, the color of the skin, to a large extent, has lost its meaning and the identity of the Negro, which has been immobilized for centuries, has moved up a notch to fertilize the dreams and intentions of universal perspectives. The black personality has, therefore, turned to be hoisted to the height of glory and coronation. His consecration has pierced the veils of hatred, brought down the curtains of racism to let the Negro appear in his pluridimensionality. The antinomies that have been so far apart in the Quartier Latin, in Montgomery, in Washington, ... met and merged to express the language of right and tolerance. The black man rose from the ashes of his objectification to walk towards a new Canaan. He has been re-enlightened. He has "died in himself in order to be reborn through the Other" (J.Chevrier, 1984:77) [My own translation]. It is the hallowing of a long universal struggle, the result of a world-wide heritage, the outcomes of the commitment of men and women was rose as defenders of a movement, of a timeless ideology: Negritude.

Obama's election was a concretization of a 'will to break' the chain of racism and rejection that has always impaired the salutary values defended by the Negritude movement. His person and personality redefined the role of each actor in the political and social constellations. Through his political crowning in 2008, he re-established social links by rendering irrational and out of date the network of conventions based on received opinions.

His identity as a Black man, an African American, evoked a positive answer to the question: who is the Negro? The latter emerged from his *imprisonment* in his own body and mind to take his rightful place in the concert of nations. Thus being, the Black community furthered the dismantling of the chains of servitude and degradation that caged them in an existence of feudal mores to experience the glorious salvation of a deliverance that confirms the singularity of its essence in the 'civilization' of universality.

A "Negro open to the four winds of the world is born" (J.Chevrier, 1984:179) [My own translation]. The relics of the Black slave lost in the darkness of ignorance and animality were buried in the will of a people to deliver themselves. A new world took shape; a universal consciousness emerged: the Negro is restored in his right as a free man. The other, who put himself in the shoes of a master, finally found himself in a state of receptivity to the contribution of the Black identity to the landscape of human civilization. The credo "Yes, we can" (Barack Obama, 2008), accompanied, at the beginning of the 21st century, the landing of the "pirogue of negritude [...] on the promised shore of the 'perfect circle of the world and close concordance' " (J.Chevrier, 1984:70) [My own translation]. However, the positive light that derived from Obama's election did not stop the discrimination, segregation and even the police brutality upon the Black community. Hence the updating and re-dimensioning of Martin Luther's King's combat into another struggle for a new perspective.

Born in the United States in the city of California, the Black Lives Matter movement has emerged as an identity-based response to the racial police blunders of which the African American community is often victim of.

Like the supporters of negritude, the standard bearers of the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S. have given substance to a spirit of resistance for the restoration of the dignity of black men. The Black's life is no longer to be stigmatized, but seen as different and respected for its cultural content. Such a claim sounds like a continuity of the identity struggle as defined by Césaire according to whom, Negritude "was a concrete rather than an abstract coming to consciousness" (A. Césaire, 1955: 30). Rightly, Blacks' Lives Matter Movement has taken on the racial question that confines and dehumanizes the African American personality. If Césaire, in a *Negritudian* context, thought that "Western civilization is decadent and moribund," the BLM movement, through the voice of the indignant, fights against a political and racial system that "still leaves scars in the mind, evidence of traumas sustained from simply existing as a Black person in the United States of America". (A.Mumia,1998:2). Thus being, the Black Lives Matter movement is an expression, a continuity of the negritude movement. It aims at focusing on the crappy life, the brutality, and police violence Blacks are victim of in America.

CONCLUSION

The negritude movement played an issuance role for the Africans and the African Diasporas. It rang loud on the drums of hope and brought Africans to sing the song of renaissance and regeneration. The commitment of its pioneers torched on the gloomy and sad picture of the colonial library to single out the darkened painting on the Negro to replenish his portrait and his past as a man imbued with culture and civilization. From the labyrinth of degradation and dehumanization, the voice of the Negro sounded husky out of ignorance to reach the borders of contestations and protestations. The positive virtues of such a commitment molded the

vagaries and perspectives of the liberating struggle that Célestin Monga defines as « the positive values of power, courage, and resistance» (C. Monga, 2016: 74). Indeed, through its various manifestations, the racial movement shook its horror-and-dirty-filled image to highlight a universe with a living-past, an active present and a gorgeous future. From within, a synergy bubbled out a wisdom that wrote and that has been writing the answer against racial discrimination. A page was then torn apart from the heavy book of a sinful discrimination. A light came through and hit the wall of separation and confinement. ‘*Things Fell apart*’ and let appear troubadours who, rid of numbness and torpor, self-assured a horizon full of memories, facts and artifacts that festooned the world of Negroes. Negritude, then, was “a negation of negation” (J.P. Sartre, 1948 : XLI) [My own translation], an expression of a mindset that looked forward enhancing the lives of Blacks that cannot but matter in a globalized world.

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