

CRITICAL INSIGHTS ON AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY AND NEGRIITUDE LITERATURE

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Introduction

“Of the African thinkers of this century, [Senghor] will probably have been the most honored and the most complimented, yet probably also the most disparaged and the most insulted, particularly by the present generation of African intellectuals.”

(Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*, 94)

Who is entitled to construct an African system of thought that is credible, rigorously acceptable? Who is the real master of the African discourse on Being and the world? What is African philosophy? To what extent its object can be taken into account? Etc. There are so many questions that stick one to another. My presentation essentially examines three points: Negritude, African Philosophy and The field battleground.

This paper seeks to re-consider the “controversial” relationship between Negritude and African philosophy and thought. As African philosophy has still to define its borders, objects, and objectives, it is time to evaluate the impact, the contribution of Negritude to its development. How deeply has the thought of Senghor and his colleagues been studied? To me, Negritude remains the most important intellectual movement produced in Francophone African thought of the last century. Enlightened by the recent movement of globalization, it would be interesting to examine this point in terms of a plurality of rationality and in terms of identity. Therefore the present movements of African Identity, Antillanité, Créolité are to be considered as straight epigones of Negritude.

1. Negritude

There are so many conceptions of Negritude that it might open up a controversy. Negritude embodies a Black literary movement and a socio-political ideology towards the emancipation of Black people. It is the equivalent of Anglophone Black Personality. Although its precursors are almost all African Americans of the Harlem Renaissance like W. du Bois, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Marcus Garvey, etc., it mostly developed in France and the Francophone areas. The word “Negritude” is originally attributed to the Martiniquan writer Aimé Césaire who published in 1939 his surrealist masterpiece *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal (Notebook of a Return to the Native Land)* considered as the ethnic anthem of Blacks all over the world.

United in a revolutionary action seeking the liberation of the Blacks from Whites and colonial power, the recognition of the Negro-African culture and civilization, Black students from the Caribbean and Africa started their movement in France in the late 1920s-30s. They were backed and encouraged by progressive Europeans from various horizons. Africanists like Leo Frobenius, Maurice Delafosse or Georges Hardy

underlined the great value of African sculptures, music and creative arts whereas Archeology contemporaneously proved that Africa is the birthplace of Humanity.

The leading figures of Negritude were: Aimé Césaire (1913-), Leon Damas from French Guyana (1912-1978) and its major theoretician Léopold Sedar Senghor (1906-2001). Others who belong to the movement are: the Haitians Jean Price-Mars, Jacques Roumain, Jacques-Stephen Alexis, René Depestre; the Guadeloupean Guy Tirolien; the Martiniquan René Maran, Frantz Fanon; the Senegalese Birago Diop, David Diop, Ousmane Socé, Diange, Sembene Ousmane, Cheikh Anta Diop; the Guinean Camara Laye; the Ivorians Bernard Dadié, Ake Loba, Keita Fodeba; the Cameroonians Mongo Beti, Ferdinand Oyono; the Malagasies Jacques Rabemananjara, Jean Joseph Rabearivelo, etc. They all were activist poets and they contested the White oppressive domination over people of African descent. Therefore their involvement in anti-colonial issues and in political action became inevitable.

Black poets claimed to re-write the Black history falsified by the West, explore the Black culture and past, redefine the sensitive values of the cosmos. They protested against all forms of exploitation of Africa and the Caribbean. By proudly affirming their African cultural and racial heritage, by celebrating the beauty of Africa and the enchanting charm of the Black woman, by singing the fights and by reminding the cruel tragedies of all Blacks, the poets of Negritude had a prophetic mission and a mystical vision of/in the New World. Their voices echoed complaints, hopes, and deep feelings of the Black people denouncing the imperialistic western ethnocentrism.

The poetic collections beside Césaire's *Notebook* are: L. Damas' *Pigments* (1937), Senghor's *Chants d'ombre* (1945). Of great importance is Senghor's anthology entitled *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre* (1948) preceded by « Black Orpheus » a foreword of the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. In 1947, Alioune Diop created the cultural journal *Présence Africaine* committed to spread ideas of freedom and emancipation, to act for a better life for all Blacks. Two international conferences of Black writers and artists were organized in 1956 (Paris) and 1959 (Rome).

Negritude played an important role in the struggle for African independence. After 1960, the younger generation of writers and philosophers – Wole Soyinka, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Stanislas Adotevi, Marcien Towa; René Depestre, Tchicaya U Tam'si – virulently criticized the movement, contesting many debatable ideas especially diffused by Senghor's Negritude. The fact that many figures of Negritude were active in politics, acted and ruled like the colonial agents and therefore, did not succeed in bringing the promised welfare, disappointed their fellow citizens. The movement became irrelevant. According to specialists of African and Caribbean Literature, the conference of Alger, held in 1969, signed officially the end of Negritude movement. Despite this controversy, Negritude remains to me the most important literary and philosophical movement of the Black Francophone world. In the 1980s emerged concepts of “national literatures” on the Continent, “creoleness” in the Caribbean.

2. African Philosophy

Until the beginning of the last century colonial power never acknowledged that Black people had any basic sense of systematic way of thinking. According to Simon Obanda in his recent book *Re-creation de la philosophie africaine* Western philosophers since the early 16th century, like Hegel and Hume, developed a dominant euro-centric ideology on the evolution of societies, races and civilizations, based of the principle that “no evolution nor history outside Europe”. The White race was considered as the leading race among races. Hume even stated that: Black people show “no sign of intelligence”. Hegel radically consolidated the idea. (Obanda, 55) Until the beginning of the 20th century, Europeans used to think that Blacks were not able of any creative, technical or intellectual skills. Evans-Pritchard would say that Black people were strangers to the principle of contradiction. Levy-Brühl would write his famous *Mentalité primitive*. The Black is not able to philosophize. All theses ideas concurred to ensure European domination over Africa, the Caribbean. The young Belgian missionary Tempels who arrived in the Congo in 1931 was educated in this system.

When Fr. Placide Tempels edited in 1945 *Bantu philosophy*, the first systematic attempt in the field, the book was a revolution that brought turmoil in the Western way of thinking, for it contradicted and dismantled well-established ideas and ideologies. He was amazed, contrarily to what he was taught, by the incredible logic he discovered in the Bantu wisdom: “It is stupid, we have been responsible for killing the man in the Bantu”. (Tempels, 20, my translation) He summarizes the result of his study as follows: "Bantu behaviour...is centered in a single value: *vital force*" (Tempels 1959, 44)

“The ultimate goal of the Bantu is to possess as much *vital force* as possible, while what he fears most is to see a reduction in his stock of this inestimable commodity. Every disease, wound or suffering or depression, every injustice and every failure is interpreted by the Bantu as a sure sign that there has been a reduction in his stock of vital force." (Tempels)

At first consideration the attempt is rather anthropological, ethnographical than strictly philosophical, following the fashion of the colonial scheme. The purpose of the Belgian missionary was of evangelization, to know better the Bantu soul in order to christianize them. Tempels concentrated his effort on comparing or finding links and gaps between Bantu animism and Western philosophy by exposing their ancestral beliefs, their way of life, their social organization, their cultural features, etc. Shifting from evangelization to ontology, *Bantu Philosophy* states clearly that the notion of vital force is the main impulse of African belief and thought.

How did African philosophers and writers react to this book? The first Africans philosophers are to find among priests or former students of major seminaries. They all unanimously greeted Tempels’ book as a challenging one and tried to implement his ideas in their research for doctoral thesis or academic purposes. Alioune Diop, the founder editor of *Présence Africaine*, published the French version in 1949 with a very warm foreword.

Fr Alexis Kagame was the first scholar to assess Tempels' work. He was writing a classical philosophy thesis in Rome when he discovered *Bantu Philosophy* and as a matter of fact he consequently changed his topic. Though he acknowledged the pioneering enterprise of the Belgian missionary, he criticized the method since this one only worked on the Luba-Tribe of the Congo and extended his results to all the Bantu. His first book *La philosophie bantou-rwandaise de l'être* (1956) is on Bantu ontology based on an accurate logical-linguistic study of Bantu languages, i.e. Kinyarwanda language. Kagame took advantage of two notions: negritude and vital force.

“Both these concepts [negritude and vital force] were modified and adapted by the African scholar theologian Alexis Kagamé, in works which are now considered classics in the field. "*Bantu philosophy*" coined in the 1940s, was found useful by Senghor and Césaire, and became popular among the French-speaking elites of Africa.” (From an article “Development of African Theology”) His second book, *La philosophie bantou comparée* (1976) applies the investigation to the whole Bantu geographic area, the region going down from Douala to Cape Town, taking into account a range of traditions and beliefs of the region. Fr Kagame's purpose remains the same.

Almost at the same period, Fr Vincent Mulago wrote *Un visage africain du christianisme : L'union vitale bantou face à l'unité vitale ecclésiale*. He used the same framework of research as Kagame but in a theological perspective. Fr Lufuluabo published *La notion luba-bantoue de l'être* in 1966. Other names like: Mutuza, Kinyongo, Elungu Pene Elungu, Tshiamalenga with his article “Vision ntu de la philosophie”, Meinrad Hebga, Jean-Marc Ela, John Mbiti, etc. But these ones are very aware of the limits of the ethnophilosophical trend. In the early 1970s the majority of the philosophers who formed the Lubumbashi Circle are almost former students of seminaries.

Callings in question did not last long to appear. Professor Franz Crahay with his famous article entitled “Le décollage conceptuel : condition d'une philosophie bantoue” was the first to attack Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy*. He set up a list of conditions to be fulfilled before talking of Bantu philosophy, among others: a good number of trained African philosophers, a connection to Greek philosophy; a conceptual distance from custom and belief data, etc. The idea is that this philosophy does not exist yet.

Africans read it blindly, colonially, carefully, and contemptuously. As comical as it may be, Africans were proud to be attributed a system of thoughts and beliefs, like Monsieur Jourdain who writes prosa without being aware of doing so, as Eboussi Boulaga said years later. By the way, Eboussi was the first African philosopher to criticize both Tempels' *Bantu Philosophy* and Kagamé's *La philosophie Bantou rwandaise de l'être* as approaches of ethno-philosophers, i.e.. “investigators who undertake a survey of opinions or people who collects opinions, signatures or testimonies” (Eboussi Boulaga, 29, my translation) Calling into question the method and the concept of African philosophy, he states that the duty of a philosopher is to create concepts, to account for the essence of things. A philosophy that is anonymous, collective instead of being of an individual

thinking subject is not philosophy, given that the philosophizing subject is not one person but the community.

In his book *Sur la philosophie africaine*, Paulin Hountondji disqualifies ethno-philosophy as a kind of pre-philosophy that takes refuge in the tradition and projects into this traditions its own theses, its own beliefs. In other words, ethno-philosophy is a kind of a spontaneous philosophy without critical reflection, without distance, because these scholars conceive “philosophy on the pattern of religion, as a system of permanent beliefs that remain stable, reluctant to any evolution, always identical, impermeable to time and history” (Hountondji, 58, my translation) The concept of philosophy changes when applied to Africa; it becomes a collective world-view, a system of spontaneous beliefs, implicit. Therefore ethno-philosophy is nothing but a *philosophical literature* without an assessment of its value or its credibility. (Ibid.)

Stressing on the geographical origin of the scholar, Hountondji states that the concept of African philosophy has to be extended to all research done by Africans on Western philosophy.. Wiredu’s thesis on Kant, Lemba’s research on Roger Garaudy or Ozankom’s book on Heidegger. Therefore philosophy is to be defined:

The Cameroonian Marxist Martien Towa is even more radical than Paulin Hountondji. First of all he sees a racist and imperialistic issue in the concept of African Philosophy: Stating an African philosophy is automatically confirming the myth that “an African has a pre-logic mentality, foreign to Reason” (Towa, 18).

Other African philosophers like Alassane Ndaw, Elungu Pene Elungu, Kinyongo, Nkombe Oleko, Wamba dia Wamba attempted other ways to found the bases of African philosophy, avoiding the problematic of its existence, by simply practicing it. According to Mudimbe, the debate on the existence or the inexistence of African Philosophy has become sterile and irrelevant (Mudimbe 2005, 33). There remains the question of philosophy itself “about which, I, personally, have no convincing definition, and which, in Africa as elsewhere, actualizes itself as a perpetual recommencement” (Ib.).

3. Controversial Relationship with Negritude

The relationship between African philosophy and thought is very controversial, since African philosophy has still to define its borders, objects, and objectives. Some African writers saw in Tempels’ *Bantu Philosophy* the fulfillment of their struggle for liberation. It is more than just an epistemic issue.

When it comes to talk about African Philosophy, one is surprised that there is a hesitation to decide between two meanings of philosophy as “Weltanschauung”, vision of the world on one hand and on the other hand philosophy “defined as a critical, auto-critical, explicit reflection bearing on language and human experience” (Mudimbe 2005, 21). And that seems to be the main issue dividing the trends. The debate is about who is entitled to philosophize on one hand and about the object philosophers can study and scrutinize. This decides of the kind of philosophy one can practice. For all this, education and the general backgrounds are relevant.

Founder members of the movement of Negritude stated lots of ideas and theories on matters typically related to philosophy. There are many writers pretending to be philosophers. There are philosophers writing novels, plays and poems. When writers discuss philosophy, they add a theoretical vision or an ideology to support their creative skills. When philosophers write creative books, they state that it is in order to support their philosophical thought or system. The first question is: who are philosophers? And what is philosophy?

A good number of Negritude writers learnt lessons of basic philosophy at the end of secondary school. A good number of philosophers, I would say the first generation of philosophers, were educated in major seminaries, since philosophy was a prerequisite to study theology. The scholastic tradition used to say: “Philosophia ancilla theologiae” (Philosophy is the servant of Theology) On the other hand the context of their education spread very clear ideas on matters like civilization, culture, race, primitive mentality, African history: a wide area of thoughts about which everybody should state a position. Black students from all over the world gathered by destiny in France joined in a common movement of liberation for the Black peoples. They founded their convictions on various discoveries issued by the recent development of social and human sciences like history, sociology, anthropology, musicology, archeology, and folklore. These sciences had the advantage to revise and negate many stereotypes on so-called “savage peoples”, “frozen societies” by Europeans. Western intellectuals and scholars helped them become conscious of their historical mission for the emancipation of Blacks. Surrealism, Marxism, Communism, Psychoanalysis, Existentialism spread a vision of the world different from the one that founded colonialism. In this regard, Negritude rose out of a necessity of a Black discourse, i.e. philosophy; philosophy intended here as a theoretical background directed towards an efficient action or an ideological praxis.

That was the mood of the time. Black writers became members of the French Communist Party: Césaire, Roumain, E. Lero and Alexis. Other like Nkrumah, Senghor and Nyerere defended socialist ideological principles. Later Marxism was the main background of African politicians: Sekou Touré, Senghor, Marien Ngouabi, Kenyatta, Nyerere, N’Kruman, Azikiwe, Seydou Badian, Lumumba, etc. attempted critical and practical analysis of Marxism in their publication. Black intellectuals all read Sartre and accepted his theory of alienation.

“Senghor’s influence on contemporary African thought, particularly in Francophone countries, is considerable” (Mudimbe 1988, 95) So that when one criticizes negritude, it is Senghor that one criticizes. Senghor published many essays on philosophy. His *Liberté I-5* in five bands constitute a huge sum of thought yet to be studied thoroughly. His background of Greek-Latin, his study and reading of all the books on social and human sciences published in the first half of the twentieth century, his essays on Socialism, on the paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin, make him one of the greatest thinker of Africa, for sure the greatest of the French-speaking Africa. He took advantage of the crisis of values in the mental universe of the West to strengthen African contribution to the “Universal Civilization” he dreamed of. He defends a kind of African Socialism that

combines Marxism and Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionist theory. His contribution to awakening the consciousness of Black people is immense. Moreover, he incarnates the negritude literature.

“There is an African literature that flatters condescending Western eras, in which African prove, by means of negritude of black personality rhetoric, that they are “intelligent human beings” who once had respectable civilization that colonialism destroyed” (Mudimbe 1988, 36).

Strict philosophers are the ones with a degree, a university degree in philosophy. To their mind all others who use philosophy either do not understand what they talk about or are just pretentious. Therefore they are not entitled to debate on philosophy. They restrict the use of its concepts to their own field. As we see, all depends on the significance that is assigned to philosophy.

Marcien Towa wrote a severe political critique against Senghor's negritude: *Léopold Sédar Senghor: négritude ou servitude?* (Clé, 1971). ‘The idea that a lot of Africans have of Negro-African Culture does not outreach the limits of their ethnic... Senghorism has been victim of such shortsightedness in opposing Black emotion to Greek Reason without taking into consideration, as Cheikh Anta Diop has reminded it, that it is the Black peoples of the Nile Valley who developed the first sciences and techniques” (Towa, 24)

Senghor's Negritude was called in question from all sides. Wole Soyinka ridiculed it comparing it to Tigritude: “A tiger does not shout its tigritude: it pounces. A tiger in the jungle does not say: I am a tiger. Only on passing the tiger's hunting ground and finding the skeleton of a gazelle do we feel the place abound with tigritude” Ezekiel Mphahlele states: “The poetry of *négritude* origin may also falsify the image of Africa by representing it as a symbol of innocence, purity, naked beauty, human decency [...] Some *négritude* verse leaves one rather worried by its elusiveness.” (Mphahlele, 137) Stanislas S. Adotevi, *Négritude et Négrologues* (1973) and The Kenyan Henry Oruka Odera wrote: “Mythologies as African Philosophy” emphasise in the same critical direction. Negritude officially became irrelevant after the Conference of Algiers in 1969.

As we can see, there are so many philosophical implications on Negritude that need to be studied in details. There is a better way to evaluate positively Negritude as a philosophy. It is for example Elungu's approach of Senghor's negritude. He seeks to search in negritude what is philosophy (Elungu 86-92). Three major components are of interest: “la révolte culturelle ou le refus de l'assimilation; la mise en perspective philosophique de son œuvre littéraire poétique; la représentation par l'auteur de l'essentiel de la civilisation négro-africaine” (Elungu 86-87) [The cultural revolt or the refusal of assimilation; the philosophical turn of his literary poetic work; the representation, by the author, of the essential Negro-African civilization]

Black civilization is founded on various elements Senghor learns from ethnology about Blacks: Blacks have genuine feeling, emotion, participation, myth, rite, sacrifice, life, vital power or force, art, and all those values form what he calls Negro-African

civilization. He takes advantage of ethnological data. But he defines culture as the dynamic spirit of civilization. Senghor is near to spiritualistic French philosophy. Ontology and a philosophical ideology are related to Senghor's negritude. "The elaboration of the negritude, according to Senghor, ideology is the result of a philosophy" (Elungu, 91).

4. Négritudes, Identity, Antillanité, Créolité

Aimé Césaire on the other hand was very critical, reluctant to this work. In his *Discours sur le Colonialisme*, the former Lycée Schoelcher student finds it a mischievous and colonial attempt to reduce Black people's creativity. At that time Césaire used to cope with Communism. I don't know how Christian the former member of the French Communist Party is. However his dissident student Edouard Glissant created Antillanité in the 1960s. And the younger Caribbean generation born in the 1950s created in the Fall 1980s Créolité in reaction to his work and philosophy. The Communist who once dreamed of a "Copernican Black Revolution" is criticized for his paradoxical crossing of the century. To me Antillanité and Créolité are direct epigones of Negritude. There would never be Antillanité nor would there be Créolité without the Negritude. All the rest is a fashionable success of the present-day.

Césaire re-interpretation of Caliban in *A Tempest* gave impulse to Black theoretic thought in the Caribbean. The allegory of Caliban-Prospero enlightens the present debate across the Black Old and New World. Césaire, Senghor and Damas have considerably contributed to define a Black identity. Frantz Fanon made Caribbean and African people aware of their complex of inferiority. Cheikh Anta Diop's Egyptology is based on Negritude, at least on the movement initiated by the Negritude ideology of re-writing the history of Black peoples, given that European historians falsified African history because of hegemonic and colonial purposes. Black people were imposed to see themselves through the lenses of Western patterns.

5. Conclusion

The contribution of the negritude movement to African Philosophy is immense. Negritude creative writings opened the possibility of positively studying in depth various facets of Black mentality. Negritude as an ideology is an incredibly rich subject for African Philosophy. Its conception is carried by a vision of man, a vision of man in society or society as a system of organization. African Philosophy largely depends on Negritude, be it just to negate its approach, which is somehow a way of acknowledging its philosophical pertinence. There are numerous philosophical studies on Senghor, Césaire, Fanon, Ch. Anta Diop, Caliban dialectics, African identity and other writers like Mongo Beti, Ousmane, Mudimbe, Ngal, Adiaffi, etc. and many writers have valuable backgrounds in philosophy, be it Marxism, Western, African or just Negritude.

Both Negritude and African Philosophy are tightly linked; they have beyond all factual opposition the same ideological goal: the valorization of Black People. Thinkers nevertheless criticized some controversial ideas of Senghor but did not dismantle his negritude. Despite plurality in terms of Rationality and Identity, Negritude remains an important part of the African thought, a step of consciousness that opened towards

various trends of African philosophy. To me, Negritude remains the most valuable literary, cultural and ideological movement produced in Francophone Africa during the last century.

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