

# Logic, Mathematics and Knowledge: On the Epistemology of Negritude or Negritude as Epistemology

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This brief essay seeks to place negritude in a state of theoretical and analytical flux by arguing the case of negritude as epistemology. This interpretive hereticism directly challenges the premature solidification of negritude as an essentialist and metaphysical view. In arguing for the epistemological status of negritude I will concentrate on the view of Senghor and not Césaire. My discussion will be guided by the following outline: In section one, I will discuss Senghor and developments in modern European epistemology, section two will focus on a discussion of the relation between negritude and epistemology, section three will be devoted to a discussion of Senghor's conception of negritude as epistemology; and finally, section four will provide a critical evaluation of the role of reason and emotion in the conception of negritude as epistemology

## I. Senghor and Developments in Modern European Epistemology

Some strong evidence supports Senghor's concerns with epistemology and his understanding of negritude as, among other things, a critique of colonial reason, as well as the imperialistic designs of modern scientific rationality. Senghor, being aware of the revolutionary developments in modern epistemology, states:

[T]he new discoveries of science—quanta, relativity, wave mechanics, the uncertainty principle, electron spin—had upset the nineteenth-century notion of determinism, which denied man's free will, along with the concepts of matter and energy. The French physicist Broglie revealed to us the duality of matter and energy, or the wave-particle principle that underlies things; the German physicist Heisenberg showed us that objectivity was an illusion and that we could not observe facts without modifying them; others showed that, on the scale of the infinitely small as on that of the immensely great, particles act on one another. Since then, the physico-chemical laws, like matter itself, could no longer appear unchangeable. Even in the field and on the scale where they were valid, they were only rough approximations, no more than probabilities.<sup>1</sup>

In another context, Senghor made comments that also clearly established his intimate familiarity with epistemological issues. He writes:

European ... artists, philosophers, even scientists [are] going to the school of participant reason. We are witnessing a true revolution in European epistemology, which has been taking place since the turn of the century ....

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<sup>1</sup>Léopold Senghor, "Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century," in *The African Reader*, eds. Wilford Cartey and Martin Kilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), p. 182.

The new method, and hence the new theory, of knowledge arose out of the latest scientific discoveries: relativity, wave mechanics, quantum mechanics, non-Euclidean geometries. And also out of new philosophical theories: phenomenology, existentialism.... It was a response to the need to outgrow the scientific positivism of the nineteenth century .... Nowadays, whether we look at science, philosophy or art, we find discontinuity and indeterminism at the bottom of everything, of the mind as well as the real, where they reveal themselves after the most detailed and at the same time the most passionate investigations.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly Senghor, since he was aware of the crises in modern science and epistemology, used this crisis situation to strategically present a counter-epistemology. This counter-epistemology served the purpose of giving voice to those who, in the words of Hegel, existed in alienation from reason. Of course, it was not Senghor's intention to answer the questions of traditional European epistemology, for these questions are not perennial. They are, as Richard Rorty has argued, the products of the unfortunate adoption of certain metaphors and philosophical vocabularies.

## II. Negritude and Epistemology

The immediate influence on negritude as epistemology comes from Bergson. His critique of scientific rationality and his advocating for intuition readily appealed to Senghor. Indeed, Senghor referred to Bergson's *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* as "the revolution of 1889."<sup>3</sup> Again, the revolution that Senghor considered decisive was the epistemological critique of scientific reason carried out by Bergson. Senghor approvingly describes Bergson's philosophical program in following manner:

Since the Renaissance, the values of European civilization had rested essentially on discursive reason and facts, on logic and matter. Bergson, with an eminently dialectical subtlety, answered the expectation of a public weary of scientism and naturalism. He showed that facts and matter, which are the objects of discursive reason, were only the outer surface that had to be transcended by *intuition* in order to achieve a *vision in depth of reality*.<sup>4</sup>

Senghor's close relationship to Bergson is significant precisely because it provides a context to better understand why many critics have unfortunately considered Senghor's position an unwise dismissal of reason and a naïve praise of emotion. Of course, what is often missing in translation is that Senghor made his point regarding the different epistemologies of the intellect/reason and intuition in a condensed poetic utterance. Consequently, then, the fate of any complacent and literal reading of his language is to

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<sup>2</sup> Léopold Senghor and H. Kaal, "On Negrohood: Psychology of the African Negro," *Diogenes* 1962, Volume 10, Number 1, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Léopold Senghor, "Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century," p. 181.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

falsely reduce his views to absurdity. Nevertheless, to the extent that Senghor is capitalizing on Bergson's critique of the intellect, as well as the other critiques of reason within the context of the foundation of mathematics, Senghor's is not dogmatically setting up a metaphysical difference between the African and the European; what he is doing is underscoring a difference in approach to, in the words of Bergson, the stuff of immediate experience. For if there exists a certain kind of knowledge that is accessible by intuition, knowledge emergent from a fusing and harmonizing with things, then Senghor believes that this tradition of knowing is compatible with African ways of knowing. Hence he does not declare Africans to be biologically incapable of rational thinking. Africans certainly are capable of rational and analytical thinking, but Senghor, like Bergson, would conclude that this kind of thinking cannot capture the continuous heterogeneous flow of duration.

In another context, Kebede has directly linked negritude with critiques of reason and not primarily with a nationalist, anti-colonialist agenda. He maintains that "The best way to connect negritude with Western philosophical positions is via the debate opposing the defenders of reason and those who rebelled against its dominance."<sup>5</sup> The distinctive controversy was not one regarding the legitimacy of reason but, rather, one concerning the limits of reason.

Abiola Irele also underscores the intimate connection between negritude and Bergson's epistemology, arguing that Bergson's epistemology served as the theoretical foundation for Senghor's development of negritude.<sup>6</sup> And, in another context, Frederick Ochieng'-Odhiambo resorts to an epistemological framework to schematize the posited difference, associated with negritude, between Africans and Europeans. Unlike critics who enthusiastically condemn negritude on the grounds that it is fated to appeal to notions of biological essentialism to register this difference, Ochieng'-Odhiambo instead utilizes an alternative epistemological scheme. He writes of Senghor:

He reduced the distinctive features between [Africans and Europeans] to an epistemological level; that is, one is ratiocinative or logocentric, the other emotive. Hence, his famous saying that: 'Emotion is Negro as Reason is Greek.' By this, Senghor means that whereas European reason is analytical, African reason is intuitive. The Europeans and the Africans both reason, but the fashion in which they reason is fundamentally different. This epistemic distinction is the pedestal upon which the different black African and the European one is anchored; it constitutes the metaphysical sheet anchor for the differences even on the ontological plane.<sup>7</sup>

Hinting at the possible epistemological origins of negritude does not conclusively

<sup>5</sup> Messay Kebede, "Negritude and Bergsonism," *Journal of African Philosophy*, Issue 3 (2003).

<sup>6</sup> Irele writes, "it is largely the epistemology of Bergson that Senghor has adopted in his formulation of negritude." Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (London: Heinemann, 1981), p. 80.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick Ochieng'-Odhiambo, "Negritude: The Basic Principles and Appraisal," in *Negritude: Legacy and Present Relevance*, eds. Isabelle Constant and Kahiudi Mabana, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, p. 69.

established its more significant epistemological signature. Hence, it is imperative that we examine Senghor's views in greater details. However, before undertaking this task, it is necessary to contextualize it.

### **III. Senghor on Negritude as Epistemology**

The discussion to follow will make reference to differences between African and European ways of thinking. I, however, want to make it clear that I do not intend for my account of these differences to be interpreted as mirror opposites of each other. For example, to say that Africans are emotional should not be immediately interpreted as implying that Europeans, since they are different from Africans, must be essentially rational. Correctly understood, the statement should not be interpreted as meaning that Africans are literally illogical and irrational, totally disconnected from what we commonly understand as rational thinking. Again, to interpret attempts to attribute a difference in thinking to Africans should not in anyway lead one to associate such thinking with the prelogical thought characteristic of early the stages of human evolution. We are only led to these conclusions if we remain anchored in the Western conceptions of things that confront the African difference by treating the Africa as an inferior other. So, instead of using Western categories to clabber African otherness, what I want to suggest is that we frame the epistemological differences between Africans and Europeans as differences attributable to differences in styles of thinking. African thought is not premodern nor are its concerns identical to those of science.

Ian Hacking has popularized the notion of styles of thinking which is relevant in this context. Roughly speaking, a style of thinking is a context that creates the conditions of the possibility of truth and falsity. On this view, the candidates for truth in a particular historical situation will be different from those in another. According to Hacking, styles of thinking are defined by the following set of necessary conditions:

[T]here are neither sentences that are candidates for truth, nor independently identified objects to be correct about, prior to the development of a style of reasoning. Every style of reasoning introduces a great many novelties including new types of: Objects; evidence; sentences; new ways of being a candidate for truth or falsehood; laws, or at any rate modalities; possibilities. One should also notice, on occasion, new types of classification and new types of explanation.<sup>8</sup>

So my point is that we need not retreat to the annals of biology in an attempt to explain the differences between the epistemological traditions of Europe and Africa. The modern scientific style of thinking has no use for religious posits, but it does not necessary follow that religious posits are useless precisely because other styles of thinking may find them quite useful. The truth of this point is contained in Quine's famous, "The Two Dogmas of Empiricism." He writes:

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<sup>8</sup> Ian Hacking, "'Style' for Historians and philosophers," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 23 (1992), p. 11.

[A]s an empiricist I continue to think of the conceptual scheme of science as a tool, ultimately, for predicting future experience in the light of past experience. Physical objects are conceptually imported into the situation as convenient intermediaries -- not by definition in terms of experience, but simply as irreducible posits comparable, epistemologically, to the gods of Homer. Let me interject that for my part I do, qua lay physicist, believe in physical objects and not in Homer's gods; and I consider it a scientific error to believe otherwise. But in point of epistemological footing the physical objects and the gods differ only in degree and not in kind. Both sorts of entities enter our conception only as cultural posits.<sup>9</sup>

Ontological posits are relative to specific epistemological concerns. And epistemological concerns need not be universally invariant. So simply appreciating the explanatory force of the notion of styles of thinking should suffice for explaining the differences in epistemological traditions.

Certainly, the differences between Europeans and Africans can not only be explained in purely epistemological terms but also in historical and cultural terms. However, even historical and cultural explanations do not directly emerge from surface differences in cultural practices but are more deeply rooted in differences in ontological orientations. Senghor claims that “It is the attitude towards the *object*—towards the external world, the *Other*—which characterizes a people, and thereby their culture.”<sup>10</sup> I understand Senghor as grounding the differences under discussion in alternative philosophical ontologies. And, as Quine thought us, ontology and epistemology reciprocally contain each other.

Senghor repudiates the metaphysical dualism that grounds modern Cartesian epistemology. Modern epistemology alienates the knowing subject from the object of knowledge, meaning that the knowing subject, standing unconnected to the object, the thing known, is a spectator of sorts, bearing no affective relation to the object of knowledge. Viewing the object as an alien being, the subject is freed to conquer the object, to instrumentally subjugate the object to his interests. The violation of the object renders the object, as it were, silent in the midst of its complete domination by the concepts and instruments of the knower. According to Senghor

[The European] distinguishes himself from the object. He keeps it at a distance, immobilizes it outside time and in some sense outside space, fixes it and slays it. Armed with precision instruments, he dissects it mercilessly so as to arrive at a factual analysis. Learned, but moved by practical considerations, the European [...] uses the Other, after slaying it, for practical ends: He treats it as a *means*. And he *assimilates* it in a centripetal motion; destroys it by feeding on it.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> W.V.O. Quine, “The Two dogmas of Empiricism,” *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 44.

<sup>10</sup> Senghor and Kaal, “On Personhood: Psychology of the Negro African,” p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

Senghor then immediately describes the African approach to the object, to the Other. The contrast is vividly striking. He writes:

[The African] does not distinguish himself, to begin with, from the object: from tree or pebble, man or animal, fact of nature or society. He does not keep the object at a distance, does not analyze it. After receiving its impression, he takes the object, all alive, into his hands—like a blind man, anxious not to fix it or to kill it. He turns it over and over in his supple hands, touches it, *feels* it.... It is in his subjectivity and at the end of his antennae, like those of an insect, that he discovers the *Other*. And at this point, he is *e-moved* ... and carried... from subject to object on the waves which the Other emits.<sup>12</sup>

Senghor not only explains the differences between the African and the European in terms of an epistemological distinction, he also acknowledges that significant conceptual variation with regard to their respective conception of reason. The European tradition models reason on the basis of mechanical and atomistic thinking. Reason, according to this view, functions as a tool of manipulation, hence predisposed to dissect the object in order to expose its hidden essence. The African tradition models reason on the basis of an organic relation; here the focus is on cultivating and sustaining an affective relation with the object such that there is a reciprocal exchange of energy and influence. Furthermore, there is no barrier between subject and object, for as Senghor claims, the African “keeps his senses open, ready to receive any impulse, and even the very waves of nature, without screen ... between subject and object.”<sup>13</sup> Senghor favors words such “embrace,” “contact,” “participation,” “communion,” to describe the African encounter with the object.<sup>14</sup> Instead of the subject seeking to manipulate the object, the goal is to intermingle with the object with the hope that the object discloses its being, relative to the temporal unfolding of the subject’s encounter with it. Senghor states that for the African “reason is not discursive but synthetic; it is not antagonistic, but sympathetic.... European reasoning is analytical, discursive by utilization; Negro-African reasoning is intuitive by participation.”<sup>15</sup> We should note here Senghor’s intention to deflate the epistemological pretensions of scientific thinking, meaning that he is not convinced that the only source of knowledge is scientific knowledge. Again, like Bergson and the mathematical intuitionists, he claims that there are other sources of knowledge. Accordingly, he writes that knowledge “is a matter of *participating* in the object in the act of knowledge; of going beyond concepts and categories, appearances and preconceptions shaped by [reason], to plunge into the primordial chaos, not shaped as yet by discursive reason.... Knowledge is then no artificial product of discursive reason made to cover up reality, but discovery through emotion, and not so much discovery as *re-discovery*. Knowledge coincides ... with the being of the object in its originating and original reality, in its discontinuity and indeterminacy: in its life.”<sup>16</sup>

Bergson’s criticism of scientific thinking focused on the fact that it is incapable of

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Léopold Senghor, *On African Socialism* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1964), pp. 73-74.

<sup>16</sup> Senghor and Kaal, “On Personhood: Psychology of the Negro African,” p. 10.

thinking reality other than as aggregates of immobile solids. This being the case, the scientific style of thinking, according to Bergson, could not think reality as a heterogeneous continuity. Senghor also uses a similar structural distinction in his characterization of reason as discursive and as intuitive. “Discursive reason,” according to him, “merely stops at the surface of things; it does not penetrate their hidden resorts, which escape the lucid consciousness. Intuitive reason is alone capable of an understanding that goes beyond appearances, of taking in total reality.”<sup>17</sup>

As mentioned earlier in this essay, the various epistemological differences Senghor attributes to the African way of thinking and the European way of thinking also manifest ontological implications with regard to the conception of the world by Africans and Europeans. Not surprisingly, Senghor maintains that the European style of thinking projects a world that is immobile, a world consisting of an aggregate of meaningless objects, whereas the world as conceived by Africans is for the most part viewed as consistent with the flow of being itself and as receptive to difference and otherness. Senghor writes that the European conception of the world is “*static, objective, and dichotomic*. It is dualistic in that it makes an absolute distinction between body and soul, matter and spirit. It is founded on separation and opposition: on analysis and conflict. The African, on the other hand, conceives the world, beyond the diversity of its forms, as a fundamentally mobile, yet unique, reality that seeks synthesis.”<sup>18</sup>

As to be expected, Senghor grounds his conception of African epistemology on root metaphors of African culture. Since these root metaphors differ from the root metaphors that ground European epistemology, the two respective conceptions of knowledge, as stated before, also differ. Traditional Western epistemology utilizes the metaphor of sight to frame knowledge. Indeed, common conceptions of knowledge are highly dependent on visual metaphors, which in turn suggest perception as the natural way of interacting with world. Hence, common expressions such as “the mind’s eye,” “the light of reason”, “the inner eye”, “truth as correspondence or picturing of reality” and finally, the notion of “grasping something with the mind,” meaning to see something clearly, are all intended as epistemological grids. The visual conception of knowledge, according to Senghor, is not dominant in the African context. Senghor resorts to music and dance as the root metaphors grounding the African approach to knowledge. Sight presupposes separation from the object, but music and dance, according to Senghor, do not require the extensive use of only one sense or part of the body, but rather the entire body. And to the extent that the entire body becomes implicated in the knowledge process, Senghor claims that the whole body becomes responsive to the rhythms of being, the object or the Other. He writes:

Let us pause for a moment to illustrate this proposition about the rhythm of a movement in music and dance. When I see a team in action, at a soccer game for example, I take part in the game with my entire body. When I listen to a jazz tune or an African ...song, I have to make every effort not to break into song or dance.... The reason for all this is that team play reproduces the gestures natural

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<sup>17</sup> Léopold Senghor, *On African Socialism*, p. 75.

<sup>18</sup> Léopold Senghor, “Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century,” p. 184.

to man, and that African ... music and dance ... reproduce the movements of the human body, which are in turn attuned to the movements of the brain and of the world....<sup>19</sup>

#### **IV. Reason and Emotion in Negritude Epistemology**

Two issues warrant critical attention. The first issue concerns the status of reason in African epistemology. Some critics may question whether or not Senghor is advocating the view that Africans are incapable of rational thinking. Senghor is clear that he is in no way endorsing or attributing irrationality to Africans. Indeed, Senghor does acknowledge the universality of reason in the sense that all human beings make use of reason. However, he does not believe that reason is epistemological normative in the sense of substantively sanctioning a particular system of beliefs as being absolute. At the same time Senghor is not a naïve relativist. His real view is that reason is available to all human beings. But the use of reason is at least constrained by the fact that human beings, as physical creatures living in a physical environment, must creatively and effectively adapt to this aleatory environment or else cease to survive. On my interpretation, Senghor's approach to reason is Darwinian; reason is a coping mechanism geared to practical survival for human beings. As such, the varying contexts and environments of human communities require a pluralistic approach to reason. The plasticity of mind and material existence, characteristic of diverse forms of life, entails diverse manifestations of reason. The habits of mind, belief and action that groups adopt become sedimented and are collectively transmitted. These patterns of thinking, feeling and acting are ultimately indicative of psychological and physiological variations among human beings. Senghor states that "Reason is one, in the sense that it is made for the apprehension of the Other, that is, of objective reality. Its nature is governed by its own laws, but its modes of knowledge, its 'forms of thought,' are diverse and tied to the psychological and physiological makeup of each race."<sup>20</sup> Senghor's pluralistic view of reason is consistent with the existence of alternative systems of logic. He also extends this plurality from logic to the possibility of alternative cognitive and psychological structures. He quotes Gaëtan Picon approvingly: "There are several geometries, several possible kinds of logic, mentality and irreducible psychological structures."<sup>21</sup> And then Senghor adds, "The mind, as well as the real, manifests itself through varied and conflicting images."<sup>22</sup>

A second critical concern is the ontological status of emotion in Senghor's conception of African epistemology. Senghor directly raised the question: what is an emotion? He rejects the view that an emotion is a mechanical muscular reaction or that an emotion is an unthinking immediate reaction. In seeking to distance emotions from being construed as arbitrary and immediate, Senghor endorses Sartre's conception of an emotion as "an abrupt fall of consciousness into the world of magic." Similarly, that "In emotion, consciousness is degraded and abruptly transforms the determinist world we live in into a world of magic." Emotion, in this context, represents the transformation of

<sup>19</sup> Senghor and Kaal, "On Personhood: Psychology of the Negro African," pp. 4-5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

consciousness, as a perspective in the world of determinism, the world governed by deterministic scientific laws and static logical rules and laws, to another mode of consciousness that is the accomplishment of forces behind the world of material objects. Similarly, Senghor also refers to the fact of one being moved to joy or tears as indicative of emotions, which, he states, are responses to the deep realities of things and are not merely uncontrolled reactions or instincts. After working through inadequate views of emotion, he writes:

To be still more precise, an emotion is the seizure of one's entire being—both of consciousness and body—by the world of indeterminism; it is the irruption of the world of the mystical— or of magic—into the world of determinism. What moves an African ... is not so much the external aspect of an object as its profound reality: its *sub-reality*, and not so much the *sign as its sense*.... To the extent that sensible aspect, with its individual characteristics, is clearly perceived through the sense organs and nerves, it is only the sign of the sense of the object. Body and consciousness, sign and sense, constitute the same ambivalent reality. But the emphasis lies on the sense.

This means that an emotion, under its initial aspect as a fall of consciousness, is on the contrary *the rise of consciousness to a higher state of knowledge*. It is 'consciousness of the world,' 'a certain way of apprehending the world.' It is an integrated consciousness, for 'the moved' subject and the 'emoving' object are united in an indissoluble synthesis.... [E]motion is a higher form of knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

In concluding, it is hoped that this brief study has contributed to a rethinking of negritude. If human existence is open, in that forms of human life need not be faithful to any one absolute predetermined conception of how human life should be lived nor the need for human beings to all agree to an absolute and universal description of the physical world, then the richness of human existence offers us numerous opportunities to know reality through its assorted modes of unconcealment. This point is not meant to be an endorsement of naïve and cheap relativism or nihilism; rather, the goal is to encourage openness to the reciprocal and invigorating dialectic of reason and emotion in human life.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 14-15.