NÉGRITUDE: A PAN-AFRICAN IDEAL?

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Pan-Africanism is not, and never has been, a unified or a structured political movement. It is a movement of ideas and emotions: its recent political history has been a search for a viable political organization.¹

As Legum suggests, the general movement toward Pan-Africanism has always been highly emotional in content, and this is even more strikingly true of négritude, which may be seen as a particular component of, a variant of, or even, in some senses, an alternative to Pan-Africanism. Négritude has always been a literary-cultural movement, a movement more potent in the realm of intellect and idea than in terms of concrete political activity, and it might even be argued that its net effect is more detrimental than helpful to the Pan-African aim of political union on a continental scale.²

Both Pan-Africanism and négritude have origins outside the African continent, in Europe and the New World; both gained impetus during the 1940's and 1950's from reaction against different aspects of the experience of colonial subjugation; and each, in various ways, derives substance in today's context from the political, economic, and psychological problems of an underdeveloped continent facing a highly competitive world. Obviously the two patterns of thought will have numerous points of overlap, but they also have points of conflict, and when the ideals seek objectification in political organization, the conflicts tend to become acute. My aim in this paper is to examine négritude within a Pan-African frame of reference, especially problems and conflicts. In particular, I want to discuss racism, political union, ambivalence toward the white (or European? or non-African?) world, and mystical overtones. It will be helpful to mention the origins and principal themes of négritude, and parallels with other intellectual ideas and movements, both African and European.

In a sense, the roots of Pan-Africanism (and of négritude) extend as far back as the slave trade, but in terms of an organized, self-conscious movement, Pan-Africanism begins in the first quarter of the twentieth century with two Americans, Du Bois and Garvey, whose accomplishments range from organization of Pan-African conferences and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples, on one hand, to proclamation of a “Negro Empire” on the other. The protest is against the inferior status of the Negro, and the means are political.

Négritude, as a self-conscious movement, began in Paris with the publication in 1939 of Cahier d'un retour au pays natal by the West Indian poet-politician Aimé Césaire, and Césaire was but one of a group of writers and intellectuals from the West Indies and Africa—including Senegal's Léopold Senghor, another poet-politician—who sought to express the frustrations of the black “exile” in a world of alien
white. "What I am," Césaire declares, "is a man alone imprisoned in white":

c'est un homme seul qui défie
les cris blancs de la mort blanche . . .
c'est un homme qui fascine
l'épervier blanc de la mort blanche
c'est un homme seul dans la mer inféconde
de sable blanc . . .

Négritude is a protest at a very sophisticated level: a protest of men largely assimilated into European culture, but for all that unable to escape from the color of their skins. This is no mere request for social equality. These men ask not to be accepted like other men, but, somewhat ironicaly, to be valued precisely because they are unique and so are in a position to make a unique contribution to mankind. The exile of physical slavery is always in the background, but the exigent concern here is an exile of spirit. "Cet exile ancestral des corps figure l'autre exile: l'âme noire est une Afrique dont le nègre est exilé au milieu des froids buildings de la culture et de la technique blanches." The physical homeland on the African continent is paralleled by a semi-mystical homeland of the soul—which is "négritude."

Senghor felt the full impact of the French assimilation policy—a policy of acceptance, on white terms, into a metropolitan white society—and he reacted as against a smothering embrace. Shelton remarks that it could be expected that French education aimed at assimilation would create "a class who very rapidly perceived the clay feet of the white gods and consequently began to oppose the whole business of colonialism and culture supremacy." So it was with Senghor: he wanted association without assimilation, on terms acceptable to both black and white. Like Césaire, he called for a renaissance of black culture and for a recognition on the part of European civilization that Negroes have a contribution to make to a world civilization. In a sense he sought to perpetuate what Sartre called "la grande division manichéiste du monde en noir et blanc," by refusing to reject totally either European or traditional cultures, wanting rather to create a new Negro culture which would draw selectively from both. He refuses the "straight choice between isolation and assimilation" which Alion Diop called "the trap in which the malice of the colonizer has cunningly tried to catch the conscience of the Africans."

The persistent themes of négritude poetry include a remembrance of past indignities; but more significant is an emphasis on present and future greatness. Even in passages recalling slavery and humiliation, references to inherent Negro values are contrasted with the shallowness of the seemingly superior whites, who

trampled down all that was strange
and filled the void
with half-digested alien thoughts;
they left a trail of red
wherever their feet had passed.

By implication, black culture is superior, even without invention and conquest:

Écoutez le monde blanc
horriblement las de son effort immense
ses articulations rebelles craquer sous les étoiles dures
ses raideurs d'acier bleu transperçant la chair mystique
écoute ses victoires proditoires tromper ses défaîtes
écoute aux alibis grandioses son piètre trébuchement

Pitié pour nos vainquers omniscients et naïfs
Eia pour ceux qui n’ont jamais rien inventé
pour ceux qui n’ont jamais exploré
pour ceux qui n’ont jamais dompté
Eia pour la joie
Eai pour l’amour
Eia pour la douleur aux pis de larmes réin-
carnées9

In David Diop’s poetry, as in Césaire’s
and Senghor’s, imagery of hardness and
coldness is associated with whites;
Negroes, by contrast, epitomize the
warmth of human feeling—some joy,
and much pain:
It seemed as if the rays of the sun
were extinguished in my empty hut.
My wives crushed their reddened mouths
Against the thin hard lips of the
Conquerors with eyes of steel.
My children took off their peaceful nakedness
To put on a uniform of blood and iron. . . .10

... In those days
There was painful laughter on the metallic hell
Of the roads
And the monotonous rhythm of the paternoster
Drowned the howling on the plantations. . . .11

But Diop looks to a new era of black
glory, when the pride, beauty, and
strength of the Negro will overshadow
a faded white culture:
This tree, young and strong,
This tree there, in splendid isolation
Amidst white and faded flowers,
That is Africa, your Africa,
That grows again, patiently, obstinately
As its fruit gradually acquires
The bitter taste of liberty.12

Senghor wonders who else but the
Negro could be “the leaven that the
white flour needs.”
For who else would teach rhythm to the world
that has died of machines and cannons?
For who else should ejaculate the cry of joy,
that arouses the dead and the wise in a new
dawn?
Say, who else could return the memory of life
to men with a torn hope?218

Sartre expresses the same theme from
a white point of view. It is with justice,
he says, that Césaire has called us
“Vainqueurs omniscients et naïfs,” for
de l’outil, le blanc sait tout. Mais tout griffe
la surface des choses, il ignore la durée, la vie.
La négritude, au contraire, est une compréhens-
ion par sympathie. Le secret du noir c’est
que les sources de son existence et les racines
de l’Être sont identiques.14

In the end, this “compréhension par
sympathie” extends to all cultures; it
is not exclusive; it is the medium by
which the Negro can be, rather para-
doxically, at once separated from and
united with the whites. Senghor calls
for “a synthesis of civilizations, re-
taining only the fecund elements of
each.” His objective is “a dynamic
symbiosis . . . a cultural blending.”15
In another place he refers to himself
as “a cultural mulatto.” Sartre express-
es it in terms of “une progression dia-
lectique”:
l’affirmation théorique et pratique de la su-
prématie du blanc est la thèse; la position de
la Négritude comme valeur antithétique est le
moment de la négativité. Mais ce moment
négatif n’a pas de suffisance par lui-même et
les noirs qui en usent le savent fort bien; ils
savent qu’il vise à préparer la synthèse ou
réalisation de l’humain dans une société sans
races.16

But to many, Negroes and whites
alike, a world society without races is
a utopian ideal which can be criticized
from at least two directions. In the
first place, it can be argued that as
long as some skins are white and others
black the notion of a dialectic synthe-
sis is a piece of romantic, even mystical,
fancy. (In reality, the insistence on
uniqueness may be more likely to per-
petuate antithesis than to promote syn-
thesis.) Second, it can be argued in
practical terms that race conflict is
simply a concrete fact of life which is likely to be with us for some time.

Whatever attempts might be made by some Africans to claim that there is no racism in Africa, the obvious truth is there to see: all the nationalistic arguments about economic and political subservience, social scorn, and the like, which were suffered by colonial peoples in Africa were imposed by white persons upon black persons. So nationalism, as a stage in the response of Africans to the colonial situation, is naturally linked with the whole problem of race supremacy, and aids in the growth of further race consciousness among Africans.17

The possibility of localized racial conflict in Africa continues to be very real—as Congo, South Africa, and the Portuguese territories attest—and the danger of négritude is that potentially it could be used (twisted) to promote racial antagonism on a generalized scale. Of course it will be countered that négritude aims at lessening racism, but one of the criticisms frequently expressed in non-French Africa—and in America—is precisely that idealization of black character and black culture, pushed by the extreme emotionalism of reaction, keeps the racial issue explosive—perpetuates the Manichean division.

The problem is that Pan-Africanism can be interpreted two ways. The slogan “Africa for Africans” can be used to unify peoples of diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, all of whom claim the designation “African,” or it can be used as an opening wedge in an ugly split between “true” (i.e., black) Africans and “foreigners.” Similarly, an exponent of négritude can emphasize the conflict between black and white peoples, or he can emphasize their ultimate “complementary” unity: the concept is big enough and ambiguous enough to accommodate both themes. To the extent that négritude fosters self-confidence, restores dignity, inspires creative activity, its emotional content is salutary; to the extent that it fosters chauvinism and accentuates bitterness, it is dangerous. And both attitudes have characterized Pan-Africanism from the beginning, for while Du Bois opposed racial arrogance of both white and black varieties, Garvey countered one prejudice with another, demanding a pure black race.

Following Sartre, apologists for négritude have tried to get around the problem with the concept of “antiracist racism.” Négritude is seen as the necessary but passing moment of antithesis which must negate the thesis of white supremacy before a non-racial synthesis can be achieved. In a somewhat similar spirit, Legum tries to establish a distinction between race-consciousness (“a positive statement in defense of one’s race”) and racialism (which seeks to “elevate that race above other races”).18 Senghor, following Teilhard de Chardin, articulates the “complementarity” theme: “races are not equal but complementary, which is a superior form of equality.”19 At the same time, he wants to establish a “Negro African Nation,”20 and what else can a Negro nation be if not racial? It is evident that there are no clear or firm dividers between the notions of racial, racist, and race-conscious, and only extreme caution tempered by patient good will can prevent them, in practice, from becoming hopelessly tangled.

Négritude is obviously ambivalent; it is not an easy concept to concretize. Césaire realized this, and was conscious of the danger of racial hate.

... preserve me, heart, from all hatred
do not turn me into a man of hate whom I shall hate
for in order to emerge into this unique race,
you know my world-wide love,
know it is not hatred against other races
that turns me into the cultivator of this one
race.
for what I want
arises from infinite hunger
from infinite thirst.21

As the suppressed Negro typically de-
veloped an ambivalent love-hate rela-
tionship with his white “superior,” so
nègritude juxtaposes expressions of ad-
miration and of contempt for European
civilization. This is not merely reaction
against the oppressions of the colonial
situation; Césaire’s “infinite hunger”
continues into the post-independence
period. The poet of nègritude wishes
to redeem and embrace that same white
world which he so bitterly rejects and
denounces. Forgiveness and revenge,
protest and acceptance, are parallel
themes. This is, in Mazrui’s apt phrase,
“less a rebellion than the paradox of
rebellious imitation,”22 for in the end
it must be admitted that forgiveness
and acceptance outweigh rejections.
Senghor hates, but he can forget his
hatred:

Lord, I have accepted your white cold that
burns worse than salt.
And now my heart melts like snow in the sun.
And I forget
The white hands that loaded the guns that
destroyed the kingdoms,
The hands that whipped the slaves and that
whipped you
The dusty hands that slapped you, the white
powdered hands that slapped me
The sure hands that pushed me into solitude
and hatred. . . . 23

The major reaction is, of course,
against Europe, but there is a problem
of vagueness: It is never quite settled
whether nègritude reacts against all
non-black culture (hence against major
portions of indigenous Africa), or only
against “European” culture (which
would seriously diminish the impact
of the black-white dichotomization). It
seems that nègritude in its most
simple and obvious form would have to
stand in opposition to Pan-Africanism
in its most simple and obvious form,
for, interpreted in terms of a strict
black-white dichotomy, nègritude must
not only divide the African continent
but also overlap into non-African areas,
particularly the Americas: in short, it
becomes non-territorial.

This particular problem becomes
most relevant when political union is
proposed—when African states con-
template merging into a greater African
community. To the extent that it is
an expression of, and a plea for, soli-
darity, nègritude could be a support
to political union. This would be most
likely, of course, among those states
comprising the former French West
and Central Africa. But the trouble is,
in part, that the solidarity encouraged
by nègritude tends to exclude non-Ne-
gro areas of Africa, and this problem
is seen even more acutely in light of
Mazrui’s reminder that Algeria, for in-
stance, has much firmer historical con-
nections with Europe than with, say,
Congo or Tanganyika.24 Typically, the
Pan-Africanist calls for continental
unity, but there are exceptions: Awo-
lowo of Nigeria is one who, like Seng-
hor, puts black African community
ahead of continental community.25 But
this is not the end of the problem, for
nègritude is to some extent a divisive
force even within the black communi-
ty; it tends to alienate those outside
the French tradition (and, of course,
even some within it). This is partly
because Negroes within the English-
speaking and (some of) the Islamic
communities have not felt the intense
alienation from traditional roots which dominated the thinking of “exiles” in Europe and America. It is also, as suggested above, partly because of racial overtones, which are repugnant to many English-speaking Negroes. (As Mphahlele has remarked, “I take my Negreness for granted, and it is no matter for slogans”; or, putting it in Soyinka’s terms, a tiger does not find it necessary to proclaim his tigritude.) And partly it is because the heavy emphasis on romantic, even mystical, doctrines or ideals seems, to some, to obscure the real problems of economic, social, and political development.

Of course Pan-Africanism, as well as négritude, may with some justice be termed a utopian ideal. Legum suggests that it is not merely an ideal, but “the right answer to Africa’s needs,” and he adds the caution that to advocate union is “not the same thing as concluding that this is in fact what will happen.” But if Pan-Africanism is utopian, it is at least a concrete and tangible ideal, whereas Senghor invites the charge of mysticism when he suggests that black French Africa represents the “soul” of France, and her “raison d’être.” Négritude claims for black men a special prerogative to represent the spiritual, the sensual, the blood-warm and “humanistic” aspects of the human community—man’s vital, vibrant, earth contact—as opposed to the harshness and cold rigidty of a rational, efficient, technological civilization.

Naked woman, black woman
Clothed with your colour which is life, with your form which is beauty...
Your beauty strikes me to the heart like the flash of an eagle.
Naked woman, dark woman
Firm-fleshed ripe fruit, sombre raptures of black wine, mouth making lyrical my mouth...

Appealing as these notions may be to the black intellectual struggling to establish his own sense of dignity and personal worth, they are not necessarily helpful and may even be a hindrance when it comes to working out a practical program for unification and development. The poets of négritude have in fact been charged with the sin of writing for a European rather than an African audience, but whether or not this is true it is at least apparent that the appeal of négritude is a sophisticated appeal likely to have little impact on the ordinary African workingman, or peasant, or housewife—unless indirectly. It is an expression, in other words, of a cleavage not only between black and white but between black intellectual and black peasant, so that to some degree the “alien and exile” theme carries directly into the heart of the African homeland.

Originating as it did in Paris, in the 1930’s, it is hardly surprising that négritude should show parallels with intellectual currents of those years: Marxism, existentialism, surrealism, to name three which are intimately associated in the general quest for “liberation.” Much of Césaire’s imagery is surrealistic, although later poets have tended toward greater analytic precision. The alienation theme is, of course, central to both Marxist and existential thought.

Sartre, in his Orphée Noir, uses a modified Marxist frame of reference: négritude is dialectic; the black race is a world proletariat; “le ‘Blanc’ symbole le capital, comme le Nègre le travail.” And much of the Marxist orientation, though without its rigid
categorizations, carries over into contemporary discussions of "African Socialism." In particular, "race" tends to be substituted for "class," and the notion of class struggle is repudiated as inapplicable to Africa. Senghor follows Marx's economic analysis at length, but concludes that it is a "philosophy of humanism, rather than economics," which is "the basic character, the positive contribution of Marxian thought." He specifically ties African Socialism in with race and, only a little less specifically, with the spiritual mystique of négritude, in terms of a unique sort of black "communion of souls."

Socialism is based, by definition, not only on race, but also on geography and history—political and economic. It is these values, especially the cultural values of sentiment, which constitute the contribution which the new Negroes can make to the rendezvous of giving and receiving: to the convergent current of socialism, in a word to the "New Directions of Socialism." We have developed co-operation, not collectivist, but communal. For co-operation—of family, village, tribe—has always been honoured in Black Africa; once again, not in collectivist form, not as an aggregate of individuals, but in communal form.

For Senghor, African Socialism is "existentialist and humanistic" and "integrates spiritual values," which ordinary socialism lacks. But it is the black African's duty to renew socialism "by helping it regain spiritual dimensions." Like négritude, the African Socialism concept is seen by some as more of a mystique than a rational political program.

Interestingly, the notion of African Socialism is also very closely identified with Pan-Africanism—with political union. Nelkin sees the three mainstreams of Pan-African thought as African unification, black nationalism, and African Socialism. The socialism theme has been a dominant one throughout the history of the Pan-African movement, for instance, in the activity of Du Bois and Padmore. It has been referred to as "the unifying ideology" of the movement, and is seen by some as essential to establishing a level of economic viability sufficient to support a stable political union of continental dimensions.

African Socialism is also closely associated with the concepts of "African Personality" and "Consciencism," which may to some extent be seen as the counterparts of négritude in much of non-French Africa. In fact, the African Personality tends to be defined, in part, as a socialistic personality. And unlike négritude, these concepts fit easily, comfortably, with Pan-Africanism, for they are not racially exclusive. The term "African Personality" suggests a unique contribution to be made not by the Negro but by the African (of whatever color), and if this notion is less schematically tidy, less symbolic, than the metaphysic of négritude, it is at the same time less socially dangerous, and (hopefully) more workable. It has sometimes been suggested that the English-speaking African—in contrast with the French-speaking—tends to avoid elaborate abstractions in his practical concern with real political and economic problems, but, as Consciencism demonstrates, this is not necessarily so. To some extent it is true of African Personality, for this is a concept easily understood at the grass roots, easily adaptable to the problems and vocabulary of the peasant who has never thought in terms of "alienation" or of a "dialectic of cultures" but who does want to take pride in his achievements as an African. The related and elaborated
concept of Consciencism, on the other hand, is as far beyond the concern of the common man, as self-consciously abstract and philosophical, as is négri-
tude—and, it might be fair to add, without the delicate coloring, the poignancy, the romance, of the French tradition.

Consciencism is an expression of Nkrumah's (and Abraham's) desire to establish a unifying doctrine which will overcome that "schizophrénie la plus pernicieuse" which results from the tension between the several cultures—traditional and modern—which impinge on the individual African today. It is a deliberate attempt "d'établir un ensemble cohérent de réflexions qui dé
termineront la nature générale de notre action, en unifiant la société dont nous sommes les héritiers"; it aims at "une révolution intellectuelle, une révolution qui oriente nos réflexions et notre philosophe vers une renaissance de notre société."

Consciencism ... représente, en termes int
 tellectuals, cette disposition stratégique des forces qui permettra à la société africaine d'
 assimiler les éléments occidentaux, islamiques et euro-chrétiens, et de les adapter à la per
 sonalité africaine. La personnalité africaine se définit elle-même par le foisonnement des prin-
cipes ayant l'homme pour objet, qui sont sous-
jacents dans la société africaine traditionnelle. Le "consciencisme philosophique" représente ce point de vue philosophique qui, à partir de l'état actuel de la conscience africaine, s'
efforce d'indiquer comment le conflit qui agite cette conscience peut donner lieu au progres.

Consciencism starts from a material-
ist basis, but it is not an ordinary ma-
terialism—it is spiritualized by "le phé
nomène de la conscience." In the course of a metaphysical romp which takes us all the way from Thales and Heraclites to Einstein and the Logical Positivists, we learn that while matter is the most fundamental category of be-
ing, it is animate, dynamic; it is capa-
ble of dialectic transformation into oth-
er categories—which is a fact, as it turns out, that the Bantu tradition had proclaimed all along. And the socio-po-
itical implications which allegedly fol-
low from these foundations turn out to be remarkably similar to those of both African Socialism and négri
tude: in particular, a "humanist" mystique; a special claim to spiritual-communal leadership; ambivalence toward the colonial experience and European cul-
ture; insistence on the unique contribu-
tion to be made by the African who is firmly rooted in a traditional past but in step with "progress" and committed to a flowering of African culture.

This synthesis of cultures, this reaching for the best of both worlds, points in the direction of a millennial future which is only implied by Consciencism but which becomes explicit in the more mystical versions of négri
tude. The cosmic vision of dialectical necessity which turns the world into a garden of de-
lights is reminiscent of Teilhard de Chardin's "Omega point," which repre-
sents a "biologically necessary" culmi-
nation of evolutionary history. (Need-
less to add, this grand climax is seen as impossible without the unique contribu-
tion of the Negro personality.) Like Césaire, Teilhard longs for a "world-
wide love" which "embraces the total of men," and he regards this "superior state of humanity" as the inevitable re-
sult of a synthesis of the various aspects or components of humanity. It is diffi-
cult to render his thought in concrete terms, but it is at least evident that he sees Omega not as a "fusion" of ele-
ments but as a grouping in which "per-
sonalizations of the elements reach their maximum simultaneously and without merging."
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Senghor—and the French intellectual climate in general—have been influenced by Teilhard’s thought, but it seems likely that the main currents of négritude are parallel to, rather than derivative from, Teilhard. Certainly it is easy enough to see in Omega the négritude mystique of a world civilization composed of various cultures, each contributing to a unified whole, but “uniquely,” without losing its identity. At this point we are well beyond Pan-Africanism, into something closer to Pan-Humanism. As a final note on Teilhard, it is interesting that, like Nkrumah, he starts with matter as the “basic reality,” and ends by subordinating physical to psychic energy. “Thus,” as Senghor puts it, “starting from concrete facts, on a material basis, but broader and more profound than Marx, Teilhard de Chardin emerges on the spiritual above and ahead.”

Even more than Consciencism, and quite unlike Pan-Africanism, négritude is persistently and essentially ethereal. It insists on dealing with psychic and cultural verities, ahead of the politico-economic. And one suspects that a Negro poet might want to argue that, just as Pan-Africanism requires solid eco-

nomic foundations, so also it requires solid racio-cultural foundations: that, in short, the vision of négritude must be fulfilled before Pan-Africanism can become a meaningful reality. Négritude represents, in Allen’s words,

the Negro African poet’s endeavor to recover for his race a normal self-pride, a lost confidence in himself, a world in which he again has a sense of identity and a significant role. It is, in Sartre’s figure from classic mythology, his Euridice recovered by Orpheus from Pluto, his lost beloved, his ultimate identity, his vision of the world and not that of a culture holding him in derision and contempt. It is not a goal to be accomplished, but rather, more basically, an affective disposition, in Heidegger’s existentialist term, the Negro’s “being-in-the-world.”

And if a pragmatist from Ghana or Egypt or Kenya should object to this emphasis on blackness, he could hardly object to Toure’s formulation, which captures a certain flavor of African aspirations, which is common to both Pan-Africanism and négritude:

Hier dominée mais non conquisee, l’Afrique est déterminée à delivrer au monde son message particulier et à apporter à l’univers humain le fruit de ses expériences, la totalité de ses ressources intellectuelles et les enseignements de sa culture propre.

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NOTES

2. This is not to suggest that the aims and concepts of Pan-Africanism are without ambiguity, or that political union is the entirety of the Pan-African ideal. It does suggest that the overlap between négritude and Pan-Africanism is not complete or without ragged edges.
11. Ibid., p. 145.
12. Ibid., p. 147.
17. Shelton, *op. cit.*, p. 120.
34. Legum, *Pan-Africanism*, p. 128.
39. This is not to suggest that they are necessarily confined to non-French Africa.