

---

## Homage to Léopold Sédar Senghor: 1906-2001

---

*Janet G. Vaillant*

Léopold Sédar Senghor was a “great baobab.” The image of Senghor as baobab tree was suggested by Abdourahman Waberi (qtd. in Thorin 63). It recognizes Senghor’s ability to survive as a distinct personality through seasons of flowering and drought, success and failure, while continuing to draw from his African roots. He dominated the ground on which he stood. The image also calls up a story told at his birth. At that moment, according to family legend, a great baobab cracked open and fell to the ground, freeing its spirit to seek out and take residence in the young child. This child grew into a towering presence that cast a broad shadow over the events of his time. Since Senghor’s retirement from public life and now his recent death, that shadow has changed shape and withdrawn to make way for others. Parts of his legacy seem to grow in significance, while others shrink and threaten to fade altogether. I have chosen to focus on three aspects of that legacy here: his ideas that were so radical for his time, his poetry that won him a wide audience, and his statesmanship that created a positive political environment for those who succeeded him. All of them are the work of one extraordinary personality whose greatest gift of all was his ability to keep perspective on himself and his work.

It is essential to recall the historical setting in which Senghor acted. Unless it is taken into consideration, the impact of his ideas and activities on the history of his time cannot be fully appreciated. His radical and original ideas were Senghor’s first great contribution. He was cautious by nature and training, but bold nonetheless, conscious of the public implications of everything he said and wrote, and eager for influence. Today it is almost impossible to fathom how radical and controversial his ideas were when first expressed in the late 1930s. Thereafter his poetry earned him recognition as a spokesman by many Africans and as the interpreter of francophone African aspirations by the French. Today Senghor’s poetry endures as the record of an individual sensibility at a particular moment in history, but it also transcends that particularity to take its place among important voices in world literature. This remarkable man also became one of the great statesmen of his era, shaping the political culture of Senegal in ways that endure to this day. Throughout his life he was universally recognized as a person without spite or hatred; he was skilled at making compromises, able to forgive and win to his side almost all those who had at one time opposed him. The glaring and tragic exception was his decision to arrest and jail his capable political partner Mamadou Dia in 1962, after what appeared then to be an attempted coup d’état.

When Senghor was a thirty-one-year-old professor, he returned from France fresh from academic triumph to give a public speech in Dakar. The boy from the countryside had studied hard and successfully to win the

highest degree in French academic life. He held a post teaching Latin and Greek to French children at a lycée in Tours. The year was 1937. French culture ruled supreme; the power of its colonial administration in West Africa appeared strong; its assimilation policy in full force. The intellectual foundation of this colonization was the proposition that Africans had no culture of their own and that they should work as hard as possible to acquire French culture and civilization. Then, and only then, they would be accepted as the equals of the citizens of metropolitan France. The urban elites of St. Louis and Dakar prided themselves on their French education and sophistication. They joined French representatives of the colonial administration and business community to listen to what this impressive young man had to say.

The radical and unexpected content of Senghor's address shocked both French and African alike. The perfect Black Frenchman, the first African agrégé from a French university, the embodiment of France's generosity to colonized peoples, stood up before the elite of the colony and ever so politely and academically questioned whether the assimilation of French culture was an appropriate goal for educated West Africans. He challenged the basic assumption on which the empire rested, namely, that Africans were without a historical past and lacked culture so that progress could occur only if they tried to become as much like the French as possible. Senghor argued that on the contrary, Africans could never move forward unless they developed a culture firmly rooted in their own traditions. He pointed to the sad example of the French West Indies and took inspiration from the American writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Furthermore, Africans could not become "French" no matter what the effort. "The Challenge of Culture in French West Africa," the title of his address, was to develop a culture based on the strengths of local tradition that was also open to the modern, European world (45-53). He went on to suggest, in a passage he chose to delete from the version included in his collected essays, that the literature of this new culture should be written in native African languages. He did not use the word or outline the concept of "Negritude" for which he later became famous, and infamous. Here he pointed out that Africa had a history of its own that included long contact with the French, that traditional Africa was dying, and that the reality of Senegal was already "Afro-French." In effect, Senghor was refusing the privileged position that he had earned by his education and that had been offered him by French intellectuals and the colonial elite because it carried the condition that he also accept second-class status as a person whose own culture was best forgotten. Of course the situation and particularly Senghor's personal position were far more complicated than this brief summary suggests (Vaillant, "The Problem of Culture"). Yet most of the ideas that Senghor later developed and for which he is known today are present in this early speech, delivered before he had become a well-known public figure. Many of the issues he raised are still discussed among African intellectuals to this day, even if most have forgotten that it was he who first identified them.

In this speech, Senghor was challenging the monolithic view of the world presented to him by the French, and more particularly the role it offered to Africans. In a way, Senghor may be likened to Molière's *bourgeois gentilhomme*, Monsieur Jourdain, who found himself talking prose without knowing it. Senghor recognized the realities that critics today call hegemonic discourse and the postmodern world, without, like Monsieur Jourdain, having the technical vocabulary since developed to describe what he had discovered for himself. He came to understand, after much hard work and psychological pain, that he possessed an experience and reality that was being neither voiced nor heard. He refused to accept the prevailing view that condemned him to an inferior identity and status. With a poet's sensibility and gift for words, he felt and described the gap between what others saw in him or wanted to make of him, and what he felt himself to be. Senghor possessed the energy and talent to act upon his insights and articulate a fresh view of the world and African identity. Others joined in this effort, but Senghor was the driving force, able to bridge the world between intellectuals and politicians. His multiple talents made of him a leader to be reckoned with for the two decades before the independence of French West Africa, and propelled him into the presidency of Senegal thereafter. Subsequent research has analyzed the power of cultural hegemony, its devastating effect on peoples throughout the world, and the difficulty with which it can be repelled or transformed. Senghor was a pioneer in the efforts to do exactly that: to resist French cultural domination and offer Africans an alternative vision of their place in the world. His ideas were so successful that, like those of many pioneers, they are now commonplace. The fact that they have fallen under attack may be considered evidence of their acceptance in his time.

The second and most celebrated part of Senghor's legacy is his poetry. Today he is most often remembered as the poet of Negritude, an idea that is justly criticized even as its original purpose and function are forgotten. His poetic gifts enabled him to achieve his chief intellectual ambition, to be, as he put it, a spokesman for his people, "to be their trumpet." In his romanticized poetic evocations of "Afrique-Eden-enfance," he created a world that caught the attention of his French-speaking audience. French intellectuals greeted his poetry as a revelation from another world. Jean-Paul Sartre, in his famous preface to a collection of black writing edited by Senghor, defined Negritude and heralded the new voices from overseas as harbingers of a coming revolution in the old world. More conservative arbiters of French taste lavished praise on Senghor and bestowed literary prizes. Fellow Africans were pleased at this recognition of one of their own. For Africans today, his meditations on a lost African paradise or anguish and tension about his relationship to France and Africa seem irrelevant to the business at hand; they have little resonance for them and their countrymen. This was not so at the time he wrote, at least not for the African elite of his generation. Senghor spoke for a transitional generation of Africans enticed into an assimilation that was in fact cruelly denied. Today this remains a common experience for many who are born outside of the European West. They are attracted by its culture and ideals, yet are

then often disillusioned by their own failure to win acceptance or by Europeans' failures to live up to their own ideals. Some are shattered by this experience; others seek refuge in religious extremism or violence, or attempt to reject the secular trend toward globalization by building cultural and religious walls against the outside world. Senghor managed to avoid these alternatives that would have forced him to deny part of his own experience. He believed that the interweaving of cultures was inevitable and remained open to all possibilities.

Indeed Senghor went further and described cultural borrowing as a cross-fertilization and source of strength, an idea summarized in his well-known phrase "s'assimiler pas être assimilé." The best strategy, he argued, was to take charge and actively assimilate what might be useful to you rather than allowing others to shape you to their wishes. Senghor's personal meditations on how to attain and maintain this position are the stuff of his best poetry. Those who shrink Senghor to fit the straight-jacket of Negritude do not take into account the bulk of his poetic work. In fact, his early lyrics about "Afrique-Eden-enfance," the kingdom of childhood, make up a relatively small proportion of his poetic oeuvre. His many love lyrics, poems evoking the mixed emotions of departure and letting go, or moods of doubt, hesitation or despair, triumph, or more often, of confusion and inner conflict, make up a rich poetic legacy that transcends the concerns of Africa. Ironically perhaps, his early lyrics are the ones most often anthologized in secondary-school textbooks of French and world literature for US teenagers. In part, he is chosen because his presence in an anthology meets the criteria of the "politically correct," yet this poetry also continues to attract outsiders to his world. US students of African descent living as a minority in a country dominated by others, as did Senghor, find that he speaks to their experience. As Senghor had hoped, his poetry endures, and with audiences he would not have imagined. There is irony in the fact that Senghor was deeply influenced by US poets of African descent such as Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen whom he read in the 1930s, and now his own poetry returns to resonate among US young people several generations later.

A third aspect of Senghor's achievement is his political legacy to Senegal. With the passage to time, it appears all the more remarkable. He had survived a German prisoner-of-war camp and was living in Paris as a successful intellectual when Lamine Gueye came to urge him to run for the French Constituent Assembly in 1945. Senghor met the call as one to duty. He soon learned humbling lessons about the limitations of the French acceptance of the "outsider." Praise for his poetry and elegant and docile persona as the black Frenchman was cheap compared with the cost of granting real power or concrete benefit to the African colonies. In 1946, he gave an uncharacteristically belligerent speech declaring that Africans were determined to achieve their liberty by any means, even by force if necessary. While seeking every possible method for gaining political support for his own cause and candidacy, an effort in which the slogan "Negritude" played an important part, Senghor never appealed directly to race as such in order to inflame anti-French sentiment or win added

popularity for himself. Although his ideas about Negritude, originally represented a kind of “antiracist racism” as he himself admitted, Senghor transformed them into an idea of cultural contribution to what he called an emerging world-wide “civilization of the universal.” Independence from France was achieved peacefully, without violence, and Senghor continued to pursue what he believed to be the special benefits of a close relationship with France. Once president, he never tried to play the religious or ethnic card in Senegal. This restraint cannot be attributed to virtue alone. Indeed it was Senegal’s good fortune that their first president was by birth from an ethnic minority, the Serer, and from a religious minority, Christian, in a largely Muslim country. Even if Senghor had wanted to appeal to a religious or ethnic base, it would have been difficult. It was far more effective to include representatives from all groups. He consistently operated on the assumption that compromise was possible. Senegal was noticeably spared violence and repression during Senghor’s presidency, nor did it fall into violence or chaos when he retired. Senghor enjoyed his power and the global status it provided, but not so much that he could not give it up.

Senghor became the first African president to give up power voluntarily, albeit to a hand-picked successor, Abdou Diouf. While Senegal may not now be free from corruption or abuse of power, to this day it remains relatively, if not perfectly, peaceful and free from violence. Abdou Diouf, too, left office when defeated in an election. Compared to what has happened in many other African countries, this is a noticeable accomplishment. Other parts of Senghor’s political legacy, such as the special relationship with France and economic policies, are more mixed. He cannot be blamed, however, for the fact that Senegal is a hard, dry land on the edge of the Sahelian desert. No oil or magic mineral has been found to free it from the cycle of drought and poverty. Politics alone cannot be blamed for Senegal’s failure to thrive economically, especially as the country tries to support a population that has tripled since independence. Its peaceful and democratic ways remain an enduring testament to the political culture developed by its first president.

What is most remarkable of all about Senghor was his ability to maintain his balance and integrity throughout his life and to excel both as a poet and a political figure. He himself believed that his two callings supplemented and strengthened his abilities in the other. Had it not been for his political activities, he said, his poetry would have been less profound, while if it had not been for his life as a poet, he might have succumbed to the temptations of power and lost himself in the details of power struggles and short-term goals.

Here, as in all he did, Senghor was a person of “both-and” rather than “either-or.” He saw inclusion, *métissage*, and symbiosis as sources of strength, for himself and for societies. The challenge was to create equilibrium and balance, two of his favorite words. He refused to give up any part of his mixed heritage. He would renounce neither his love of France when it would have been politic to do so, nor his roots and inspiration from Africa. Indeed he understood that his personal integrity depended on maintaining the equilibrium among his disparate experiences and

sometimes conflicting tendencies. "If this symbiosis could not be realized," he once wrote, "there would be nothing left for me but to take my own life" (Letter). Strong words that reveal an unusual awareness of an inner psychic reality.

A deep religious faith provided Senghor strength, hope, and a belief in the power of forgiveness. It shaped and gave strength to the spirit of the baobab. All of his achievements were rooted in this faith. Today, at a time when religious and ethnic differences are manipulated by politicians greedy for power and offered up as reasons for violence and hatred, it is important to recall the positive force that religion can offer those able to draw upon it. Senghor expressed his religious convictions in the language of Christianity, but freely invoked his Ancestors and the spirits of African tradition as well. His behavior over and over again revealed his transcendent conviction that compromise and integrity were possible, and that life had meaning even if, as wrote at a moment of near despair, "il est impénétrable, le labyrinthe de tes desseins" 'the labyrinth of Your designs is impenetrable' (*Poèmes* 288). Commentators have underestimated the importance of faith as a source of Senghor's energy and basic optimism, with the recent exception of Wole Soyinka (96-124). Even if the impact of Senghor's belief is impossible to measure in any exact way, it was immeasurable in both senses of the word.

Evidence for the importance of religious faith to Senghor is abundant, in both his poetry and his personal life. Biblical images abound in his poetry, particularly those that promise forgiveness and reconciliation. The poet repeatedly calls for God's help in giving him the strength to give up hatred and forgive those who have destroyed Africa or mistreated his people; the image of the Eucharist is prominent in the title and elsewhere in one of his strongest collections, *Hosties Noires*. The poet calls upon both the ancestral gods and the image of the prodigal son in seeking forgiveness for apparently betraying his own Ancestors. Equally significant is his reliance on religious imagery at times of great importance or tragedy. In his ceremonial speech on the occasion of independence, and in the presence of General de Gaulle, he concludes with the words of Christ on the road to Emmaus: "Abide with us for the evening is upon us" (qtd. in Rous 40). Later, after the death of the son he adored in an automobile accident, he wrote an elegy in which the evocation of traditional African sources of immortality and those of Christianity blend harmoniously in a stunning display of poetic mastery and deep-felt grief, bewilderment, and ultimate reconciliation (*Poèmes* 283-91-).

These images were not mere poetic devices. Senghor's actual behavior suggests they meant far more. As a child, Senghor had wanted to become a priest. His first introduction to learning and culture was to the French Catholic environment at a mission school. When the possibility of seminary was denied him, he withdrew in deep disappointment. His devout aunt, Hélène Senghor, with whom he lived and who was the main influence in his later childhood, assured him that God must have other plans for him. Later, in Paris, Senghor's French schoolmates recall his attending mass, an oddity among that skeptical crowd. When he met failure in his

exams, and his goals once again threatened to become unattainable, Senghor reported that he fell into a depression that included a loss of his faith. After World War Two, Senghor gravitated toward the Catholic intellectuals around the journal *Esprit*, whose thinking and style he found compatible with his own. The Catholic philosopher Teilhard de Chardin helped shape his worldview. After his divorce and remarriage, he was so troubled to be denied Catholic communion that he engaged Senegal's Ambassador to Rome to intervene with the Pope so that he could again become a communicant. When President, he often had a mass said for him personally at the palace in Senegal.

Senghor was not infallible. He made mistakes and errors of judgment. He felt compelled occasionally to use his power to still political opponents. Once he gained power, he clung to the middle way. His serene exterior, however, masked a poet able to grapple with the contradictions and complexities of changing emotions and an ambiguous reality. On balance, however, he was a powerful force for peace and reconciliation and achieved the respect of world opinion while also delivering concrete benefits to his country. He was a baobab who towered above his native land, but remained rooted in it. He was invited to membership in the French Academy, but he did not require French recognition as an "immortal" for his name to live beyond his death.

Let me end on a personal note. I met many times with Senghor, beginning some thirty years ago. At first these were the respectful interviews of a young scholar who went on to write his biography. Later, after he had given up power, they became less business-like and more relaxed. I also spoke with many of his French friends from his school days and with Africans who had worked both for and against him during his political career. I even had the privilege of meeting with Mamadou Dia several times after he had been released from the harsh prison where he had been held almost fifteen years. What was remarkable to me was that all of these people spoke of Senghor with respect and affection. Even Dia spoke without bitterness. He recalled with pleasure the time they had worked together and his continued respect for the man who had taken away his freedom for much of his mature life. Their clash had ended without bloodshed, a tribute to both men as well as to the Senegalese soldiers who refused to fire on their own. It is for this reason that the split between the two seems truly tragic, though others have argued that they were two such strong personalities that the sharing of power between them would have been impossible. I am not so sure. Dia was also an extraordinary personality of deep religious conviction and a forgiving spirit. Members of a younger generation often felt differently about Senghor, but they were already living in a different time, with aspirations of their own. The importance of religious belief to Senghor was something I recognized only slowly. It grew on me steadily as I tried to make sense of the pieces of his life. His niece's husband, Edouard Basse, was particularly convincing. He was the ambassador to Rome who intervened with the Pope at Senghor's repeated request. Senghor emerges from the accounts of his friends as someone of enormous self-discipline, serenity, and personal generosity.

He was a person with a sense of calling to a cause beyond himself and the intuition of a world beyond the day-to-day. The historical record confirms this view.

The last time I saw Senghor, he and his wife, Colette, had invited me to lunch at their house in Verson in Normandy. It was 1992, and the president was showing his age. The three of us chatted over lunch, enjoying the perfect summer day. Afterward, we sat out in the back garden. Senghor gestured toward the house and several tall evergreens silhouetted against it. They always remind me of the cedars of Lebanon, he said, and then he began to sing in a voice, still fine and strong, one of the hymns he had learned as a child at the mission school in Ngasobil. His wife then turned to him and said, "Really, Sédar. That is too much." And they both laughed.

---

## WORKS CITED

- Rous, Jean. *Léopold Sédar Senghor*. Paris: John Didier, 1967.
- Senghor, Léopold Sédar. *Poèmes*. Paris: Seuil, 1990.
- . Letter to the author. 8 Oct. 1970.
- . "Le problème culturel en A.O.F." Conférence inédite de Léopold Sédar Senghor, Premier Agrégé de L'Afrique noire française, prononcée le 4 septembre 1937 à la chambre de commerce de Dakar. *Essais et études universitaires*. Ed. Jean Dumont. Paris: Nouvelle Edition, 1945. 44-53.
- Soyinka, Wole. *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*. New York: Oxford UP, 1999.
- Thorin, Valérie. "Le catéchisme senghorien à l'index." *Jeune Afrique* hors-serie 3. (2002): 63.
- Vaillant, Janet G. *Black, French and African: A Life of Leopold Sedar Senghor*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990.
- . "The Problem of Culture in French West Africa." *L'AOF: Réalités et héritages: sociétés ouest-africaines et ordre colonial, 1895-1960*. Dakar: Direction des archives, 1997. 682-96.

