
Senghor: Lessons in Power

Wole Soyinka

Recently, East Timor celebrated a hard won independence, the end of a singularly brutal passage through Indonesian colonialism. Present were Heads and representatives of governments, Human Rights organizations, relief agencies, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, and even the Head of the Indonesian government. Missing, however, was one former Head of State who, by rights, should have been accorded a place of honor at that ceremony—this was Léopold Sédar Senghor.

The little known, or at least rarely acknowledged, debt that East Timor owes to Léopold Senghor is simply this: while both the Big and the Lesser powers, Western and Eastern blocs, as well as the Third World turned a blind and even sometimes complicitous eye to the violation of the political will of the East Timorese by the Indonesian government, Senghor, in faraway Senegal, did not. He was perhaps the only African Head of State to interest himself in the fate of these people, and aid them in their struggle for self-determination. His position was even in defiance of the policies of the United States government, which, through Henry Kissinger, had explicitly assured Prime Minister Suharto of its lack of objection to Indonesia's plans to annex that nation.

Senghor's involvement was a logical extension of his pan-Negritude convictions. This poet of race affirmation lived his convictions to the very limits of realpolitik. His obsession with the mapping of the geography of the black race took him, as we know, beyond the more readily acknowledged Diaspora of the Americas and the Caribbean, but to the subcontinent of India, to Papua New Guinea and the South Sea Islands. East Timor fell marginally into this orbit and thus, at some point or the other, pulled him into the politics of that anomalous act of colonialism.

Senghor's point man was a black Cuban defector whom at a certain point I feared, ironically, to have CIA connections. He penetrated through to the very earliest guerilla encampment of Timorese resistance and returned to Senegal with his report and photographs. I still recall the picture of him in camouflage, taken with a small group of insurgents deep in East Timorese jungle. I am in no position to even attempt to guess how much material aid—if any—Senghor provided the resistance in situ. What is beyond dispute is that he did provide them an office and funds in Dakar, and was indeed the first, if not the only, African government to recognize the Timorese resistance as both legitimate and viable.

Distant East Timor has cause to be grateful to Léopold Senghor—but what of the African continent itself, that is, quite apart from his gift of an immense body of poetry and his championing of black affirmation, captured in that combative expression—*Negritude*? I can think of two areas in which Senghor can be considered an exemplar, a medium, and mediator for the future of the continent.

One is his philosophy of conciliation, which, considered profoundly, may be regarded as the precursor of South Africa's seemingly miraculous

resolution of a potentially destructive conflict. This is not of course to suggest that South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission consciously took its cue from Senghor's writings and preaching, and the fidelity with which he sustained his vision even into his final years. In any case, it was a message that was often regarded with suspicion, mostly on account of the messenger, and his insistence of a foundation of French culture as departure point for this reconciliation. Nowhere was this ambiguity provided such resonance as on the occasion of the celebration of his ninetieth birthday, in Paris, an occasion that brought together a remarkable array of scholars, politicians, and friends to pay him tribute. In a filmed address to that gathering—Senghor was too frail to be physically present—the celebrant's bequest to humanity was indeed a vision of the reconciliation of the races, but stubbornly projected through the prism of French culture and civilization!

Where Senghor's bequest lacks all ambiguity, however, is his lesson in power, one that brings with it the transcendence of the humanist over the trappings of office, a lesson that one wished so desperately that other African Heads of State would heed. That bequest is perhaps best demonstrated by an incident that took place after he ceased to be the President of Senegal. It took place in a Scandinavian country. Senghor had retired from office and embarked on his new career as poet, sage, and traveling statesman. When he arrived at the borders of this country, however, he discovered that, having probably become used to such minor matters being taken care of by a well-trained staff, he had overlooked the expiry date of his passport. So there he was, the ex-president of a well-respected nation at the frontier of a foreign state, technically without an identity.

He was afforded every courtesy, remained at the VIP lounge with the Senegalese Ambassador and his staff who had come to receive him—but he could not cross the border into that nation where he had so often been an honored guest, had indeed been received on state visits. Senghor took it stoically. The Ambassador wanted to raise a full-scale diplomatic furor but Senghor said No, rules are rules, and protocols must be fulfilled. And so the Ambassador raced to his office, dug out the necessary stamps, renewed Senghor's passport, and returned to the Airport. Only then, his identity restored, could his passport receive the authority of an entry permit, and Léopold Sédar Senghor was escorted with all dignity through the airport, free to pursue whatever business had brought him to that country. Senghor, I was informed, took the greatest pains to assure the embarrassed immigration officers that he was not in the least offended, indeed, congratulated them on the performance of their duty.

Both outside and within Senegal, our colleagues testify to similar episodes that affirm that Senghor's relinquishing of power was not simply symbolic. After years of pomp and circumstance of power, he accepted and fully lived his transformation into a private citizen. As recent events in Zimbabwe have demonstrated, the sermon that Léopold Sédar Senghor, priest *manqué*, has preached with his life remains as urgent and pertinent as ever: there is—life after power.

