
Senghor in Context

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Without resorting to emotional hagiography, the image of Léopold Sédar Senghor that will be retained will be that of an intellectual and a politician of character and quality. Senghor forged for himself the personality of a man of determination and decision, and he saw himself as a man who was faithful to his ideas, to his friends, and to his own choices. The average Senegalese said of him, “Lu Mu Matt Mu Dog,” that is, “He never yielded, once he had made up his mind and made a decision.” A man of calculation and vision, of dialogue and dexterity, with a synthesizing outlook, a leader and a convener, he always knew how to turn affairs to his own advantage, and always with great tact. His character and his temperament made him a true leader and a Head of State who was concerned with method and the law, but also with formal legalism.

Senghor was a continuator and a forerunner in cultural or intellectual domains as well as in political or ideological fields. Those who challenged him most strongly have often been, in this regard, those who, without ever acknowledging so, have reworked the very fields he plowed. Senghor the theoretician of autonomy for the colonies is, moreover—and we must not forget this—heir to a whole host of Senegalese politicians of international stature who made a mark on their era alongside Durant Valentin, François Carpot, Blaise Diagne, Ngalandou Diouf, and Lamine Guèye, Senghor’s mentor. Between 1848 and 1948, these predecessors gave shape to the Senegalese communal, civilian, democratic, secular tradition inherited by Senghor and his generation. They challenged assimilation and the Napoleonic Code; adapted customary law; adopted a Sharia that respected the physical and spiritual integrity of the individual; invented the multilingual school for speakers of African languages, Arabic, and French; and led a permanent struggle for civil rights.

Co-opted by the drafters of the French Constitution after the war, the deputy-poet, veteran fighter and prisoner was—at the time of the Congresses of Manchester (1945), Bamako (1947), and Bandung (1956), which he did not attend, and during the harsh period of the wars of liberation and independence—the contemporary of such eminent personalities as Haile Selassie, Namdi Azikwe, Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah, Habib Bourguiba, Houphouët-Boigny, Mohammed V, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Lumumba, and Kasawubu, as well as Nelson Mandela, whom he received in Dakar, and Amílcar Cabral, to cite only those. Within the context of those independences that were, as he wrote, bestowed, and under the control of France, at the time of the Cold War, he succeeded, through his choices, in emerging among his peers as the administrator of the authoritarian-state party, Gaullist in character and marked by neocolonial influence. The generations that fought strongly against him for a policy that survived in an often mediocre manner understand him, without nevertheless siding with him on the essential stakes of the battle. Senghor was able to achieve things and knew better than anyone else how to admin-

ister. For his opponents, through the polemics and adversity he cultivated, he constituted a challenge and a permanent defiance in which the nature of the debate was rarely without a loftiness in the argument. “At least *he* listened to us” in the polemic he cultivated and in the adversity he cultivated, was a favorite saying of Emile Ologoudou, my friend and colleague at the University of Dakar and the Bureau de l’Union Générale des Etudiants d’Afrique Occidentale, whose president was Doctor Daouda Sow, a militant who came out of the BDS. The deputy-poet who became the president-poet was to remain a formidable polemicist. Abdoulaye Ly, like him a veteran of World War Two but even “higher ranked than the bespectacled older conscript,” later said of Senghor, not without humor and affection, that he became an advocate of “*dagge*” and, with age, naturally loved to be right—“*Leo bëggul lu moy yeynaa la.*”

The unanimous euphoria for Senghor elicited by his loss is not only emotional and humanly natural. It is symptomatic. It reflects, in the collective unconscious and within the political classes, a sentiment of failure and impotence. The Senegalese Left, as an appendage of European Communist, Stalinist, Trotskyite, Maoist, or situationist movements, has never been able to elucidate its ideology, its strategy for acquiring and exercising power; its program is no longer distinguishable. Senghor, who at least attempted to produce a coherent line of thought and body of work, is therefore used as a reference point for its rereadings. The traditional political class has not known how or else has been unable to undo, redo, or do what Senghor was not able or did not how to do; it admits its inability to imagine and to break away and go beyond Senghor to produce a balanced economy and institutions, a real school system and education that are on the right wavelength. There is dispute among Senghorians, Neo-Senghorians, Crypto-Senghorians, and parricide Senghoricides over the turnabout, the prestige that has been recovered after two decades of the forced eclipse of the spiritual father whose legacy has suddenly once again become precious. They are less eager to risk calling for an assessment of the Senghorian regime. He has his positive and even threatened legacy: the authority of the secular State, the Civil Code for the protection of individuals and women, the land Code for the protection of the state’s social patrimony, both hereditary and national, rural and urban, the cultural consequences of the Festival des Arts Nègres, etc. He also leaves a negative legacy that continues today: economic failure, the ruin of the industrial fabric, illegal gains, the ruin of public enterprise and the misappropriation of funds that reached a climax under President Diouf; failure of political assimilation and extraversion within the school system and education; a ban, in tacit accord with France, for reasons of State, against introducing even to this day, under pain of sanction, national languages—vectors not of artificial external grafts and pale imitations, but of plural and rooted popular modern forms of creativity; a hereditary monarchic Republic; etc. The president-poet was still dreaming, in 1980, for the Senegalese who were “tired” of President Kéba Mbaye and the country he had left, about a universal francophony, as well as about fifteen barriers and a prosperity

that he himself had never known how or been able to give them. His *L'an 2001 naatange!* remained a slogan. As for his successors—they do not dream, with the same ambitions. They are not, at the opening of the new millennium, engaged in any conclusive policy on water and its usage beyond the rural and semi-urban majority. They are content, at least for the time being, to fabricate, following the example of Abdou Diouf's regime whose policy of a cap on flow and loans they have adopted, a hypothetical strategy initiated by the World Bank as a palliative measure against the disasters of structural adjustments, with the sole objective of a 50% reduction, by 2015, in the poverty experienced on a daily basis by 75% of the population. That could risk being "*l'an 2015 Ndoolange!*" It is understandable that the people, even more "tired," nurse a nostalgia for Senghor, who has become by comparison their reference point. Nor is it so astonishing that the generation of thirty-somethings, who did not experience that half-century and the struggles over the true battle stakes, are now discovering, amidst their frustrations over a more comprehensive approach, a Senghor who is among the most appealing of figures, a great patron of the arts and letters. In fact, the fault lies in the time period. Senghor in context, under siege from the French hegemonism that has not done well for him upon his demise, above all weathered, or managed, more or less fortuitously, the domains that he could control. It was a popular counterculture developed in reaction to the official policy of the author of *Ethiopiennes* that determined the international reputation of Senegalese artists in their chosen fields—built upon the spoken word, image, and African-language writing—of cinema, and literatures and the stage arts of national expression. This counterculture has flourished especially in the realms of music, dance, or traditional and modern choreography. While evanescent in theoretical and ideological terms, the Senghorian impact has nevertheless not been negligible in the expansion of the Senegalese school of plastic arts, indeed of an architecture that has freed itself from the dogma of "black asymmetry" in which it had been locked. Senghor and Mamadou Dia could do little for an economy that was annexed and marginalized by the overvalued CFA franc that acted as a screen and implacable organic guardian, at the very time the Asian dragons were achieving their rise in power. They could do little even for a balkanized francophone Africa. The visionless President Abdou Diouf failed to appreciate the room for movement that opened up as French domination, beginning in the 1980s, lost its grip to globalization and increased competition. Senghor could not have imagined a Senegal and Africa without the France of Giscard crowning Emperor Bokassa, or the France of Mitterrand at the funeral of Félix Houphouët-Boigny. Those who claim their legacy from him in this regard do not realize that his demise marks the end of an era. France, in tune with itself and its times, is now diluting its own military bases into the European forces and NATO, its money into the Euro, and its francophony into the unlimited new communication technologies. In the year 2002, Senegal and so-called francophone Africa find themselves, paradoxically, with less direct supervision,

in a 1960s context, at least in terms of creating—like those Dragons of Southeast Asia a half century earlier—their own economic, cultural, and geopolitical future. The Senghorian legacy, now obsolete in that regard, remains just as inoperative for the *moodu moodu* who have already understood the lesson in their own way, as for the thirty-somethings who in general are poorly educated. Those who for a half century have challenged the Senegalese infantryman who was continued by Clémenceau and reaffirmed by De Gaulle, who today still reject an Africa that is the subaltern partner in economics, politics, or culture, still have the right and duty to memory and action. The African and Senegalese political and cultural project claiming that “to think and act by and for oneself” is more than a slogan predated Senghor and his generation. It will survive them as a destiny to be fulfilled with greater happiness by the new generations.

That having been said, the author of *Ethiopiennes*, the poet-hermeneut of African values of civilization, left behind a literary *oeuvre* that marks an era. It sheds light on the qualities of a man who defined himself, not without reason and pride, as a stubborn Sereer. Senghor played this role his entire life, convinced, as was his younger friend Birago Diop, that “the dead are not dead.” He was, moreover, not only a stimulating protagonist on the intellectual and literary scene, but also a remarkable, dramatic player in the manner of De Gaulle and Malraux, two of his role models in this regard. He knew how to be, completely and consciously, always on stage, through his gestures and his words, his humor and his sense of the tragic, playing out the dramas and all the events of political and civil life, controversies over art and culture, or simply the different facets of character that he chose for himself and knew how to be. Over the decades, he officiated felicitously as the happy ambassador of a black culture he interpreted according to need, and he was heeded, accepted, and not challenged. Reread his text for Dakar’s Chamber of Commerce on Africa’s cultural future in 1937, his numerous speeches at ceremonies where he was awarded honorary doctorates. Those were essentially “German, Japanese, Indian, or Russian ceremonies of giving and receiving” performed in the name of Negritude and Africa. Listen to him again on television—from which he was banned by his political heir but to which he was restored upon his death—and hear that artistry of the word that was his alone.

Lilyan Kesteloot, the pioneer and founder, along with Emile Snyder, Mamadou Kane, Thomas Melone, Abiola Irele, and Edris Makward, of literary criticism in the Black African realm—all these can rest assured about the perception the generations will retain of Senghor’s *oeuvre* and of the destiny he chose for himself. The generations will be continue to visit and reappraise the essayist. They will read “Femme nue femme noire,” the preface to U Tam’si’s *Épitome*, and the postface to *Ethiopiennes* just as long as they will be reading Eluard, Claudel, or Saint-John Perse. And neither his friend Césaire, nor Pablo Neruda, nor Nazim Hikmet will take offense.

We will remember, in rereading the texts and sequences that are all so very rich, the poet, who along with Césaire, Damas, Birago, and Socé Diop, founded *L’Étudiant Noir*; the schoolteacher and militant syndicalist of the

Lycée de Tours; the speaker who in 1937 under the eyes of the Governor General and the dumbfounded indigenous elites declined culture with the words “Silmang Faye Kor Yande my compatriot from Jilor, Samba Sène my neighbor and a man of culture who also cultivates his fields . . . and Demba Ndiaye our citizen of four communes: he has studied, evolved, and even assimilated.”

We will remember the writer who was fascinated by the physical and vestimentary elegance of Sterling Brown, the professor at Howard University and classic author of *Southern Road* written in the dialect of the South. We remember the peasant poet-deputy, decked out in an American GI cap, out and about in a Land Rover, campaigning in the postwar period, in peasant Wolof, promising, in his inimitable phrasing, “barigo junne,” or “a thousand francs per one-ton barrel.” Then too there was the poet-petitioner, the unifier, the opponent of balkanization, the defender of the federations of the AEF, the AOF, Nigeria, and unity in Congo-Zaïre and in the continent. Nor shall we certainly ever forget the president-poet enmeshed in General De Gaulle’s hegemonism, transformed into the theoretician of a “Negritude at the service of francophony.” That is the title of the book dedicated to him in commemoration of the 1966 Festival of Black Arts and the 1969 Festival of Algiers. The historian who writes the truth will retain, with the distance and with a comprehensive approach that is indispensable in this field, the entire itinerary that will continue to make the reputation and extend the influence of a poet who with Alioune Diop and Aimé Césaire founded *Présence Africaine*, and of a politician whose merit will not have been among the least.

—*trans. R. H. Mitsch*

