
Sine and Seine: The Quest for Synthesis in Senghor's Life and Poetry

Mildred Mortimer

As a member of the group of American students, scholars, and teachers discovering Senegal during the 1970s, the first decade following independence, I came to know a country led by a poet-president Léopold Sédar Senghor. In 1969, the year I arrived, President Senghor was elected to the French Academy of Moral Sciences, filling a chair vacated by the late Konrad Adenauer. In addition, the World Festival of Negro Arts, a highly successful conference that had brought thousands of visitors and hundreds of performing artists and writers to the Senegalese capital three years before had become a treasured memory. Highly esteemed abroad, Senghor was nevertheless facing increased criticism at home as economic problems grew more acute. With public dissatisfaction mounting, it is not surprising that university students took to the streets in 1972 and 1973. They were demanding better scholarships and an end to corruption and neocolonialism, i.e., Senegal's strong dependence upon France in the economic and political sectors. In this vein, Interior Minister Jean Collin, a French national who had taken Senegalese citizenship—and married into the Senghor family—was resented by many Senegalese. With increasing pressure to introduce reforms, the president reinstated the post of Prime Minister, naming Abdou Diouf, Senegal's subsequent president, to the position.

Looking back on that era, I remember a public meeting in the streets of Dakar with President Senghor arriving to address the crowd. I have forgotten the substance of his speech, but recall being surprised that the man who mastered the French language far better than most native French, spoke it with a distinctly African accent. Despite years spent in Paris, he did not sound like a Parisian. Why should he? Senghor was a francophone African, not a Frenchman. He was, as many critics have noted, representative of synthesis. Symbolically, he combined Sine with Seine, the rivers of Africa and Europe, knowledge of the culture and traditions of his native Senegal with that of his adopted French heritage.

Two of Senghor's biographers, Jacques Louis Hymans and Janet G. Vaillant, chart the poet-president's quest for synthesis. Hymans, in 1971, begins his text by stating:

Among African leaders today, Léopold Sédar Senghor stands unique. He is the living symbol of the possible synthesis of what appears irreconcilable: he is as African as he is European, as much a poet as a politician, as influenced by rationalism as by irrationalism, as much a revolutionary as a traditionalist. (xi)

Writing two decades later, Vaillant concludes her text upon the same note:

Just as he refused to choose between his talents as poet and politician, sensing that each added depth to the other, so too, he

refused to choose between his two homelands, France and Africa. He knew their strengths and weaknesses, their darkness and their light, and he loved them both. (344)

It is the quest for synthesis and its subsequent realization that is a remarkable factor in Senghor's life. Unlike Cheikh Hamidou Kane's Samba Diallo, the protagonist of *Ambiguous Adventure*, Senghor found his way through the quagmire of cultural conflict to a harmonious balance of African and Western values. One may argue that Senghor, a Catholic Serer who could worship in Europe's churches and cathedrals upon his arrival in Paris in 1928, faced less cultural conflict than Kane's tragic hero, Samba Diallo, a devout Muslim. Indeed, African Muslims were rare in the capital at that time. Christianity was an important cultural bridge into French culture for Senghor as well as a crucial spiritual support (Vaillant 261-62). Yet it is clear from his writings, beginning with "In Memoriam," the opening poem of *Chants d'ombre* [Shadow Songs], Senghor's earliest collection of poems, that he felt the weight of exile as an African in France.

How then was Senghor able to achieve the synthesis that Hymans terms irreconcilable? Should we attribute his success to nurture or nature, to values rooted in his African cultural heritage or to the poet's individual talents: an inquisitive mind, linguistic ability, spiritual bent? In this essay, I propose to test the hypothesis that the roots of synthesis lie in Senghor's past, in the Childhood Kingdom to which he refers so often. There, his maternal and paternal families provided different and yet complementary aspects of his education. Whereas his mother and maternal uncle gave him grounding in his ethnic culture and tradition, his father, as a representative of a French trading company, proposed the blueprint for successful negotiation with the French. To this early education Senghor was to add a later political and philosophical commitment to reconciliation, to bridging the gap between the colonized and the colonizer through *métissage culturel*, the crossfertilization of ideas.

Senghor was born in Joal, Senegal, in 1906. As he explained in a book of published conversations with Tunisian journalist Mohamed Aziza, his ethnic background was mixed. His father's family was Serer with Malinké ancestors from Guinea. His mother, who claimed Serer origins, was in fact Peul. Although he was born in Joal, where his polygamous father lived, Senghor spent his early childhood in Djilor, his mother's family village near the Sine River. There, the young boy who rarely saw his father grew close to his maternal uncle, Waly. He lived the life of the villagers, accompanying his uncle to the fields. Senghor explains: "J'ai vécu, alors, pendant quelques années dans ce que j'appelle le 'Royaume d'Enfance.' Je chassais avec les petits bergers, je maraudais avec eux et j'écoutais leurs histoires: leurs contes et leurs légendes" "I lived for several years in what I call the "Childhood Kingdom." I hunted with the little shepherd boys, I roamed with them, and I listened to their stories: their folktales and legends" (34).

Seeing his son adapting effortlessly to this rural life, the father, who hoped to see the boy follow him into commerce, took the child from the world of his mother and uncle with its rich oral tradition and attachment

to the land, and placed him in Catholic mission schools, first in Joal, then in Ngasobil. A Serer speaker, Léopold Sédar quickly learned French and Wolof. Examining this double acculturation to Joal and Djilor, Senghor states that he was attached to both paternal and maternal worlds. From his father, he gained the sense of tradition and honor; from his mother, he acquired a profound attachment to her extended family (35). Nevertheless he describes his father's abrupt decision as a painful rupture: "Il m'enleva des bras de ma mère et de mon oncle, pour m'envoyer à la Mission catholique de Joal" 'He snatched me from the arms of my mother and uncle to send me to the Catholic Mission in Joal' (34).

Senghor not only recalls his childhood with nostalgia and reverence, but also posits the clear division between the world of his mother and his father, a dichotomy expressed in Malinké culture by the terms *badenya* (mother-childness) and *fadenya* (father-childness). This division reflects a dialectical tension between the group and the individual that results ideally in equilibrium through the interaction of two axes, group affiliation (*badenya*) and individuality (*fadenya*). Within this construct, actions that enhance the individual are considered "father-centered" and those that reinforce the social group are judged to be "mother-centered." In this vein, *fadenya* promotes social disequilibrium: jealousy, competition, self-promotion.; *badenya* encourages social harmony: submission to authority, stability, cooperation, values that keep the individual within the social group. Moreover, this division can be described in terms of centrifugal vs. centripetal forces with *fadenya* ejecting the individual from the community and *badenya* bringing the prodigal son or daughter back home (Bird and Kendall 15).

Exploring Mande culture (Malinké is the name attributed to the Mande inhabiting the western region of the former Mali Empire), Charles Bird and Martha Kendall note that Mande children raised in large close-knit extended families are taught via oral tradition to value the rebel, the extraordinary individual:

The figures preserved in history are those who broke with the traditions of their village, severed the bonds of *badenya*, traveled to foreign lands searching for special powers and material rewards, but just as importantly, they are also the ones who returned to the villages and elevated them to higher stations. This image of the rebel hero who breaks with, but ultimately returns to his people is not without relevance to the modern Mande child. It has probably always been this way and will probably always continue to be so. The pull of this great literary tradition is to *fadenya*, and its effect has been to spin the headstrong youth out in to the world of adventure. (22)

Oral tradition keeps alive the memory of great deeds performed by extraordinary individuals as the *dyali*, or praise-singer, pays homage to the value of *fadenya*. In this way, Mande children not only learn about the life and exploits of heroic figures such as Soundiata, founder of the Empire of Mali, but gain respect for the individual who ventures forth beyond the cir-

cumscribed limits of the village. Bird and Kendall explain, however, that the rebel hero need not be as extraordinary an individual as Soundiata, the legendary warrior and empire builder. He—or she—may simply be a child whose schooling leads beyond the village or today’s migrant worker who chooses a life of urban poverty in France rather than till the land at home (23).

Studying the concepts of *badenya* and *fadenya* in Camara Laye’s autobiographical novel, *L’enfant noir*, Christopher L. Miller discovers that Laye’s mother and father are at first equal presences in his life; both transmit important elements of Malinké culture to their son. That equality, however, is of short duration. Although Laye’s mother’s magical powers are clearly acknowledged and her son dedicates the book to her memory, his father’s role as supporter of the boy’s outward journey quickly assumes greater importance (131).

I am calling attention to Miller’s perceptive analysis because I find that it applies to Senghor’s life experiences as well. Once he enters the mission school, a decision taken by his father, Senghor is also “spun out into the world of adventure” as he embarks upon the outward journey that leads to his formation as a francophone African poet and statesman. Significantly, Miller notes that the Guinean novelist and the Senegalese poet pay tribute to the Childhood Kingdom in similar fashion. The critic calls attention to the fact that Camara’s poem “À ma mère” and Senghor’s “Femme noire” both depict an allegorical, idealized African woman (131). We may add that Senghor’s “Élégie des circoncis” [Elegy of the Circumcised] recalls Camara’s description of the Konden Diara, the night of the roaring lions that anticipates the circumcision ritual, the passage to manhood. Thus, as Camara recreates the Childhood Kingdom, representing his family compound in Kouroussa, Guinea as a space of security and magic, with powerful adults protecting the innocent and vulnerable African child, Senghor depicts his childhood in the Sine-Saloum region of Senegal with a similar sense of security. Finally, the Guinean novelist and the Senegalese poet both reveal the tension between opposing centripetal and centrifugal forces. As they submit to the pull of *fadenya*, they hold fast to the Childhood Kingdom, now situated in imaginative space, and reached through memory.

Portraits of Senghor’s family members appear in Senghor’s early poems. Recalling his uncle Waly, Senghor writes in the long autobiographical poem, “Que m’accompagnent koras et balafongs” [To the Music of Koras and Balaphon] in *Chants d’ombre*:

Tokô’Waly, mon oncle, te souviens-tu des nuits de jadis
quand s’appesantissait ma tête sur ton dos de patience
Ou que me tenant par la main, ta main me guidait
par ténèbres et signes?

(. . .)

Toi Tokô’Waly, tu écoutes l’inaudible
Et tu m’expliques les signes que disent les Ancêtres de la sérénité
marine des constellations

Le Taureau le Scorpion le Léopard, l'Éléphant les Poissons familiers
Et la pompe lactée des Esprits par le tann céleste qui ne
finit point. (*Poèmes* 36-37)

Tokô'Waly, my uncle, do you remember those nights long ago
When my head weighed upon your patient back?
When taking me by the hand, your hand led me through storms
And signs?

(. . .)

You, Tokô'Waly, you can hear beyond hearing,
And you explain to me the signs spoken by the Ancestors
In constellations as serene as the sea,
The Bull, the Scorpion, the Leopard, the Elephant, the Fish—
All familiar, and the milky grandeur of the Spirits
Through the endless celestial salt flats. (*The Collected Poems* 23-24)

Thus, Senghor honors the uncle who provided his initial African education, one that took the form of an informal apprenticeship to the world of nature. Léopold Sedar's uncle taught him to listen attentively, capture the inaudible, decipher nature's signs, probe surface reality.

We find in this poem significant characteristics that occur throughout Senghor's poetry and contribute African references to his work: the poet's preference for direct address (Tokô Waly), use of repetition (Tôko Waly/Toi Tokô 'Waly; la main/ta main), enumeration (le Taureau le Scorpion le Léopard), African vocabulary (tann, salt flats), and the choice of Senegalese musical instruments (kora and balafon) to accompany the text. These elements are all reminders of the griot's art. In addition, the use of juxtaposition, enumeration without commas, increases the sense of motion and intensity of feeling (Ansah 42). Most important, however, is the poet's emphasis upon night as a key symbol of African identity and specificity. Linking traditional education to night, the poet associates Africa with blackness, a clear reference to Negritude. Moreover, as night contrasts with day, black with white, Africa with Europe, the night also conveys peace, meditation, the presence of the ancestors, and mystical union (Irele 27). Significantly too, the poet recalls childhood memories of physical closeness, his head cradled in his cherished uncle's back, his hand clasped in his uncle's grip. The maternal uncle conveys the warmth, stability, and nurturing associated with *badenya*.

A portrait of Senghor's father emerges in "à l'appel de la race de Saba," [At the Call of the race of Sheba] published in *Hosties noires* [Black Hosts], Senghor's second volume of poetry. Here, the poet situates his father within his polygamous household, surrounded by his many children:

Mes frères et mes soeurs serrent contre mon coeur leur chaleur
nombreuse de poussins.

Je repose la tête sur les genoux de ma nourrice Ngâ, de
Ngâ la poétesse

(. . .)

Et mon père étendu sur des nattes paisibles, mais grand

mais fort mais beau
 Homme du Royaume de Sine, tandis qu'alentour sur les
 kôras, voix héroïques, les griots font danser leurs doigts
 de fougue
 Tandis qu'au loin monte, houleuse de senteurs fortes et
 chaudes, la rumeur classique de cent troupeaux. (*Poèmes* 57)
 My brothers and sisters, like so many chicks, press against
 my heart with their warmth.
 I rest my head on the knees of my nurse Ngâ, the poet Ngâ,
 (. . .)
 (. . .) And my father
 reclining on soft mats, so tall so strong
 so handsome
 Man of the Sine Kingdom, surrounded by griots with koras
 And heroic voices, who set their spirited fingers to dance,
 While from the distance, surging hot and smelly,
 Comes the classic lowing of a hundred herds.

(*The Collected Poetry* 42-43)

Although the poet recalls his father with admiration—the man is tall, strong, handsome—and recreates a scene in which griots are singing Basile Diogoye Senghor's praises and acknowledging the large herds of cattle that confirm the man's wealth, he reveals a lack of intimacy between his father and himself. There is no physical contact between them; the child rests his head in the lap of the Ngâ, the poetess, not the father. This distance is understandable; as a small child, Senghor rarely saw his father who divided his time between a village household in Djilor and his other wives and children who lived in Joal (Vaillant 9).

In both poems, the poet uses *vers libre*, or free verse, combining different verse forms or segments of the alexandrine or twelve-syllable verse. As Abiola Irele explains, Senghor's lines generally divide into regular groupings on a binary principle (29). For example, the line that describes the father begins with a classic alexandrine: "Et mon père étendu sur des nattes paisibles" / "And my father reclining on soft mats" and ends with a half-alexandrine, six syllables composed of three groups—*mais grand, mais fort, mais beau*/[so tall so strong so handsome] with *mais*/[so] serving as a repetitive conjunction that lauds the patriarch's physical stature. Just as the griot praises the father with his words and music, so does the son through his command of the French language and poetic technique.

Examining Senghor's style and versification, Irele finds that the poet does not so much seek to free his versification from set forms but to construct units within the structure that convey his thoughts and feelings. The critic notes as well that Senghor's poetic method uses the general framework of French poetry such as the alexandrine along with elements of oral poetry tradition: repetition, enumeration, the apostrophe, and the vocative. In this vein, rhythm and sound become important elements to convey the African poet's grounding in oral tradition and his link to the spoken

word. Senghor, like the griot singing his father's praises, considers himself a *maître de la parole*, a master of the spoken word.

When he depicts his mother, the poet tends to fuse a personal portrait with an abstract image. This characteristic appears in Senghor's "Nuit de Sine" and "Femme noire," both published in *Chants d'ombre*, and in "Ndessé," which appears in *Hosties noires*. Since the first volume of poetry emphasizes the beauty and harmony of African society in contrast to the second, which reveals growing political awareness of colonial oppression, it is not surprising that "Ndessé" [Blues] brings together the theme of Edenic Africa and new political awareness. A Serer word that means sadness or melancholy, *ndessé* evokes the sense of mourning for the unattainable: mother, village, bygone days. This poem expresses the poet's nostalgia for both his mother and for his homeland when, as a captive of the Germans during the war, he can only return to Senegal through memory. At this point in time, Senghor mourns both the passing of time that has resulted in his mother's aging: "Mère, on m'écrit que tu blanchis comme la brousse à l'extrême hivernage" 'Mother, they write me that you are turning pale as the bush at the end of the rainy season' and his personal sense of cultural loss. He no longer speaks his maternal Serer language as he once did: "Ma langue glisse sur nos mots sonores et durs" 'My tongue slips on our sonorous, hard words.' Finally, to his mother who, sadly, cannot read the poetry he writes in the European's tongue, he admits the pain of his experience abroad: "L'Europe m'a broyé comme le plat guerrier sous les pattes pachydermes des tanks" 'Europe has crushed me like the warrior flattened under the monstrous feet of tanks.'

Contrasting the painful present, life in the prison camp, with memories of the Childhood Kingdom, Senghor seeks refuge in the memory of the child suckled at the maternal breast:

Je ne suis plus que ton enfant endolori, et il se tourne et retourne
sur ses flancs douloureux

Je ne suis plus qu'un enfant qui se souvient de ton sein maternel
et qui pleure.

Reçois-moi dans la nuit qu'éclaire l'assurance de ton regard
Redis-moi les vieux contes des veillées noires, que je me perde par
les routes sans mémoire.

Mère, je suis un soldat humilié qu'on nourrit de gros mil.
Dis-moi donc l'orgueil de mes pères! (*Poèmes* 82)

I am no longer your sickly child, turning and tossing
On his aching sides,

I am no longer a weeping child remembering your breast.
Receive me in the night brightened by your steadfast gaze.

Tell me again the old fireside stories so I can lose
Myself on roads of forgetfulness.

Mother, I am a humiliated soldier with only course grain to eat
Tell me about my fathers' pride! (*The Collected Poetry* 61)

Thus, Senghor returns once more to the image of the comforting adult protecting the vulnerable African child as he had earlier depicted the boy resting against his Uncle Waly's back and cradled in Ngâ's lap. The poet cannot go back to his mother's breast, but he can recall the image, thereby evoking a romanticized Mother Africa. Moreover, by invoking woman's role as storyteller, he calls upon oral tradition, the power of the spoken word, in his attempt to find the strength with which to face adversity, incarceration in a German prisoner-of-war camp. Gloria Saravaya offers an interesting interpretation of the poet's reference to *gros mil* (course grain), suggesting that the poet equates *écriture*, writing in the colonizer's language, with "course grain" and calls upon his mother to sustain her with her Serer language and oral tradition since the values of the French colonizer have not (91).

In this poem, the reader again encounters Senghor's preference for direct address (*Mère*), repetition ("je ne suis plus"), African vocabulary, (*Ndesse*, *paragnessés*) and the night evoked as a symbol of serenity and refuge. Senghor, however, reaches beyond the nostalgic reminiscences and evocation of Mother Africa. Writing from Stalag 230, he transcends his individual experience to touch a universal chord. Internment has brought the poet face to face with alienation and the consequences of alterity. He is a non-European in a European war, an African in Europe, a French colonial subject held hostage in a German internment camp.

In his published conversations with Aziza, Senghor explains that this war experience almost cost him his life. Captured by the Germans with his unit in 1940, he was lined up against a wall with fellow Africans to be shot. About to be executed by a firing squad, the group decided that they would all cry out "Vive la France! Vive l'Afrique noire!" in the face of certain death. Luckily, a French officer appealed to their captors' sense of honor, reminding the Germans of the African soldiers' courage in war; their lives were spared (83). However, Senghor's early brush with death altered his way of thinking of his personal mission in life. He confronted both the ephemeral nature of human existence and the pervading racism among some—but not all—Europeans. It was a French officer who saved his life. This episode is one that confirms duality, Senghor's sense of belonging to both France and Africa.¹

As a prisoner, Senghor spent much of his time among African recruits who had come directly from their villages. Ironically, internment allowed him to renew contact with an African community from which he grown distant over time. Now, long evenings in the barracks are devoted to cultural activities: African folktales, poetry, music (Vaillant 171). Moreover, the prison camp enforces his sense of solidarity with his compatriots as it allows him to reconsider the relationship between African colonies and European powers, the latter having revealed its moral weaknesses and destructive impulses. Hence, Senghor transforms the war experience into a renewed quest for social justice and a firm commitment to public service. He will be prepared to articulate universal concerns because of his unique life experiences that include a very constructive—yet almost fatal—encounter with the West.

Senghor emerges from World War Two as a poet-statesman. As Senegal's representative to the Constituent Assembly in 1945 and to the French National Assembly in 1946, he pursues his political ambitions. Author of *Chants d'ombre* (1945) as well as his now classic *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française* with Sartre's celebrated preface, "Orphée noir" (1945), and *Hosties noires* (1948), he confirms his literary credentials. Charting a personal identity quest in *Chants d'ombre*, he assumes a more public voice in *Hosties noires*. As spokesman for his comrades in arms, Senghor takes on the role of the *Mande dyali* or griot, singing the praises of the African soldier who had fought in Europe's wars. Among the poems in *Hosties noires*, "Taga de Mbaye Dyob" ["Taga" for Mbaye Dyob] honors one of Senghor's fellow prisoners. "Aux Tirailleurs sénégalais morts pour la France" praises the courage of the African riflemen who participated in both world wars. "Tyaroye" pays homage to African soldiers killed during a protest for equitable pensions as French war veterans.

The poet selects the title *Hosties noires* for its multiple meanings, black victims and black hosts. The latter commonly refers to the consecrated wafer or sacrificial host of Catholic Communion, but as Janice Spleth notes, it can also suggest animals sacrificed to the gods in animist rituals (73). All interpretations convey the sense of Africa's sacrifice to Europe's wars. Choosing to view the sacrifice positively, Senghor writes in "Au Gouverneur Eboué" [To Governor Eboué]: "L'Afrique s'est faite hostie noire / Pour que vive l'espoir de l'homme (*Poèmes* 72) / "Africa become black host / So the hope of man can live" (*The Collected Poetry* 55-56).

Senghor recognizes the *Tirailleur sénégalais* (Senegalese rifleman) as the rebel hero who, imbued with the sense of *fadenya*, has traveled to foreign lands searching for "special powers and material rewards" (Bird and Kendall 22). Not only does the African soldier hope to return home as a hero, he also aspires to French citizenship and a military pension promised him by the French colonial administration. Indeed, broken promises led to the violent incident in the camp at Thiaroye, a massacre that inspired Senghor's poem. On 1 December 1944, African soldiers awaiting discharge in the camp on the outskirts of Dakar were fired upon by French soldiers when they protested unfair remuneration for their military service. The violent incident resulted in the death of at least twenty-four African soldiers, the wounding of eleven others, and prison terms for thirty-four (Vaillant 173). The deaths combined with the subsequent cover-up angered the Senegalese. In "Tyaroye," Senghor expresses his personal anger and disillusionment:

Prisonniers noirs je dis bien prisonniers français, est-ce
 donc vrai que la France n'est plus la France?
 Est-ce donc vrai que
 l'ennemi lui a dérobé son visage?
 Est-ce donc vrai que la haine des banquiers a acheté ses bras
 d'acier? (*Poèmes* 90)

Black prisoners, I should say French prisoners, is it true
 That France is no longer France?
 Is it true that the enemy has stolen her face?
 Is it true that barkers' hate has bought her arms of steel?
 (*The Collected Poetry* 68)

The use of repetition (*est-ce donc vrai/est-ce donc vrai*—Is it true/Is it true) as well as repetition with variation (*prisonniers noirs/prisonniers français*—Black prisoners/French prisoners) allows the poet to anchor his tribute to the soldiers in the oral tradition that sustained Africans throughout the war.

Admittedly disillusioned and angry, the poet vows that the dead at Tyaroye will not be forgotten but does not succumb to hatred. For him, the fallen are witnesses of “immortal Africa” and “the new world.”

Non, vous n'êtes pas mort gratuits. Vous êtes les témoins de
 l'Afrique immortelle.
 Vous êtes les témoins du monde nouveau qui sera demain.
 (*Poèmes* 91)

No, you have not died in vain.
 You are the witnesses of immortal Africa
 You are the witnesses of the new world to come.
 (*The Collected Poetry* 68)

Although he expresses his anger at injustice and inequality in a colonial world, the poet chooses to end the collection with the hope of reconciliation. In the closing poem, “*Prière de Paix*,” he prays to God for fraternity:

Et donne à leurs mains chaudes qu'elles enlacent la terre
 d'une ceinture de mains fraternelle
 DESSOUS L'ARC-EN-CIEL DE TA PAIX. (*Poèmes* 96)

And give their warm hands
 A band of brotherly hands so they can embrace the land
 UNDER THE RAINBOW OF YOUR PEACE. (*The Collected Poetry* 72)

Despite his political activities in the post World War Two period, particularly the responsibilities of president of Senegal following elections in January 1961, Senghor maintained his literary activity. He published two new collections of poetry, *Ethiopiennes* (1956) and *Nocturnes* (1961). The latter contains the poet's first series of elegies, a poetic genre that will become more prevalent in his later work. The elegy becomes appropriate to Senghor's mood as the weight of Senghor's political burdens grows heavier (Speth 125). Similarly, his choice of this genre can be interpreted as a new form of reflection and self-awareness.²

Elégies majeures, published shortly before Senghor left office in 1980, can be viewed as the poet-statesman's attempt to bring together his private and public selves as he addresses fundamental themes such as death and friendship. He will use the elegy to express his irreconcilable grief at the loss of his son, Philippe-Maguilen Senghor, killed in an automobile accident in 1982, and to reveal his personal sorrow at the death of Georges

Pompidou.³ In contrast to these two works, Senghor's elegy for Martin Luther King marks a more public statement of grief as it emphasizes his commitment to speak for racial justice beyond Senegal's borders.

A five-part poem, Senghor's elegy for the slain American civil rights leader begins with the poet's expression of personal sorrow. The poet acknowledges the sad fact that King's death occurred on 4 April, Senegal's national holiday. As he prepares to participate in the national celebration with his customary public speech, he is struck mute by the news of King's assassination:

Mais les mots comme un troupeau de buffles confus se
cognent contre mes dents
Et ma voix s'ouvre dans le vide. (*Elégies majeures* 34)

but the words like a herd of stumbling buffaloes
Bump against my teeth and my voice opens on the void.

(*The Collected Poetry* 212)

In the second part of the elegy, Senghor explains that he first learned of King's assassination while attending the Senegalese independence day celebration in Saint-Louis, the former capital of Senegal. The poet contrasts the mood of joy among the people with sorrow once the news was known:

Je vois les rires avorter, et les dents se voiler des nuages bleu-noir
des lèvres

Je revois Martin Luther King couché, une rose rouge à la gorge
(*Elégies majeures* 35)

I saw laughter stop and teeth become veiled with blue-black lips,
I saw Martin Luther King again, lying with a red rose at his neck.

(*The Collected Poetry* 213)

The third part depicts an apocalyptic nightmare in which God punishes mankind with fire, plagues, and drought for not having sufficiently supported King in his struggle for justice:

Les volcans ont sauté au jardin de l'Éden, sur trois mille
kilomètres, comme feux d'artifice aux fêtes du péché (37)

The volcanoes have erupted in Eden,
Across three thousand kilometers, like fireworks celebrating
The festivals of sin (214)

In the fourth section of the elegy, the poet recreates the scene of King's murder as he stood on the balcony of his hotel in Memphis, Tennessee on 4 April 1968. Here, the poet fuses realism with Christian symbolism:

James Earl Ray dans son télescope regarde le Pasteur
Martin Luther King, regarde la mort du Christ:
"Mon frère, n'oublie pas de magnifier ce soir le Christ dans son
résurrection!"

James Earl Ray sees the Reverend Martin Luther King
Through his telescopic sight, sees the death of Christ: "My brother,
Do not forget to magnify Christ in his resurrection this evening!"

In the fifth and last section, the poet dreams of a heaven filled with figures of American history: Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, John F. and Robert Kennedy, as well as African-American figures Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Dubois, Malcolm X. All surround Martin Luther King in joyous song; the poet ends his elegy with optimism: “Je chante un paradis de paix.” (42) / “I sing of a paradise of peace” (218). Significantly, within this vision of paradise, Senghor refers once again to his Childhood Kingdom:

Et ils chantaient à plusieurs voix, ils chantaient Hosanna! Alleluia!
Comme au Royaume d’Enfance autrefois, quand je rêvais. (40)

And they sang in several voices, singing Hosanna! Hallelujah!
As in the long-ago Childhood Kingdom when I would dream. (217)

If, to counter the violence in the postcolonial world, the poet remembers the idyllic harmony of Edenic Africa, he nevertheless remains convinced that he and his black brothers and sisters everywhere must struggle for peace and harmony in the world. With the clear understanding that there is no possibility of returning to a precolonial state of innocence—if it indeed ever existed—the poet not only joins Sine to Seine, rivers of Africa and Europe, but embraces the Atlantic as well.

In the introduction to his translation of Senghor’s poetry, Melvin Dixon finds that the Senegalese poet, from *Chants d’ombre* through the elegies, takes his readers on a three-part journey to show the importance of his African culture to world civilization: the first recognizes the African heritage; the second places Africa in dynamic relation to Europe; the third recognizes universality (*The Collected Poetry* xxiii). My choice of poems reflects Dixon’s paradigm. Senghor’s family portraits evoke the Childhood Kingdom and reflect his African heritage. Poems that praise the *Tirailleurs sénégalais* attest to Africa’s contribution to Europe. Finally, the poet’s elegy for Martin Luther King expresses a profound belief in the universal values of peace and brotherhood.

Dixon also notes that Senghor’s metaphor of the Childhood Kingdom must be viewed as a structured return to ethnic roots for sustenance and meaning, a process that calls upon memory as the key to unlock a usable past (xxv). Charting Senghor’s quest for synthesis, I find that its blueprint lies in the poet’s early experience of balancing the demands of the individual with those of the community, negotiating between *fadenya* and *badenya*. To that, however, he adds the vision of reconciliation between black and white communities that extends beyond the relationship between France and her African colonies. Hence, by combining a usable past with the vision of a better future, Senghor used the present—his remarkable life—to achieve the synthesis he so passionately sought.

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