

Léopold Sédar Senghor and the Civilization of the Universal

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One among the concepts strongly defended by Léopold Sédar Senghor is what he called the civilization of the universal, which forms an essential component of his thought. This concept has been thoroughly commented and, at times, wrongly or controversially interpreted. My approach consists of a personal reflection on the backgrounds of Senghor's thought. First of all, I will deal with Senghor's conception of Negritude and what it implies in terms of black identification, the recognition of Africa as the birthplace of races. Then I will examine the civilization of the universal as defended by Senghor and its link to the thought of Father Teilhard de Chardin, a French paleontologist. Finally, I will present the passionate debate on his work and thought. Senghor was among the African writers and thinkers probably the most admired, the most honoured throughout the world, but also the most criticized and hated.

I. Negritude according to Léopold Sédar Senghor

Born in Joal, Senegal, on 9 October 1906, president and poet Leopold Senghor died on 21 December 2001, in France. After his training at the Catholic Liebermann College, he went to Paris in 1928. He attended the Louis le Grand College with former French President Georges Pompidou as classmate. When he completed an aggregation degree in grammar in 1935, he got in touch with black students from Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific. Since the beginning of the century Afro-American panafricanists have claimed their emancipation through movements such as the Harlem Renaissance and journals. Dr William E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Richard Wright, etc. came to France and spread ideas of liberation. The word Negritude was created by Aimé Césaire, but it is Senghor who is its herald, its theoretical supporter, and main frontrunner. His political adventure will never impact on his literary production and his passion for Negritude. From *Chants d'ombre*, his first poetic collection, to the last volume of *Liberté* Senghor's impact on the African and Francophone culture is considerable. With a firm resolution he defends his convictions and debatable statements by addressing all objections, by re-adjusting and re-formulating his arguments, and clarifying his ideas throughout the years.

One definition Senghor gave of Negritude has become classic: 'Negritude means the entire values of the civilization of the black world as they are expressed in the life and the works of

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Blacks' (Senghor 1977: 90). This definition was revised and many times refined to mean 'nothing but a will to be oneself' or a 'fight weapon for decolonization' (ibid.: 91). Negritude for Senghor and his friends becomes an ideological tool that goes beyond the simple quest of self and pushes towards the liberation of all blacks. This claim will attain its highest achievement with the political independences of African countries or the status of Overseas Departments and Territories (DOM-TOM) for some French islands.

With Negritude, the oppressed black first of all becomes conscious of his race: 'Negro cannot negate that he is Niger or claim for himself this abstract uncoloured humanity: he is black. It is why he is forced to be authentic; when he is insulted, oppressed, he stands up, he collects the word Negro that has been thrown to him, with dignity' (Sartre 1948: xiv). This idea expressed by Sartre perfectly suits Senghor's view. He realizes that he is humiliated, exploited because of his skin colour, and this fact causes him to think to the pre-colonial African Eden, Africa of empires and great civilizations. Therefore Negritude appears in an existential context made of mythical remembrance of a Lost Golden Age. This is maybe the reason why the preferred literary genre to canalize these frustrations will be poetic lyricism.

In his poetry, Senghor sings with an intense emotion of the idyllic Africa, black beauty, the harmony of the African universe, the invisible links common to all people who share the black sensitivity. He worships African gods, adores trees and mountains of the Guinea Bay, he remembers the prime inspiration of the poetess Marone and other Serere poetesses, he takes on the status of a griot in exile who is without his tom-tom, balafong or korah: 'Le voilà donc, le poète d'aujourd'hui, gris par l'hiver dans une grise chambre d'hôtel. Comment ne songerait-il pas au Royaume d'enfance, à la Terre promise de l'avenir dans le néant du temps présent ? Comment ne chanterait-il pas la "Négritude debout?"' (Senghor 1990: 156–157) To revalorize the black, his culture and civilization, to claim his right to exist and his right of freedom, to re-write his history that has been distorted and robbed, to defend the values shared by all Blacks regardless of their origin, these have been the milestones of the anti-colonial fight of Negritude. To be black and proud to be black was somehow the slogan that led the founder members of the Negritude movement. As J. Jahn (1958: 240) writes: 'Negritude has restored the legitimacy of belonging to African culture.'

Senghor will then try to define the black man. In his poem 'Prière aux masques' he situates and defines the Black by comparing and opposing him to the White, but at the same time he exposes a totalizing vision of the universe. Africa and Europe being linked by the navel, it is up to the Black to ensure rhythm and sensitivity to balance the geometrical world of the White. Forgetting all the misdeeds of colonization, despising the exploitation and slavery perpetrated by the White against the Black, Senghor amazingly argues that Blacks and Whites are called to live in harmony in a world without races or social classes. Everyone would contribute without harm to the common pot, to the cultural symbiosis of mankind, something totally unique that one has and that no other can bring. Senghor's humanism consists of complementarity of cultures and civilizations, or cultural metissage. At the concert of the world to come, the Black appears to be a mystical artist: 'Nous sommes les hommes de la danse, dont les pieds reprennent vigueur en frappant le sol dur' (Senghor 1990: 24): We are the peoples of dance, whose feet regain force once they touch the soil. This is also Senghor's traditional Africa.

Africa as birthplace of mankind is a central topic to all members of the Negritude movement. Césaire finds himself in the Bambara mysticism of his personal geography in the same way Laleau is embarrassed to express his authentic Senegalese feelings in French, a language imposed on him by history.

A trained grammarian, Senghor distinguishes between humanity, a concept of history science, and humanism, a concept used by the movements of existentialism, essentialism or spiritualism.

The fact that the most ancient vestiges of man on earth have been located in Eastern Africa comforted the members of Negritude in their conviction that Africa is the mother of the whole of mankind, of the prime unity of men and races. By defending such theses, Senghor strove for the recovery of the total unity of humankind.

From the time he attended school, Senghor was aware of the black man colonized under the French Assimilation system. Human sciences such as ethnology, linguistics, sociology, philosophy and the study of the arts provided him with basic tools to construct his own conceptual system. Trained under the mirror of ‘The Civilization’ i.e. European, Senghor had in his heart the germs of a personal rebellion against the condescending colonial mentality; he had formed the ‘idea, not the word, of a black civilization different but equal’ (Senghor 1977: 227). That is actually the real issue.

The colonized is conceived by the colonizer as a sub-man, without culture, without history. Senghor’s struggle will therefore consist of conquering a human status equal to that of the White. This is a condition sine qua non for the existence of any civilization. The recognition or the consciousness of the black race therefore becomes a fundamental step for the revalorization of civilization values that are specific to black people. The idea of a black culture would open the way to a more total entity which would involve any human being, *the Integral Man*. Regarding Africa, the mission of Negritude is to ‘create in Africa and for Africans, a *new civilization*, which suits Africa and the new times, which is the fruit of a real culture’ (Senghor 1964: 124). Concretely Latin civilization and black civilization will try to transcend their differences for the sake of the common construction of an *Afro-Latin Civilization*. This concept will later coincide with the Civilization of the Universal.

The consequence of such statements is that, by raising the difference with the Europeans, Senghor and the other members of Negritude will forge discourse which is fundamentally racial, without being racist, without inciting to visceral hatred against the oppressor. Sartre had underlined this anti-racist racism of Negritude in his foreword to Senghor’s *Anthologie*. Negritude writers obviously seek to mark their difference and originality, although remaining lucid. Conscious of a racist excess, Senghor clarifies that ‘Negritude has never insisted on skin colour, but on ethnicity. As one knows ethnicity is not only race with its physical qualities, but more culture with its civilization values’ (Senghor 1977: 281)

2. The Civilization of the Universal

The idea of Civilization of the Universal is already present – in progress and explicitly – in all the first publications of Senghor. In *Chants d’Ombre* one can read:

Que nous répondions présents à la renaissance du Monde
 Ainsi le levain qui est nécessaire à la farine blanche.
 Car qui apprendrait le rythme au monde défunt des machines et des canons?
 [That we be present at the renaissance of the World
 Like the leaven is necessary to the white flour
 For who would teach rhythm to the dead world of machines and canons?]

These three verses of ‘*Prière aux masques*’ express the imperfection of the present world and therefore suggest its transformation into a world where all contradictions will disappear into a new skin.

The world strives to an imminent renewal, a process in which the contribution of Blacks will be not only be essential, but also active, inspiring and productive. The analogy with the leaven makes the Blacks constitutive principles, essential parties of the new universal society. Trustful to his thought that opposes reason to feeling-emotion, Senghor situates the contribution of Blacks at the level of the rhythmic pulsation which will give life to the world of metres and canons. Soul instead of intelligence, intuition instead of knowledge, direct perception instead of a deductive path towards the truth, those are the main concepts on which Senghor builds his theory of the Civilization of the Universal. He develops a proper terminology: kingdom of childhood, meeting of giving and receiving, symbiosis of civilizations, dialogue of cultures, etc.

The theoretical backgrounds of Senghor stem from the human sciences already mentioned above, from Marxism, from the doctrine of Father Teilhard de Chardin, of existentialist and spiritualist philosophers, and also from his personal life experiences. His readings of Africanists or Afro-American precursors, conversations with colonized colleagues make him fully aware of the colonial situation. Books like *History of the African Civilization* by Leo Frobenius, *Esquisse d'une théorie des émotions* by Sartre and *Le Phénomène humain* by de Chardin exerted a considerable influence on him. Senghor has proclaimed himself a Marxist-socialist after he recovered his faith thanks to the writings of Teilhard de Chardin. From Marxism he retained the materialistic dialectics, the base of his anti-colonial fight and his own political action.

He keeps from the historical dialectics the notion of synthesis, notions of transcending the contingent antinomies that de Chardin presents under the term 'universal'. The Universal can be defined as the fusion and subjugation of differences for the sake of an essential dimension of being. For the Negritude movement there is on one hand affirmation of one's being in the world as a Black, there is also on the other hand the necessity to overtake this dangerous isolation. Self-affirmation is not an end per se but a means to open oneself to the Other:

[...] Notre souci a été de l'assumer, cette Négritude, en la vivant, et, l'ayant vécue, d'en approfondir le sens. Pour la présenter, au monde, comme une pierre d'angle dans l'édification de la Civilisation de l'Universel, qui sera l'œuvre commune de toutes les races, de tous les civilisations différentes – ou ne sera pas (Senghor 1964: 9).

[Our concern has been to endorse Negritude by living it and after living it, to deepen its meaning in order to present it to the world as a milestone in the construction of the Civilization of the Universal, which will be the work of all races, of all different civilizations – or will not be.]

Senghor often repeats this idea, because to his mind closing oneself in a pot would be a foolish suicide. His critical readings of publications by his Negro-African fellow citizens give him lessons of this essential option of openness. In a foreword to Peter Abrahams' *Une Couronne pour Udomo*, he states:

La *Négritude*, pour s'exprimer, doit se dépasser, en dépassant le folklore et l'exotisme. Elle le fera en revenant aux sources mêmes de la Négritude : à notre art ancien, qui est *art* parce que son objet est *l'Homme* et que le *rythme*, loin d'y être abondance, est *mesure*, celle-là même qui donne à chaque chose, sa juste place. Pour quoi je dis que Peter Abrahams est le *Classique de la Négritude* (Senghor 1964: 430).

[*Negritude* to express itself has to go beyond itself by going beyond folklore and exoticism. It will do that by returning to the very sources of Negritude: to our ancient *art* which is art because its object is *Man* and *rhythm* instead of being abundance is *measure*, the very measure that gives a just place to everything. Therefore I state that Peter Abrahams is the Classic of Negritude.]

The words in italics – *Negritude*, *art*, *Man*, *rhythm*, and *measure* – are linked in Senghor's universe. Art as expression of the black soul constitutes the essential contribution of the black man to the Civilization of the Universal. Rhythm is the element which, when applied to juxtaposed words, insures the aesthetic substance to the Negro poem. Measure in this context means lucidity, constancy. For beyond the black man, beyond the race or the skin complexion, there is the human being: the Integral Man. The Civilization of the Universal obeys this dynamic of man, man conceived as human person; 'the person-man is an instable tissue of forces which interact: a world of solidarities which seek to link themselves' (Senghor 1993: 7).

The Civilization of the Universal meant that as the last resort of the Negritude thought is to be built upon its first resource which is the human being. This is a real man, provided with flesh and bones, with body and mind, with will and soul. Not abstract, ideal or surreal. 'Regarding man, the Universal cannot be universal unless it is colored with humanity, unless it is enrooted in man' (Senghor 1977: 18).

Finally the Civilization of the Universal corresponds to the Omega Point of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard successfully goes beyond the dialectic materialism of Marx, which places the economical above the human, the material above the spiritual. Although Marxism is the starting point of Senghor's analysis, it is rectified, even completed by Teilhard's vision. According to Senghor, Marx had brought down the materialism of Hegel from the spiritual to the material, to the historical reality: 'If Marx had remained in this dialectic vision of the world, if he had gone far till the end of the historical movement, there would have been no doubt that he would have satisfied our hope and all our issues' ('Pierre Teilhard de Chardin et la politique africaine', quoted by Rous 1967: 115–116).

To Senghor's view, thanks to his research in anthropology and paleontology, Teilhard de Chardin has gone far beyond this historical antinomy by extending the theory of evolutionism to all natural sciences. It is here that the Omega Point as the final expression of surpassing the dialectics gets its real meaning. Humanity seeks with all its strength to attain the Omega Point, identifiable with Jesus Christ, the only mediator between God and his peoples. In lay words, the Civilization of the Universal is the meeting of giving and receiving, an initiative to be constructed by all human beings.

Marxism keeps its significant rigour in Senghor's thought, but it has to be re-examined by Negro-Africans: 'Marxism has to be, not revised but re-thought by black heads and according to values of Negritude' (1977: 288). As did the Russian Lenin and the Chinese Mao, Marxism has to be revised and adjusted to the cultural and psychological circumstances of Negritude. The colonial reality is that the capitalist Europe has transformed African peasants into workers, proletarians. This is why Marxism will serve as the basis for the African Socialism dreamed by the Senegalese poet. His effort will be to reconcile Marxism and his Christian faith. All through his life Senghor remained a socialist and a democrat.

In a previous study presented some years ago in Martinique I underlined that Negritude has temporarily operated according to a movement from the Other's gaze toward a personal view (Mabana 2006). The sight of the Other (the European) has been determinant in the taking into account of the civilization values of Negritude. Ethnology and discoveries by Africanists such as Leo Frobenius, Delafosse and Delavignette, have proved the existence of a black civilization, which was not yet acknowledged by Europeans at that time. Therefore the Western civilization becomes a civilization among others. Just as the black slave reacted to the outlook of the dominant master to claim his blackness, so does Senghor claim the existence of the black civilization as an integral property of any human group.

Having obtained the status of 'a human' for the black man thanks to Negritude, proving the basis of his civilization is simply nothing but an exercise of argumentation. It is what he brilliantly

did. There is therefore a way of life and socio-cultural organization based on values specifically belonging to Blacks. This is why Negritude will be defined in terms of civilization. According to the Hegelian schema of thesis-antithesis-synthesis revised by Teilhard de Chardin, the civilization which is expected to come will consist of mixing the different poles, i.e. the African one and the European one, in one common pot: the Afro-Latin civilization, prefiguring the Civilization of the Universal.

Civilization of the Universal is a way for Senghor to deny the European primacy on civilization, invite them to build a unique civilization which would eradicate racial distinctions. So, contrary to the expansionism of the European civilization, the future belongs to hybridity of cultures: 'La civilisation idéale serait comme ces corps quasi divins, surgis de la main et de l'esprit d'un grand sculpteur, qui réunissent les beautés réconciliées de toutes les races' (Senghor 1964: 96): the ideal civilization would be like these almost divine bodies, born out of the hand and the mind of a great sculptor, which reach all the beauties of all races.

3. Cultural metissage

In 1950 Senghor published an article entitled 'De la liberté de l'âme, ou l'éloge du métissage' in the journal *Liberté de l'Esprit*. This article is published in *Liberté I*. He first presented the situation of the colonized and of the Negro-African historically situated in the French Republic; he retraced the lives of the Negritude writers forced to adjust themselves to historical realities instead of seeking refuge in the Kingdom of the original childhood:

Notre vocation de colonisés est de surmonter les contradictions de la conjoncture, l'antinomie artificiellement dressée entre l'Afrique et l'Europe, notre hérité et notre éducation. C'est de ma greffe de celle-ci sur celle-là que doit naître notre liberté. [...] Supériorité, parce que liberté, du Métis, qui choisit, ou il veut, ce qu'il veut pour faire, des éléments réconciliés, une œuvre exquise et forte. [...] Trop assimilés et pas assez assimilés ? Tel est exactement notre destin de métis culturels (Senghor 1964: 103).

[Our mission as colonized people is to overtake the conjectural contradictions, the antinomy artificially created between Africa and Europe, our heritage and our education. It is from the conjunction of our education on our heritage that our freedom will raise up. [...] Superiority because freedom of the Métis who chooses where he wants, what he wants to do, of reconciled elements a work that is beautiful and strong. [...] Too much assimilated or not enough assimilated? That is exactly our destiny of cultural Métis.]

The move from the biological metissage to the cultural aspect proceeds from the same totalizing deduction as for the Civilization of the Universal. However Senghor clearly perceives the difficulty and posits the solution of ambivalence or ambiguity to express the drama endured by the colonized. In the colonial system the Mulatto enjoys a position that is both privileged and ambiguous. The cultural mulatto, being more difficult to define, is actually nothing but a man without roots, one who is assimilated who still pretends to some kinds of originality.

Senghor's theory of metissage is very ambiguous, very debatable. Like his statement on the Negro emotion, it is amazingly very similar to Arthur Gobineau's theory on the Inequality of human races. The only difference is that Senghor only keeps the positive side of this theory. The main reproach is that he 'extends his own temperament and personal complexes of inferiority to the whole black race' (Mezu 1968: 177). The consequence of such an attitude is that many young Africans came to dismiss the Negritude movement.

It is now worth talking about an essential element of Senghor's theory: culture. A Congolese philosopher has well understood the originality of the notion of culture by Senghor: 'If ethnology

provides Senghor with the definition of Negro-African civilization, it is Senghor himself who defines Negro-African culture' (Elungu 1984: 89) By the way Senghor has in practice accepted all the discoveries of the human sciences at the beginning of the twentieth century because these discoveries allowed him to articulate his discursive argumentation. He agreed with the idea of civilization since it constituted the title of a book by his mentor Frobenius: *History of the African Civilization*. What is the difference between Negro-African culture and black civilization? Senghor (1964: 96) defines culture as the motor of civilization: 'a civilization stagnates and dies if it is not animated by a strong spirit of culture.' Every civilization absolutely needs a cultural breathing in order to live. For Senghor (ibid.: 93) culture is 'civilization in action, or better the spirit of civilization'. Culture is a disposition, an acquisition from education by an initiation or a learning process.

4. Debate on Senghor

A powerful theoretician and an outstanding genius, Senghor incarnated alone the destiny of the Negritude movement. Like the Lion of Ethiopia, Senghor is a man of an extraordinary erudition, a poet with a magical word, a talented creator of myths. Better than any other, he has expressed Negritude, he has lived it and concretized it through his poetry and essays, through his political speeches and cultural activities. He has been admired, flattered, received high honours but he has also faced some violent and sarcastic criticisms.

His creative writings have been accompanied by an important theoretical production collected later in his philosophical and cultural bands. It is precisely the tone of his poetry, the pretentiousness of his statements and the ideological background of his thought which have harmed the entire Negritude. Senghor was reproached for being very kind with the Whites whereas his people expected from him a revolutionary involvement to conquer freedom. He is blamed for having offered, through his meeting of giving and receiving, a gentle hand to the merciless colonial oppressor. He is blamed for having misled the Blacks instead of guiding them towards a revolution, towards freedom. He is blamed for having, as an assimilated or a naïve ignorant, adopted the statements which confirmed the racist stereotypes of Europeans over Ethiopians, and the superiority of Whites over the Blacks, what in reality justifies oppression, assimilation and the dominance that Blacks faced years ago.

The South African Es'kia Mphahlele criticizes Senghor's empty discourse, the Nigerian Wole Soyinka ridicules the tiger who sings his *tigritude*, the Beninan Stanislas Adotevi qualifies him as a negrologue whereas the Camerounian Marcien Towa in *Léopold Sédar Senghor: Negritude ou Servitude*, accuses him of perpetuating the White's superiority: 'Thus at all levels – political, religious, linguistic, Senghor invites us, in the name of the biological, to bow in front of the European superiority' (Towa 1972: 115).

Beyond all this, I personally blame his speech made on 3 February 1951, at the Pen Club of the French-speaking Belgian Writers, entitled 'Belgians in the Congo'. To me it is a scandalous, shocking support to the Belgian colonization in the Congo:

Voilà quinze ans que je prône les civilisations métisses. Il n'est de plus grande civilisation que métisse. Heureux les Belges... Ce qui est remarquable, par-dessus tout, dans votre génie, c'est qu'il a su, animé par l'esprit latin, mettre toute chose à sa place dans un ordre fécond. Vous n'avez pas fait autre chose au Congo (Senghor 1964: 123).

[For fifteen years I have proclaimed the metis civilizations. There is no important civilization which is not metis. Happy Belgians... What is wonderful beyond everything in your genius, is the fact that it has

succeeded, thanks to the Latin spirit, in putting everything in its place in a fruitful order. It is exactly what you did in the Congo.]

The first time I, a Congolese, read this tribute to the Belgian colonial work, I remained speechless for a long time, destroyed and confused. I wrote in pencil on the front pages of the article: 'Défense et Illustration de la colonisation belge. Choquant! Horrible!' These statements reminded me of the speech made by the King of Belgium on 30 June 1960, at the celebration of the independence of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In that speech he emphasized the successful civilizing mission of the Belgians in the Congo. That is another face of Senghor, disgustingly denounced by everyone and deemed too tender towards the oppressors of his race.

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My opinion has always been to state that the herald of Negritude has the defects of all genius. Although he had tried to correct or justify his controversial statements at various occasions in interviews and writings, he never succeeded in removing the suspicions surrounding his entire literary production. His debatable theory of Black emotion and Greek reason has been fought more with nationalist or anti-colonial slogans than with rigorous arguments. In a relatively recent book *Négritude et Poétique*, Pius Ngandu Nkashama (1992: 38) refers to Senghor's 'hermeneutic circularity' to comment on the theory of emotion. He thinks that a phenomenological and epistemic approach would be more fruitful to explain Senghor's notions of image-analogies, image-rhythms or image-symbols, which are key terms in his system.

One can like or hate Senghor, but one has to acknowledge that his legacy to the Francophone world and to the world of universal culture is immense. His thought has so deeply marked Negritude that he has become its emblematic figure. He wrote to celebrate France poems of tremendous beauty and fineness while claiming the inspiration from the poetess of his native village, Joal. As far as he could do so, Senghor maintained a balance between his Western training and his traditional education, albeit many saw in him one who was assimilated and acculturated. His poetry and his essays are a terrific source of wisdom and instruction which has not yet delivered all its secrets. Senghor is, along with the Martinican Aimé Césaire, the Francophone writer most read, the most commented, and surely the greatest.

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