

HISTORICAL ORIGINS
AND LITERARY DESTINY
OF NEGRITUDE

Ever since the mediaeval quarrel over universals, there have invariably been minds for whom every general concept is a *flatus vocis*. And for many African intellectuals, the term "negritude," introduced by Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor around the years 1933-1935, is no more than just a word. Yet the mere fact that it came into being, even though it should have no intelligible content, is in itself significant. It is indicative of the same growing awareness that led to the struggle against racial discrimination and the liberation movements of colonial peoples. But a growing awareness of what?

In a recent treatise, in which he studies the psycho-social foundations of culture and development, the American economist Everett E. Hagen writes:

The satisfaction derived by an individual from his activity in life depends in part on the status associated with it. That status shall be

Translated by Victor A. Velen.

satisfying requires not that it is high but merely that it is deemed appropriate by the person occupying it and is respected by others. The peasant as well as the lord, the craftsman as well as the political leader or corporation executive, has a status. One's status derives not only from one's economic function, however, but all that one does and believes, all of one's relationships to other persons and to the unseen forces in which one believes... One's status, that is, is one's identity; it includes one's purposes and values in life... For the inner satisfaction of the members of a society, as for social stability, it is essential that the status (the identity) of the members of each group in a society also be recognized by the other groups as appropriate and good.¹

Seen in this perspective, the secular impact of the Europeans on Africa has not only destroyed existing social structures, by replacing the traditional ruling classes with a foreign administrative caste; it has also undermined the ethical and psychological substratum of indigenous societies by demonstrating, through the mere evidence of their invincible power, the intrinsic inferiority of all the systems of beliefs, values and behavior which up to then had given a satisfactory meaning to life.

It will be useful to retrace the phases of this process. The first contacts between Europe and black Africa were of a commercial order and were established within the framework of common interests and mutual esteem. The monarchs of the coastal regions sold gold, ivory and slaves in order to obtain manufactured and luxury goods in exchange. In the sixteenth century the king of Portugal and the king of the Congo exchanged correspondence and ambassadors; the Bakongo princes received their education in Europe; and the Manikongo Alonso (1507 to 1543) undertook the task of modernizing and christianizing his kingdom on the model of European states. The same type of relations persisted for the two centuries that followed, when the populations of the interior gradually constituted large organized states, such as the empires of Akan, Oyo, Dahomey or the Lunda kingdom of Mwata Yamvo, in order to participate as well in the profitable European trade. During all this time the Europeans had not gained sufficient technological power to

¹ E. E. Hagen, *On the Theory of Social Change*, Dorsey Press, Homewood, 1962, pp. 185-86.

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proceed to the conquest of the dark continent. Nor did they desire it. And the extremely sporadic and localized contacts between the white man and the black world were not of a sort to provoke profound disturbances in the African cultures. In fact, until the nineteenth century, only the slaves, shipped to the sugar and cotton plantations across the Atlantic, really felt the impact of European power. Being confronted through slavery with the proof of their own weakness and inferiority, they accepted the white man's appraisal of them, and the chief ambition of their "elites" was to become like whites, to adopt their beliefs and values, to participate in their educational system, and to imitate them in everything.

But in the nineteenth century, with the prodigious rise of colonialism, which had been made possible by the industrial revolution, this same alienation from self was to become the fate of the entire dark continent. Was not the white man's power proof of an absolute superiority which gave him nearly divine status? In the eyes of the black man, the white man's contempt for his primitive way of life, his superstitious beliefs, his rudimentary economic structures and his traditional administrative organizations appeared justified. For the Europeans, African culture was devoid of value. It is true, as Hagen writes, that:

The low valuation of indigenous individuals manifested by the conquerors would not have mattered if the conquerors had no prestige in the indigenous society. However, the conquerors did have one characteristic conveying tremendous prestige, their overwhelming power. Thus their valuation counted.²

Thus, all of Africa was now subjected to the trauma experienced previously by the slaves taken to America. Justly despised, in his own esteem, by his masters, the Negro lost the feeling of having a place in the world of man; he considered himself as subhuman, he lost confidence in the value of his ideals and traditions; he was deprived of his dignity and his identity.

Such a situation is obviously unbearable. Every man has the need to feel his worth. Whole peoples have gradually become extinct as a result of having been robbed of their status, their

² *Ibid.*, p. 414.

identity, and their human value. In general, however, the collective instinct of preservation produces techniques of survival, first among which is what Hagen, adapting the terminology proposed by Robert K. Merton,³ calls "ritualism."

The black slave embraces the religion of his masters; the equatorial citizen proudly perspires in a double-breasted jacket; the typist wears spectacles fitted with window glass; the negress has her hair uncurled; the intellectual prefers to get his degrees in European and American universities; the politician talks of democracy. In the eyes of the average European, these attitudes generally appear comic: they result from a clumsy mechanical imitation of outward forms of behavior emptied of their ethical and cultural contents. For the informed observer, however, they are mainly pathetic, for they bear witness to an effort—inevitably maladroit—to acquire a spare personality, a personality that, it is vainly hoped, will appear worthy and respectable in the view of the social group which establishes the hierarchy of values. Thus, the black man adopts the ways of life of the white man and his criteria of judgment, in a ritualistic fashion, without realizing that they have no value in themselves but are the expression of an inner life whose sources escape him.

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These phenomena are clearly manifest in the literature, which in turn clarifies the psychological processes from which it derives. The first Negro-American, Negro-West Indian and Negro-African works, as spaced out as they are in time, show a common preoccupation with assimilating the conceptions, the themes and the style that the white man proposes as models. The first Negro author of the United States, Jupiter Hammon (1720?-1800) wrote a poem with the suggestive title, *The Kind Master and the Dutiful Slave*. And his contemporary, Phyllis Wheatley (1753?-1784), a slave in Boston, describes the continent from which she had been taken as "the land of errors and Egyptian gloom," in verses that slavishly imitate the style of Pope! A century later, Paul Lawrence Dunbar (1872-1906) dedicates his poetry to the

³ R. K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Glencoe, Ill., 1957.

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men of his race, but he makes them consonant with the image that the white man has of them, as inferior beings who accept their situation in the social structure and lead a primitive picturesque and idyllic existence. The characters of his three first novels are whites involved in conventional bourgeois plots.

In the same way the French-language West Indian writers echo, often with considerable skill, the Romantics, the Parnassians and the Symbolists—for which they were severely criticized by one of their compatriots, Etienne Léro in 1932:

The West Indian, stuffed with white morality, white culture, white education, white prejudices, displays in his little books an inflated image of himself. Being a good copy of the pale man replaces for him social as well as poetic reason. He is never decent enough, esteemed enough—"You behave like a negro," he indignantly points out if you evince some natural exuberance in his presence. Nor does he want, in his poetry, to "behave like a negro." He makes it a point of honor that a white man read his book without guessing his pigmentation.⁴

In Africa itself the novels of the colonial period were obviously written from a European perspective: church and administration are more or less discretely flattered; the traditional African is painted with the romantic hues of uncanny folklore (as in *Ngando* by the Congolese Paul Lomani-Tshibamba) or of idyllic pastoralism (as in *L'enfant noir* by the Guinean Camara Laye).

It is not surprising that this attempt at mimesis should have been abandoned first by the negroes of the United States. In the disappointment that followed the Civil War the emptiness of ritualism was revealed. On the other hand, the debate over slavery had thrown harsh light on the contradiction that existed and still exists between the American democratic ideal and the reality of racial discrimination. Finally, christianity, which in the South had rediscovered its primary function as a religion of slaves and underprivileged, no longer appeared merely as a promise of salvation in the hereafter, but as a statement of human

⁴ Quoted in L. Kesteloot, *Les écrivains noirs de langue française. Naissance d'une littérature*, Brussels, 1963, p. 29. The present article owes much to this work, which contains a valuable documentation on the genesis of French-language negro literature.

dignity recognized here on earth. These three factors jointly led the American Negro to proclaim his worth as a Negro, and this as early as the first years of the twentieth century. In 1902, P. L. Dunbar chose Harlem as the setting for his last novel, *Sport of the Gods*, and introduced Negro characters who were no longer comic or pathetic, goodnatured or resigned, but who lived in a realistic context of social protest.

In a world free of racial prejudice, this would have appeared only as a particular form of the proletarian inspiration which permeated all Euro-American literature at the end of the nineteenth century, and which contributed so powerfully to the emancipation of the underprivileged classes. And it is a fact that the rise of Negro literature everywhere was tied to social rebellion. A historian of Cuban letters wrote that "the *negrista* movement is the Cuban version of Spanish-American indigenism and international populism."⁵ And the beautiful book *Les bouts de bois de Dieu* (Paris, 1960) by the Senegalese Sembène Ousmane, which deals with a railway strike, gives a social dimension to a negritude whose psychological and cultural values are proclaimed in Senghor's poetry. But in a society and a universe dominated by the idea of the innate superiority of the white race, the social element seems curiously secondary. In her work on Negro literature in the French language, Mme Kesteloot cogently remarks that "contrary to what Sartre thinks, ... it would seem... that socialism or communism was a preliminary step towards the negro's demand for racial emancipation, rather than the opposite."⁶

The fact is that the grandson of the Italian, Polish or Armenian immigrant is a white American, just like the descendant of the pioneers. But the descendants of the black slave are just as black, and the racism of the whites has compelled the Negroes to become aware of their human status within the

⁵ J. A. Portuondo, *Bosquejo histórico de las letras cubanas*, Havana, 1960, p. 61. The main figure of the *negrista* movement was the poet Nicolás Guillén, an exact contemporary of Langston Hughes, since he too was born in 1902.

⁶ Kesteloot, p. 184. The allusion to Sartre refers to "Orphée noir," the preface to L. S. Senghor's *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, Paris, 1948, pp. 60-61.

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framework of a racial identity, indelibly inscribed in the color of their skin. While proletarian literature, even when it appeals to a class mystique, generally demands that unprivileged individuals participate in the full life of a homogeneous society, Negro writers have to face an even more difficult task. They must show in the first place that the Negro is really a part of human society, that is, they must assert the worth of negritude. If the word does not yet exist, the concept is present. This was evident when the poet Langston Hughes declares: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame." It was even more obvious when the elderly historian W. E. B. DuBois stated in 1940 that his autobiographical work, *Dusk of Dawn*, was "not so much my autobiography as the autobiography of a concept of race." The import of this declaration becomes clear if it is recalled that DuBois was one of the first to attempt, as Melville Herskovits says, "to comprehend the entire picture of the negro, African and New World, in its historical and functional setting,"⁷ in his *Black Folk, Then and Now* (1939), a work that crowns a long career of research in this field.

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Born in the United States under the pressure of an intolerable situation, this tendency to rehabilitate the Negro in his African-ness found the ground admirably prepared. Euro-American civilization had developed under the triple sign of reason, science and technique. In the same way that romanticism was born of a need to reestablish the affective and sensory values ignored by the rationalism of the Age of Enlightenment, the main trends of Western civilization were questioned again at the end of the nineteenth century. Bergson's attractive intuitionism and the exploration of the subconscious by Freud suggested to writers and artists ways of life, of thought, of creation, tending to produce a more total experience, a more cosmic understanding, a more authentic expression. When ethnologists began to study primitive peoples in a truly scientific spirit, and while Oswald

⁷ M. J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Boston, 1962, p. 2.

Splengler was preparing to dissect the corpse of the West, novelists such as D. H. Lawrence and E. M. Forster in England, Blaise Cendrars and later André Malraux in France were searching other areas of the globe for a less sophisticated but also less degenerate humanity, more primitive but living in harmony with the dark powers of the universe. But while this literary nomadism was mainly directed toward India and China, Italy and Mexico, for artists and musicians, negritude, which did not yet have a name, was the new pole of attraction, the new fountain of forms and inspiration. African sculpture and American jazz introduced mysterious rhythms, tellurian pulsations, a direct expression, as it seemed, of the profound life of the body and of the subconscious.

Thus arose the myth of a paradisaic Africa, the throbbing homeland of rhythm and passion,—a myth that first took form in 1914 in the famous and interminable poem by Vachel Lindsay, *The Congo (A Study of the Negro Race)*:

Wild crap-shooters with a whoop and a call
Danced the juba in their gambling-hall
And laughed fit to kill, and shook the town,
And guyed the policemen, and laughed them down
With a boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, BOOM...
THEN I SAW THE CONGO, CREEPING THROUGH THE BLACK
CUTTING THROUGH THE JUNGLE WITH A GOLDEN TRACK.
A negro fairyland swung into view,
A minstrel river
Where dreams come true.
The ebony palace soared on high
Through the blossoming trees to the evening sky,
The inlaid porches and casements shone
With gold and ivory and elephant bone.
And the black crowd laughed till their sides were sore
At the baboon butler in the agate door,
And the well-known tuner of the parrot band
That trilled on the bushes of that magic land.
A troop of skull-faced witch-men came
Through the agate doorway in suits of flame,
Yes, long-tailed coats with a gold-leaf crust
And hats that were covered with diamond dust.
And the crowd in the court gave a whoop and a call

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And danced the juba from wall to wall.
But the witch-men suddenly stilled the throng
With a stern cold glare, and a stern old song:
"Mumbo Jumbo will hoo-doo you."⁸

The Negro poets of the United States soon adopted this myth, adding a deeply felt nostalgia to its gawdy picturesqueness. *Heritage*, a poem by Countee Cullen (1903-1946), provides an example:

What is Africa to me;
Copper sun or scarlet sea,
Jungle star or jungle track,
Strong bronzed men, or regal black
Women from whose loins I sprang
When the birds of Eden sang?
One three centuries removed
From the scenes his fathers loved,
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,
What is Africa to me?

Quaint outlandish heathen gods
Black men fashion out of rods,
Clay and brittle bits of stone,
In a likeness of their own.
My conversion came high-priced;
I belong to Jesus Christ,
Preacher of humility;
Heathen gods are naught to me.
Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
So I make an idle boast,
Jesus of the twice-turned cheek,
Lamb of God, although I speak
With my mouth thus, in my heart
Do I play a double part.
Even at thy glowing altar
Must my heart grow thick and falter,
Wishing He I served were black...⁹

⁸ V. Lindsay, *The Congo and Other Poems*, 1914.

⁹ C. Cullen, *Color*, New York, 1925.

Much of the poetry of Langston Hughes expresses with haunting pathos the predicament of the American Negro, torn between a powerful and contemptuous civilization in which he lives, although he did not create it, and the colorful allurements of the African dream.

Closer consideration of this African myth shows that it is made up of a cluster of very different and sometimes contradictory attitudes, whose heterogeneity reflects the perplexity of a race feeling its way toward the light, searching for an awareness of its own identity and seeking to discover the ways to its salvation. Some exalt Africa as the continent which, through Egypt, gave birth to European civilizations.¹⁰ But more frequently, conceptions generally considered as "civilized" are forcefully rejected. It is significant that G. R. Coulthard could devote a whole chapter of his book on West Indian literature¹¹ to the

¹⁰ The Jamaican Marcus Garvey declares in *Philosophy and Opinion* (New York, 1926, II, p. 19): "When Europe was inhabited by a race of cannibals, a race of savages, naked men, heathens and pagans, Africa was peopled by a race of men who were cultured and refined..." In a sonnet, entitled *Africa*, his compatriot Claude McKay writes:

The sun sought thy dim bed and brought out light.
The sciences were suckling at thy breasts;
When all the world was young in pregnant night,
The slaves toiled at the monumental best.
Thou ancient treasure house, though modern prize,
New peoples marvel at thy pyramids.
The years roll on, thy sphinx of riddle eyes
Watches the mad world with immobile lids.

The work of the Senegalese Sheik Anta Diop, *Nations nègres et culture* (Paris, 1954), has this significant subtitle: "De l'antiquité négro-egyptienne aux problèmes culturels de l'Afrique noire d'aujourd'hui." The Malian Fily-Dabo Sissoko, in *Les Noirs et la culture* (New York, 1950), considers important the fact that Aesop was a Negro. It is perhaps necessary to consider this tendency as a form of ritualism, since it aims at rehabilitating Africa in the name of European criteria, albeit by distorting historical reality somewhat. As Herskovits said, works of this type are part of polemic literature and are interesting mainly as "manifestations of the psychology of interracial conflict." (*Op. cit.*, p. 2).

¹¹ G. R. Coulthard, *Raza y color en la literatura antillana*, Seville, 1958; English translation, *Race and Color in Caribbean Literature*, Oxford University Press, London, 1962. The quotes used in the notes that follow are taken from this fine work, which, like that of Mme Kesteloot, is an indispensable tool for the study of contemporary Negro literature.

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“rejection of European culture as a theme in Caribbean literature,”—a theme in which he distinguished four principal factors:

First, the feeling that the Caribbean negro is somehow constricted in the moulds of European thought and behaviour patterns which are not fitted to his nature.¹² Linked with this is the interest in African cultures, past and present, both in Africa and their remains in the West Indies. Second, the feeling that European civilization has failed, by becoming excessively concerned with power and technical progress and not sufficiently concerned with the production of happiness for the human individual. African or negro culture is presented as being nearer to nature and nearer to man.¹³ Third, the rejection of Christianity as an agent or ally of colonialism,¹⁴ and finally, the attack on

¹² For instance, *Trabison*, by the Haitian Raymond Laleau:

And this despair, equal to no other
for taming, with words from France,
this heart which came to me from Senegal.
(tr. by G. R. Coulthard)

¹³ In his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Paris, 1947) the Martiniquan Aimé Césaire writes:

Listen to the white world
horribly tired from its immense effort,
hear its rebellious joints cracking under the hard stars,
its blue steel stiffness piercing the mystical flesh,
hear its victories trumpeting its defeats,
hear its miserable strumbling accompanied by grandiose alibis,
pity for our conquerors, omniscient and naive.
(tr. by G. R. Coulthard)

¹⁴ The Haitian, Jacques Roumain, displays especially spirited vengefulness in *Bois d'ébène* (Port-au-Prince, 1945):

Surprise
Jesus Mary Joseph
when we catch the missionary by the beard
laughing horribly
to teach him in our turn
by kicking his bottom
that our ancestors were not Gauls,
and that we don't give a damn
for a God who,
if he is the father,

European civilization for the brutality and cynicism with which it enslaved and exploited the Negro, while still maintaining high-sounding principles of freedom and humanitarianism.¹⁵

This criticism of modern civilization, which is nowhere as strident as in the West Indies, is inevitably tied together with a mystical exaltation of primitivism, mainly in its most elementary and shocking aspects. In Cuba, J. A. Portuondo writes, “*negrismo* is a pure cult of the picturesque, which depends on the two predominant elements of negro folk art: rhythm and color”;¹⁶ and Coulthard notes its “characteristic atmosphere of dancing and sex... a noticeable insistence on the animality of the dancers’ movements of hips, contortions of muscles, in an atmosphere charged with sexuality, alcohol and sometimes voodoo.”¹⁷ The Portorican Palés Matos praises Africa in a rather strange way in a poem entitled *Niam-niam*:

Asia dreams its nirvana
America dances its jazz,

well, we, dirty niggers,
it is obvious that we must be his bastard sons,
and it won't help yelling
Jesus Mary Joseph
like an old bladder spilling over with lies.
(tr. by G. R. Coulthard)

¹⁵ See in particular *Le Drapeau de demain* by the Haitian Jean Brierre (Port-au-Prince, 1931):

Men led by the low instincts of beasts,
and draping themselves in the vain name of civilisers,
and believing themselves the kings of the whole planet,
command that the Negro, branded by his colour,
throughout the world, should be an unconscious thing,
a stepping stone for their ostentation,
should live in the night, and die in filth
while Civilisation, carrying its torch
stained with the blood of our race,
watches them parade under triumphal arches.
(tr. by G. R. Coulthard)

¹⁶ Portuondo, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

¹⁷ Coulthard, *op. cit.*, pp. 31 and 34.

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Europe plays and theorises,
Africa grunts: ñam-ñam.
(tr. by G. R. Coulthard)

In his *Cabier d'un retour au pays natal* Aimé Césaire crudely reveals the logical tie between the rejection of the modern world and the apology of primitivism:

Because we hate you and your reason, ... we turn to
the precocious dementia of flaming madness
of persistent cannibalism.
(tr. by G. R. Coulthard)

And in 1927, the Haitian Carl Brouard wrote of a disturbing *Nostalgie*, which figures, it seems, in all the anthologies of Haitian poetry:

Drum
when you sound
my soul screams towards Africa.
Sometimes
I dream of an immense jungle
bathed in moonlight
with hirsute, sweating figures,
Sometimes
of a filthy hut
where I drink blood out of human skulls.¹⁸
(tr. by G. R. Coulthard)

Lyrical poetry lends itself to such excesses, although we may rest assured that if he had to choose, even the wildest West Indian poet would prefer canned beer, however dehumanized it may be. The violence of this reaction against Europe and of this primitivist assertion illustrates, on a verbal level and frequently with real talent, the psychological process of alienation which Richard Wright revealed in his *Native Son*.¹⁹ Like the hero of this novel, the West Indian poets, whether they write in

¹⁸ The three texts are quoted by Coulthard.

¹⁹ E. E. Burgum has given a detailed interpretation of *Native Son* from this point of view in *The Novel and the World's Dilemma*, New York, 1947.

French, English or Spanish, are incapable of overcoming the conditioning imposed upon them by a long tradition of oppression, injustice and contempt. Dominated by a quite understandable rage and hatred, their attitude is basically negative. Literature for them is a means of venting the wrath that obsesses them. Whereas Wright has overcome the deterministic mechanism of violence geared on violence which he takes to pieces, the West Indian poets remain caught up in this circle which crushes them and draws from them only cries of rage. It is to be deplored that of the four branches of modern Negro poetry—West Indian, Negro-American, African of French expression and African of English expression (the latter has been very little studied up to now)—the first should be the best known. Not that its representatives lack genuine talent. But a comparative study shows that the narrow range of their inspiration awards them only a strictly limited place in the whole of Negro literature.

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The fact is that Negro experience is infinitely varied, and we are far from knowing the historical factors which have provoked this diversity. A common submission to dependence and to disparagement has kindled a wide range of reactions. The vengeful anger that burns in West Indian poetry is certainly not lacking in other Negro literatures, but in these it is surrounded with more durable, more positive elements. Thus, the Negro poets of the United States have frequently transmuted into conscious and deliberate art the intense religious feeling which inspired the *Negro spirituals* to spring from the soul of the people. And in Africa the majestic rhythm of the poems in which Senghor celebrates his people gives utterance to the serenity of a mind that does not allow itself to be obsessed by painful though inevitably transitory grievances. Moreover, the generation of poets has been completed since 1940 by a generation of novelists: Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin in America, Peter Abrahams, Mongo Beti, Sembène Ousmane, Hamidou Kane and the Nigerian school in Africa, and George

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Lamming in the West Indies. With them the cries of rage and vengeance have made room for a more objective understanding of the Negro coping with his lot, a more mature analysis of the psychological factors of the interracial clash and a perception, both more concrete and more subtle, of the social, ethical and cultural problems which the "winds of change" fanning contemporary history pose to the white and the black man alike. After a long period of slavish imitation and a short period of frantic rebellion, Negro literature has reached a third phase in its search for a black identity, a phase in which a more acute sense of reality is allied with a more positive feeling of responsibility.

The nostalgic idea of a common Africanness which crystallized in the post-Rousseau myth of a free and picturesque Africa, peopled by coconut trees, crocodiles and happy cannibals living in harmony with tellurian forces, was artificial and just as utopian as the "Back to Africa" movement launched by Marcus Garvey. In 1940, in his autobiography entitled *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes relates how he had to renounce the gifts of a benefactress who, he said, "wanted me to be a primitive, and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive. But, unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an American Negro—who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa—but I was not what she wanted me to be." The multiplication of effective contacts with African reality was responsible for spreading this obvious truth. In 1953, when Richard Wright visited the Gold Coast, which was to become Ghana, he admitted his incapacity to understand Africa and said so in *Black Power*: "I found the African an oblique, hard-to-know man who seems to take a kind of childish pride in trying to create a state of bewilderment in the minds of strangers... I had understood nothing. I was black and they were black but my blackness did not help me."²⁰ Many such testimonies could be quoted. They show that at a time when Senghor and Césaire were co-operating in defining the

²⁰ These two quotes are taken from the work of the South African writer Ezekiel Mphahlele, *The African Image*, New York, 1962.

cultural unity of the Negro world with a oneness of purpose facilitated no doubt by a common French education, the Negro intellectuals of the United States, who had been the first to formulate the concept of a general Africanness, were beginning to apprehend its diversity.

Paradoxically enough, the conferences of Negro writers—in particular those held in Paris in September 1956, in Rome in March 1959 and in Philadelphia in June 1960—which purported to enhance this cultural unity of the Negro world, ended in fact by stressing its multiplicity. For the Negro world is not a homogeneous and monolithic magma, but, like every human community, a concrete and diversified reality. It might be said that every black man has his place on a graph whose two coordinates are the pre-European tradition and the adaptation to modern civilization. At the start of this graph, as it now stands, are the primitive populations of the equatorial jungle, and at the other end are the Negro intellectuals of South Africa and the United States. But this oversimplifies the problem. Each of these coordinates breaks down in turn into differentiated factors. The pre-European tradition is not the same for the Senegalese Moslem and for the animist of the tropical forest. On the other hand, the impact of modern civilization has not been felt everywhere and on all in the same way. Once it is admitted that negritude is not a metaphysical entity but can have meaning only in designating a number of situations that are recorded in history, it becomes possible to realize the value and fecundity of the cleavages and tensions that it involves.

Contrary to the Jews, the Negroes of the diaspora have lost their contact with the languages and religions of their ancestors. The Negro American conceives of himself today as a black American and not as an exiled African. Commenting on the 1956 Conference of Negro writers and artists, James Baldwin writes:

What, at bottom, distinguished the Americans from the Negroes who surrounded us, men from Nigeria, Senegal, Barbados, Martinique—so many names for so many disciplines—was the banal and abruptly quite overwhelming fact that we had been born in a society, which, in a way quite inconceivable for Africans, and no longer real

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for Europeans, was open, and, in a sense which has nothing to do with justice or injustice, was free.²¹

As a minority group in an open but powerfully developed society, the American Negroes feel less and less impelled to destroy the existing structures. They know that they will be integrated into them and that theoretical and institutional multiracialism is certain to be translated into reality; they know that this will occur within the framework of Western civilization, which they know well and to which they are attached.

The situation is entirely different in Africa, where European civilization has often manifested itself in its least attractive aspects and where a pre-European tradition, which the American Negro does not have to take into account, has remained deeply rooted. It is not yet possible to estimate the influence that the diversity of the traditional substratum may exercise on the configuration of contemporary Africa. But it is clear that the methods of colonization constitute a lasting factor of differentiation. In his own comment on the 1956 Conference, Ezekiel Mphahlele states:

It is significant that it is not the African in British-settled territories—a product of “indirect rule” and one that has been left in his cultural habitat—who readily reaches out for his traditional past. It is rather the assimilated African, who has absorbed French culture, who is now passionately wanting to recapture his past. In his poetry he extols his ancestors, ancestral masks, African wood carvings and bronze art and tries to recover the moorings of his oral literature; he clearly feels he has come to a dead-end in European culture, and is still not really accepted as an organic part of French society, for all the assimilation he has been through.²²

The variety of administrative and educational practices produced a distinction between French-speaking and English-speaking Africans, which came to the fore at the Rome Conference, when the Ghanaian delegates criticized the way in which proceedings were conducted by French-speaking Negro intellec-

²¹ J. Baldwin, *Nobody knows my Name*, New York, 1961, p. 29.

²² Mphahlele, pp. 25-26.

tuals. It would seem that the French policy of direct administration and of cultural assimilation had provoked a greater alienation of the elites in relation to the people and, consequently, a more conscious, more violent, and perhaps also more artificial reaction against modern civilization. The satirical anti-clericalism of the Cameroonian Mongo Beti in *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba* (Paris, 1956) testifies to this. On the other hand, a particularly lucid conception of the significance of traditional cultures and a singularly elevated vision of all that the irruption of Africa on the scene of history implies for the future fate of mankind may be found among the French-educated writers such as Sheik Hamidou Kane in *L'aventure ambiguë* (Paris, 1961). On the contrary, the novelists and playwrights of the very active Nigerian school, such as Cyprian Ekwensi, Chinua Achebe, Onuora Nzekwu or John Pepper Clark, are less interested in the principles of their own culture and of future syncretisms than in the concrete conflicts that the incompatibilities of tradition and the modern world force on the everyday life of individuals. Observing that "the man of culture in countries of British influence hasn't really caught the negritude fever of the assimilated men in the countries of French influence," Mphahlele finds the reason for it in the fact that "the English-speaking African is much steadier and more confident of himself."²³ There can be no doubt that the policy of indirect rule once instituted in Nigeria by Lord Lugard, by respecting the social structures and the cultural autonomy of the populations concerned, considerably mitigated the inferiority complex provoked by the subjugation to the white man's power as well as the intensity of the process of compensatory self-assertion resulting from it.

But English-speaking Africa is not homogeneous itself, and the South-African Negroes who have been able to visit other regions of the continent frequently experience feelings of isolation and incomprehension which are far from being solely the result of the institutional measures taken by the Pretoria government. After living for centuries in close symbiosis with

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

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a white community, which, after all is also autochthonous, the South-African town dweller is as totally cut off from the tribal tradition as his American counterpart. The reproaches that Ezekiel Mphahlele addresses to the editors of *Présence Africaine* are revealing, even though they may not be entirely justified:

They seemed to think that the only culture worth exhibiting was traditional or indigenous. And so they concentrated on countries where interaction of streams of consciousness between black and white has not taken place to any significant or obvious degree, or doesn't so much as touch the cultural subsoil.²⁴

And he stresses "how similar the American Negro's cultural predicament is to ours in South Africa and in other multi-racial communities."²⁵ But if the South-African Negro intellectual is detribalized and acculturated, and if his political objective is not negro independence, which would have to start out with genocide, but a multiracial society, still in the southern republic colored people constitute a majority dominated by a racially distinct group. This is an eminently colonial situation which finds its literary reflection in the socio-racial obsession that characterizes the novels of Peter Abrahams, in the same way that it permeated West Indian literature or Senegalese literature before independence. Here again, however, similarity does not mean identity. In the most valid literary expressions of the Negro experience in South Africa one seldom encounters the intransigent violence, the systematic denigration and the hysterical tone which frequently mar the poems of Aimé Césaire, Paul Nizer or Léon Damas. This is undoubtedly in part because the South-African Negro elite has deeply absorbed the Christian message. But there is another reason, which Noni Jabavu has outlined in a pregnant comparison between the West Indian and African mentality:

Rootlessness, a historical sense of dereliction, absence of tradition, search for identity—these characteristics impressed me during conversations with West Indians. As an African, I possessed a heritage

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

embedded in my language, tribal loyalties, stored treasures of legends, events. Do not these give any African a fortunate sense of continuity? Whatever deprivations apartheid imposes on us in my own country, these can never efface the strengths and traditions of our people.²⁶

This statement completes rather than contradicts Mphahlele's declarations: in southern Africa the sectional sense of tribal loyalty today is breaking away from its earlier cultural context and is beginning to assume the modern form of a feeling of national solidarity, more advanced perhaps than in many independent African countries. While the Senegalese and Nigerian novelists have recourse to a foreign idiom to give literary expression to the clash of cultures, this same subject has inspired in South Africa a novel in the Xhosa language by a prominent Negro writer, A. C. Jordan, formerly lecturer at the University of Cape Town and presently professor at the University of Wisconsin.²⁷ This would seem to suggest that the South-African writer is less alienated from his people, his traditions and his negritude than his colleagues of Western Africa.

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With the present state of our knowledge, we can only lift a corner of the veil of ignorance which conceals the diversity of Africa, nevertheless the concept of negritude already seems to dissolve into uncontrollable multiplicity. The reason is that the concept is too frequently used in a summary and rhetorical manner, and without the nuances which ensure the validity of universals. On an affective, polemic, and to some extent strategic level the word "negritude" represents, as the American writer Stanley Allen has said, "the Negro African poet's endeavour to recover for his race a normal self-pride, a lost confidence in himself, a world in which he again has a sense of identity and

²⁶ N. Jabavu, review of a novel by V. S. Naipaul, "The Middle Passage," *New York Times Book Review Suppl.*, September 22, 1963.

²⁷ For an interesting but too brief comparison between this work, *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya* (The Wrath of the Ancestors) and *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, see Mphahlele, pp. 200-203.

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a significant role.”²⁸ But inevitably the question arises as to what this identity consists of, whether there really exists such a thing as a negro soul, or, to use Kwame Nkrumah’s expression, an “African personality.” A negative attitude with regard to this question would not be *a priori* justified. After all, we have an immediate consciousness of the unity of Western civilization, and we admit without discussion that this civilization was formed by secular historical processes, that it differs essentially as much from those that preceded it as from those which in the East and in the Arab world established themselves simultaneously, and that it gathers into a fundamental unity peoples otherwise clearly differentiated by their national characteristics. It is legitimate to approach the problem of the African personality in the same spirit.

The international confrontations that have succeeded each other in the course of the last ten years have posed this problem fully in all its complexities. In his comments on the Paris Conference, James Baldwin, powerfully struck as he was by the diversity of the Negro world, still asserts that a common factor exists:

It became clear as the debate wore on, that there *was* something which all black men held in common, something which cut across opposing points of view, and placed in the same context their widely dissimilar experience. What they held in common was their precarious, their unutterably painful relation to the white world. What they held in common was the necessity to remake the world in their own image, to impose this image on the world, and no longer be controlled by the vision of the world, and of themselves, held by other people. What, in sum, black men held in common was their ache to come into the world as men.²⁹

The importance of this will should not be underestimated for it brings together two historical factors which can only strengthen it and make it more efficient. One is the gradual disappearance of white messianism: a more refined moral sense, the bad use the white man has made of his power and knowl-

²⁸ Quoted by C. Legum, *Pan-Africanism*, New York, 1962, p. 94.

²⁹ Baldwin, p. 35.

edge, a certain loss of vitality as a necessary consequence of an excess of material prosperity,—all this has softened the aggressiveness of the white man and has undermined his confidence in his own superiority and in his innate right to rule the globe. Secondly, the Negro world, in its will for self-assertion, finds support in the Asian world, so much so that two-thirds of mankind are today united in the revolutionary determination to abolish the hegemony of the white race.

United in this revolutionary dynamism, the Negro peoples are also united at present in the historical phenomenon of underdevelopment. For Aimé Césaire, the Negroes are:

those who have invented neither gunpowder nor the compass
those who have never known how to harness steam or electricity
those who have not explored the seas nor the sky.

Whether this is, as Sartre affirms, a “proud claim of non-technicity”³⁰ or, as Mme Kesteloot believes, “the objective, humble, grieved recognition of a true inferiority, added to all the rest of the liabilities of his race,”³¹ matters little: the fact itself is acknowledged. Technological underdevelopment is evidently the result of underdevelopment on the level of rational and scientific knowledge. In declaring that “the philosophic effort of traditional Africa has always been reflected in vital attitudes and has never had purely conceptual aims,”³² the commission on philosophy created by the Rome Conference recognized in fact that African thought has not gone beyond the pre-conceptual stage. Nevertheless, underdevelopment does not only have negative aspects, and it is expedient to free the term of the derogatory connotations that surround it in the ethnocentric context of the Euro-American vocabulary: the wisdom of lived experience, although deprived of any conceptual framework, is nonetheless a wisdom. Incapable of mastering nature by himself or even of understanding its laws, plunged into an incomprehensible, arbitrary and frequently menacing world, primitive man develops

³⁰ Sartre, *loc. cit.* (see note 6 above), p. xxx.

³¹ Kesteloot, p. 156.

³² Legum, p. 216.

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dimensions of being that the progress of science and technique atrophy. He must concoct myths in order to account for natural phenomena and he must resort to magic in order to act on his environment and to control his own fate; but he is imbued with an intense, constantly experienced religious feeling, whose spiritual quality is independent of the false beliefs and superstitious practices through which it manifests itself. On the other hand, the absolute necessity to group together in order to survive has endowed him with a community feeling which is not the application of an abstract doctrine but a powerful emotional reality. At the Rome Conference it was rightly noted in the preamble to one of the resolutions that the essential values of the Negro cultural personality are "a fundamental faith in a transcendental Force from which man draws his origin, upon which he depends and towards which he is drawn" and "the sense of a vital solidarity ('*solidarité*'), a French word which seems to us the least removed from the Fulah *neddaku*, the Bambara *maya*, the Madagascar *fibavanana*, and others, and which comprises a series of moral and social virtues, such as Ancestor worship, the veneration³³ of the Elders, hospitality, the spirit of tolerance, etc."

But if this religious feeling and this community sentiment, not constituted into doctrinal systems, but actually and immediately lived and experienced are at the core of what Senghor calls the "*Negritude of the sources*," the third common characteristic of the Negro personality is that it is now irrevocably engaged in the dialectics of history. He is implicated in a modern version of the eternal drama by which human civilization renews itself and transforms itself and which Toynbee defined as "the challenge which a civilization presents to a barbarism." Like the Achaeans of the Minoan period and the Germans under the late Roman Empire, the Africans, after having served abroad or at home as a proletariat for a powerful and proud civilization, now reject their former bondage and are taking their destiny into their own hands. The experience of mankind shows that such an event—which has never yet occurred in the past with such magnitude—exerts an incalculable influence on the further

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

evolution of civilization. But if this revolutionary transfer of power appears in the retrospective view of the historian as the triumphal accession of young, primitive, inexperienced peoples, bubbling with ambition, to higher, more universal ways of being, of thinking, of creating, the actors in the drama feel it quite differently. German poetry of the heroic period, from the *Edda* to the *Nibelungenlied*, does not reflect only the exaltation of the victory over Rome; it is also imbued with a poignant feeling of tragedy, obsessed by the irrevocable destruction of the ancient order, disturbed by the painful consciousness of chaotic wars, of whose general and positive direction it is not aware. The same fluidity of the historical context gives rise to similar characteristics in neo-African literature. Until the middle of the century the Negro writer everywhere in the world pursued a very precise goal: the definition and recognition of the identity and human dignity of his race. Despite the difficulties that he still encounters, it is now clear that this aim will be realized in the near future. The majority of the African countries and the Caribbean Islands have acquired their independence. In the United States, government authorities are definitively committed to desegregation. There is no doubt that the Republic of South Africa also will be obliged, whether through violence or negotiation, to recognize the rights of the majority of its population. This evolution implies that the literary inspiration furnished by racial conflict is destined to dry up at the source and make way for the genuine problem of the times: the problem of the confrontation of cultures. For at the very moment when the African writer takes possession of his cultural heritage, of the "*Negritude of the sources*," and when he assumes responsibility for it, he also becomes aware of the paradox, to some extent biological, of all life, of all becoming, of all growth. He finds that his ancestral heritage does not arm him to survive in the modern world, that respect for a venerable tradition is a factor of stagnation, that tribal solidarity in a modern state is a factor of corruption, that abstract thought and economic development corrode the emotional ties that bind men together and to the world in which they live, and that science negates the mythical interpretation of the universe.

From a literary point of view this third aspect of negritude

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is doubtless the most fecund, but also the most tragic. If the work of the Nigerian Amos Tutuola testifies to the loyalty of the African to ancestral myths, that of his compatriots, Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi and Onuora Nzekwu and, in Senegal, Sheik Hamidou Kane, is focused on the necessity of making an agonizing choice; while it reflects a keen desire for evolution, it reveals not only the inner dilemmas to which each choice leads but also a pathetic perplexity over the validity of the sacrifices that this historic choice entails. The young nations, just like adolescents, win their autonomy only in order to lose it in the network of responsibilities to which it leads. All progress, all growth implies to some extent that something dies as something else is born. And while it is inevitable that a syncretism between the negritude of the sources and the requirements of universal civilization will be effected, history teaches us that these processes are painful, that they last for centuries and that their concrete orientations are unpredictable and uncontrollable.