

**NEGRITUDE: TOWARDS AN AUTHENTIC AFRICAN NARRATIVE  
IN THE THOUGHT OF LEOPOLD SENGHOR**

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**Abstract**

*This paper explores the concept of negritude in the philosophy of Leopold Senghor, a seminal figure in African intellectual history. The paper examines how Senghor's notion of Negritude seeks to reclaim and revalue African cultural heritage and identity, challenging dominant Western narratives that have historically marginalized African experiences. The paper is a critical analysis of Senghor's writings. It attempts to uncover his quest for an authentic African narratives that reconciles the complexities of colonialism, cultural assimilation, and black consciousness. The investigation of the paper reveals the tensions and possibilities in Senghor's Negritude philosophy, shedding light on its enduring relevance in contemporary debates about African identity, decolonization, and the politics of cultural representation.*

**Keywords:** Negritude, Leopold Senghor, Philosophy, Identity, Decolonization.

**Introduction**

Culture is the product of human beings who live in a given environment; and as such, it is considered to be defined as the way people live<sup>1</sup> and the expression of whom and what they are. Culture can also be seen as a set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and it

<sup>1</sup>R. Linton *The Cultural Background of Personality* 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (Michigan: Appleton – Century-Crofts, 1945) P. 32

encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyle, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs.<sup>2</sup> This definition of culture as explained by UNESCO highlights the comprehensive and inclusive nature of culture as a way of life, encompassing various aspects of human society and individual experiences. These experiences human beings act on and produce what should be or what ought not to be within that environment at that point in time. Hence it is very much appropriate not to condemn cultural practices; but rather to strive towards an adoption of a disposition necessary for an admirable understanding and assimilation of a profound cultural life and practice. In this wise, it is proper to assert that culture should be enriched as society evolves. Therefore, in telling the African narratives as it relates to the African story, it is very important for African story-tellers to understand these dynamics of the African cultural enterprise so as to avoid telling our own African stories that are problematic to the African identity. This is the very reason, despite the emergence of the written materials about the African people; there is a need not to neglect the African oral tradition as a necessary reference material in understanding the culture of a people. This is to help in the process of a more holistic interpretation of understanding the era of a people in their own thought process.

Parents in Africa (Nigeria) are supposed to be stakeholders of cultural practices and pass it unto their generation through oral and documented material. This can also be done through the learning of African indigenous languages. It is very unfortunate that cultural stakeholders in Africa seem to paint culture as ugly before their children and hence, the seemingly disinterestedness of children to patronize their cultural as an ugly site to behold. This has made lots of Nigerian children get disinterested in their languages or even visit their villages to understand how their people think, and understand the world in which they live. This also has affected how we tell our own narrative to the world. This raises a very fundamental question.

- Who will and should tell our story?
- Why do parents and cultural stakeholders paint the African story in such a manner this generation (also known as Genzees) gets disinterested?
- How can we get an authentic narrative of the African story in a society where we have almost lost our cultural heritage; and especially with the continuous migration of our people to Europe and America?

How can we tell our story when the majority of Nigerians in exogamous marital transit to Europe and America are in an interracial marriage? It is very important to note that exogamy despite its positive side can also be a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, reflecting changing social norms, cultural exchange,

and individual changes. This paper shall explore the concept of Negritude in Leopold Senghor in searching for an authentic African narrative in re – imagining the word as an emic form of empowerment.

### **What is Negritude?**

Negritude is a literary and philosophical movement that emerged in the 1930s and 1940s in Paris.<sup>3</sup> Negritude is the celebration of the African people and cultural heritage; and, it seeks to reclaim and redefine what it means to be African. The themes in Negritude emphasize cultural pride, cultural identity, and cultural uniqueness. In fact, negritude is black consciousness. It is the self – affirmation of the black people and their values with also their history. Hence Leopold Senghor, one of the foremost in pioneering the Negritude Movement in the late thirties<sup>4</sup> defines it as:

The whole of the values of civilization, cultural, economic, social, political which characterize the black people, more exactly the Negro-African world. It is essentially instinctive reason, which pervades all these values because it is reason of the impressions, reason that is seized. It is expressed in the emotions, through an abandonment of self in identification with the objects; through the myth, I mean by images, archetypes of the collective soul, especially by the myth primordial accorded to those of the cosmos. In other terms, the sense of communion, the gift of imagination, the gift of rhythm, these are the traits of negritude that we find like an indelible seal on all the works and activities of the Blackman.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, negritude is the affirmation of the pride of an African in all his/her characteristics, contributions and responsibilities to history.<sup>6</sup>

### **A Review of Some African Classical Literatures and Our Cultural Descriptions**

In an attempt to describe the African world, there is no better description that can best describe the African world unless African themselves. Hence, we have great works written by African – Nigerian scholars like Elechi Amadi who wrote *The Concubine* and made it into a film in 2007. The book was praised for its classic simplicity and timelessness, with a writing style that is simple, descriptive, and easy to understand and highly recommended for those who might want to understand the African setting before colonialism. “*The Concubine*”<sup>7</sup> is a classic Nigerian novel that explores love, tragedy, and cultural traditions as reflected in

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<sup>3</sup>A. Micklin Negritude Movement <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/negritude-movement/> (2008, June 29) Retrieved online 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 2024

<sup>4</sup>C.B. Okolo, *African Social and Political Philosophy Selected Essays* (Nsukka: Fulladu Publishers, 1993) p. 55

<sup>5</sup>L.S. Senghor, “Discours Prononce” a l’universite d’Oxford 26<sup>th</sup> October, 1961

<sup>6</sup> C.B. Okolo, *African Social and Political Philosophy Selected Essays*, p.56

<sup>7</sup>E. Amadi *The Concubine* (Nairobi: Longman Publishing Group, 1966).

the African way of life. This book was written six (6) years after Nigeria got her independence and the author is likely to have known his culture first hand and the colonial setting. In the novel we could interact with the African culture and lifestyle. The work captures the native point of view using the language, concepts, and cultural categories of the Nigerian people. As, such, it prioritizes the internal logic and meaning of the culture, rather than posing external frameworks or assumptions.

More so, in another grand style Chinua Achebe in his literary work *Things Fall Apart*<sup>8</sup> reflects the descriptive nature of culture in the Eastern part of Nigeria. The novel attempts to describe a particular situation in Africa especially the intrusion in the 1890s of white missionaries and colonial government into tribal Igbo society. Hence, the author's narrative explores contemporary complexities of African culture and the impact of colonialism on traditional societies. It is a powerful work that also describes the African society. In this classical work, the reflection of what constitutes the African way of life is a narrative that depicts who we are as a people in Africa. It shows the rich varieties of our religious practices, social life and political system. The literature was written in English which was a deliberate choice to reach a wider audience. Also, it is to subvert the dominant language of the colonizers. The work was considered to be recognized as upholding the African identity, an approach towards nationalism, and a process of decolonization. The novel reveals Chinua Achebe's ability to explore competing cultural systems and their languages to the same level of representation, dialogue and contestation.

In addition, Wole Soyinka is another prominent Nigeria playwright and political activist who have made significant contributions to African literature. His work on *A Dance of the Forest*<sup>9</sup> also reveals the interplay between matter (human) and spirit (natural) world as it presided over by the gods and spirits. Soyinka unveils the rotten aspects of the society and demonstrates that the past is no better than the present when it comes to life. The play interpolates contemporary European modes of playwriting with more traditional representations of Nigerian rites.

In similar vein, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie seems irritated with the psychometric mindset of the West against Africans. She believes that more African stories need to be told so that the continent's history, heritage and development can be preserved. She thinks that the African narrative and the stories we tell should reflect the intentions of those who are custodians of cultures as they show the existence of people, who they are and what they represent in their worldviews. In fact, she believes that the African child should be taught about African culture and history rather than just learning about cultures. This is necessitated with the fact that stories can give people confidence and dignity and

<sup>8</sup>C. Achebe *Things Fall Apart* (United Kingdom: William Heinemann Ltd, 1958).

<sup>9</sup>W. Soyinka *A Dance in the Forest* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press) 1963

shape their socio-economic and political perception. Hence, the need to be unprejudiced in narrating the African story to African children.

The above justifies the position on the need for the African story to be told to the African generation and beyond. This steadily applies to the use of language as the basic instrument in unlocking the cultural worldview of the African story.

### **Negritude in the Thought of Leopold Senghor**

Leopold Senghor's concept of Negritude is rooted in his experiences growing up in Senegal and being educated in France. He was also a beneficiary of the process of "assimilation" during French colonial era. Although, he benefitted from it, the process received criticisms from black francophone scholars because it was not well managed. Senghor held that the whole process of assimilation should complement and recognize the already existing culture in Africa. This means that there should be enculturation and not assimilation.

Negritude is a way of affirming and celebrating African culture; while also rejecting the idea that the western culture was superior.<sup>10</sup> In fact, for Senghor colonialism in a way alienated him from his roots. He sort for a way out of this alienation and believed that Negritude was an inherently creative force, and he drew on music, poetry, and other forms of art to express this. Senghor also emphasized the importance of spirituality and community, and saw Negritude as a way of creating a new kind of global community based on mutual respect and understanding. In the thought of Senghor, negritude was a way of affirming African culture in several ways.<sup>11</sup> Negritude, Senghor asserts, "Is the consciousness of being black, the simple recognition of the fact, implying acceptance and responsibility of one's destiny as a black man, one's history and one's culture. It is the refusal to assimilate, to see oneself in the 'other'. A refusal of the other is affirmation of the self".<sup>12</sup> Senghor also perceives negritude as a way of understanding and embracing the unique and diverse cultural values of Africa.

Senghor believes that African cultures have their own unique forms of knowledge and ways of seeing the world; and as such the African culture should be valued and respected. He describes negritude as the affirmation of the black man, in his wholeness, his uniqueness and his originality. He saw negritude as a way to affirm the dignity and worth of African people despite the oppression and marginalization they faced. He believed that negritude could be a source of pride and strength, and that it could help to shape a new positive identity for the African

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<sup>10</sup>L. Senghor *On the Appeal from the Race of Sheba*, trans John Reed and Clive Wake in *Selected Poems* (London: Atheneum, 1966)

<sup>11</sup>P. Kwasi, *Negritude: A Re-Evaluation*, ed. Biodun Jeyifo (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985)

<sup>12</sup>A. O. Alexander & F. Egbulonu, "The Influence of Negritude Movement on Modern African Literature and Writers: A Study of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*". In *Okike: An African Journal of New Writings*. No 51 July, 2014

<sup>13</sup>L. Senghor, *On African Socialism*. Trans Mercer Cook (New York: Praeger, 1964)



people. He also believed that negritude was more than just a political or social movement; but, rather it was also about the creative and expressive potential of African cultures.

### **The Effect of Prejudice in Narrating the African Story and Culture**

In narrating the African experience and story there is a need to avoid prejudice. It is unfortunate that beneficiaries and those who are ignorant of what culture is seem to present a story that is bias. This epistemic bias seems to have brought about a misconception of the African culture. Prejudicing African culture refers to the biases, stereotypes, and discriminatory attitudes that have historically been held against African cultures, tradition, and values. These prejudices have been perpetuated through colonialism, slavery, media representation, and other forms of cultural imperialism.<sup>14</sup> Prejudices have far reaching effects which include cultural suppression, identity erosion, loss of cultural heritage, social and economic marginalization and political disenfranchisement.

More so, it is important to unravel the dynamics and formative process in prejudicing the African culture. The belief that Western cultures and values are superior to that of Africans can cause serious danger in telling the African stories; especially when African culture and values are reduced to oversimplified or inaccurate representations. An example as observed is when African culture and values are considered as tribal or primitive. This consequently leads to cultural appropriation whereby there is an adoption of African cultural practices without understanding, respect, or compensation; thereby, ignoring or minimizing the contributions and achievements of African cultures; and viewing African cultures as inferior or in need of “civilizing” or “development”.

### **The Quest for an Authentic Narrative through an African Hermeneutics**

In African philosophical discourses, the study of African philosophy is a rational inquiry into the nature of African culture. It is investigative in nature and a reflection on what constitutes what is African. Hence, there is a need for an investigation and interrogation into the African way of life for an authentic African narrative. This is where educating ourselves about African histories and a culture becomes imperative. Through education, Africans can amplify the African voices and perspectives and as such, challenge the stereotypes and biases. This will go a long way to support African cultural expression and innovation; and thereby create room for cultural equity and inclusion. There is a need for an African hermeneutical process to interpret the intentions of cultural innovators so as to unravel the intentions of the past so as to redirect the African understanding to a more unbiased approach to the African narrative. As such, there is a need to have the right people to tell the African story. Those who should tell the African story ought to be not just people with inadequate understanding of the African cultures, but those who are expert and who have firsthand experience of the African way of life before colonialism.

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<sup>14</sup>E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Knopf Publishers: 1993)

The import of hermeneutics in the African narrative cannot be over emphasized. Inwood opines that, the concept hermeneutics carries the meaning of “to express” “to explain”, “to translate”, and “to interpret”.<sup>15</sup> Oguejiofor lends credence to this when he posits thus: “Hermeneutic involves bringing an inner meaning into the open. It entails making explicit what is implicit. It is thus a quest for meaning, one's own meaning in one's life, society and milieu, in short, in the totality of one's universe, which could be said to be constituted by one's cultural symbols”.<sup>16</sup> This vividly explains the African quest for an authentic narrative. A number of African thinkers conceive hermeneutics as a mechanism for analyzing the African experience. For instance, Okere argues that, all philosophies must spring from and deal with non-philosophical features of lived experience and its expression in religion, culture etc. by non-philosophy, it is meant to be non-reflected or un-reflected baggage of cultural background. This is premised on the grounds that, for a philosophy to be described as “African”, it must have an expression of the African life-world, this becomes the basis for reflection. In this process, hermeneutics becomes a bridge between culture and philosophy, for “it is only within the context of hermeneutics that African culture can give birth to African philosophy”.<sup>17</sup> From the foregoing, it is pertinent to note that an authentic African narrative can only come from an untainted account that clearly and precisely articulates the African experience. In this regard, ethno-philosophy and Sage philosophy play a significant role in this hermeneutical quest to divest the African narrative of intended and unintended consequences from those who seek to project an African narrative that is not really African in its conception and expression.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Leopold Senghor's concept of Negritude offers a powerful framework for understanding the complexities of African identity and the quest for authentic cultural expression. Through his philosophy, Senghor challenges dominant Western narratives and reclaims African heritage, affirming the value of black consciousness and cultural diversity. As we grapple with the ongoing legacies of colonialism and cultural assimilation, Senghor's Negritude reminds us of the importance of decolonizing our minds and reclaiming our stories. Hence, African culture and values are learned not inherited. Therefore it is important that the present generation learn and understand their culture. This will facilitate a robust African cultural identity in the face of an emerging globalization of cultures. Parents are indeed stakeholders in this regard as they teach children the African language so as to unravel the African hermeneutical process of unlocking the African world. The African cultural heritage is central to the African development as a people.

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<sup>15</sup>M. Inwood, *Hermeneutics*, in E. Craig (ed.) (London: Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <sup>1998</sup>

<sup>16</sup>J.O. Oguejiofor, *Negritude as Hermeneutics: A Reinterpretation of Leopold Sedar Senghor's Philosophy*, (American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly, <sup>83</sup>, <sup>1</sup>.)

<sup>17</sup>T. Okere, *African Philosophy: A Historico-Hermeneutical Investigation of the Conditions of its Possibility*, (Lanham: University Press of America, <sup>1983</sup>) p. <sup>18</sup>