

## NEGRITUDE AND AFRICAN IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN THOUGHT

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### **Abstract**

*The paper critically discusses the ideology of Negritude as espoused by Leopold Senghor, one of the African public intellectuals and Former President of Senegal. The idea of Negritude was also launched in other to tackle the denigrating way the West looks at Africa; especially the aspect of cultural imperialism which gave birth to slavery and colonialism. Though Negritude sees the place of identity as the basis for development and modernization, its idea of African Identity is essentialist in character. What is essentially African was based on a pristine past. This paper contended with that and argues that African Identity in this contemporary era, can be reconstructed through the critical engagement of those values and attributes that are native to Africans, and harmonize the influences of the other to it through reconciling synthesis. This process of reconciling synthesis will galvanize ideas and transform such into actions, for the development of Africa. Nonetheless, the paper in agreement with the ideology of Negritude maintains that no culture is superior to the other. As such in this paper, we placed Negritude at the heart of African contemporary thought and identity, while indicating the very essence of having a collective identity for Africans through the African idea of personhood. The paper discovers that the construction or reconstruction of African identity for development and modernization can only be enabled through transformative leadership. The implication of this discovery is that Africa needs a new crop of leaders who possess the prerequisite leadership credentials for leading modern people. More so, the paper suggests that for this to happen, Africa needs some housekeeping in the area of leadership orientation, downplaying of inner cultural imperialism and hegemony, and 'silencing the guns'. The paper employed critical analysis.*

**Keywords:** Negritude, Senghor, Africa, ideology, self-retrieval

## **Introduction**

The French Policy of Assimilation which it claimed to have adopted in its colonial territories in Africa was due to the need to spread the French idea of liberty, egalitarianism, and fraternity which shaped the French Revolution of 1789 (Washington, 1973. p.1). These ideas are at the heart of France's political value and philosophy, as such it becomes the colonial philosophy that drives French colonialism. However, the whole idea of assimilation was more of a policy statement than a reality. The French were more interested in acculturation than actually transforming the lives of the inhabitants of the French territories for the better. Just like every colonizing power who is interested in exploiting resources from the colonies, the French never cared about the welfare of the people of their colonized territories but the promotion of their economic interest. And that was a widespread practice on the continent of Africa. as Africans, having been seen as people of no civilization and no culture at all by the West was brutally pillaged and enslaved for more than four centuries in the name of “civilizing the heathen” (Washington, 1973, p.2).

Leopold Senghor, having taken advantage of this hitherto brutal system, gave an expression to the African experience in the French language. This gave the Negritude a global appeal and popularity. One of the main qualities constituting Negritude is the heritage of suffering, which, Africans are identified with today. The idea of servitude has come to mark the black man, either directly through slavery or indirectly through colonialism (Washington, 1973. p.27). This means that the idea of servitude is what the black man is identified with throughout the history of his encounters with the rest of the world. And Negritude, as liberation philosophy, was aimed at addressing the cultural aspect of such dehumanization. The main thrust of Negritude was to prove to the Europeans that Africa, the black continent, has a civilization and was also capable of contributing to the growth of the world in her own capacity and according to her worldview. That cultural superiority as practiced by the West then (and even till now) is a mistaken idea, hence, if the world must progress, all cultures must have to contribute their own quota.

This paper will attempt to look at the importance and impact of Negritude on the pride of the black race, and explore the futility of cultural hegemony which

formed the basis of slavery and imperialism by arguing that cultural cooperation is the best way forward for the world, that every culture and civilization is unique in its own way, and then attempt to explore how the concept of Negritude contributed in awakening the African consciousness which gave the negro race the vigor to begin to seek how to take their own destinies by their hands.

To achieve this aim, we will try to provide a summary of Negritude by giving out its main theses and ideas, attempt to show the connection between Negritude and the African identity by proving the influence it has on the idea of African identity. Then we shall explore how the confidence of realizing the identity gave rise to a thought system that made the demand for an end to imperialism widespread, and briefly discuss the mistaken idea of cultural imperialism, and then conclude by trying to prove how the world will be a better place if every culture was given a seat on the table in order to contribute to world civilization.

### **A Brief Profile of Leopold Senghor**

Leopold Sedar Senghor was born in Senegal in 1906. He obtained his college education in France, taking advantage of the French Policy of Assimilation. While he was in France, he met other Africans and developed the idea of Negritude in 1932. In 1934, he founded a black student newspaper known as *L'Etudiant Noir* to defend black values and awaken Negroid consciousness. In 1940, was mobilized for the Second World War, and was later taken captive for 2 years.

Senghor later joined politics and became a member of the French Parliament, representing the peasant class. He spearheaded the overseas independence group for Senegal in the French National Assembly. He later came back to Africa joined Senegalese politics and rose to become the president. Senghor died in 2001 in France.

### **The Mistaken Idea of Cultural Superiority**

Many of the Western intellectuals who are today being celebrated in Africa, wrote provocative and racist things against the continent. This is what can be called the “racialization of reason and man” which is taken to mean that race defined reason and man (Ugwuanyi, 2010. p.10). The likes Hume, Kant, Hegel, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Locke harbored anti-Semitic ideas against the black

race. For instance, Hume said that he was “apt to suspect the Negroes to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other race than the white (race)...” (Emevwo Biakolo, in Coetzee & Roux, 1998, p.2 as cited in Ugwuanyi,2010, p.10). Montesquieu on his own wondered how God who is wise could place a good soul in a “black and ugly body” ( Ogude, 1983, p.109 in Ugwuanyi,2010, p.11). Hegel referred to Africa as “the land of childhood” (Hegel,1956, p.19 in Ugwuanyi,2010). We now see how these highly revered Western intellectuals spoke of blackness in derogatory and insulting terms. The implication is that they took Africa as a people of no ideas, no civilization, and no ability to establish and maintain institutions, hence, the idea of colonialism. This portrayal of Africa by these respected Western ideal molders eventually sowed the seed of cultural imperialism in Western minds. As Olufemi Taiwo (1997) wrote, “Hegel is dead but the ghost of Hegel dominates the hallways, institutions, syllabi, institutional practices and journals of Euro-American philosophy” (cited in Ugwuanyi, 2010, p.12).

Much literature has been written by Africans and by Westerners who we might call friends of Africa, to challenge the derogatory labeling the West gave to the African continent prior to and upon their arrival on our shores. As a result of that fact, we would not wish to dwell much on that aspect in this paper. But one important argument of this paper, which we have had the pleasure of repeating, is that it was that deliberate misconception of Africa that led to slavery and the Berlin Conference of 1885, where the West “officially” decided to invade Africa. The openness of God’s creation, human creativity, and environmental factors play vital roles for cultural diversity (Walt, 2011. p.2). Walt (2011) goes ahead to argue that cultural diversity is divinely ordained and that the first 11 chapters of the book of Genesis confirm that God’s intention was not that there should be one culture or one civilization (Walt, 2011). The flood which scattered Noah’s descendants all over the earth (Gen.9:19) was part of the divine plan of God to establish cultural differences, and hence, differences in civilizations. This implies that Western civilization cannot be said to be a superior one among all other “divine civilizations”.

Therefore, the Western idea of having a superior culture that encouraged their invasion and consequent violation of Africa was (is) a mistaken idea. God, Himself does not support a monolithic culture, the reason why He confused their language at Babel and made them scatter in order to fill the earth. So based on this background, it is worthy to note that the idea of cultural imperialism is ungodly, hence should be rejected by all persons of conscience. According to

Huntington (1993), “Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, custom, tradition, and most important, religion” (cited in Ugwuanyi,2018, p.33). Huntington (1993) went further to assert that people of different civilizations have different views on the relationship between God and man, the individual and group, the citizens and the state, parents, and children, husband and wife, and many other noticeable differences (cited in Ugwuanyi,2018, p.33). Cultures overlap and complement each other, in that sense; there is no culture that is intrinsically perfect and irreproachable. Hence, a modest stance must be adopted by all in order to be able to critically study and compare different civilizations, extracting those ideas that make each of them unique, in order to shape the world better.

### **An Overview of the Concept of Negritude**

The Negro was said to be uncivilized and uncultured, the West brought their idea of civilization and culture to Africa, using religion (especially Christianity) as a means. Negritude is a counterargument to that Western idea, it was meant to be a springboard that the black race will stand on and formulate a better and more potent idea to counter colonialism and imperialism. That is, it was meant to herald what we call the *Contemporary African Thought*- an antithesis to the Western idea of Africa as people deserving of civilization through conquest. As an idea, Negritude influenced many African intellectuals who had gone to acquire the white man’s knowledge to think Africa first, thereby using such knowledge to fight for the liberation of the continent. The concept of Negritude also tries to prove that no culture is ironclad, and no civilization can be said to be superior as every people evolved according to the peculiar nature of their situation. If all cultures and worldviews will be given pride of place and if the West comes down from their ladder of superiority which breeds conquest, the world will be a better place for peace and harmony to reign. Then instead of cultural hegemony, we should have cultural cooperation.

As a worldview, Negritude does not claim cultural superiority, it is expected to serve both the European and the African; teaching everybody how to take pride in one’s culture while leaving the door open for positive influences from other cultures. Negritude is therefore a weapon for African cultural renaissance, national liberation and decolonization. It is an affirmative theory for authentic Africanity not necessary a theory for development and modernization (Wilder, 2015). Essentially, the theory is calling Africans to the fact that, there is nothing to be ashamed of in the African past, but rather there is dignity, glory, and

solemnity (Fanon,1980. p.169). At least we are not lower animals; Africans have an identity like other peoples of the world, in that we have impacted world civilization through so many ways, even before the white man set his foot on our continent. But as has been recorded, though Senegal was said to be a colony of France, the distinction between citizens and subjects remained (Washington, 1973. pp. 14-15). Going forward, Senghor clearly stated the difference in the manner of civilizations when he said thus “Let us understand each other clearly, it is not the reasoning eye of Europe, it is the reason of touch, better still, the reason of embrace, the systematic reason more closely related to the Greek *logos* than Latin *ratio*” (Senghor as cited in Abanuka, 2013. p.84). This simply means that every civilization developed according to the prevailing circumstances of the environment. And even the Negro African thinks and acts affectionately (Abanuka, 2013, p.83), the emotional reasoning still has something tangible to contribute to the world in terms of furthering civilization. Two different approaches to reason couldn’t have birth to the same civilization; therefore, the black race should be given a seat on the table of world governance, so as to contribute their own quota.

This is not however to rule out cross-culturalism, as this paper intends to argue that Africa should begin to accept beneficial ideas from elsewhere that could fit into the African thought system in order to reinforce the African identity and be able to play a vital role in the world. Ugwuanyi (2018) maintains that the need to “apply endogenous African perspective” has become very paramount in Africa in order for us to be able to contribute better to world civilization. That is the essence of Negritude and the search for a more rational and globally appealing African identity. But we must begin with building on what we have so as to be able to make necessary improvements. Hence, Negritude is a humble way of Africans telling the entire world that we should not contribute to being derogated. That we have an abundance of civilization we can articulately tap into in order to make a mark for ourselves, to the benefit of the entire world.

### **Contemporary African Thought System**

By contemporary African thought system, we mean the thought systems of post-independent African political elites and intellectuals. It is a form of intellectual hybridization that seeks to interrogate the legacy of colonialism and African indigenous knowledge, in order, to produce something new that should serve as a basis to foster Africa’s development (Asuquo, 2019). Some of these thought systems are primarily articulated to completely decolonize Africa in all

ramifications. Thought is a mental exercise which is embedded in a people's worldview. The mental nature of thought presupposes that it has a lot to do with the past. It is a thought system that helps us to validate, accept, reject, approve or disapprove of whatever we encounter in life. Hence, the contemporary African thought is that pattern of thinking which is led by reason, and that helps to appreciate the essence of African modernity, while eschewing those practices and traditions that have the tendency to hamper such modernity. Be they the ones coming from the West; like modern slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism, cultural hegemony, and so on, or the ones coming from among us like African Socialism and other theories of development and modernity.

As Ugwuanyi (2010) captures it, the African thought has been considerably humanist, putting man at the center of everything about thinking and the world in general (p,6). This implies that man is the agent saddled with the responsibility of fashioning thought, modifying, and using it to better the lives of his fellows. Man is the one who thinks, so one cannot talk about thinking without making reference to the "thinking man" as Descartes (2017) puts it. It is therefore the responsibility of the African to harbor those thoughts that have the potential of effectively slugging it out with other thought systems of the world in order to rescue Africa from the brinks and from being the ideological, economic, religious, political, and technological dumping ground of the world (Steyn & Mpofu, 2021). Africa needs strong men of thought who are neither afraid nor ignorant to address the rest of the world as regards what Africa wants and how we want to organize ourselves politically and economically. The kind of political leadership we desire is not those leaders who will easily jump at the slavish loan offers of the West and China, thereby mortgaging the future of our children and our children's children.

The contemporary African thought shall also be the thought of conscience. It shall be the thought system that encourages harmony, integration, and reconciliation. In this thought era, every idea is important, hence no idea is useless. In doing this we propose Nkrumah's *Consciencism*. We should embrace a dialectical harmony of the three aspects of thought in Africa; the Christian, Islamic, and African thought systems, and harmonize them in such a way that they will be used in the interest of Africa and Africans. Abanuka (2013) notes that Philosophical *Consciencism* entails that every man should be treated as an end, not a means to an end (p,98). This is the essence of contemporary African thought. Positive action must come to overwhelm negative action (Abanuka, 2013, p,99). There will be no place for inaction, as all hands will be on deck to

help institute and establish the thought system that will help Africa to compete in these contemporary times. Neo-colonialism is a greater danger for independent African countries than colonialism, as the end of neocolonialism is to divide the people from their leaders and cause the rulers to become instruments of oppression on behalf of the colonialists (Abanuka, 2013, p,99). That is exactly what a contemporary African thought pattern is meant to fight against. It seeks to make the African believe in the 'African Self' for economic and political emancipation. The 'African Self' is the consciousness that characterizes the African as a unique being with others. It is a collected Self that is open for progressive engagement with the other on equal terms.

### **The Idea of an African Identity**

Having seen the arguments of Negritude which is geared towards reinforcing the ancient culture of Africans, and the need for Africans take pride in what is intrinsically African, in order, to comfortably contribute their own ideas toward the transformation of the world. To this end, Africans must embrace the positive contributions of Negritude and other Afrocentric writings, so as to be able to chart a formidable course for development and modernization. Therefore, there should be a critical engagement with Negritude and other theories for the formulation of enduring ideologies that can be the basis for African Identity in the modern age. It is pertinent to note that if Africa must create an identity which could attract respect from those who deride us, we must do some sort of housekeeping in Africa.

While it a fact of history that during the colonial era Africa was exploited, plunder, and looted by the powers and made to be the periphery of the global capitalist order. There is also the fact that the colonial powers could not be able to do all this if there are no inner collaborators among Africans. These inner collaborators are the greedy leaders who are only interested in the individual self at the expense of the collective self. Consequently, in the postcolonial era, we are witnessing a new breed of politicians who are not corrupt, power-drunk but blinded with the privileges without service to the people. They have institutionalized incompetence, nepotism, bigotry, and backwardness in the various countries in Africa. So, the housekeeping must start from replacing this crop of African Leaders alongside with the mindset and culture in which things are done in the political and economic realm of African society. Leadership is very essential for the transformational change of any society. Singapore under Lee has proved it (Asuquo & Akerele, 2021). Therefore, Africa needs a new



generation of leaders who have the essential leadership credentials to lead their people in the modern age.

Nevertheless, the stage of the housekeeping is to downplay this whole idea of cultural hegemony and superiority that, led the Europeans to invade in the guise of ‘civilizing Africans’. It is disheartening that this idea of cultural and ideological hegemony is not totally absent from among Africans themselves. Different cultures and ethnic groups within Nigeria and Africa in general, have been at loggerhead over the years, trying to superimpose their ideas and culture on one another. The same thing Africans are complaining against the West is still at home in Africa. Africans must deliberately expunge infighting in the form of civil war, violent sectional conflicts, ethnoreligious unrest, and undemocratic means to capture political power by constructing an identity that connotes progress, peace, mutual respect, and shared prosperity for all. As Fanon (1980) argues, the fact of an ancient civilization of Songhai and others does not take away the fact that today’s African has to work to overcome hunger and underdevelopment (p.168). One of the ways of achieving such is by constructing an identity that is open to positive influences from the other, which, could be inspired by the ideology of Negritude.

More so, Walt (2011) exposes the already known poverty issues in Africa, that one out of every three Africans does not get enough to eat. And as at 1990, 170 million Africans were already victims to chronic hunger (p,23). The number keeps rising by the day! So, the need for constructing an African identity, which will be so modest and ready to tap from other areas of the world (so long as such foreign ideas can help to tackle Africa’s domestic challenges), while building its foundations from an African worldview, cannot be overemphasized. While we disagree with the essentialist ontology of Negritude when it sees what is essentially African as emotional. Nonetheless, the idea of African personhood that is relational and open which Negritude also espoused, is one that fit properly with the idea for a new Africa.

The African idea of personhood should be reinforcing in the consciousness of modern Africans if they want to integrate the legacies and ideology that the colonialists gave to us. Fundamentally, the African sees personhood as one who is part and parcel of the community. As Tutu (1999) maintains, an African is a person through other people. So we don’t buy into the Cartesian dictum of “I think therefore I am”, but we believe that being human has to do with belonging to our communities and bearing one another’s burden (p.35). Therefore, the African identity being canvassed in this paper will have the African idea of

person being a defining factor, if it is to address African challenges. Africans cannot continue to seek solutions to their problems through Western lens alone. Africans must first seek the African solutions, when they can't be recollected through research, Africans can look to others. And whenever plausible external solution is found, African must try to interrogate it and domesticate it, rather than transpose it blindly into Africa. By African definition of personhood, someone should never be living in affluence while his kinsmen languish in abject poverty. This is because according to Kanu (2015), a person is understood in reference to his kinship, hence, the reality of the community is prior to the individual.

There is a possibility that when the idea of African personhood is made the basis for African identity can help in a way to fight poverty, fight corruption and redistribute wealth in Africa. The culture of unnecessary amassing of wealth through corruption for the exclusive pleasure of the individual at the detriment of the community is quite unAfrican. This is because Africans believe in communitarian living, and nobody is considered a person in the African sense if he/she becomes distanced from his/her community.

The quest for this identity should be a holistic one; in language, culture, arts, politics, and education. Africa must begin to evolve African ideas that will shape her, stepping out of the system handed over to her by the colonialists. Some other parts of the world, like India, China, Brazil, and other countries who were once colonized have already left Africa behind in this urgent task for the birth of an identity. Africa cannot continue to lag behind, hence the need for this task of identity reconstruction. Africans cannot continue upholding values system which engenders corruption and dishonesty. The African value of caring for one another must become one of the bedrocks of the African identity being canvassed by this paper. This African identity is in line with what Fanon (1980) calls *National Culture*. It is the sum total of efforts made by a people (Africans) in the sphere of thought to take its place at the very heart of the struggle for freedom and emancipation (p. 188). This Fanonian national culture will lift the African continent from the state of underdevelopment to a state of development. This idea of African identity is beyond lip service, as it requires purposeful engagements and actions. Raising Africa to its lofty heights has gone beyond "speech making" (p,189). It must involve active participation in the affairs of Africa at all levels and fronts within and beyond the continent.

Africa is endowed both in human and material aspects of living. The natural resources locked beneath the African soil are so numerous to mention, the reason

why other parts of the world envy and jostle to subjugate Africa. When Africans harness and utilize these abundant natural materials to the benefit of the African people, they will begin to grow as a people and other parts of the world will begin to take them serious. One of the ways Africans can do this, is by evolving an African unique way of doing things that involve faith in the Self without neglecting the other. Africans must engage in the process of self-retrieval through critical interrogation of those values and attributes native to Africa and harmonize external influences with it, so as to galvanize ideas and transform such into actions, for the development of Africa. By doing this, every part of Africa will benefit and the other can see something novel in Africa that can be transpose into other climes.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has stressed the need for Africa to use the philosophy of Negritude as a launch pad to put her at the pedestal of development, using the African thought system as a vehicle. Negritude, and other postcolonial African thought theories, has emphasized the uniqueness of the Negro civilization; insisting that, contrary to the Western held belief, it is worthy and able to make concrete contributions to further world civilization and development. Thus, the African should utilize this impetus afforded by the concept of Negritude and negotiate himself out of socio-economic and political doldrums. This can be achieved by evolving a particular way of thought, an identity that will act as an agent for the decolonization of the African mind. In doing this, we shall effectively utilize our God-given resources, and usher in authentic development in the African continent.

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