

PERSPECTIVES ON AFRICA  
A READER IN CULTURE, HISTORY,  
AND REPRESENTATION

edited and introduced by

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 **BLACKWELL**  
*P u b l i s h e r s*

Kenya.

# NEGRITUDE: A HUMANISM OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

LÉOPOLD SÉDAR SENGHOR

During the last thirty or so years that we have been proclaiming negritude, it has become customary, especially among English-speaking critics, to accuse us of *racialism*. This is probably because the word is not of English origin. But, in the language of Shakespeare, is it not in good company with the words humanism and socialism? Mphahleles<sup>1</sup> have been sent about the world saying: "Negritude is an inferiority complex"; but the same word cannot mean both "racialism" and "inferiority complex" without contradiction. The most recent attack comes from Ghana, where the government has commissioned a poem entitled "I Hate Negritude" – as if one could hate oneself, hate one's being, without ceasing to be.

No, negritude is none of these things. It is neither racialism nor self-negation. Yet it is not just affirmation; it is rooting oneself in oneself, and self-confirmation: confirmation of one's *being*. Negritude is nothing more or less than what some English-speaking Africans have called the *African personality*. It is no different from the "black personality" discovered and proclaimed by the American New Negro movement. As the American Negro poet,

Langston Hughes, wrote after the first world war: "We, the creators of the new generation, want to give expression to our *black personality* without shame or fear . . . We know we are handsome. Ugly as well. The drums weep and the drums laugh." Perhaps our only originality, since it was the West Indian poet, Aimé Césaire, who coined the word negritude, is to have attempted to define the concept a little more closely; to have developed it as a weapon, as an instrument of liberation and as a contribution to the humanism of the twentieth century.

But, once again, what is negritude? Ethnologists and sociologists today speak of "different civilizations." It is obvious that peoples differ in their ideas and their languages, in their philosophies and their religions, in their customs and their institutions, in their literature and their art. Who would deny that Africans, too, have a certain way of conceiving life and of living it? A certain way of speaking, singing, and dancing; of painting and sculpturing, and even of laughing and crying? Nobody, probably; for otherwise we would not have been talking about "Negro art" for the last sixty years and Africa would be the

<sup>1</sup> The South African writer, Ezekiel Mphahlele, author, among other books, of *The African Image*, strongly disagrees with the concept of negritude.

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only continent today without its ethnologists and sociologists. What, then, is negritude? It is – as you can guess from what precedes – *the sum of the cultural values of the black world*; that is, a certain active presence in the world, or better, in the universe. It is, as John Reed and Clive Wake call it, a certain “way of relating oneself to the world and to others.”<sup>2</sup> Yes, it is essentially relations with others, an opening out to the world, contact and participation with others. Because of what it is, negritude is necessary in the world today: it is a humanism of the twentieth century.

### “The Revolution of 1889”

But let us go back to 1885 and the morrow of the Berlin Conference. The European nations had just finished, with Africa, their division of the planet. Including the United States of America, they were five or six at the height of their power who dominated the world. Without any complexes, they were proud of their material strength; prouder even of their science, and paradoxically, of their *race*. It is true that at that time this was not a paradox. Gobineau, the nineteenth-century philosopher of racial supremacy, had, by a process of osmosis, even influenced Marx, and Disraeli was the great theoretician of that “*English race*, proud, tenacious, confident in itself, that no climate, no change can undermine.” (The italics are mine.) Leo Frobenius, the German ethnologist, one of the first to apprehend the rich complexity of African culture, writes in *The Destiny of Civilizations*: “Each of the great nations that considers itself personally responsible for the ‘destiny of the world’ believes it possesses the key to the understanding of the whole and the other nations. It is an attitude raised from the past.”

In fact, this attitude “raised from the past” had begun to be discredited toward the end

of the nineteenth century by books like Bergson’s *Time and Free Will*, which was published in 1889. Since the Renaissance, the values of European civilization had rested essentially on discursive reason and facts, on logic and matter. Bergson, with an eminently dialectical subtlety, answered the expectation of a public weary of scientism and naturalism. He showed that facts and matter, which are the objects of discursive reason, were only the outer surface that had to be transcended by intuition in order to achieve a *vision in depth of reality*.

But the “Revolution of 1889” – as we shall call it – did not only affect art and literature, it completely upset the sciences. In 1880, only a year before the invention of the word electron, a distinction was still being drawn between matter and energy. The former was inert and unchangeable, the latter was not. But what characterized both of them was their permanence and their continuity. They were both subject to a strict mechanical determinism. Matter and energy had, so to speak, existed from the beginning of time; they could change their shape, but not their substance. All we lacked in order to know them objectively in space and time were sufficiently accurate instruments of investigation and measurement.

Well, in less than fifty years, all these principles were to be outmoded and even rejected. Thirty years ago already, the new discoveries of science – quanta, relativity, wave mechanics, the uncertainty principle, electron spin – had upset the nineteenth-century notion of determinism, which denied man’s free will, along with the concepts of matter and energy. The French physicist, Broglie, revealed to us the duality of matter and energy, or the wave-particle principle that underlies things; the German physicist, Heisenberg, showed us that objectivity was an illusion and that we could not observe facts without

modifying them; others showed the scale of the infinitely small as immensely great, particles act on matter. Since then, the physico-chemical matter itself, could no longer be unchangeable. Even in the field of rough approximations, no more certainties. It was enough to scrape the things and of facts to realize just the instability there is, defying our instruments, probably because they are mechanical: *material*.

It was on the basis of these discoveries, through a combination of logic and amazing intuition, of science and inner experience, Teilhard de Chardin was able to transcend the traditional dichotomies which were so difficult to reject, to reveal to us the living unity of the universe. On the basis of the new scientific discoveries, Chardin transcends the old dichotomies of philosophers and the scientists and Engels had perpetuated by precedence over the spirit. He shows the theory that the stuff of the universe is composed of two realities, but in reality in the shape of two phases: there is not matter and energy, matter and spirit, but spirit-matter, or space-time. Matter and spirit are one. “network of relations,” as the French philosopher, Bachelard, called it: energy, network of forces. In matter – and therefore, only one energy, with two aspects. The first, *tangential energy*, is external, is material and quantifiable together the corpuscles, or particles, make up matter. The other, which is internal, is psychic and is centripetal force. It organizes the complex the center-to-center relation of internal particles of a corpuscle. If force is force, it follows that radial force is creative force, the “primary spirit” and tangential energy is on

<sup>2</sup> Léopold Sédar Senghor: *Selected Poems*, introduced and translated by John Reed and Clive Wake. See also: *Léopold Sédar Senghor: Prose and Poetry*, by the same authors.

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It was on the basis of these discoveries, through a combination of logical coherence and amazing intuition, of scientific experiment and inner experience, that Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was able to transcend the traditional dichotomies with a new dialectic, to reveal to us the living, throbbing unity of the universe. On the basis, then, of the new scientific discoveries, Teilhard de Chardin transcends the old dualism of the philosophers and the scientists, which Marx and Engels had perpetuated by giving matter precedence over the spirit. He advanced the theory that the stuff of the universe is not composed of two realities, but of a single reality in the shape of two phenomena; that there is not matter and energy, not even matter and spirit, but spirit-matter, just as there is space-time. Matter and spirit become a "network of relations," as the French philosopher, Bachelard, called it: energy, defined as a network of forces. In matter-spirit there is, therefore, only one energy, which has two aspects. The first, *tangential energy*, which is external, is material and quantitative. It links together the corpuscles, or particles, that make up matter. The other, *radial energy*, which is internal, is psychic and qualitative. It is centripetal force. It organizes into a complex the center-to-center relations of the internal particles of a corpuscle. Since energy is force, it follows that radial energy is the creative force, the "primary stuff of things," and tangential energy is only a residual

product "caused by the interreactions of the elementary 'centers' of the consciousness, imperceptible where life has not yet occurred, but clearly apprehensible by our experience at a sufficiently advanced stage in the development of matter" (Teilhard de Chardin). It follows that where life has not yet occurred the physico-chemical laws remain valid within the limitations we have defined above, while in the living world, as we rise from plant to animal and from animal to Man, the psyche increases in consciousness until it makes and expresses itself in freedom. "Makes itself": that is, *realizes* itself, by means of – yet by transcending – material well-being through an increase of spiritual life. "Realizes itself": by that I mean it develops in harmonious fashion the two complementary elements of the soul: the heart and the mind.

### The Philosophy of Being

The paradox is only apparent when I say that negritude, by its ontology (that is, its philosophy of being), its moral law and its aesthetic, is a response to the modern humanism that European philosophers and scientists have been preparing since the end of the nineteenth century, and as Teilhard de Chardin and the writers and artists of the mid-twentieth century present it.

Firstly, African ontology. Far back as one may go into his past, from the northern Sudanese to the southern Bantu, the African has always and everywhere presented a concept of the world which is diametrically opposed to the traditional philosophy of Europe. The latter is essentially *static, objective, dichotomic*; it is, in fact, dualistic, in that it makes an absolute distinction between body and soul, matter and spirit. It is founded on separation and opposition: on analysis and conflict. The African, on the other hand, conceives the world, beyond the diversity of its forms, as a fundamentally mobile, yet unique,

reality that seeks synthesis. This needs development.

It is significant that in Wolof, the main language of Senegal, there are at least three words to translate the word "spirit": *xel*, *sago*, or *degal*, whereas images have to be used for the word "matter": *lef*(thing) or *yaram* (body). The African is, of course, sensitive to the external world, to the material aspect of beings and things. It is precisely because he is more so than the white European, because he is sensitive to the tangible qualities of things – shape, color, smell, weight, etc. – that the African considers these things merely as signs that have to be interpreted and transcended in order to reach the reality of human beings. Like others, more than others, he distinguishes the pebble from the plant, the plant from the animal, the animal from Man; but, once again, the accidents and appearances that differentiate these kingdoms only illustrate different aspects of the same reality. This reality is *being* in the ontological sense of the word, and it is life force. For the African, matter in the sense the Europeans understand it, is only a system of signs which translates the single reality of the universe: being, which is spirit, which is life force. Thus, the whole universe appears as an infinitely small, and at the same time an infinitely large, network of life forces which emanate from God and end in God, who is the source of all life forces. It is He who vitalizes and devitalizes all other beings, all the other life forces.

I have not wandered as far as might be thought from modern ontology. European ethnologists, Africanists and artists use the same words and the same expressions to designate the ultimate reality of the universe they are trying to know and to express: "spider's web," "network of forces," "communicating vessels," "system of canals," etc. This is not very different, either, from what the scientists

and chemists say. As far as African ontology is concerned, too, there is no such thing as dead matter: every being, every thing – be it only a grain of sand – radiates a life force, a sort of wave-particle; and sages, priests, kings, doctors, and artists all use it to help bring the universe to its fulfilment.

For the African, contrary to popular belief, is not passive in face of the order – or disorder – of the world. His attitude is fundamentally ethical. If the moral law of the African has remained unknown for so long, it is because it derives, naturally, from his conception of the world: from his ontology – so naturally, that both have remained unknown, denied even, by Europeans, because they have not been brought to their attention by being re-examined by each new generation of Africans.

So God tired of all the possibilities that remained confined within Him, unexpressed, dormant, and as if dead. And God opened His mouth, and He spoke at length a word that was harmonious and rhythmical. All these possibilities expressed by the mouth of God *existed* and had the vocation *to live*: to express God in their turn, by establishing the link with God and all the forces deriving from Him.

In order to explain this *morality in action* of negritude, I must go back a little. Each of the identifiable life forces of the universe – from the grain of sand to the ancestor<sup>3</sup> – is, itself and in its turn, a network of life forces – as modern physical chemistry confirms: a network of elements that are contradictory in appearance but really *complementary*. Thus, for the African, Man is composed, of course, of matter and spirit, of body and soul; but at the same time he is also composed of a virile and a feminine element: indeed of several "souls." Man is therefore a composition of mobile life forces which interlock: a world of solidarities that seek to knit themselves together. Because he exists, he is at once end and beginning: end of

the three orders of the mineral, and the animal, but beginning order.

Let us ignore for the moment orders and examine the human Man and based on him, lies this of concentric circles, bigger and and higher, until they reach G the whole of the universe. Each village, province, nation, hum the image of Man and by vocation society.

So, for the African, living according to moral law means living according to a moral law composed as it is of contradictory complementary life forces. Thus to the stuff of the universe are added threads of the tissue of life. Thus the contradictions of the elements toward making the life forces come to one another: in himself first but also in the whole of human life, bringing the complementary together in this way that Man is in their movement towards God reinforcing them, he reinforces himself he passes from *existing* to *being* reach the highest form of being God has this quality; and He has fully as creation, and all that exist themselves and express themselves

## Dialogue

Ethnologists have often praised balance, and the harmony of organization, of black society, which is based on the *community* and on the *group*, which, because it was founded on reciprocity, the group had no individual without crushing him; he blossoms as a person. We emphasize at this point the characteristics of negritude and its place in contemporary human life, permitting black Africa to move

<sup>3</sup> In African religion, the ancestors are the essential link between the living and God. This is why they are surrounded by a complex ritual so as to ensure the maintenance of this link.

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the three orders of the mineral, the vegetable, and the animal, but beginning of the human order.

Let us ignore for the moment the first three orders and examine the human order. Above Man and based on him, lies this fourth world of concentric circles, bigger and bigger, higher and higher, until they reach God along with the whole of the universe. Each circle – family, village, province, nation, humanity – is, in the image of Man and by vocation, a close-knit society.

So, for the African, living according to the moral law means living according to his nature, composed as it is of contradictory elements but complementary life forces. Thus he gives stuff to the stuff of the universe and tightens the threads of the tissue of life. Thus he transcends the contradictions of the elements and works toward making the life forces complementary to one another: in himself first of all, as Man, but also in the whole of human society. It is by bringing the complementary life forces together in this way that Man reinforces them in their movement towards God and, in reinforcing them, he reinforces himself: that is, he passes from *existing* to *being*. He cannot reach the highest form of being, for in fact only God has this quality; and He has it all the more fully as creation, and all that exists, fulfil themselves and express themselves in Him.

## Dialogue

Ethnologists have often praised the unity, the balance, and the harmony of African civilization, of black society, which was based both on the *community* and on the *person*, and in which, because it was founded on dialogue and reciprocity, the group had priority over the individual without crushing him, but allowing him to blossom as a person. I would like to emphasize at this point how much these characteristics of negritude enable it to find its place in contemporary humanism, thereby permitting black Africa to make its contribu-

tion to the "Civilization of the Universal" which is so necessary in our divided but interdependent world of the second half of the twentieth century. A contribution, first of all, to international cooperation, which must be and which shall be the cornerstone of that civilization. It is through these virtues of negritude that decolonization has been accomplished without too much bloodshed or hatred and that a positive form of cooperation based on "dialogue and reciprocity" has been established between former colonizers and colonized. It is through these virtues that there has been a new spirit at the United Nations, where the "no" and the bang of the fist on the table are no longer signs of strength. It is through these virtues that peace through cooperation could extend to South Africa, Rhodesia, and the Portuguese colonies, if only the dualistic spirit of the whites would open itself to dialogue.

In fact, the contribution of negritude to the "Civilization of the Universal" is not of recent origin. In the fields of literature and art, it is contemporary with the "Revolution of 1889." The French poet, Arthur Rimbaud (1854–1891), had already associated himself with negritude. But in this article I want to concentrate on the "Negro revolution" – the expression belongs to Emmanuel Berl – which helped to stir European plastic art at the beginning of this century.

Art, like literature, is always the expression of a certain conception of the world and of life; the expression of a certain philosophy and, above all, of a certain ontology. Corresponding to the philosophical and scientific movement of 1889 there was not only a literary evolution – symbolism then surrealism – but another revolution, or rather revolutions, in art, which were called, taking only the plastic arts, cubism, expressionism, fauvism, and cubism. A world of life forces that have to be tamed is substituted for a closed world of permanent and continuous substances that have to be reproduced.

Since the Greek *kouroi* (the term used for

the statues of young men in classical Greek sculpture), the art of the European West had always been based on realism; the work of art had always been an imitation of the object: a *physiōs mimēsis*, to use Aristotle's expression: a corrected imitation, "improved," "idealized" by the requirements of rationality, but imitation all the same. The interlude of the Christian Middle Ages is significant insofar as Christianity is itself of Asian origin and strongly influenced by the African, St. Augustine. To what will the artist then give expression? No longer to purely objective matter, but to his spiritual self: that is, to his inner self, his spirituality, and beyond himself to the spirituality of his age and of mankind. No longer by means of perspective, relief, and chiaroscuro, but, as the French painter, Bazaine, writes, "by the most hidden workings of instinct and the sensibility." Another French painter, André Masson, makes it more explicit when he writes: "By a simple interplay of shapes and colors legibly ordered." This interplay of shapes and colors is that of the life forces and which has been illustrated in particular by a painter like Soulages.

"Interplay of life forces": and so we come back to - negritude. As the French painter, Soulages, in fact, once told me, the African aesthetic is "that of contemporary art." I find indirect proof of this in the fact that, while the consecration and spread of the new aesthetic revolution have occurred in France, the majority of its promoters were of Slav and Germanic origin; people who, like the Africans, belong to the mystical civilizations of the senses. Of course, without the discovery of African art, the revolution would still have taken place, but probably without such vigor and assurance and such a deepening of the knowledge of Man. The fact that an art of the subject and of the spirit should have germinated outside Europe, in Africa - to which

ethnologists had not yet given its true place in world culture - was proof of the human value of the message of the new European art.

Over and above its aesthetic lesson - to which we shall return later - what Picasso, Braque and the other artists and early explorers of African art were seeking was, in the first place, just this: its human value. For in black Africa art is not a separate activity, in itself or for itself: it is a social activity, a technique of living, a handicraft in fact. But it is a major activity that brings all other activities to their fulfilment, like prayer in the Christian Middle Ages: birth and education, marriage and death, sport, even war. All human activities down to the least daily act must be integrated into the subtle interplay of life forces - family, tribal, national, world, and universal forces. This harmonious interplay of life forces must be helped by *subordinating* the lower forces - mineral, vegetable, and animal - to their relations with Man, and the forces of human society to its relations with the Divine Being through the intermediary of the Ancestral Beings.

A year or two ago I attended, on the cliffs of Bandiagara in the Mali Republic, an entertainment which was microcosm of Dogon art.<sup>4</sup> Even though it was but a pale reflection of the splendors of the past, this "play-concert" was an extremely significant expression of the Dogon vision of the universe. It was declaimed, sung, and danced; sculptured and presented in costume. The whole of the Dogon universe was portrayed in this symbiosis of the arts, as is the custom in black Africa. The universe - heaven and earth - was therefore *represented* through the intermediary of Man, whose ideogram is the same as that of the universe. Then the world was *re-presented* by means of masks, each of which portrayed, at one and the same time, a totemic animal, an ancestor and a spirit. Others portrayed the

foreign peoples: nomadic Fulani Europeans. The aim of the entertainment by means of the symbiosis of the song, dance, sculpture, and painting techniques of integration - to the universe and the contemporary world in a more harmonious way by making African humor, which corrects the expense of the foreign Fulani conquerors. But this ontological entertainment - that is, an artistic creation - as well: a joy for the soul for the eyes and ears.

It was perhaps - indeed, it was this last aspect of the African aesthetic that first attracted Picasso and I toward 1906, they discovered Africa were inspired by it. For my part me from the start of the D concert," even before I tried to understand meaning, was the harmony of form, of color and rhythm, that it. It is this harmony by which, I was moved; which, in the reality, acts on the invisible appearances are only signs, subordinated in a complementary fashion to or establishes the link between them through the intermediary of Man. I mean the attributes of man to our senses: shape and color, time, movement and rhythm.

I have said that these appearances are more than that: they are signs, the "lines of force" of things insofar as they are used in their only their characteristics of sound, movement, and rhythm. Lods, who teaches at the National Art of Senegal, was showing to his students intend exhibiting at the Festival of African Arts. I was struck by the noble and elegant shape and color. When I dis-

<sup>4</sup> The Dogon are a West African tribe among whom wood sculpture has achieved a very remarkable degree of excellence.

The Fulani are a nomadic pastoral people.



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 struck by the noble and elegant interplay of  
 shape and color. When I discovered that the

pictures were not completely abstract, that  
 they portrayed ladies, princes, and noble  
 animals, I was almost disappointed. There was  
 no need for me to be: the very interplay of  
 colored shapes perfectly expressed that elegant  
 nobility that characterizes the art of the  
 northern Sudan.

This, then, is Africa’s lesson in aesthetics:  
 art does not consist in photographing nature  
 but in taming it, like the hunter when he repro-  
 duces the call of the hunted animal, like a  
 separated couple, or two lovers, calling to each  
 other in their desire to be reunited. The call is  
 not the simple reproduction of the cry of the  
 Other; it is a call of complementarity, a *song*: a  
 call of harmony to the harmony of union that  
 enriches by increasing *Being*. We call it pure  
 harmony. Once more, Africa teaches that art is  
 not photography; if there are images they are  
 rhythmical. I can suggest or create anything –  
 a man, a moon, a fruit, a smile, a tear – simply  
 by assembling shapes and colors (painting  
 sculpture), shapes and movement (dance),  
 timbre and tones (music), provided that this  
 assembling is not an aggregation, but that it is  
 ordered and, in short, rhythmical. For it is  
 rhythm – the main virtue, in fact, of negritude  
 – that gives the work of art its beauty. Rhythm  
 is simply the movement of attraction or repul-  
 sion that expresses the life of the cosmic forces;  
 symmetry and asymmetry, repetition or oppo-  
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 meaningful signs that shapes and colors,  
 timbre and tones, are.

Before concluding, I should like to pause for  
 a moment on the apparent contradiction that  
 must have been noticed between contempo-  
 rary European art (which places the emphasis  
 on the subject) and African art (which places it  
 on the object). This is because the “Revolution  
 of 1889” began by reacting, of necessity,  
 against the superstition of the *object*; and the  
 existentialist ontology of the African, while it  
 is based on the being-subject, has God as its

<sup>5</sup> The Fulani are a nomadic pastoral people found throughout West Africa.



pole-object; God who is the fullness of Being. What was noticed, then, was simply a nuance. For the contemporary European, and the African, the work of art, like the act of knowing, expresses the confrontation, the embrace, of subject and object: "That penetration," wrote Bazaine, "that great common structure, that deep resemblance between Man and the world, without which there is no living form."

We have seen what constitutes for the

African the "deep resemblance between Man and the world." For him, then, the act of restoring the order of the world by re-creating it through art is the reinforcement of the life forces in the universe and, consequently, of God, the source of all life forces – or, in other words, the Being of the universe. In this way, we reinforce ourselves at the same time, both as interdependent forces and as beings whose being consists in revitalizing ourselves in the re-creation of art.

ON 1

... In this chapter we shall deal with a problem, which is felt to be fundamental, the legitimacy of the claims of a political party to be recognized that the political party mobilizes the people hardly to solve the problem of legitimacy. The political party starts from living reality and it is this reality, in the name of the state, that weighs down the present and the future of men and women, that they fix their eyes on it. The political party may well speak in the terms of the nation, but what it really wants is that the people who are living should understand the need to take part in the political life, simply, they wish to continue to live.

Today we know that in the first stage of the national struggle colonialism tries to suppress national demands by putting forward economic doctrines. As soon as these demands are set out, colonialists try to ignore them, recognizing with humility that the territory is suffering from serious underdevelopment which requires a great economic and social effort. But it so happens that certain spectacles (centers of work for the unemployed) are opened here and there, for example, the crystallization of national consciousness in a few years. But, sooner or later, colonialism realizes that it is not within its powers to suppress a project of economic and social development which will satisfy the aspirations of the people.