

## Reviving the Negritude Movement: Strategy For Enhancing African Cultural Independence

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**Abstract:** Negritude was an African-brewed social, cultural and intellectual tradition of the 1930s based on the ‘philosophy of blackness.’ It contains the requisite parallels and inter-relationships in the history of thought in Africa. The study examined the historiography of Negritude in terms of the idea and its thinkers, culture and the historical context in which it was produced – factors which qualify it for revitalisation and re-ennobling. From this perspective, we demonstrated that Africa has made enormous contributions to world intellectual and cultural traditions, even as the continent currently grapples with the need to maintain its indigenous African cultures and traditions in the face of overwhelming and seemingly irresistible Western cultural imperialism. It began by tracing the origin and the role played by the Negritude movement in recovering and regenerating African culture, in reaction to the French Policy of Assimilation in her African colonies before Independence. Using media and non-media sources, the study concludes that Negritude deserves to be revitalised and Africa culturally de-marginalised, as the continent has made and continues to make enviable contributions to world history and civilization, in spite of the current realities of imported global technology.

**Key words:** Negritude • Africa • Culture • Civilisation • French and Assimilation

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### INTRODUCTION

Negritude is both a concept and a movement whose development is located in historical, cultural and sociological contexts and which provoked wide-ranging implications for those affected by the phenomenon. It refers to the literary and ideological movement developed by Francophone black intellectuals, writers and politicians in France in the 1930s; these included the Martiniquan poet Aime Cesaire, the Senegalese President and poet Leopold Sedar Senghor and the Guianan poet Leon Damas. The group found solidarity in a common black identity through which it rejected the French colonial racism. For them, the shared black heritage of members of the African Diaspora remained the best instrument for fighting the French political and intellectual hegemony [1]. Thus, the movement became very purposive and ambitious as a significant aspect of the comprehensive reaction of black people throughout the world to the colonial situation.

The movement which took root in Paris drew inspiration from the Haitian anthropologist Anteno Firmin who, in 1885, published an early work on negritude *De*

*l’Egalite des Races Humaines (On the Equality of Human Races)*, as a rebuttal to French writer, Count Arthur de Gobineau’s work *Essai sur l’inegalite Races Humaines (Essay on the Inequality of Human Races)*. Negritude was also inspired by the Harlem Renaissance through the works of authors such as Claude McKay and Langston Hughes who laid the groundwork for black expression in the United States of America. Negritude reflected the conditions of the French-speaking Africans in the French world. Unlike the British, the French adopted the colonial policy of cultural assimilation, sometimes pejoratively described as turning Africans into ‘Black Frenchmen.’ [2] Although literate Africans were accepted as men in French society, African culture was branded inferior and worthless. The French maintained the belief that their culture was superior to all others and that it was their mission to export it to their African colonies [3].

This atmosphere of enforced cultural imperialism was to fire the cultural sensibilities of the small assimilated black elite who felt smothered in foreign ideas and clothes and, therefore revolted intellectually. It offered them the opportunity to strip themselves of the French cultural trappings in order to discover their own true blackness.

Thus was the birth of the 'philosophy of blackness' that is, Negritude, an intellectual revolution against enforced assimilation of French culture [4]. It was a movement geared toward puncturing the stereotype of African cultural inferiority.

Literarily expressed in poems, novels, drama and dance, Leopold Senghor of Senegal was the greatest African contributor to the Negritude movement. Others who patronized the movement were the novelist Bernard Dadie, the dramatist Cofi Gadeau of Ivory Coast and the Guinean ballet producer, Keita Fodeba [5]. In its racist mood, the Negritude stressed the essential unity of the black race, thus acquiring the description, 'anti-racist racism.' On the global context, it preached the unity of all humanity which must be achieved by true assimilation of equals and on a voluntary arrangement and not through force.

Although Negritude was an ideological and literary movement while Pan-Africanism spoke in political terms, both movements were similar in the sense of emphasizing the oneness of all Africans and a common struggle to regain their human dignity and independence. In addition, as with the Negritude,

*Pan-Africanism was the brain-child of the Africans in diaspora. Basically, it is an emotional and intellectual reaction on the part of peoples of African descent against the inhuman treatment, degradation, injustice, oppression and alienation they suffered in a predominantly white society or society though not predominantly white, but whose dominant values were western - societies which looked upon Africans and peoples of African descent as sub-human. It is therefore a movement directed at restoring dignity to the African through the rediscovery of the African personality [6].*

The political goal of Pan-Africanism was to form an organization that would embrace all of Africa and in 1963, this found practical expression in the Organization of African Unity, now African Union (AU). Thus, Pan-Africanism and Negritude had such basic elements as the restoration of dignity to the African through the rediscovery of self and the creation of a common identity for all Africans and peoples of African descent throughout the world, geared towards achieving the general up-liftment of the black race. Chinweizu has noted that as an ideology Pan-Africanism contained "the most important ideas that have brought the Black race thus far in our quest for liberation from imperialism and racism and for the amelioration of our condition in the world; it

continues to be the vehicle for Black African hopes and aspirations for autonomy, respect, power and dignity," and embedded in the thinking of our intellectual progenitors such as Boukman, Biko, Dessalines, Edward Blyden, Sylvester Williams, Casely-Hayford, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, George Padmore, Kwame Nkrumah, C.L.R James, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Malcom X, Aime Cesaire, Cheikh Anta Diop, Amical Cabral and Julius Nyerere [7].

By and large, the object of Negritude was the rehabilitation of Africa as a distinct and autonomous place of the black race, after its deformity and bastardisation by European colonial imperialism. It, therefore, represented a movement geared towards the recovery of the African spiritual integrity after its 'colonial desecration.' In the French West African colonies, France adopted the policy of Assimilation, the aim of which was to make the natives lose their African cultural identity and adopt the French culture. Put differently, the French came to 'Frenchify' their West African subjects.

*Ab initio*, the French were interested in exploiting the resources of the interior and in 1659 an agent of the *Compagnie Nomande* established the city of St. Louis on the Senegal. In 1672, they drove the Dutch from Goree, while another chartered company, the *Compagnie Senegale*, occupied the coastal towns of Rufisque and Joal. Among the French distinguished travelers were G. Mollien who in 1818, discovered the sources of the Gambia, the Rio Grande and the Senegal and Rene Caillie, the first European to reach Timbuktu and return alive and report his experiences. In the bid to strengthen the economy of France after the restoration of the Bourbons, the French undertook a programme of establishing large plantations of tropical crops like groundnuts, cotton and indigo on the Senegal, with the appointment of Col. Schmaltz as governor. But this experiment was a colossal failure owing to adverse climate, shortage of labour, poor soil and indigenous opposition from the Traza branch of the Moors who inhabited the right bank of the Senegal. The dream of flourishing tropical plantations was abandoned and attention was turned to commerce [8].

But for several years only the trade in guns was profitable. Thus, French penetration of the interior was a hazard arising from opposition by the Traza who allied with the Negro people to encircle the French colony with hostile neighbours. French position was compounded with the rise of Al-Hajj Umar in the 1840s who, it was feared, would soon call on his fellow Muslims to take up arms against the infidels. It was not until 1854 when Louis Faideherbe was appointed governor that French fortunes began to turn around on the Senegal. An able soldier,

administrator and clear-headed diplomat, Faideherbe transformed and brightened the prospects of the colony. He began a number of public works and founded *Ecole des Otages* for the training of interpreters and emissaries into the interior. Through a number of military demonstrations, French prestige was firmly established. In 1855, the Walo Kingdom was brought under direct French control; and in 1858 the Traza met the same fate, thus ending their molestation of French traders in the interior. Faideherbe deposed the Damel of the State of Cayor in 1861 to enable him open an overland route connecting Dakar and St. Louis; and to offer effective defense to the colony and protection to French traders, he built forts at Medina, Joal and Kaolack. Al-Hajj Umar, however, continued his challenge of the French and after his forces attacked the French garrison at fort Medina, the two reached a peaceful settlement in 1860. The next year, Faideherbe departed from Senegal and to come back a second time but with less appealing results. The point to emphasize is that because of the achievements of Governor Faideherbe, Senegal became the base of French political and cultural incursion into West Africa [9].

Such beautiful cities like St. Louis, Dakar and Abidjan built by the French Colonial government were meant to exhibit French culture and civilization. French administrators had an ingrained belief that the French mission was to produce a French African in Africa that is, a rational man which is the finest example of French culture and not to destroy the traditional religion and replace it with Christianity. In addition, because education was the universal inheritance of mankind, the French believed that it should be transmitted *gratis*. The result was the establishment of free State schools, but it was only Senegal that had secondary schools designed to serve all French West Africa with William Ponty School being the oldest and most famous. In 1918, a School of Medicine was created, the Lycee Faideherbe in 1920, while another secondary school was opened in Dakar in 1940. It was not until after World War II that Secondary School facilities spread beyond the Senegal. In 1945 a Lycee was established in Bamako and in 1953 another opened in Abidjan. It is instructive that the French language was the medium of instruction from the earliest grade, in contradistinction to the British system which employed the vernacular initially. For the British, the missions were primarily interested in spreading the gospel and the quickest and easiest way to do this was to use the vernacular [10].

Another striking feature of French education was its heavy 'Frenchness' as the system produced black Frenchmen such as Blaise Diagne and Leopold Senghor,

among others. After World War II, the French reverted to their 19<sup>th</sup> century policy of extending rights of citizenship. They also initiated a crash programme of assimilation aimed at producing African elites in French culture. There was increased funding of schools and universities were founded as appendage colleges of the universities in the metropole. In most cases, identical programmes were followed and the same dress and eating habits were insisted upon to produce black Frenchmen that would take over the colonial structure [11]. Further to this, the French policy of Assimilation was designed to make the African admire the French colonising heroes like Napoleon and Faideherbe and to condemn the heroes of African resistance to French imperialism such as Al-hajj Umar, Samori Toure and Sekou Toure as misguided brigands who impeded the flow of French benevolence. Perhaps, an adequate epitaph to the colonial period could be an excerpt from a poem by Agostinho Neto, former President of Angola, thus 'I live in the dark quarters of the world... where the will is watered down and men are confused with things.'

French largesse to the Africans who showed brilliance and commitment in learning the French culture and civilization, aside from scholarship, also included French citizenship, voting rights and privileged positions. Those who refused to avail themselves of the French free education were either conscripted into the army or into forced labour. In 1914, the Communes of Senegal elected Blaise Diagne, an educated Senegalese, to become the first African to sit in the French Chamber of Deputies (Parliament) and who, in 1916 was responsible for the passing in that Chamber of the Loi Diagne which gave French citizenship to the people of Senegalese Communes. It was Diagne who, in 1921 shocked the Third Pan-African Congress in Paris that 'we French natives wish to remain French, since France has given us every liberty.' Thus, Assimilation was geared towards creating citizens who would be more attached to the privileges and opportunities which linked them with the imperial country that is, France. Put differently, aspiring black Africans were lured and hoodwinked into the pervasive French culture and civilization at the expense of the indigenous African cultures.

**The Negritude Movement in Action:** Ironically, it was the same Frenchified Africans who were exposed to the luxury and privileges of French culture and civilization that formed the Negritude movement as a reaction against the French policy of Assimilation. The reaction and struggle to return to the indigenous African culture became necessary when some of these black intellectuals had

reached the limit of French civilization and yet they were discriminated against as black people in France. The ambivalence arising from policy implementation became glaring to the African elite under the stark reality of his isolation in Paris. The fallacy that underlain the whole fabric of French education was discovered as they realized that they were not and could never be Frenchmen. The onus, therefore, was on them to rediscover what it was to be an African. African intellectuals came to a painful realisation that they were indeed black people and that there was need to return to their black mannerisms and civilization. The result was the glorification and idolisation of African culture. Inadvertently therefore, the policy of Assimilation in no small measure, contributed to this process of rediscovering Africa and her culture. African poets who wrote under the banner of Negritude became emboldened in asserting the dignity of the blackman and in rejecting colonialism.

The term Negritude was coined and first used in 1935 by Aime Cesaire in the 3<sup>rd</sup> issue of *L'Etudiant noir*, a journal which he had started in Paris with fellow students, Leopold Senghor and Leon Damas, as well as Gilbert Gratiant, Leonard Sainville and Paulette Nardal. *L'Etudiant noir* also contained Cesaire's first published work, 'Negre', which is notable not only for its disavowal of assimilation as a valid strategy for its reclaiming the word 'negre' as a positive term. Cesaire, also a playwright and politician studied in Paris where he discovered the black community and 'rediscovered Africa.' He saw the Negritude as the fact of being black and appreciated the history, culture and destiny of black people. Cesaire recognised the collective colonial experiences of blacks – the slave trade and plantation agriculture and mining and attempted to redefine it. *L'Etudiant noir* was a response to similar black journals in Paris at the time. To Cesaire and Senghor, the West Indian Journal, *Legitime defense* was too assimilationist while the Nardal sister's journal, *Revue du monde noir*, too bourgeois to truly represent the experience of French-speaking blacks. However, it was the *Legitime defense* and the Nardal sister's that created the enabling environment for black intellectualism in Paris [12].

On his part, Leopold Senghor, poet and later first President of Independent Senegal, effectively used the Negritude to work toward universal acceptance of African people, a modern incorporation of the expression and celebration of traditional African customs and values. He had left Senegal in 1928 to study in Paris and being disillusioned by the ill-treatment of Africans in France and in its colonies, he joined Aime Cesaire to found *L'Etudiant noir* which proclaimed the principle of

Negritude [13]. But the Guianan poet and member of National Assembly, Leon Damas, usually called the "enfant terrible" of the Negritude, had a militant pattern of defending black qualities. To him, every kind of reconciliation with the West should be rejected. The point of emphasis here is that Negritude as an ideological and literary movement became one of the answers to the stereotype at black inferiority propounded by Europe and through the literary works of poets and novelists, contributed to the development of African nationalism as well as broadening the base of black consciousness throughout the world.

#### **Negritude and its Relevance to Contemporary Black Africa:**

In 1966, the first World Festival of Negro Arts was held in Senegal to demonstrate the Negro contribution to world music in the Negro spiritual and jazz, the influence of Negritude on the white French novelist Jean-Paul Sartre, as well as the contribution of African carvings to modern European painting and sculpture [14]. This was against the backdrop of the critical posture of a few English-Speaking Africans on the relevance of Negritude. For instance, Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian playwright, had stated that "a tiger does not proclaim its tigritude." It is not in doubt that Negritude was also designed to convince the non-black world that Africans had made useful contributions to world civilization and to prove to the assimilated blacks throughout the world that he belonged to a culture of which he should be proud. And as a cultural renaissance, the Negritude became necessary in order to dismantle the colonial mentality which afflicted Africans through Western education.

Worthy to note is the fact that Negritude served as a point of departure from the colonial tendency. But today, we are facing the same challenge of regenerating and sustaining our indigenous cultural norms and values in the face of Western pop-culture, an over-bearing aspect of Western cultural imperialism, orchestrated through their mass media machine. The most amazing example was the recent 'Big Brother Africa,' a television show that celebrated nudity across Africa - exhibitions usually frowned at by African culture and which must be halted if Africa must be seen as a serious co-player in the international arena.

The current socio-political and economic realities in modern Africa underpin the necessity to continue the propagation of African culture to the consciousness of African peoples throughout the world. But this African cultural rejuvenation must be accomplished through the right revolutionary approach. Chinweizu has advocated excursion into Niggerology that is, the scientific study of

the Nigger – a Negro (black African) who has been driven crazy by living under white supremacy. According to him there is need to study the degree of damage that centuries of living under relentless white terrorism (during slavery and colonialism) did to African culture and through that, to the psychology of black Africans at home and in the diaspora. He argued that Negroes were not Niggers before their encounter with the white supremacy system of slavery and colonialism. Niggerology is, therefore, important in order to exhume the psychological roots of African lack of development and ‘to learn how to kill the nigger in each of us’ that is, eradicating the nigger psychology and blocking its transmission to the next generation, in our efforts toward building a black African Superpower [15].

Negritude is coterminous with the work of Marcus Garvey who between 1910 and 1914 traveled to investigate the condition of blacks in the Caribbean and Central America, as well as in Europe. While in London in 1914, Garvey asked:

*Where is the black man’s Government?*

*Where is his king and his Kingdom?*

*Where is his President, his country and his ambassador, his army, his navy, his men of big affairs?*

*I could not find them and then I declared ‘I will help to make them.’*

The result was that Garvey set out to dramatize the possibility of Black Power in a world dominated by White Power. By the account of his exploits given in 1925 in the USA, Garvey had between 1914 and 1922 ‘aroused the Negro’s mind to all the possibilities of the future one way or the other. We did everything that was humanly possible to arouse consciousness in sleeping Negroes all over the country, all over the West Indies and all over the world.’ Through the activities of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and its auxiliaries, businesses, conventions and parades, Garvey proved before the eyes of Negroes the political, economic, military, religious and social possibilities of Black Power. These activities, dramatized on the streets of Harlem, New York no doubt, stirred the imagination of Negroes around the globe [16]. In addition to initiating the ‘Back to Africa’ movement, Garvey will be most remembered by his slogans of ‘Africa for the Africans,’ ‘the renaissance of the black race’ and his sustained demand for Africa to be freed from colonial oppression.

It is not to be taken that post-Independence Africa has not made any bold attempt at indigenous

development. For instance, in 1967 President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania published his development blueprint titled the Arusha Declaration in which he pointed out the need for African model of development and which formed the basis of Ujama (African Socialism). For Nyerere, the African extended family means that every individual is in the service of the community and that personal acquisition is prohibited, making room for horizontal distribution of wealth. Thus, Ujama is characterized by a community where co-operation and collective advancement defines the existence of every individual. Nyerere translated the Ujama concept into a socio-political and economic management model through several means viz: the creation of one party system in order to solidify the cohesion of the newly independent Tanzania; the institutionalization of social, economic and political equality through the creation of a central democracy, the abolition of discrimination based on ascribed status and the nationalization of the key economic sectors; the villagization of production which essentially collectivized all forms of local productive capacity; the fostering of Tanzanian self-reliance through two dimensions: the transformation of economic attitudes and cultural attitudes that is, Tanzanians must learn to free themselves from dependence on European Powers; the introduction of free and compulsory education for all Tanzanians in order to sensitize them to the principles of Ujama; and the implementation of the African land holding system that is, a member of the society would be entitled to a piece of land on the condition that he uses it [17].

## CONCLUSION

Despite the prevailing socio-cultural, political and economic malaise confronting the African continent, which arose from the exploitation of her human and material resources by the erstwhile colonial administrators and their internal lackeys, as well as the latest onslaught of globalisation, it is imperative for Africans to embark on the rediscovery, re-ennobling and sustenance of their indigenous cultures and traditions as begun by the progenitors of Negritude. This can be achieved through an African renaissance programme such as decolonisation of knowledge in public institutions, especially in the universities as begun in South Africa [18] African policy makers should, therefore, engage in major shifts in policy formulation and implementation with regard to the forms of knowledge production in African educational institutions.

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