



Themes of Idealism and Nostalgia in Negritude Poetry

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ABSTRACT

The central thrust of this paper is on the themes of idealism and nostalgia in Negritude poetry. Some critics regard negritude poetry as being sentimental and idealistic. Though true, this observation may be explained by the fact that the historical antecedence that gave rise to this literacy art form, in the first place, necessitated its thematic features. Negritude literature was a child of historical circumstances that gave a voice to Francophone students in France. They suffered racial discrimination because of their skin colour. If their literary works were written to repudiate the negative depiction of the black race by pseudo-scientific theories propounded by racist ethnologists like Levy Bruhl, de Gobineau and Spengler, as well as extol Africa, then these writers became so passionate as to sound strident, idealistic, nostalgic and sentimental in the delivery of their craft.

INTRODUCTION

Literature is an art form that explores man in his social setting. Every committed literature must concern itself to addressing some social issues as they affect man in his society, with a view to correcting the imbalance. Otherwise, literature becomes a mere entertaining art without a social vision. Oftentimes, artistic vision is occasioned by some developments in the society that the artist must address. In this way, the literary artist becomes the spokesman for his society as well as the visioner who must chart a new course for others to follow.

Negritude literature was a child of necessity, birthed by the socio-historical forces that the black man has been subjected to. As a race, the black race has suffered the indignities of slavery, colonial exploitation, neo-colonialism and racial discrimination at the hands of Westerners. And in order to correct the distorting notions about Africa held by the west, the founding fathers of Negritude - Aime- Cesaire from Martinique, Leopold

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Sedar Senghor from Senegal and Leon-Gontran Damas from French Guyana - decided to chart a new course through literary artistry. These founding fathers of La Negritude, known as *Les trois p'eres* (the three fathers), originally hailed from three different French colonies in Africa and the Caribbeans. Providence brought them together in Paris in the early 1930s' when they were students in France. Although each of the three founding fathers had different ideas about the purpose and styles of La Negritude, this literary and ideological movement is generally characterized by the following:

1. Reaction to colonization: Denunciation of Europe's lack of humanity, rejection of Western domination and ideals.
2. Identity crisis: Acceptance of and pride in being black;
3. Valorization of African history, traditions, and beliefs.
4. Very realistic literary style
5. Marxist ideas" (About .com 1).

The Negritude writers were so passionate in their extolation of the virtues of Africa that they often painted an idealized and romanticized picture about Africa and the black race. This dominant motif in their works is what some critics consider as the weakness of the Negritude literature. Prominent among these critics are Soyinka and Frantz Fanon, although there were others who were sympathisers.

What Is Negritude?

The word *Negritude* was coined from a Latin expression *Nigritude-inis* which to the Romans meant the essence of being black, though in its modern usage, it signified the essence or qualities of being a black person. The pejorative word *nigger* (from the French word *negre*), used in reference to the blackman, was later to become accepted by the blackman but, this time, in a positive light, to refer to the affirmation of being black with a sense of pride. In fact, the term *Negritude* which very closely resembles "blackness" in English, was first deliberately and proudly used in 1935 by Aime Cesaire in the third issue of *L' E tudiant noir*, a protest magazine published in Paris with Leopold Senghor, Leon Domas, Gilbert Gratiant, Leonard Sainville, and Paulette Nardal (Okeh 147; Lawless1; Wikipedia 1).

Negritude was the reactionary movement exemplified as a literary expression which was aimed at correcting the various distortions about Africa from the western world. It was a socio-cultural renaissance that gave birth to a new literary movement that glorified blackness and the Black race. In a sense, it was nationalist and pan-Africanist in outlook. In a broader sense, it celebrated blackness and embraced the blackman the world over. The movement could not have been limited to Africa only since most of its founding fathers were from the Caribbeans, though of African extraction. Having started in Paris, France, in the 1930s by a group of Francophone West African and West Indian students as an ideological and a reactionary posture to correct false notions about Africa held by Western

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anthropologists, the movement blossomed into something of a revolutionary literary and cultural movement that was to bring African literature and the African continent into the lime-light.

Heather Carlberg sees Negritude from two perspectives - broader and narrower views. In his broader view, he sees Negritude, as a literary and ideological movement begun by French-speaking black intellectuals, as an “important and comprehensive reaction to the colonial situation”. Africans and blacks around the world were influenced by this black consciousness movement which “rejects the political, social and moral domination of the West”. The narrower definition considers Negritude as the writings of black intellectuals who “affirm black personality and redefine the collective experience of blacks”. The dominant theme of this literature is the passionate praise of the black race. It painted a kind of romantic myth of Africa as a victim of colonialism in all its social, moral and psychological implications. The movement “rehabilitates Africa and all blacks” in its repudiation of European ideology that considers the black as inherently inferior to the white (1).

Another view considers Negritude as a “literary and political movement developed in the 1930s” by a group of intellectuals from the French colonies in West Africa and the Caribbeans. Prominent among these were the future Senegalase President Leopold Sedar Senghor, Martinican poet Aime’Cesaire, and the Guianan Leon Damas. The Negritude “writers found solidarity in a common black identity as a rejection of French colonial racism.” One uniting force amongst the Negritudians was the “shared black heritage of the members of the African diaspora” and this became a potent tool in fighting against “French political and intellectual hegemony and domination” (Wikipedia 1).

Historical Antecedence

It is a fact to claim that Negritude as a literary movement was a reactionary art form that was necessitated by historical development in the world at that time. Historically, the Black race has been a victim of oppression and mindless denigration at the hands of the white race. As a continent, Africa’s history has been characterized by three phases in her evolutionary development - the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial experiences. Literature from the continent has attempted to explore each of these significant phases.

Negritude literature emerged on the world stage as a result of some historical antecedence that helped to shape its form and theme. Emerging from the dark days of slavery in Europe and the New world, the Black man began to vehemently assert his position in the world. The abolition of slavery and slave trade did not give the Blackman a complete reprieve from the negative perception by the western world. Racially biased treatises by European ethnologists like Levy Bruhl, de Gobineau and Spengler encouraged such negative perceptions. These ethnologists claimed that black

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people were barbaric, historiless, were of inferior intelligence and that they lived on trees like monkeys (Okune 158).

In the 1920s in the United States of America, the Black Renaissance Movement had begun as a reaction against such theories propounded by the racist ethnologists. Black writers from the Caribbean and the United States of America such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Claude Mackay, Jean Toomer, Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen repudiated such notions in their writings. Later in the 1930s, Andree Nardel and Dr. Sojous (a Haitian) founded the *Revue du Mode Noir*, which became a rallying point for Black students of African and West Indian origin in Paris. This review laid the foundation of a black cultural renaissance in France. Following this, Black West Indian students published a protest journal, *Legitime defense* in 1932, which was proscribed by the French government for its radical language and revolutionary stance against the repressive policies of the French government towards the West Indian Islands. As a reaction, some West Indian students with their African counterparts founded another channel through which they could make their voices heard. This channel was *L'Etudian Noir*, a journal founded in 1934 by such West Indians as Leonard Sainville, Aime Cesaire, Leon-Gontran Damas and Aristide Maugree' and west African writers Birago Diop and like Leopold Senghor Ousmane So`ce. As a leader of the journal, Senghor influenced his other compatriots to such an extent that African traditional poetry was adopted as a form of literary expression (Mokwenye 5).

Peter Okeh in his article "Negritude and the Issue of identity in African Literature" gives assent to the point raised above. He posits that the Negritude ideology sought to debunk the negative characterization of Africa by the Western world as primitive people, idolaters, half ape carnibals that live on trees, witches and wizards, and a people without history and culture. Negritude writings attempted to sell to the Western world the values of African civilization manifested in creative arts such as dances, folk-tales, myths, legends, native poetry, oratory, mode of life, etc. The plethora of African artistry were attempts to establish African identity through black writing (157).

The Negritude movement drew inspiration from the Harlem Renaissance which was popularised by the works of African writers like Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, whose works dwelt on the themes "blackness" and racism in the United States. Before this time, however, the slave revolution led by Toussaint L'Ouverture in the 1790's had asserted a prominent place for Africans in diaspora. This led to the flourishing of black culture in Haiti in the early 20th century. Besides, during the 1920s and 1930s in Paris, Paulette Nardal and her sister Jane introduced black students from French colonies to the writers of Harlem Renaissance, which also influenced the Negritude movement. Paulette Nardal and the Haitian Dr. Leo Sajou founded *La revue du Monde Noir* (1931-32), a literary journal which served as a mouthpiece for the Negritude movement. Elsewhere in the Spanish - speaking Caribbean, negrismo, which shared the Harlem vision

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was also developing. At the same period in 1932, a relationship had developed between Aime Cesaire and prominent Martiniquan surrealists Pierre Yoyotte and J.M. Monnerot who had signed the “Murderous Humanitarianism”. And later in 1948, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote an essay “Orpheus Noir” (Black Orpheus) where he did a famous analysis of the Negritude movement. This served as the introduction to a volume of Francophone poetry called *Anthologie de la nouvelle poesie negre et malgache*, compiled by Leopold Senghor. In this essay, Sartre “characterizes *negritude* as the polar opposite of colonial racism in a Hegelian dialectic - a kind of “anti-racist racism”, a requirement for the final goal of racial unity (wikipedia 1,2).

On his part, Gerald Moore in *Protest and Conflict in Africa literature* sees Negritude as a reaction by Black students in Paris to the social experience they had come to face with in the thirties and early forties. This social experience, according to Gerald Moore, was their common “subjection to a policy of assimilation which, when it was rationalized and perpetuated, became what, if we wish to be Marxists, we may regard as part of the innate dynamics of the situation.” The education system and the assimilationist policy were deliberately aimed at subjecting the black man economically and politically to the French value system. As an exploited class in both political and economic sense, blacks in Paris shared a common experience of colour. But the experience of contemporary Africa was what these blacks did not share in common. Gerald Moore thinks this is where Negritude upon African soil begins to acquire some flavour of its own, and no longer a universalizing outlook, particularly as evoked in the works of Senghor and some other writers (35).

It is also worth noting at this point that the experience of the African service men during the Second World War (1939-1945) was another historical antecedent that encouraged the Negritude movement. An allied factor that goaded the Negritude movement was the nationalist movement which was itself fuelled by the World War II experience. African servicemen who were drafted into the war white counterparts. The mist of illusion held by the African servicemen about the whiteman’s superiority soon vanished, as the former observed that the latter could equally suffer pain and die. Thus upon their return home at the end of the war, and armed with their experiences on the battle fields, Africans began to agitate for self governance. Leopold Senghor (later to become first black President of Senegal) was one of those ex-servicemen who, apart from his role in the Negritude movement, was a vanguard in the Senegalese nationalist movement which saw to that country’s independence in 1960.

Idealism And Nostalgia In Negritude Literature

The basic philosophy of Negritude was the reconstruction, through art, of the image of Africa, with a view to correcting the various distortions from Western philosophical discourses. Messay Kebede argues that it is

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“generally admitted that both the form and content of Negritude owe much to Western philosophical discourses, especially to French intellectual influence” (1). It is, therefore, not surprising that most of the outstanding exponents of Negritude like Senghor, Cessaire, Leon - Damas, etc., were deeply influenced by French culture. But their views of Negritude are reflected in their works of arts, mainly poetry. Now if we consider Negritude as a reaction by some black intellectuals, it is also not surprising that the themes of their works constantly resonate themes of idealism, romanticism and nostalgia.

Leopold Senghor is one of these writers whose works explore themes of idealism, romanticism and nostalgia. Most of Senghor’s poems are inspired by the feeling of alienation and exile which he experienced while studying in France. This feeling reinforced the poet’s nostalgia and a longing for a return to his idealised home in Africa. The poem “In Memoriam”, taken from Leopold Senghor’s first collection *Chants d’Ombre* explores the above themes. The poet also invokes his ancestors in this particular poem. This is based on the belief in most African cultures that the dead are alive and that they can act on behalf of their living relations. Senghor appeals to his ancestors to protect him from harm in his alien environment. This is a rather different picture from the Catholic Christian belief in the observance of All Saints day and the Christian Sunday to which the poet is indifferent:

Let my mind turn to my dead!
.....
O dead who have always refused to die, who have resisted death
From the Sine to the Seine, and in my fragile veins you my
 unyielding blood
Guard my dreams as you have guarded your sons, your slender..
 limbed wanderers ... (“In Memoriam” Senghor)

Senghor has sometimes been criticized for his cultural ambivalence in his Negritude vision due to his sympathetic gesture to the West. According to him, “our tasks is to integrate, to assimilate the contemporary values with our own to make new blood” (Kebede 9). Such critics deplore Senghor’s compromise with the colonial masters which they contend is a marked departure from the original revolutionary stand of Negritude. Lines such as these tend to justify the claims of the critics:

That from the dangerous safety of my tower, I may go down into
 the street
To my brothers whose eyes are blue
Whose hands are hard (“In Memoriam” Senghor).

Apart from the invocation of his dead ancestors in the lines of his poems, Senghor also invokes the image of the African woman who is often used as the symbol of Africa. The imagery of the African woman is frequently captured in the erotic sense of beauty, inviting fragrance and a peaceful

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countryside:

Woman, lay on my forehead your perfumed hands, hands softer
than fur.
Above, the swaying palm tree rustle in the high night breeze
Hardly at all. No lullaby even.
The rhythmic silence cradles us.
Listen to its song, listen to our dark blood beat, listen
To the deep pulse of Africa beating in the mist of forgotten
villages...
("Nuite de Sine", Senghor)

The following lines also contain the theme mentioned above. Here the poem celebrates the poet's love for Naett, a young African girl to whom the poet dedicates the poem. The poem is couched in the traditional praise-singing form. Note the sensuous images that run through the poem:

I will pronounce your name, Naett, I will declaim you , Naett!
Naett, your name is mild like cinnamon, it is the fragrance in
which the lemon grove sleeps,
Naett, your name is the sugared clarity of blooming coffee trees
And it resembles the savannah, that blossoms forth under the
Masculine ardour of the midday sun.
Name of dew, fresher than shadows of tamarind,
Fresher even than the short dusk, when the heat of the day is
silenced....("I will pronounce your name" Senghor)

The theme of the celebration of the "black woman" which characterizes Senghor's poetry must have been influenced by his love for his mother and the matriarchal system of the poet's serere tribe. Senanu and Vincent describe *Nuite de Sine* as an:

erotic evocation of the soporific beauty and fragrance
of the African night - the stars, the moon, the trees,
the quiet villages and the familiar scenes associated
with them. The sheer exuberance and irresistible drowsiness
come through the modulated tone, the cumulative variation
in ideas and attitudes, the metaphors, and the cadence and rhythm
which sink us "into the high profundities of sleep" by the time
we get to the end of the poem (27).

Let us now consider one of David Diop's finest poems by the title of "Africa" and see what Negritude themes are explored here:

Africa

Africa my Africa
Africa of proud warriors in ancestral savannahs

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Africa of whom my grandmother sings
On the banks of the distant river
in have never known you
But your blood flows in my veins
Your beautiful black blood that irrigates the fields
The blood of your sweat
The sweat of your work
The work of your slavery
The slavery of your children
Africa tell me Africa
Is this your back that is bent
This back that breaks under the weight of humiliation
This back trembling with red sears
And saying yes to the whip under the midday sun
But a grave voice answers me
Impetuous child that tree young and strong
That tree over there
Splendidly alone amidst white and faded flowers
That is your Africa springing up anew
Springing up patiently obstinately
Whose fruits bit by bit acquire
The bitter taste of liberty.

- David Diop

David Diop's poem "Africa" highlights three historical periods in Africa's experience: the pre - colonial period of heroic past with great warriors, the colonial period of subjugation, suffering and humiliation, and the post - colonial period that saw African nations asserting their independence.

The tone of the poem is nostalgic, particularly the first seven lines that extol Africa's past. This is hardly surprising as the poet was born and raised in France. He lived most of his life abroad and knew little about Africa. Most of the Negritude poet wrote while in France. It was, therefore, natural that their poems should be characterized by nostalgic reminiscences about Africa. Besides, Negritude writers were pre-occupied with protestation against colonial domination of Africa and with the burden of correcting the distorted notions about the continent held by the western world. That explains why these writers were somewhat emotional in the handling of their subject and their tone so strident that one can not help but tag their work as sentimental piece of literature. Thus, the socio-historical experience of these writers influenced their themes and style a great deal. One undeviating theme was the praise and glorification of Africa. Though Diop knew little about Africa, yet the "beautiful black blood" of Africa "that irrigates the fields" flowed in his veins.

As a continent, Africa had undergone different phases in her historical political evolution. One of these experiences is slavery and colonial

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exploitation captured in lines eight through sixteen. For nearly four-hundred years, Africa underwent the humiliation of slavery and colonial exploitation. In time, however, Africa had to assert her independence from the colonial yoke. Africa is captured in glowing terms in this poem as a sapling growing up “patiently obstinately” amidst “white and faded flowers”. In the poet’s creative imagination, “white and faded flowers” is a metaphor for the moribund western culture. This is a common theme among Negritude writers - “the repossession and redefinition of Africa’s identity” by a deprecating denunciation of western values as decadent culture. The foregoing is another poem by David Diop entitled “The Vultures”. The last lines conveys the poet’s robust hope regarding Africa’s glorious future that would follow her independence from colonial yoke:

The Vultures

.....
Of foreigners who did not seem human
You who knew all the books knew not love
Nor our hands which fertilize the womb of the earth
Hands instinct at the root with revolt
In spite of your songs of pride in the charnel-houses
In spite of the desolate villages of Africa torn apart
Hope lived in us like a citadel.
And from Swaziland’s mines to the sweltering sweat of Europe’s
factories
Spring will be reborn under our bright steps (David Diop)

In the preceding lines of the above poem (elipted from the above lines), David Diop begins by condemning in strong terms the hypocrisy of colonialism captured in the imagery of Christian missionaries in their civilizing mission in Africa. And just as in the poem “Africa”, “The Vultures” ends by declaring the poet’s proclamation of hope and liberty for Africa’s bright future.

And just as in Senghor, there is the invocation or the presence of ancestors in Birago Diop’s poems. The poem “Vanity” stresses the importance of the guiding spirit of ancestors. He admonishes Africans to remember their roots and to stop emulating western culture which we do not fully understand. But should we refuse to hearken to their words of wisdom, when calamities befall us, they would not give heed to our cries:

When our Dead come with their Dead
When they have spoken to us with their clumsy voices;
Just as our ears were deaf
To their cries, to their wild appeals
Just as our ears were deaf

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They have left on the earth their cries...
For us, blind deaf and unworthy sons...
If we weep, gently, gently
If we cry roughly of our torments
What heart will listen to our clamouring
What ear to our sobbing hearts? ("Vanity", Birago Diop)

Note the invocation of the dead ancestors who are a constant presence in Birago Diop's poems. This adaptation of traditional elements in Negritude poetry is an attempt to depict black Africa as a world that is in touch with the spiritual world, a world enriched with myth and superstition. Consider the following:

In one of the three vessels
The three vessels where certain evenings come
The souls serene and satisfied,
The breathings of the ancestors,
Ancestors who once were men
Forefathers who once were sages.... ("Viaticum" Birago Diop)

The water's voice sings
And the flame cries
And the wind that brings
The words to sighs
Is the breathing of the dead
Those who are dead have never gone away...
The dead are never dead ("Breath" - Birago Diop)

Negritude writers took pride in the fact that African values are in close proximity to the world of spirit through nature, as opposed to the artificial materialistic values of the west. Like David Diop's pre-colonial Africa of proud warriors in ancestral savannah, Césaire's pride lies in the proposition that:

my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral,
it plunges into the red flesh of the soil
it plunges into the blazing flesh of the sky
(*Return to My Native Land* Césaire)

Jonna Roger's view captures the thought raised above in asserting that the basic ideas behind Negritude is predicated on the assumption that:

the mystic warmth of African life, gaining strength from its closeness to nature and its constant contact with ancestors, should be continually placed in proper perspective against the soul-lessness and materialism of western culture; that

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Africans must look to the richness of their past and of their cultural heritage in order to choose which values and traditions, could be most useful to the modern world...(1).

Criticisms Against Negritude

There have been several criticisms against Negritude as a cultural/ideological movement as demonstrated in the literary expressions of the 1930s in France by French - speaking black intellectuals. One of these well known critics is Wole Soyinka who declares that the “tiger does not proclaim its tigritude but it pounces”. In other words, Soyinka considers Negritude as full of talk than action. Of course, Senghor rejects the view that races can be mutually exclusive and expresses the thought that his Negritude is essentially the expression of values of traditional Africa as they are embodied in the thought and institutions of African society, even though he does not desire a return to outmoded customs, but a return to their original spirit. In his criticism, Soyinka sees Negritude as belonging to colonial ideology because it “gives a defensive character to any African ideas”. He sees the artist’s role as drawing valuable lessons from the past and moving on to “the re-appraised of the whole human phenomenon”. While stating the above view, Soyinka notes the imperfections of the past which is a part of the human condition and which should warrant the writer to question the present (Carlberg 1).

Senghor’s poetry reflects a cultural ambivalence for which he has been severely criticized by those who consider his views as sympathetic to the West. These critics express their dismay at Senghor’s “strategy of compromise” with the colonial master as a “mask for a policy of accommodation to neo-colonial situation”, a far cry from the original revolutionary stand of Negritude ideology (Irele, qtd in Kebede 9). The fact that Leopold Senghor and Aime Cesaire, the two most prominent exponents of the movement were deeply immersed in French culture has always been cited as a typical example by critics. The influence of Henry Bergson, as a particular instance, and other Western philosophical discourses, have been identified in the works of the two activists.

Another criticism leveled against Negritude border on the mode of its discourse or expression. This concerns the matter of “imported and inauthentic intellectual expression”, which they consider as “detrimental to African interests and modernization”. These critics claim that Negritude is an imported ideology that is submissive to the West, particularly in its racist ideas which tend to endorse colonial view points on Africa (Mudimbe qtd in Kebede 10).

Yet other critics claim that Negritude writers were too sentimental in their extolation of traditional African values as though everything about Africa were perfect and faultless. They claim that the passionate exaltation of traditional African values is in itself not a modest thing. Perhaps this is why the likes of Soyinka contend that rather than do too much talk, Negritude should demonstrate its philosophy. Usually, talk is cheaper than

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action. It is in view of this that some critics have accused Negritude of being an “irrelevant escapism, a conservative ideology”, that detract from the reality of Africa’s true cultural dilemma (Kebede 13).

Nwoga for his part also claims that protest literature has its dangers; in this case, the danger of misjudging European culture. He expresses the fear that in their exile and in their attempt to present an oppressed Africa, that the Negritude poet would exaggerate the grandeur or innocence of Africa, or dwell so long in Africa’s past while ignoring to address those problems plaguing the continent in the post-independence era (217). Indeed, the paradox of Africa’s political struggle is that while the nationalists fought to free their people from the yoke of colonial domination, post - independent Africa to a large extent remains a backward continent engrossed in the mire of corruption, ethnic rivalry, political instability and nauseating poverty which are home-spun.

CONCLUSION

Negritude was a reactionary cultural, ideological and literary movement which originated in France in the 1930s by a group of Francophone West African and West Indian students as a means of correcting the distorted notions about Africa held by western anthropologists. Admittedly, some ideological stances held by the vanguards of Negritude were flawed, such as the sentimental over exaltation of Africa’s cultural values. But despite the criticisms levelled against Negritude, we can, at least, admit that it paved the way for the emergence of African literature. Besides, Negritude may well be considered as one of the historical developments that led to Africa’s struggle to achieve political independence from colonial yoke. The movement instilled nationalist consciousness in Africans who began to revolt against the cultural imperialism of Europe. This culminated in the independence of African states. It is, therefore, not surprising that Leopold Sedar Senghor, one of the apostles of the Negritude movement, fought for Senegal’s independence and eventually became that country’s first President.

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