

Ellen Farney

HIST 332-Dr. Freed

1 May 2019

Léopold Sedar-Senghor's life is arguably more comparable to that of a French man than one born in a small village in Africa. Born in the first years of the twentieth century to a wealthy merchant in a small coastal village in West Africa; Senghor was educated in the French style from a young age and by the time he was twenty-two he had made his way to Paris to study.¹ His early life was heavily influenced by the French language, culture and values, however, while he was at university in Paris, Senghor's view of French influence on African people and his understanding of Africans as a group changed greatly, and his views would continue to evolve for the rest of his life.

Senghor's views had consistently been impacted by the French idea of "what" the African was. He grew up idolizing the French culture and believing that it's guidance, though forceful, was beneficial to Africa. Senghor recalled: "our ambition was to become carbon copies of the colonisers."² He began to look more closely at the African people and their culture and after this he no longer agreed that the African people needed the French influence, and the concept of assimilation was now unfavorable to him. This change in view would lead to his central role in the creation of the concept of "Négritude." While there are many varying interpretations of Négritude and its origins, Senghor himself has explained it as "the sum of the

¹ Thomas Patrick Melady, *Profiles of African Leaders* (New York, NY: MacMillan, 1961), 72.

² Walter A.E. Skurnik, "Léopold Sédar Senghor and African Socialism," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 3 (1965): 350.

cultural values of the black world,”³ In this paper I will argue that the oppressive French policy of assimilation along with Senghor’s belief in the sensitivity and depth of the African personality mark the conceptual origin of Négritude, which would influence the creation of African Socialism.

In his analysis of Senghor, Gerald Moore took a psychological approach to provide an understanding for Senghor’s need to connect to and to promote a culture that he had little personal connection to. Having grown up in a highly French influenced home, he lacked the experiences of traditional Senegalese culture, and Moore attempted to discuss this and how it connected to Négritude as well as to Senghor’s poetry.

“The black man living in a continent of black men, embedded in his own society, does not need to trumpet and proclaim his blackness. But the black man who finds himself in the bottom stratum of a society dominated by colour gradations; without a language, a culture or even a name distinctly his own; separated three thousand miles and a couple of centuries from his origins; that man will wish to justify and exalt his blackness.”⁴

Moore argued that it was this alienation that Senghor felt within his own ethnicity that led him to fervently declare the importance of traditional African culture.⁵

Michael Lambert discussed the environment in which Senghor grew up and how it helped lead to his later ideologies. Lambert used various things such as the *Originaire*’s⁶ fight for

³ Léopold Sédar-Senghor, “Negritude and African Socialism” in *The African Philosophy Reader*, ed. P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (London, UK: Routledge, 1998. Reprint, 2001), 438.

⁴ Gerald Moore, *Seven African Writers* (London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1962. Reprint, 1966), 2.

⁵ Moore, *Seven African Writers*, 2.

⁶ *Originaires* were the Senegalese who were born into the French communes but who maintained their traditional African and/or Islamic beliefs, they were the class under *Évolués*.

French citizenship as well as the tiered class system set up in French West Africa, an analysis of some of Senghor's writings and an interpretation of Aimé Césaire's "discovery" of Négritude to, at least partially, combat the thought that Négritude itself was a racist movement.⁷ He used these things to try and explain what caused Parisian African intellectuals to create a movement in order to distinguish between "black" and "French," and to create their own personal identity.⁸ which he claimed played a part in the animosity that lead to the African Socialism and Négritude movements.⁹

Lambert also noted two critiques of Négritude. He talked about how Jean Paul Sartre labeled Négritude as the "anti-racism racism" movement¹⁰, as well as how while the writings of this movement were supposed, in part, to be in support of the poor in Africa, the poor could not read them. The majority of lower-class Africans did not speak French and therefore, could not read it.¹¹

In his article, Peter Aberger argued against the idea that Négritude was a racist idea. Aberger used the concepts of Négritude objective and Négritude subjective to explain how he thinks Senghor viewed race.¹² He also includes Senghor's definition of culture, "a racial reaction of man to his environment,"¹³ and then his creation of the term "ethnie"¹⁴ and how he began to

⁷ Michael C. Lambert, "From Citizenship to Négritude: "Making a Difference" in Elite Ideologies of Colonized Francophone West Africa," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35 (1993): 240.

⁸ Lambert, "From Citizenship to Négritude," 251.

⁹ Lambert, "From Citizenship to Négritude," 242.

¹⁰ Lambert, "From Citizenship to Négritude," 249.

¹¹ Lambert, "From Citizenship to Négritude," 249.

¹² Peter Aberger, "Léopold Senghor and the Issue of Reverse Racism," *Phylon* 41 (1980): 276-277.

¹³ Aberger, "Léopold Senghor and the Issue of Reverse Racism," 280.

¹⁴ Aberger, "Léopold Senghor and the Issue of Reverse Racism," 280.

use it interchangeably with race. Senghor's love of the writings of Arthur de Gobineau is another topic Aberger used to emphasize Senghor's confusion with the concept of race,¹⁵ as he believed that there was something mental and emotional, in addition to physical, that distinguished members of one race from another.¹⁶

In her review of a few pieces written about Senghor, Janet Vaillant described Négritude as a concept that "encompassed a variety of meanings. It was used to refer to a distinctive black style as well as distinctive psychology or affective attitude towards the world. It also denoted a militant rejection of the superiority of white French civilization and an effort to create a more positive black identity."¹⁷ She also discussed the issue of Négritude and racism and how it was portrayed in the articles she reviewed. She remarked that Senghor was troubled to find that some had found his ideas to resemble a different form of racism, and she claimed that his goals were to show a separation between black and white people by way of their personalities and individual qualities.¹⁸

After examining some of Senghor's writings, I feel that there is sufficient evidence that Senghor was heavily influenced by the French policy of assimilation. He discussed at length his change in views regarding the ability of an African person to develop their own personal ideas and personal identities. He acknowledged the French view of African minds as "tabula rasa," or

¹⁵ Aberger, "Léopold Senghor and the Issue of Reverse Racism," 281.

¹⁶ Aberger, "Léopold Senghor and the Issue of Reverse Racism," 281-282.

¹⁷ Janet G. Vaillant, review of *The Concept of Negritude in the Poetry of Leopold Sedar Senghor*, by Sylvia Washington Ba; *Leopold Sedar Senghor: An Intellectual Biography*, by Jacques-Louis Hymans; *Leopold Sedar Senghor and the Politics of Negritude*, by Irving Markovitz and *Leopold Sedar Senghor et la naissance de l'Afrique moderne*, by Ernest Milcent and Monique Sordet, *ASA Review of Books* 2 (1976): 156.

¹⁸ Vaillant, "Review of *The Concept of Negritude in the Poetry of Leopold Sedar Sengh...*," 156.

blank slates that the French could influence in order to create their ideal French citizens.¹⁹ When writing about the way Africans in French West Africa were made to feel, Senghor said “The only hope of salvation you could hold out to us was to *let ourselves be assimilated*.”²⁰ In addition, when writing about the same topic, he pointed to the French as a major factor in the developments of Négritude; “It was the French who first forced us to seek its [Negritude] essence, and who then showed us where it lay.”²¹

Senghor went on to discuss the way that Africans were made to feel by the policy of assimilation. He introduces their struggle to pull themselves up into the French society that they were taught to desire and how the quest that he and many others came to value much more was the search for their “collective soul,”²² or personal identity. He compared this to the fabled quest for the Holy Grail.²³ He goes on to credit the discovery of this personal identity and individuality to the “freelance thinkers- writers, artists, ethnologists, and pre-historians.”²⁴ He goes on to say that the destruction and constraint of Black Africa started during the earliest days of colonisation.²⁵ His discussion of these ideas are representative of Senghor’s feelings about colonization, specifically the French policy of assimilation, France’s iron grip on West Africa, and they allow for the idea that the French control of West Africa had a significant influence on Senghor and his development of Négritude to come to fruition.

¹⁹ Léopold Sédar-Senghor, “The Spirit of Civilization, or The Laws of the African Negro Culture,” in *African History in Documents: Western African History Vol. 1*, ed. Robert O. Collins (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1990. Reprint 2012), 138.

²⁰ Sedar-Senghor, “Negritude and African Socialism,” 438.

²¹ Sedar-Senghor, “Negritude and African Socialism,” 438.

²² Sedar-Senghor, “Negritude and African Socialism,” 439.

²³ Sedar-Senghor, “Negritude and African Socialism,” 439.

²⁴ Sedar-Senghor, “Negritude and African Socialism,” 439.

²⁵ Sedar-Senghor, “Negritude and African Socialism,” 439.

The second element that I believe had a profound impact on Senghor's development of Négritude is his belief in the ability of the African man or woman to be moved emotionally more so than a caucasian person. His short book titled *The Foundations of "Africanité" or "Négritude" and "Arabité,"* provides his description of Négritude and its importance. Senghor started by spending a great deal of time at the beginning of the book describing how Africa is the "cradle" of humanity, speaking from an anthropological perspective.²⁶ He went on then to talk about cultural convergence in the second part of the book, where he states his definition of culture, essentially stating that it is a way of "feeling and thinking" as well as acting that is relative to a certain group of people.²⁷

His section in part two of the book labeled "The Fluctuants" is evidence of his beliefs as he discussed what he felt were some of the specific characteristics of Africans in comparison to those of Americans or Europeans (white people). He referenced the study of characterology and the philosophers that established it such as, Gaston Berger and Le Senne.²⁸ He went on to discuss Africans by first splitting them into two groups, the Arab-Berber and the Negro-African, he referred to them as the "fluctuants," implying that they are ever-changing and that their cultural values eb and flow depending on various circumstances. His saying that they belong to a "fluctuant ethnotype,"²⁹ however, was not to imply that they had a weakness about them, as Senghor insisted that this emotional prowess was equal to the logical skill he pointed to caucasians having.³⁰

²⁶ Leopold Sedar-Senghor, *The Foundations of "Africanité" or "Négritude" and "Arabité"* trans. by Mercer Cook (Paris, FR: Présence Africaine, 1967), 10-18.

²⁷ Sedar-Senghor, *"The Foundations of "Africanité" or "Négritude" and "Arabité,"* 37-41.

²⁸ Sedar-Senghor, *"The Foundations of "Africanité" or "Négritude" and "Arabité,"* 42.

²⁹ Sedar-Senghor, *"The Foundations of "Africanité" or "Négritude" and "Arabité,"* 42.

³⁰ Léopold Sédar-Senghor, "Negritude and African Socialism," 132.

One of his greatest claims, and one that is most criticized by others, is the distinction between African emotion and “heart” and Caucasian “logic.” He said, “It is the subject that is moved. He reacts to the object, but with his own orientation and rhythm: his subjective style that he imposes on the object.”³¹ Senghor claimed that Africans are more emotional beings, and that they are more capable of being “moved” (emotionally) by a certain subject, whereas white people are more logical and less emotional. He noted that this is a race-based distinction.³²

“In short, while a great many Europeans and Americans, especially the French and Anglo-Saxons, think with their head, by concepts and schemas logically connected, Mediterraneans and Africans, or specifically Arabs and Negroes, think with their soul- I would even say: with their heart.”³³

In addition, he added that the force of nature had a significant impact on the sensitiveness of the African people. He stressed Africans’ connection with nature and how it allowed them to “feel more than they see” as well as enabling them to have a deep understanding of the things around them.³⁴ Senghor also stressed the importance of African descendants learning the traditional African culture and incorporating it into their art and literature in order to show the true beauty and depth of the culture. He tasked them with continuing the work of those before them to show the rest of the world that Africa has a unique and sophisticated culture.³⁵

These two factors evidently had a lasting impact on Senghor and the way he would go on to advocate for not only the physical freedom of Africans suffering under European colonial rule,

³¹ Sedar-Senghor, “*The Foundations of “Africanité” or “Négritude” and “Arabité”*,” 43.

³² Sedar-Senghor, “*The Foundations of “Africanité” or “Négritude” and “Arabité”*,” 42.

³³ Sedar-Senghor, “*The Foundations of “Africanité” or “Négritude” and “Arabité”*,” 44.

³⁴ Léopold Sédar-Senghor, “Négritude and African Socialism,” 132.

³⁵ Léopold Sédar-Senghor, “Négritude and African Socialism,” 132.

but also the mental, emotional and spiritual freedom of Africans both as a whole and individually. His later political career appears to be deeply influenced by Négritude and the values that he adopted starting as a student in France. The oppressive forcefulness of the French policy of assimilation is the first influential force that led Senghor to search for a new truth about African identity, and the sensitivity and passion he discovered to be a key piece of the African personality fused together with it to create the seed that would blossom into the flower that would become Négritude.

Bibliography

- Aberger, Peter. "Léopold Senghor and the Issue of Reverse Racism." *Phylon* 41 (1980): 276-283.
- Lambert, Michael C. "From Citizenship to Négritude: "Making a Difference" in Elite Ideologies of Colonized Francophone West Africa." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35 (1993): 239-262.
- Melady, Thomas Patrick. *Profiles of African Leaders*. New York, NY: MacMillan, 1961.
- Moore, Gerald. *Seven African Writers*. London, UK: Oxford University Press, 1962. Reprint, 1966.
- Sedar-Senghor, Leopold. "Negritude and African Socialism." In *The African Philosophy Reader*, edited by P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux, 438-447. London, UK: Routledge, 1998. Reprint, 2001.
- Sédar-Senghor, Léopold. "Negritude: A Humanism of the Twentieth Century." In *Perspectives on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History and Representation* 2, edited by Roy Richard Grinker, Stephen C. Lubkemann and Christopher B. Steiner, 477-483. West Sussex, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010.
- Sédar-Senghor, Léopold. *The Foundations of "Africanité" or "Négritude" and "Arabité."* Translated by Mercer Cook. Paris, FR: Présence Africaine, 1967. Reprint 1971.
- Sédar-Senghor, Léopold. "The Spirit of Civilization, or The Laws of the African Negro Culture." In *African History in Documents: Western African History Vol. 1*, edited by Robert O. Collins, 130-142. Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1990. Reprint 2012.
- Skurnik, Walter A.E. "Léopold Sédar Senghor and African Socialism." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 3 (1965): 349-369.
- Vaillant, Janet G. Review of *The Concept of Negritude in the Poetry of Leopold Sedar Senghor*, by Sylvia Washington Ba; *Leopold Sedar Senghor: An Intellectual Biography*, by Jacques-Louis Hymans; *Leopold Sedar Senghor and the Politics of Negritude*, by Irving Markovitz and *Leopold Sedar Senghor et la naissance de l'Afrique moderne*, by Ernest Milcent and Monique Sordet. *ASA Review of Books* 2 (1976): 154-162.