

SENGHOR'S NEGRITUDE AS FOUNDATIONALISM: A KEY TO THE AFFIRMATION OF AFRICAN IDENTITY.

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Abstract

One of the marked features of the contemporary black African is his unquenchable desire to regain, in Sartre's phrase, his existential integrity. This implies "the original purity of his [black African] existence'. Before now, the black race is regarded as debased by the whites who claim to be the epitome of civilization and development in all its ramifications. They see the black race as having contributed nothing and can contribute almost nothing to the global development. This make them to increasingly question the rationality of the African which eventually is the necessary condition that makes one a human. As such, some like the French went to the extreme of trying to make French people of the blacks. The negritude movement as championed by Leopold Sedar Senghor is as a result of this negative attitude of the whites against the blacks and it gears towards asserting the black identity. His drive is not for social progress, economic consolidation and stability but above all for self actualization through the resource of his being and culture. It is back to his root as source of his existence and survival as 'a being in the world' in Heidegger's phrase. This work will adopt three methodologies in line with the theme under discussion. It employs expository, hermeneutic and critical approaches. First of all, the exposition of the epistemological theory of foundationalism will be made. Then, Negritude Movement will be interpreted hermeneutically in the light of the foundationalists theory. Finally, Senghor's notion of negritude and the tenets of the foundationalists will be evaluated so as to see how much Senghor's Negritude qualifies as a basic epistemological truth for the Negro- African as a way of affirming his identity.

Keywords: Senghor, Negritude, Foundationalism, Affirmation, African Identity.

Introduction

The African experience of colonialism was a tragic one particularly in the assimilation policies of the French and the Portuguese. It was a period of total eclipse of the black man and the full worth of his civilization. A time marked with a complete self-alienation as a black African with a distinct culture. As Chukwudum B Okolo says:

The policy, in short amounted to making French citizens out of [black people]... It meant uprootedness of their being and cultural values since they were neither accepted as French people nor as distinct citizens of the black world. The policy simply ignored and even despised the whole values and civilization of a people (Okoro; 1984).

With regard to his being or personality, the African remain inauthentic, untrue, an invisible man, or as Fanon would say, "Black skins, White masks"(Fanon; 1967), since he was measuring his identity with the western standard, namely: the white man and his cultural ideals. This makes it appear as if Africa is no nation at all. This is in terms of her meaningful contribution to the global movement towards modernity and development in general. Hence, the question started from whether Africans are rational at all to the question about their humanity.

Philosopher like Comte de Gobineau speaking about the black race has this to say:

The majority of human races are unable to be ever civilized, unless the mix with others;...not only do these races not possess the necessary internal spring to push them forward on the scale development, but moreover...no external agent would be able to fertilize their organic sterility, however energetic this agent might be otherwise (Gobineau; 1981).

In another place he continues:

while the thinking faculties [of the negro] are mediocre or even nil, he possesses in the desire, and therefore in the will, an often terrible intensity ... To this chief character traits he adds an instability of humors, a variability of sentiments which nothing can fix, and which for him annuls virtue and vice (Gobineau; 1981).

Many other philosophers and thinkers from the west also showed familiar attitude towards the Negro-race. Even though colonialism is not totally bad, a juxtaposition of its good and bad sides leaves many questions on the desk of the white man. Added to this is the issue of the slave trade. The emergence of African philosophy which its possibility has so much been debated on is only a means to affirm that Africans have an identity to portray to the rest of the world as a unique people. Hence, many philosophers from within and outside Africa have risen to the challenge of trying to show that Africans both before and now, reason. This is because the faculty of reasoning is a measure for rationality and that which necessarily qualifies one as a human being. This adventure however is not without some criticisms.

More so, many traditionalist movements and political theories have risen all to help affirm the fact that the Negro-race is and is as important as her sister races in the world and has an important role peculiar to her which she is to play for the benefit of the nations of the world and for global growth. Among these traditionalist movements is the Negritude Movement which was championed and further developed by Leopold Sedar Senghor. Senghor established this movement with his fellow Negro students in Paris by name; Aimé Ceasire

and Leon Damas. Despite the fact that Aimé Césaire claims to be the first to coin and use the word 'Negritude', Senghor was the foremost proponent of the movement. This negritude as already mentioned above, is the keyword of this research.

Going by the idea of many philosophers from within and outside Africa, some of which we have seen above, it is pertinent to ask; does it mean that Africans actually have no identity at all? Has the Blackman nothing whatsoever to contribute to the global society? Are the whites not actually misinformed or even prejudiced about Africans? Is one's colour a measure of his or her rationality and dignity or is this a mere racist attitude? Is there still any hope for the Blackman amidst these challenges? How does the Blackman rise up to this challenge of self identification after several decades of cultural corrosion? How do we correct this ill-impression of the whites about the Blacks? How do we carry out the reform of the African mindset to free it from the psychological effects of racism and colonialism and the consequent feeling of perennial inferiority? These and more will form the subject of our discussion in this write-up.

Negritude as a concept was derived from the Latin word '*negritudo*' meaning '*black black colour*' or '*blackness*'. The aim of this cultural movement as was developed by black intellectuals studying in Paris in the mid thirties is to respond to a situation that alienated them and their cultural values. The coming together of these black students from Africa, Guyana and Martinique studying in Paris is not by chance. It was the consequence of their common experience of alienated consciousness, of staying in the white world (France) without really being incorporated into it. The assimilation policy of the French colonial government implied in practice total self-alienation as black people with a different cultural circumstance, outlook and values. The policy, in short, amounted to making French citizens out of these black students from different parts of the black world. Hence, this work is aimed at trying to establish negritude as foundationalism, a basic epistemological truth about the black man upon which he can build other truths about himself and his environment. Thus, he will confirm an identity truly given to him by nature amidst other several peoples of the world. With this he can have a stable ground, a kind of a spring board, upon which he can rest on to make his unique contribution amidst other races that make up the entire humanity.

A SHORT REVIEW OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL THEORY OF FOUNDATIONALISM

The philosophical theory of foundationalism is the doctrine which holds that knowledge is ultimately considered on beliefs that demand no further justification. This idea arises from the understanding that a person's beliefs are in general confirmed by other beliefs. This produces an infinite regress. The stand of the foundationalist in this regard is to claim that this regress can only be avoided if there are basic foundational beliefs which are self evident and justifying. According to Simon Blackburn, "foundationalism is the view in epistemology that knowledge must be regarded as a structure raised upon secure, certain foundation"(Blackburn, 1996). A classical example to this was produced by the French Enlightenment philosopher René Descartes. In his *Meditations*, René Descartes disputed the contemporary principles of philosophy by contending that everything he knew he came from or through his senses. He applied varieties of arguments to dare the reliability of the senses, citing past errors and the possibilities that he was dreaming or being deceived by an Evil Demon. Descartes made strenuous effort to establish the sure foundations for knowledge so as to avoid skepticism. The method he used was to query all his beliefs until he arrived at

something that is clear and distinct and, therefore, indubitably true. Consequently, Descartes arrived at his '*cogito ergo sum*' – '*I think therefore I am*', or the belief that he was thinking – as his indubitable belief suitable as a foundation for knowledge (Descartes; 1641). Invariably, Descartes' '*cogito ergo sum*' solved his problem of the Evil Demon – the possibility that he was being deceived by an Evil Demon, rendering all of his beliefs about the external world false. Even when his beliefs concerning the external world were doubtful, nevertheless, his beliefs about what he was experiencing were still indubitably true, even when those perceptions do not have any relation with anything in the world. He argued that he could be certain that he exist as a thinking being and this served as a rock for him on which he sought to establish further knowledge of the world. Some philosophers sought this epistemic foundation in logical truths (rationalists), whereas others sought it in one's current sensory experience or mental state (empiricists). However, as Thomas Mautner observes:

There exist two problems in traditional foundationalism: it is argued that these beliefs taken as foundation are subject to doubt and so not self-justifying. Again, even if they are free from doubt such belief with slender content is difficult to use in the justification of the more full-bodied belief about external world (Mautner; 1997).

In response to this, a fallibilist foundationalism was formulated which opines that beliefs need not be certain in order to be self-justifying. Hence, foundationalism implies that knowledge and epistemic justification have dual forms: certain instances of knowledge justification are foundational (non-inferential) and all other instances thereby are non-foundational (inferential), as they derive ultimately from foundational knowledge or justification. Robert Audi (ed.) observes thus:

This view about knowledge originates in Aristotle's posterior analysis regarding knowledge, but receives extreme formulation in Descartes' meditations and got its varying details in the works of 20th century philosophers as Russell, C.S Lewis and Chisholm (Audi; 1999).

The forms of foundationalism proposed by philosophers vary in two major areas: the exact elucidation of non-inferential or foundational knowledge and justification and the separate information of how foundational knowledge and justification can be passed on to non-foundational beliefs. The attempt to resolve this matter gave rise to two schools in foundationalism: radical (classical) foundationalism and modest foundationalism.

Radical (Classical) Foundationalism

Radical foundationalism represented by Renè Descartes holds that foundational belief is sure and certain, and can be able to offer an assurance of the certainty of the non-foundational beliefs they holdup. For the classical foundationalists, basic beliefs subsist, and they are justified without making any reference to other beliefs, whereas non-basic beliefs must necessarily be justified by basic beliefs. Radical foundationalism holds that basic beliefs must be infallible so as to justify non-basic beliefs. Classical foundationalism equally maintains that only deductive reasoning can be employed to pass on justification from one belief to another. According to Robert Audi (ed.):

This school is unpopular because of two reasons: very few if any of our perceptual beliefs are certain (indubitable). Again is that those beliefs that may qualify as certain knowledge (e.g. the belief that I am thinking), lacks the substance to guarantee the certainty of our rich, highly inferential knowledge about the external world (Audi; 1999).

Modest Foundationalism

This is the view point that foundational beliefs do not need to possess or to acquire certainty.. Contemporary foundationalists typically endorse modest foundationalism. Thus, foundational belief here is called 'basic belief'. However, it is the precise understanding of the term 'basic belief' that is controversial among the modest foundationalists. Nevertheless, Robert Audi (ed.) observes; "Despite all this disagreement over the basis of foundational justification, modest foundationalism typically agree that foundational justification is characterized by defeasibility" (Audi; 1999). Hence, for him, "foundationalists agree however in their general understanding of non-inferentially justified foundational belief as beliefs whose justification does not derive from others" (Audi; 1999).

SENGHOR'S NEGRITUDE IN THE LIGHT OF THE FOUNDATIONALIST THEORY FOR THE AFFIRMATION OF THE AFRICAN IDENTITY

Before we delve into this topic proper, it will be good to explain who an African is. The phrase, 'African personality' has become rather common in the social and political sayings of many contemporary African leaders and intellectuals. However, whatever meaning this phrase enjoys today, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, the late leader of Ghana can rightly be regarded as its ardent promoter and spokesman. Thus, just before the First Conference of Independent African States held in Accra in April 1958, Kwame Nkrumah made this famous statement: "for too long in our history, Africa has spoken through the voices of others. Now what I have called an African personality in international affairs will let the world know it through the voices of african's own sons" (Nkrumah; 1963). Since the proclamation of this phrase by Nkrumah, many African thinkers have made use of the same concept with little difference in meaning and interpretation. However, bearing in mind the many controversies that may arise from the our understanding of who an African is because of the multi-cultural nature of the African continent, it becomes necessary to ask; what actually identifies one as an African?

What it means to be African

The definition an African as a person born and nurtured in African environment is really a circular definition, one has to necessarily define African environment or stock. It is an indisputable fact that the climatic conditions of most parts of Africa differs from those of Europe and Asia. Again, it is a fact that the cultural evolution and the consequent value systems of most black African societies not only differ from those of Europe and Asia but also differ between various African groups themselves, even though one can still see many points of similarities. However, the question remains whether these biological, climatic and cultural differences make the black African a different kind of human being? At this juncture, it is good to remind us that what makes a person a human being is man's biological specification and man's unique psychological endowment. These two qualities practically distinguish human beings from every other brutes. However, as Ruch & Anyanwu observe, "While human nature and its dignity is universal and common to all men, each human person is also a particular mix of all the elements which go into his making. This mix determines his individual

personality which is his character and temperament and his physical individuality"(Ruch & Anyanwu, 1981). But can what we have just said about individual personality be transferred to what we can call a collective personality? On this Ruch and Anyanwu write:

"Everyone has heard of the clichés of the stodgy Englishman, the stingy Scotman, the amorous Frenchman, the stolid German, the emotional African... And then we meet young Englishmen going ravingly emotional at a Beatle concert; we meet Scotsman squandering money; we meet frigid Frenchman, emotional German...serious African intellectuals...."(Ruch & Anyanwu; 1981).

For them this clichés should never be thrown away because of this little differences. This is because there exists a broad collective national or regional character or personality in a people, determined by its mode of education, value priorities imposed by social convention and pressures, by a geographically or culturally imposed mode of life or by historical events. This is not racialistic genetic differentiation but a cultural differentiation, explained by the fact that groups have developed in isolation from each other. Hence, C.B.Okolo writes: "Whether the African is one people or many is insignificant.... We rather assert that the African is easily identifiable ontologically or as being-in-the-African world. He is not just a being but a 'being with'"(Okolo; 1993) answering the question of what it is to be black and African at the same time, Okolo maintains that the African child is born black but becomes African. This issue of becoming African means, philosophically speaking, that an African is not just simply a being but essentially a 'being-with'. This very *belonging-ness* is the basis of his claim to the title, 'African'. Hence, in African metaphysics, the horizon of the African 'self' is essentially towards others. An individual person's existence has meaning only in relation with others. What this implies is that the individual becomes meaningful only in relation with others, in a community of persons. It is the community that owns the individuals, to such an extent that outside the context of the community, the individual has no real existence. This social relations of self in African philosophy are seen rooted in the extended family system as well conceived by Ruch & Anyanwu as one "in which everybody is linked with all the other members, living or dead, through a complex network of spiritual relationship into a kind of mystical body"(Ruch & Anyanwu, 1981). However, philosophers like Whitehead and John Dewey also conceived man and all other existing things, not discretely, but essentially in relation to others. Again, Heidegger views Dasein as a being with others. More so, Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel explain existence in terms of I- Thou relationship. These western views which seems to conflict with the African being-with is cleared by the fact that unlike in African philosophy, reality for these western thinkers is monistic and as such consisting only the tangible, the visible, the verifiable; whereas the African universe is idealistic including the visible and invisible, material and spiritual, time and eternity, all of which are interconnected and mutually interacting with one another. Again, African being-with is different from the Aristotelian or the Platonic concept of man as social or political animal. This is because the reason given by these philosophers for man as a social and political being is largely within the domain of the egoistic and utilitarian intent. But the African being-with as an ontological category and as culturally a defining mode of the being of the African is over and above the merely egoistic and the merely utilitarian needs of self and equally beyond the community to which self belongs. Therefore, that one is born black does not necessarily mean he is an African but cultural differentiation of being-with in the sense we have articulated is a necessary factor.

From this perspective, the black or Afro-American who is born black but without the African being-with is not African. The white man who is neither born black nor has the African being-with is far from being African. The white South African without the African being with is not African though born in Africa. But a member of any race could become African, of course through African being-with.

Negritude vis à vis the Epistemological Theory of Foundationalism

In order to attain certainty about the knowledge claims which he has, the greatest French thinker, Rene Descartes, sought for a foundation upon which knowledge claims can rest so as to guarantee their certainty. Thus, Descartes who gave the classical formulation of this epistemological theory of foundationalism, began in his Meditation by doubting all the knowledge claims he had. He dared the contemporary principles of philosophy by proposing that every knowledge he may claim to have is acquired from or through his senses. He used various arguments to challenge the reliability of the senses, pointing to past errors, possibility of dreaming, or the deception by an evil demon. All he did in his bid to formulate a sure foundation for knowledge as to avoid skepticism. Thus, he attempted to find truths which were clear and distinct because they would be indubitably true and a suitable foundation for knowledge. Then, by questioning all of his beliefs, he eventually landed at his "*cogito ergo sum*". Descartes argued that he could be certain that he exist as a thinking being and this served as a rock for him on which he sought to establish further knowledge of the world. This idea of Descartes, in a great sense not only influenced the western mind but is also a product of a predominant culture which emphasizes the I, the individual. In a similar manner, when Senghor talks about negritude he defines it as;

“... the whole of the values of civilization – cultural, economic, social, and political – which characterize the black peoples, more exactly the Negro-African world. It is essentially instinctive reason, which pervades all these values, because it is reason of the impressions, reason that is ‘seized’. It is expressed in the emotions, through the myth, I mean by images – archetypes of the collective soul, especially by the myth primordial accorded to those of the cosmos. In other terms, the sense of communion, the gift of imagination, the gift of rhythm – these are the traits of negritude that we find like an indelible seal on the works and activities of the black man”(Senghor; 1961).

This understanding of negritude as Senghor describes here is a tantamount to or better put, a résumé of our explanation of who is an African, which is characterized by being-with, in the African perspective. Thus C.B Okolo writes: “[this] relationship constitutes self to the extent that the African could well echo *Cognatus Ergo Sum* (“I am related [to others] therefore I exist”) to borrow Descartes known expression, *Cogito ergo Sum*” (Okolo; 1993). Hence, just as Descartes used the thinking I as a foundation for western knowledge, this relatedness which negritude emphasizes can as well serve as foundation for African knowledge. Thus Senghor was right when he writes that emotion is while reason is Hellenic. Even though he has been criticized by this because it was taken to imply that Africans do not reason, Senghor has as well cleared this confusion by explaining this type of reasoning he ascribes to Africans. This is not the reasoning-eye of Europe, it is the reason of the touch, better still, the reason of the embrace, the sympathetic reason, more closely related to the Greek *logos* than the Latin *ratio*.

For logos before Aristotle meant at once reason and speech (Senghor; 1961). Worthy to note here is that although the mode of being African is characterized by all sort of relationships, the relation of man to man is dominant and central to this pursuit of socialized living in which the human concern constitutes a centrifugal force, so to speak is broadly called African humanism, which has been differently tagged and characterized by various scholars, Africans and non- Africans. For Senghor, the distinguishing characteristics of the Negro-african, is his negritude of which the 'sense of communion', the openness of man to man, is basic. For him the gift of rhythm and the sense of communion, among others, are "the traits of negritude that we find like an indelible seal on all the works and activities of the black man" (Senghor; 1961).

Foundationalistic Implications of Negritude

The explanation of the concept of negritude provides a lot of meaningful knowledge that are fundamental and basic to the African. This basic knowledge can as well serve as a foundation for understanding and appreciation of his being, as well as an explanation for his beliefs, aspirations, value choices and in fact his entire understanding of reality. Life for the African is a co-participation, and this is the very reason for characterizing him as being-with. Thus, when Senghor describes the African mind as 'intuitive by participation', he does not at all mean that Africans lacks the capacity of rational or logical discourse or the ability to think but merely points to this essential cultural trait, which Sartre describes as a certain effective attitude to the world or basically emotional. Because the meaning of the concept of negritude is foundational to the African mind, it accounts for the basic difference between the white and black man to the world of man and nature. This difference is poles apart and is evidenced in their global relationship to man as well as nature. However, this difference is not innate but cultural. It is not the mental capacity itself but its basic cultural attitude to life. Based on this, Okolo maintains that the thought of the essential superiority of the white mind to the black is simply a pipe-dream. Some thinkers like Jacques Maquet, an anthropologist, see this difference in the basic attitude to life between the blacks and white as a product of the differences in their socio-cultural upbringing. What is emphasized here is that the African child on being born is immediately in touch with the human and physical environment which builds and shapes the much pronounced human angle or dimension of the African. This is not the case with the European or American child who enjoys alone in his crib. This amount to our initial statement that one is only born black but becomes African and that a member of any race, for that matter, could become African, of course through African being-with. Therefore, the point I wish to drive home here is that being-with is a fundamental horizon of the African. His mode of being in the world is such that he may well be culturally defined as a being-with. In its main dimensions, the humane angle, the human attitude of feeling involved with others in cooperative living predominates. However, this being with is a by-product of culture, rooted in the extended family system and in the essential religious world-view and tradition of the African himself. The above statement is simply the summary of what the concept of negritude means. This mode of being which is at the base of the existence of the African, and which distinguishes him from his sister races in the world is what confers an indelible identity on him. It makes him African and by the means of which he makes people of other races African.

Evaluation and conclusion

Just as the Cogito – the thinking, being which was proposed by Descartes, the father of modern philosophy in Europe, could serve as a foundation for the western knowledge which defines

his personality, from, by and with which he comes to learn and know other realities; the Cognatus – the relatedness, the being- with which Senghor, one of the best known modern African philosophic thinker as J. Obi Oguejiofor and Godfrey Igwebuike Onah addressed him, tries to expound in his negritude could also serve as a foundation for the African knowledge which defines his personality, from, by and with which he comes to learn and know other realities. The above foundations shape the mode of knowing and the attitude to the world in the European and African respectively. These different foundations not only account for the major differences between the African and the people of other races, but also give each his own distinct identity. Thus, Cogito as a foundation for the western process of knowledge acquisition manifested in their individualistic lifestyle, lack of extended family system, their method of reasoning which is a kind of a distanced analysis of things for the singular purpose of utility. All these result to their subjectivism towards goals, ideals and values choices. On the other hand, the Cognatus as a foundation for the African process of knowledge acquisition is manifested in their communal spirit, extended family system, unitary worldview, reason-by- embrace which Senghor sees as akin to logos in its original pre-Aristotelian sense than the European reason which is nearer to the Latin ratio. The consequences of which is the existence of objective values, goals, and common ideals among the Africans. Hence one of the highest punishments an African could undergo is ostracizing one from sharing in the life of the community.

This relatedness, the participatory nature of the African as we saw above sums up the entire meaning of the African worldview. Because this character is a product of the predominant culture in which he was groomed, the concept of negritude which is the sum total of the cultural values of the black man, can only be understood and explained in terms of this African relatedness, and as such a foundation for further explanation and understanding of the African. What is meant here is that with negritude as a basic epistemological foundation of which we could be certain about beyond all doubt, one could be able to understand the idea, motives and reason behind the African notion of the world, his public and private life, his idea of morality as well as his choice of values. However, culture being what it is, something dynamic and fleeting, the qualities of being-with can be lost with time with the incursion of alien cultures and values for example in the interplay of industrialization and urbanization. Thus, being with as a distinguishing cultural characteristic of the African is today, more or less fluid. It does not mean that being-with, in its qualities and dimensions can be lost, regained or even lost forever, but implies what we said earlier that it is not automatic with blackness. One is born black but becomes African and people of any race could become African with the African being-with. Albeit, through the process of colonialism, the African culture was not only influenced by the dynamic and fleeting characteristics of culture, but suffered from a cultural corrosion from the cultures of the colonial masters. One of the consequences of this is the conflicting personality which presently plagues his existence. This mode of being which W.E.B Du Bois described as Double Consciousness and which Frantz Fanon sees as Black skin, White Mask, is what imbued the question of whether Africans have identity at all to show amidst other races of the world in its primordial sense. Because of this multi-identity nature of the present African, the doubt that he has any real identity is in a way justified. However, whatever doubt the present nature of the African may create and of all that he may doubt about himself, he cannot doubt the fact that he exists in a family which not only determines his existence as much as he determines the existence of the family, but also

influences his attitude to life in general. This relatedness is the basic epistemological foundation for the African which he is not only certain about, but is also indubitable.

Conclusion

Thus, it is only by a return to these cultural values which are foundational to the African and synonymous with his existence can he make meaningful and original contribution to the world. It is only when Africans themselves recover and put into practice the qualities of being-with, will they bestow upon the world, a more human face. It is in this way that the African can differentiate himself in this multi-raced world. It is by this means that he can affirm an identity which was given to him by nature.

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