

SENGHOR SPEAKS ON AFRICA

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Leopold Sedar Senghor was President and Head of State of the Republic of Senegal from 1960-80, when he retired, and was also Minister of Defence from 1968-69. A graduate of the Sorbonne, he is also a writer and scholar of international repute.

Former President Senghor has received numerous international awards, including the Dag Hammarskjöld Prize, 1965; The Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, Frankfurt; the Haile Selassie African Research Prize, 1973; and the Apollinaire Prize for Poetry, 1974.

Amongst many other publications, Professor Senghor has also written Langage et Poésie Négro-Africaine, 1954; L'apport de la Poésie Nègre, 1953; Esthétique Négro-Africain, 1956 and Collected Poems, 1977.

Since his retirement from the Presidency, Professor Senghor has taken up the position of President of the "Interafricaine Socialiste", Dakar.

It should be noted that any opinions expressed in this article are the responsibility of the author and not the Institute.

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This is the edited text of an interview in French, given by former President Leopold Sedar Senghor on 13 February, 1982, to Christine von Garnier, correspondent for Agence France-Presse, the Journal de Genève and the Neue Zürcher Zeitung.

This report on her interview was originally prepared by Ms. von Garnier for the Africa Institute of South Africa, whose permission to reproduce it is gratefully acknowledged.

Leopold Sedar Senghor has been retired from the Presidency of Senegal for one year and is now living in his beautiful house at the seaside in Dakar, where I was received. This home, in Sudano-Sahelian style, reveals the man: everything in it is harmony, beauty and of universal culture.

The effect of meeting this rare personality is to make one feel like a "citoyen du monde" (a citizen of the world). Barriers of culture, race and nationalism fall; all seems to be so easy between human beings of good will, because "chaque homme à une vocation d' universalité", as he said (every human being has a vocation for universality).

Question:

Mr. President,

After a long political life filled by numerous successes, but also by difficulties and failures, may I ask you, in what do you believe? Which are the main principles which have guided your life?

President Senghor:

I am going to answer this question in a book which will be published in the collection, Ce que je crois (Edition stock, 1983), and which I have entitled: de la Négritude à la Civilisation de l' Universel (From Negritude to the Civilization of the Universal). I believe in Negritude, i.e. the values of the black world. I had such a good education, (my father was a rich farmer), that I never had an inferiority complex. Thus all through my life, I could search for arguments and prove them to exalt and illustrate black values. This will be the first part of my book.

After classical studies at the Sorbonne (Latin and Greek), I attended the "Institut d' ethnologie de Paris". I was taught by Paul Rivet, a well known

anthropologist .../

anthropologist, that the first and greatest historical civilizations were civilizations of biological and cultural cross-breeding. He used to say: "Look at this map of the world. All around the world, at the latitude of the Mediterranean Sea, the great races have met and interbred. From Gibraltar to East India for the Whites and the Blacks; from Burma to America through the Pacific Ocean for the Yellows and the Blacks".

He was one of the first to say that the Indians have arisen from cross-breeding between Yellow and Black, which was proved correct later on.

Von Wutenau, one of my German friends in Mexico, has insisted on the Negro influence in pre-Colombian America. These are the reasons why the second part of my book will be entitled "Métissage" (Cross-breeding).

The third part will be devoted to the Civilization which all nations are busy edifying, volentes nolentes, Civilization of the third millenium, in which each continent, each race, each nation, brings his irreplaceable contribution, and the Negroes do not come empty-handed. From that day which I call the Revolution of 1889, i.e. from the day of the publication of Henri Bergson's book, Essay on the Immediate Data of Conscience, one has understood the contribution of Negroes to the enrichment of the Civilization which Teilhard du Chardin calls "La Civilisation de l'Universel", and to the École de Paris.

When I was a deputy in France, I wrote an article in the Revue Diogène about the "Negro-African Aesthetic". The great painter Pierre Soulange, said then to me, "It is the aesthetic of the twentieth century".

What have the Negroes brought to this aesthetic? My definition of a Negro work of art is that it is a texture of symbolic, melodious and rhythmic images. This work has the sense of the analogic image, it is full of harmony and melody of colours and forms. It is built on the rhythm, on the repetition which does not repeat itself exactly, on assymetrical parallelisms. That is all my book will speak about.

Q. It is said that Africa is exploited, plundered, strangled.

What do you think about that?

A. It is true. I have often said so on international occasions.

Firstly, there was the "Traite des Nègres" (Slave Trade).

Twenty million Negroes were deported, and for every one slave deported, ten died on their way. It means that in fact 200 million human beings were lost. It is the worst genocide in history; the first harm done to Africa

Secondly, since the gaining of independence by many countries in the early sixties, the deterioration of the terms of trade has worsened, as statistics from the World Bank show. Between 1952-1972, before the petrol crisis, the annual deterioration was 2,5%. Today, annually the specialists have calculated that this deterioration has worsened during the last years from 30% to 200%.

These are the two evils done to Africa. While the rich are becoming richer every year, we are becoming poorer every year. Let us take an example: Last year - only for cocoa - the Ivory Coast lost 400 milliards CFA. You see, it is a catastrophe for us.

The New Economic Order proposed by the Third World calls first for a New Cultural Order. To quote an example: an American finds U.S. \$10 000 a year insufficient to live on, but the same American thinks that U.S. \$200 per capita in Africa is quite sufficient, because "these people have no civilization". It is this way of thinking that must first change.

It is known that one of the earliest civilizations was born in Africa, in Egypt, among people who were black. Herodotus, who visited Egypt in the 5th Century B.C., tells us in the second book of his Histories that the Egyptians had black skin and frizzy hair. Today race is measured by the numerical tables of blood groups. Contemporary Egypt has the same table (with one or two points of difference), as the Senegalese people and nobody can deny that the Senegalese are black.

Q. It is the thesis of Cheikh Anta Diop.

A. Yes, it is his thesis and he is right, his book treats of this matter at length.

Q. What are the guide lines of your "Socialisme Démocratique"?

A. There was recently a board meeting of the "Interafricaine Socialiste", in Dakar on 4 February. We interpret the socialist authors in Negro-African terms. Marx says that the first activity of man is to satisfy animal needs: eating, housing and dressing. This is the reason why I

said .../

said that in our African development plans, we must first develop the rural sector. We must first achieve self-sufficiency. Once these basic needs have been satisfied, man can devote himself to his ordained activity, which is to create "works of beauty". This means that priority must be given to the rural world, but primacy to culture.

But, before all that, before social justice and cultural development, one must give to every citizen the enjoyment and exercise of the fundamental liberties of human rights.

It is in this respect, in the frame of our democratic regime in Senegal, with separation of the legislative, executive and judicial powers, that I have condemned the numerous coups d' état in Africa. It is a real plague. Unfortunately the European mass media, as well as the African, seems to agree with it; Rawlings, (of Ghana), has turned into a kind of continental hero.

Socialism for me means firstly democracy, respecting the fundamental liberties of human rights. Then, we need a "vital minimum" - self sufficiency in food - and only after that comes social justice and the elevating of man by means of culture. In Senegal we allocate one third of our budget, 33%, to culture.

Q. Does communism stand a chance in Africa?

A. Let us look at the situation. Today one third of African states call themselves Marxist-Leninist. One must not underestimate the influence of international communism in Africa, precisely the influence of the USSR. I believe the Soviets are more intelligent, more methodical, more patient than is generally believed. They have their hands on Angola, Mozambique and Ethiopia, and they are the ones who in fact support the Polisario in Occidental Sahara. I believe in the communist danger for Africa and I deplore the fact that the Occidental world is not more conscious of this situation and fails to help us more in our efforts to develop our countries, for, the best antidote to communism is development; economic development of course, but also cultural development.

Q. Do you think that one-party states are only a stage in the political development of nations towards multiparty systems?

It .../

- A. It is exactly what I said recently in my introductory speech at the meeting of the "Interafricaine Socialiste" in Dakar. Senegal had a multiparty system before independence. Early in 1848 we sent representatives to the French Parliament and from then we have always had a multiparty regime. But in the sixties, after most African independences, I said that the states which had not yet had a multiparty system should be careful and start with a single party system, based on democratic principles, and this during a generation, i.e. for twenty to thirty years. This is the reason why the African states who want now to be democratic, should introduce multiparty systems.
- Q. Senegal has just established diplomatic ties with Angola. By doing that it recognizes implicitly the Cuban presence in that country. What is your personal opinion?
- A. When I heard about the revolution in Angola on 25 July, (1975), I contacted a representative of General Spínola and Mario Soares. I told them that it was time for decolonization. The first discussions took place in Dakar, and I advised the political parties of Angola to form a common front to discuss with the Portuguese. I even gave them a legal adviser. They heard me out, but when I told them to constitute a coalition government, they refused to listen any further.
- When I was President of Senegal I said to President Neto that we recognised the independence of Angola, but that we would establish diplomatic ties only when the Cuban troops had gone. In Neto, I admired the poet; sadly, however, he died two years ago. My successor, in the framework of our socialist programme, has adopted a politic of "changements dans la continuité" (changes in continuity), with which I agree. Thus I agree with his decision to establish co-operative bonds with Angola. But I think that the basic problems will not be solved as long as there is an "armée d' occupation" in that country, which is the fact with the Cubans.
- Q. What do you think about Namibia?

- A. In Dakar, in May 1976, I said to Kissinger that the Americans should try to promote majority rule within two years in Rhodesia and Namibia. Rhodesia has now become an independent Zimbabwe and I have a high regard for Robert Mugabe, whom I helped when he was fighting for independence. What about Namibia? We were among the first to accept the opening of a SWAPO office. I think that the contact group has recently done good work. The SWAPO representative told me that there is only one clause in their document which is not acceptable, and if that is so then I think that dialogue is still open. Democratic elections must now take place in Namibia and a democratic constitution must be drawn up. It is the chance for Namibia to become a multiracial democratic state. Cultural cross-breeding is very important and biological cross-breeding will follow naturally, anyway.
- Q. Do you consider the members of the present government as "stooges" of Pretoria, as it is said?
- A. I do not like to use clichés, for I had the occasion to discuss with members of the South African Government.
- Q. And Namibians?
- A. No, I never had the occasion to talk to them, but they have never asked me.
- Q. Senegalese people are deeply democratic and tolerant people, why then do you recognise SWAPO as the sole representative of Namibia?
- A. The regime in Namibia has been imposed by South Africa. We did not agree with the fact that the U.N. had entrusted a mandate to South Africa on Namibia, because South Africa has a racist regime, which is why their government is not recognised by us. South Africa should have given independence to Namibia as did the French and the English on their mandates on Togo and Cameroun. It is a theoretical point of view, I agree, but it is the strength of the Senegalese democracy to fight first for principles.

- Q. I understand your point of view. I would like to mention, however, that the government in Namibia was elected in 1978 under South African supervision which is an arguable point, but that this government represented 60% of the whole Namibian population at that time, according to foreign journalists. Today it has lost ground considerably because South Africa prevented it from instituting the necessary constitutional reforms.
- A. I believe you, but one should have organised elections under U.N. supervision which would certainly have been representative of 95% of the Namibian people. People say that SWAPO stands under communist influence. Things are not so simple. This organisation plays on two scenes, like Nicaragua for example. They ask the international socialists for help as well as the international communists; but they are first and foremost nationalists!
- Q. The Whites in Namibia all think that the Soviets will use SWAPO in Namibia, and you just said that one should not underestimate the influence of the USSR in Africa. They ask themselves if Sam Nujoma will be able to resist them, like Robert Mugabe.
- A. I agree with you, there is a danger. This is the reason why, when I was President of Senegal, I tried to see Sam Nujoma as often as possible to discuss with him. But you know, in politics there are never certainties. One can never foresee 100% of what will happen. A work of art can be perfect, but not a political work, it is "l'art du possible".
- Q. Would you agree to discuss with members of the Namibian Government and other parties? This government is a dé facto government, if we like it or not, and it uses South Africa to attain independence legally.
- A. As President of the "Interafricaine Socialiste", yes, yes, yes, if they ask for it. I have also contacts with Savimbi, who uses South Africa for his own purpose.

Q. Did you know that in Namibia a black man can marry a white woman?

A. Really? It is already great progress.

Q. Did you also know that some Namibian Ministers were ready to resign last November if South Africa was not willing to implement reforms in the Namibian constitution?

A. I did not know it. As I am already discussing with progressive white South Africans, then I do not see why I would not discuss with white and black Namibians.

Q. How would you like to see evolution in South Africa?

A. I think one must start dialogue between the different communities, and I have had the occasion to tell this to South African Foreign Minister Botha, in Paris, when he asked to see me. Dialogue between progressive Whites and Whites of the government; between Whites and Indians, Coloured and Blacks. In the Lusaka Declaration, the OAU has recognised white South Africans as having the same rights and duties as black South Africans. We were ready to consider them as full Africans, but we asked for the establishment of a democratic regime. I think that democratic evolution will take one more generation at least, before it is realized; but we would like to see the South African Government starting, but it never starts!

Q. Have you got friends in South Africa?

A. Yes, I have got friends in the Progressive Party, Helen Suzman and Colin Eglin, who often come to see me. We are ready to develop contacts with whoever asks for it. As I told you, I have also seen Foreign Minister Botha, who asked for it. We also receive South Africans for conferences, when they are not political.

Q. Would you accept an invitation to South Africa by a non-governmental progressive institution?

- A. I cannot go to South Africa, because when I was invited, I put some conditions and they were not accepted.
- Q. But if you were invited by a private organisation or people?
There is such distress in liberal and intellectual circles that they want to turn towards francophone African states to find a solution to their problems. In fact, they do not really know which way to go; they are apprehensive. You should give them the benefit of your experience.
- A. In such a case, if I were invited, I would consult the "Interafricaine Socialiste" (of which, as I have said, I am the President) and give a favourable notice. But you know, we Africans, we always fear being trapped, therefore we want to be careful. We would study the problem. Moreover, the cleavage in Africa is a political one; there are the Marxist-Leninists and the others. But there is also a cultural cleavage; francophone and anglophone, which is very important, but there is no racist cleavage along the lines Black-White, Arab-Black.
- Q. To end, I would like to come back again to a question which is close to my heart. Do you really think that there is a risk of a communist influence with SWAPO?
- A. There is always a risk with every liberation movement, for the communists are those who bring the bigger support and help for their liberation. Amilcar Cabral (of Guinea Bissau) told me once: "I feel much nearer to the Scandinavian Socialists, but I am forced to accept Soviet help, because I have no choice". This is the problem, you see. There is always a risk. I do not underestimate the Soviets at all; they are intelligent, well organised and patient, and they can smile. Therefore, your fears are partly justified, but the reality is always complex and full of nuances.