Negritude as Hermeneutics:  
A Reinterpretation of Léopold Sédar Senghor’s Philosophy

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Abstract. While highlighting the inherent tension between the quest for universalization and the unavoidable particularity in philosophical hermeneutics, this essay argues against what it regards as the uncritical characterization of Léopold Sédar Senghor’s concept of “negritude” in terms of ethnophilosophy, a derogatory term employed in contemporary African philosophy to describe philosophy that is communal, and which can be sieved out from such genres as proverbs, wise sayings, and myths. It reviews the background and the contents of negritude, including its metaphysics and its epistemology of emotion. It calls attention to Senghor’s ideas about communalism and his universalism seen in his theory of the civilization of the universal, and concludes that Senghor’s negritude is the outcome of a particular and personal interpretation of his experience of the African condition, and is therefore eminently hermeneutical.

I.

Introduction. Contemporary African philosophy reached a watershed in 1945 with Placid Tempels’s Bantu Philosophy. By the time Tempels was penning his slim volume, the first generations of colonially educated Africans had started making their voices heard, mostly in literature, anthropology, and politics. With the establishment of modern universities in Africa, starting especially from the 1950s, came also the establishment of the first academic departments of philosophy. Especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s a good number of philosophy departments sprouted in new African universities. The context of the birth of these philosophy departments raised, with some justification, the question of African philosophy. With the prefix “African” becoming almost a necessary complement of most humanistic disciplines—African languages, African literature, African religion, African history, and so forth—philosophy in African universities had to acquire a special coloring by paying more attention to its continental context. But the designation “African philosophy” quickly evoked
a cacophony of views about the existence and essence of any philosophy that can rightly be described by the adjective “African.” The content of the work of Placide Tempels became the lightning rod of this debate. Within this process the coinage “ethnophilosophy” emerged as a veritable sign of contradiction. First, many African professors of philosophy seasoned in the best traditions of Western philosophy reacted against the philosophic movement that Tempels’s work had initiated. Ethnophilosophy was viewed as a distortion of philosophy as such, or of pure philosophy. Negritude, especially in its expression by Leopold Senghor, was quickly classified as ethnophilosophy—a word coined by Paulin Hountondji in obvious disdain of the claim that there is a special African philosophy distinct from “real” philosophy. Ethnophilosophy was viewed as philosophy in the debased sense. It was described variously as generally accepted philosophy, as collective philosophy, and as cultural philosophy; and its method was regarded as doing philosophy by exhumation, in the sense that the researcher has only to search the culture and discover a philosophy that has already sedimented into the consciousness and common practices of his or her people. All these derogatory tags were, by implication, pitted against the ideal philosophy, one that is not ethnically based, not buried in the past or a common tradition, and stands above particular cultures.

Against the background of the critique of ethnophilosophy, Theophilus Okere initiated the tradition of hermeneutics in contemporary African philosophy. This current—later championed by Tshiamalenga Ntumba, Nkombe Oleko, and Tsaney Serequeberhan—insists that, wherever it is found, philosophy must be an individual interpretation of one’s cultural symbols, mediated by one’s understanding and self-understanding. Briefly, it must be hermeneutical. This essay argues that Léopold Sédar Senghor’s negritude is hermeneutical precisely in this sense, and that its categorization as ethno-philosophy is too facile in that it fails to pay attention to important factors in the birth and evolution of Senghor’s philosophy.

II.

The Import of Hermeneutics. Etymologically, the term hermeneutics means “expression,” “explanation,” “translation,” or “interpretation.”1 Although many thinkers add different slants to the meaning of the term, in general, hermeneutics involves bringing an inner meaning into the open. It entails making explicit what is implicit. It is thus a quest for meaning, one’s own meaning in one’s life, society, and milieu—in short, in the totality of one’s universe, which could be said to be constituted by one’s cultural symbols. Modern hermeneutics first started in connection with the Scriptures, given the need to rise beyond mere

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text to its meaning for each epoch. Philosophical hermeneutics as a discipline is comparatively more recent. Wilhelm Dilthey saw it as the core discipline that should be the foundation of all the arts or humanities (Geisteswissenschaften). Before Dilthey, Friedrich Schleiermacher emphasized two elements of hermeneutics, the grammatical and the psychological, and highlighted the circularity of the hermeneutical process: we cannot understand a word or a sentence except in the context of the whole text, but we cannot understand the text unless we understand the component words or sentences. In the same way, to understand a text we must first be privy to the author’s intention, which we cannot access except by the instrumentality of the text. This is the reality of the hermeneutical circle. Dilthey, for his part, emphasized the historicity of all interpretations. But it was Schleiermacher who first defined hermeneutics as the “doctrine of the act of understanding,” extending its application to all texts, not just the biblical. For Dilthey, man is basically made in history. There is first and foremost self-understanding, which belongs to the psychological realm, but understanding of things occurs through history. Edmund Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology aimed at arriving at proposition-less understanding by bracketing all the factors that could constitute a wedge between the object and its comprehension as it is. Martin Heidegger turned against Husserl’s claim to presupposition-less understanding with his analysis of the different modes of the object. To arrive at the real nature of understanding, for Heidegger, requires an appreciation of that being whose nature it is to understand, the only being who is capable of understanding. In Heidegger hermeneutics thus turns into fundamental ontology, which is primarily an understanding and interpretation of Dasein. This attempt to explain the ontological condition of understanding is what Heidegger calls hermeneutics. It involves historicity and commitment to the existential horizon of one’s time, and is the central element of being in the world. Understanding, which serves as the basis of interpretation, is deeply related to one’s situation, but it is not closed in on it. In any case, it is not presupposition-less, with its elements of Vorhabe, Vorsicht, and Vorgriff, representing respectively something we have, see, and grasp in advance.

Hans-Georg Gadamer begins with an analysis of Vorurteil (prejudice). Against Dilthey and Husserl, he follows the lead provided by Heidegger, but his theory takes its point of departure from the Enlightenment’s vacuous valorization of the claims of reason against authority, tradition, and prejudice. Gadamer discountenances the bad connotation given to the word Vorurteil by the Enlightenment.

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Etymologically, the word “prejudice” originates from *pre-judicium* (“prejudgment”), representing all prior experiences and influences that usually accompany an act of understanding. He follows the lead traced by Heidegger, underlining what he names the *Vorstruktur des Verstehens*, that is to say, the predetermined structure of an act of understanding. For Gadamer, understanding should be seen in the context of tradition, so that it becomes an activity in which the past and the present are fused. One major element in this tradition is language, which serves as the vehicle of our understanding. Language imposes a limit, as well as marking the promise of creative possibility. Because thinking is tied to the boundaries of language, our understanding is language-bound.

One’s own language world in which one lives is not a barrier preventing objective knowledge, but rather includes everything which our insight can reach or extend to. Of course, those who are brought up in a certain linguistic and cultural tradition see the world differently from those coming from other traditions. Furthermore, the historical worlds succeeding each other in the course of history differ from each other and from the world of today.

Basing himself on the gains of these thinkers, Paul Ricœur dwells a great deal on the question of method, viewing philosophy as a process which starts from a phenomenological level and proceeds to hermeneutical and reflexive states. It is “a reflection upon existence and upon all those means by which that existence can be understood.” It is a recovery of the self, an overcoming of the separation between the self and one’s true being. Due to the impossibility of a presupposition-less starting point in reflection, it is inherently impossible to achieve universality. It is the actual existential situation that provides the starting point for reflection, so that there arises a tension between philosophy’s aim at universality and its anchor in particular contexts from which it must operate, but which it must strive to transcend. Philosophy is, in Ben Ramose’s words, a “particularist interpretation with universal appeal.” Philosophy “begins with non-philosophical presuppositions which in the end cannot themselves be confidently justified with finality.”

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can attain the depth of interpretative insight needed, especially with respect to self-understanding, which to him is central to the hermeneutical process since understanding involves self-understanding. This awareness leads Ricœur to the strengthening of the pivotal role of the “other” in self-understanding. Different forms of false consciousness show the limitation of consciousness and the contrariety embedded in it: self-awareness carries within it a certain limitation in that it is self-deceptive, so that it needs a fundamental corrective from the “other.”

From this very brief excursus into the thought of a few hermeneutic thinkers, it is clear that despite the different emphases that we have observed, certain elements can be identified as basic in the hermeneutical process: psychology, history, and context, as well as understanding, prejudice, tradition, intention, and language. Philosophical hermeneutics operates within the bounds of the tension created by the desire for universality, on the one hand, and the inevitable particularity of philosophical reflection, on the other: the tension between self-understanding and the phenomenological pole of the “other.” Philosophy as hermeneutical process must be colored by the particularity of its birth, and in spite of the inherent tendency of the discipline, universal philosophy is an illusion, since the subject which is at the center of philosophy as hermeneutics is inevitably bedeviled by his/her particularity, his/her specificity, generating an ambivalence since this does not necessarily exclude universality. It is this tension that the rest of this essay tries to highlight in Léopold Senghor’s philosophy of negritude.

III.

Hermeneutics and African Philosophy. The implication of the remarks above is that African philosophy must also be a hermeneutics of the African condition, symbols, culture, language, history, and so forth. It was Theophilus Okere who, in a thesis defended in 1970 at the Catholic University of Louvain, came to this conclusion after a reading of Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricœur, and Hans-Georg Gadamer from the background of the Igbo culture. Okere inveighs against ethnophilosophy in its expressions by Tempels, Kagame, and Mbiti, calling it a false route to African philosophy. For him, whatever direction philosophy takes, it must involve an interpretation mediated by the individual, his culture, environment, personal experience, and history. For Tsenay Serequeberhan, a later follower of the hermeneutic tradition, the hermeneutics of African philosophy involves on the one hand horizon, which is the context of its imbeddedness, and, on the other hand, discourse, which is the outcome of the interpretive process working on a particular situation. Serequeberhan’s major work summarizes the

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10 Ibid., 65–6.
African horizon as one of violence and counter-violence, tracing the distinction of the “other” in the Western tradition. This “other” turns out to be distinctive not by mere difference but by his or her inferiority, sub-humanity, and uncivilization, identified with the “primitive mentality” of Lévy Bruhl. It is indeed this idea of the other that served as the backdrop for colonial violence—the logic of force, or of the I-am-right-because-I-conquer, which in turn unleashes the process of re-humanization of the African seen in the counter-violence of the struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism.

It is important to note here that, even though hermeneutics entails interpretation impregnated by the context and mediated by the individual’s self-understanding, there is no common track it must follow even when it evolves in identical contexts. The factor of the individuality of self-understanding makes this a matter of course. But even the identity of context may also be seen as more apparent than real since it is inevitably apprehended from different perspectives. Thus the result of the hermeneutical process must of necessity be different. In the context of African philosophy, therefore, we cannot say in advance what the result of the interpretation will be. Nor is there any canon against which wrongness and rightness is to be determined. This is why philosophical interpretations are all-embracing; that is also why a bad philosophy is no less philosophical than a good one; finally, that is why it is almost impossible for practitioners to agree with any measure of unanimity on what philosophy is and what it is not. Any definition of philosophy becomes a pris de position against other definitions and other conceptions. As F. H. Bradley says in reference to metaphysics, the critic of metaphysics is “a brother metaphysician with a rival theory of his own.”

IV.

Background to Senghor’s Philosophy. Pure philosophy, pure reason, in the sense in which it is completely non-contextual, is an illusion. This fact underlines the pivotal importance of origin, of influence, of the passage through time and experience. Senghor’s own world was fashioned by the colonial distortion of the African psyche. He was born in 1906, at which time most of Africa had been carved up among diverse European nations. His native Senegal came under the assimilationist policy of the French. Senghor’s early years were spent in his native African village, which enabled him to imbibe a measure of traditional African culture. But it goes without saying that the greater part of his education was made up of schooling in French culture, language, and tradition. He is thus

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12See ibid., 55–86.
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one good sample of Mugo Gatheru’s “child of two worlds.” Senghor had the best of what French colonialism could offer; still he was haunted by his deep alienation from his origins. Long years in France failed completely to erase his hankering for his African past, but on the contrary deepened it. Such was the result both of specific French colonial policy and the general philosophy, ideology, or thought pattern that made colonialism possible: denigration of Africa and Africans on the one hand and the proclamation of all-round superiority of the colonizing culture:

The long exercise of colonial subjection, and the mystification of racist ideas of superiority that went with it, saw francophone Africans being taught to discard whatever they had of their own and to acquire instead the trappings of French civilization. “Gallicization” was the basis of almost all education in French colonial territories. A few Africans were given the keys to French culture. However, the intention was not to promote symbiosis, but assimilation. This project failed entirely: the best and the brightest assimilés used the keys given to them to open another door, the door to African cultural liberation.

The reference to specifically French colonialism is of pivotal importance in Senghor’s hermeneutics. While the basic ideologies propping up colonial subjugation and the resentment they engendered in the African remained generally similar, it is not to be overlooked that the earliest apostles of negritude were all products of French assimilationist policy. While these assimilés were strident in their attachment to their pristine African past, their counterparts in the English-speaking colonies were generally less afraid of being Westernized.

It is commonly suggested that the “indirect” or nonassimilationist style of British colonial rule may have softened the reaction that produced Negritude in French-controlled areas. Protestant missionaries were more likely than Catholics to learn native languages and to translate the Bible into them. French administrators, as an outcome of the ideas of 1789, were more likely to make Africans French citizens, or at least to assert equality under the law. The concomitant assumption was that the citizens were becoming completely French without a backward glance at the culture that was being lost.

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14Mugo Gatheru, the Kenyan (Kikuyu) writer, expressed this double heritage that is so common to vast majority of Africans in the title of his autobiography: *Child of Two Worlds* (London: Heinemann, 1966).


The effort to obliterate the cultural heritage of the new French people led Senghor and some Martiniquean students to do the opposite: to assert their existence, to project their cultural sense of value and thus convince their masters that their culture had something to offer to humanity. Senghor initially made much of this ability of having something to offer. This was a quest for denied recognition, even though in seeking it, one unwittingly plays in the court of one’s opponent. Thus by 1945 Senghor accepted assimilation as a matter of course. His problem was that the process was not well managed. He was not speaking against assimilation but advocating “right” assimilation:

There is no question of France’s adopting African customs and institutions. Still, she must understand the spirit of Africa. And perhaps she will be able to benefit from this spirit when she comes to turn back again to the old French tradition. But for the colonies there is the problem of assimilating the spirit of French civilization. It must be an active and judicious assimilation, fertilizing the indigenous civilizations, bringing them out of their stagnation, re-creating them out of their decadence. It must be an assimilation that leaves room for association. Only on this condition can there be a common ideal and a common purpose in life, only on this condition can there be a French empire.17

Thus the assimilation that the apostle of negritude was advocating in the 1945 was one that would better achieve the desire for a French empire. The main focus, then, of Senghor’s efforts at the initial stage of the negritude movement was primarily self-assertion before the burden of negativity heaped on the African self-image. Negritude was an attempt to give the lie to the misconceptions of the European colonial agenda and to do this, Senghor argued that Africa had something to offer.

V.

*The Philosophy of Negritude.* The philosophy of negritude grew from this need. It is thus a reaction against colonial machinations. Such a reaction is the way of all philosophies and all efforts at interpretation. There is no understanding except if there is misunderstanding, a negativity that becomes the originate instance of hermeneutics. In Hans-Georg Gadamer’s words: “Understanding becomes a special task only when . . . misunderstandings have arisen.”18 Senghor’s concept of negritude is centered on the misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the African and his heritage, a situation that has since imposed enormous


18Quoted in Serequeberhan, *The Hermeneutics*, 16.
burden on all aspects of his life. It is against this background that negritude becomes a philosophy with clear aims, in particular, the aims of furnishing a corrective measure and of contributing to the amelioration of a state of affairs that has obviously uncomfortable consequences. By this character, negritude aligns itself neatly with the rest of contemporary African philosophy, which seeks to use philosophical reflections as an avenue toward improving the lot of battered Africans. This aim was also discernible in Tempels’s *Bantu Philosophy*. It is more fully so in the attempt by many contemporary African philosophical workers to commandeer philosophy to serve as an agent of development in order to ameliorate the socio-political and economic misery into which most African societies have sunk today. That is why negritude has been described as “a philosophy of social action.” For Senghor himself, negritude was “a weapon of defense and attack and inspiration.” “It is the sum total of the values of the civilization of the African world. It is not racialism, it is culture.” As a philosophy, negritude has the advantage of “recognizing the situatedness of our lived historicity as the proper object of reflection for African philosophic thought.” That recognition entails an awareness of the battered ego of the African under colonialism, as well as of the almost complete denigration of his tradition and cultural heritage. Kamal Salhi notes, “So great was the degradation inflicted by colonial rule that many Africans have come to join in the denigration of their own historical achievement.” Again in Senghor’s words, “Africa’s misfortune has been that our secret enemies, in defending their values, have made us despise our own.”

Thus, negritude is not simply a reaction directed at an oppressor. It has a dual focus. It is an attempt to unearth the reality beneath a falsified image of African culture. It is also an effort to bolster the flattened ego of many Africans in order to counter the inferiority complex which years of slavery, colonialism, apartheid, and underdevelopment have ingrained in their psyche. That is why as a philosophy, negritude is affirmation rather than negation. It defends the heritage of African civilization and the African personality, for “the very being of being is to preserve one’s being.” It is a call to one’s own being, and for Julio Finn, negritude “is nothing but a desire to be oneself.” According to Senghor and thinkers of his ilk, to do this requires a return to the source, to the land of birth, its values and civilization. For Price-Mars, “we do not have

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21Salhi, “Rethinking Francophone Culture,” 9
a chance to be ourselves unless we do not repudiate any part of our ancestral heritage.” Beyond these common features, negritude does not really lend itself to any precise and all-embracing general definition. It is after all a movement originating from circumstances which are not static in themselves. The long years during which Senghor developed the concept of negritude also witnessed an evolution bringing in different nuances, elaborations, and interpretations. Again negritude can be distinguished according to different foci and emphases in particular writers at particular times. Jacques Louis Hymans identifies three strands of the movement:

There are many negritudes: the aggressive negritude clamoring for recognition of the African values; the conciliatory negritude advocating cultural miscegenation or cross-breeding; and an inventive negritude tending towards a new humanism. These three major currents have been present from 1931 onwards; but according to the period and the militant, one of these aspects has taken precedence over the other.26

Asante-Dako underpins the inseparability of these three tendencies: “the ‘conciliatory’ and the ‘inventive’ are in the ‘aggressive’ just as the ‘inventive’ and the ‘aggressive’ are in the ‘conciliatory’ and the ‘aggressive and the ‘conciliatory’ in the ‘inventive.’ All are found in each; and each is found in all.”27 Notwithstanding the impossibility of giving a neat definition to the philosophy of negritude, its basic inspiration overflows into its metaphysics and epistemology, its idea of society, and also into its universalism.

VI.

Senghor’s Metaphysics and Epistemology of Emotion. Léopold Senghor borrowed the basic structure of his metaphysics from the Bantu Philosophy of Placide Tempels. Fundamental to all existence is life or the life-force. It constitutes the summum bonum of all beings, so that the aim of human living is to increase its share in the life-force. That is why for Senghor, African metaphysics is an “existential ontology.” Being as life-force is constantly changing. Senghor whole-heartedly supports Tempels’s theory of the vital force. In The Foundations of “Africanité,” he asserts that reality—be it mineral, vegetal, or animal—is a manifestation of the one universe, which in turn is a network of different but complementary forces which are nothing but the emanation of the powers of God. God is the only true being

25Quoted ibid.
and the force of all forces. The universe achieves its unity through the convergence of all these forces which find their origin in God. In his own words, Negro-African ontology “proceeds by polymorphic dialectic, by induction: by involution and extension. By integration in the etymological sense of the word.”28

In fact it is the unequal possession of life-force by different manifestations of being that constitutes differences within a particular species of being and between one species and another. To continue in existence, man needs to foster his individual essence by increasing his life-force. Life-force is the foundation of moral as well as intellectual life, but it is only when it enters into man that it becomes alive and can increase. Other beings also possess life-force, which is responsible for the sort of feeling of which they are capable. This hierarchy of forces gives rise to a hierarchy of being: God, the ancestors, living human beings, animals, vegetables, and minerals. Each of these species possesses an internal hierarchy.

Man stands at the very center of the total hierarchical structure. He is an individual who is able to increase his being. Being is individual, but also interdependent. But all are meant to be of service to man. The ancestors are powerful, but they must use their power to strengthen the living; otherwise they turn from “living dead” to “really dead.” The lower beings “have no other purpose in God’s plan than to support the action of the dead. They are instruments, not ends in themselves.”29

In Senghor’s view, the human being’s oneness with other beings strongly influences his/her mode of knowing. That is why he makes a strong distinction between the European and African ways of apprehending reality. Let us call the way of knowing specific to the African in Senghor’s thought “the epistemology of emotion.” Faced with an object, the European separates, analyzes, and divides. The African, on the other hand, faces the object with full consciousness of his oneness with it. He does not distinguish, but feels one with the object of knowledge, establishing a community with it.

With reference to this “essentialist” way of knowing, it has often been said, and the statement has often been criticized, that “reason is Hellenic and emotion is Negro.” Senghor, however, did not mean to say that the way of knowing which he assigned to the African was inferior. Quite the contrary: in his repeated defense of the assertion, he tended to suggest the superiority of the mode of knowledge which in his opinion is peculiar to the African: a mode of knowledge that does not dissect, destroy, but rather respects and preserves the object. Senghor, then, was unapologetic in asserting a different mode of knowing. For him reason as

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such is the same in all humans, but its application differs according to circumstances: “Reason is one in the sense that its purpose is to apprehend the Other, that is, objective reality. But the modes of knowledge . . . ‘forms of thought’ . . . are different and linked to the psycho-physiology of each race.” African reason he calls “reason by embrace,” likening it to *logos* as opposed to *ratio*:

\[\text{Ratio is compass, T-square and sextant; it is measure and weight. Logos on the other hand was living word before Aristotle forged it into a diamond. Before the most typical human expression of a neutral and sensory impression, logos does not mold the object (without touching it) into rigid logical categories. The word of the African negro, which becomes flesh . . . restores objects to their primordial color, and brings their true grain and veins, their names and odors.}^{31}\]

For Senghor, “What moves the African negro is not so much the external aspect of an object as its profound reality: its sub-reality, and not so much the sign as its sense.” When he therefore talks of reason as being Hellenic, the word “reason” must be understood with many qualifications. As far back as 1945 he clearly stated that the reasoning faculty is “the same in all men” and that there is nothing like primitive mentality of Lévy Bruhl. Far from being a failure of consciousness, African emotion is, on the contrary “a higher level of consciousness” and “a complete state of consciousness.” In his view, this accession to a higher and complete state is conditioned by the African’s historic acquaintance with being, his long evolution. According to Senghor, the primordial context of the Negro-African *homo sapiens* was one in which reality was abundantly accessible and “friendly.” This is why a sort of good-neighborliness, understanding, and friendship grew between the African and nature. This origin conditions the African’s mode of knowing and perceiving, making it a sort of inner recollection instead of a totally new encounter as would be the case if the object of knowledge were estranged from the being of the subject. “So, when the Negro-African responds to the object and throws himself upon it, knows it, his knowledge stems more from analogical images of real experience that surge up within him, than from the novelty of his impression.”

VII.

*Communalism against Individualism.* The unity which exists between the human being and nature and which, for Senghor, influences the former’s mode

\[\text{\footnotesize 30Ibid., 121.}^{30}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 31Ibid.}^{31}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 32Ibid., 127.}^{32}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 33Ibid.}^{33}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 34L. S. Senghor, *The Foundations of “Africanite,”* 51–2.}^{34}\]
of knowing also influences his/her social action. The human being is still the center of being, but he/she is not viewed as an autonomous individual. Rather, the family plays the central role, not in the restrictive nuclear sense but the family seen as a concentric circle, such that every level of society—nation, region, tribe, and kingdom—mirrors the family in extended form. For Senghor the family involves a deep sense of community, which can be summarized in the phrase, “I am because we are,” or “ubuntu.” The basis of the social structure is thus the family understood as “center and source, the hearth that maintains the flame of life, the ‘vital force’ which increases and intensifies as it is manifested in the living bodies of a multiplying and prospering people.” While such ideas of the primacy of interpersonal relations are very much African, they can also be found in other philosophical traditions. In Jewish philosophy, there is the example of Benedict Spinoza’s monism, in which the individual is an important page in the book of creation. Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*, in which the I becomes itself through the Thou, is not a stranger to this conception, and Emmanuel Levinas’s emphasis on the absolute responsibility for the well-being of the Other contains a measure of Senghor’s communalism as well. While Senghor regarded this type of relationship as essential to the African, it is not a static but a developing and moving one. For him, it serves as the foundation of African socialism. His conception of socialism is, however, opposed to Nkrumah’s, being more akin to Nyerere’s “ujama.” For Nkrumah, the scientific socialism of Marx and Engel had to be accepted tel quel, but Senghor and Nyerere saw the foundation of socialism in African philosophy, civilization, and culture; that is why they repudiated the violence inherent in Marxist socialism. Given the importance of cultural values in shaping socio-political institutions and practices, Washington Ba was correct in asserting that “negritude is the philosophical basis for Senghor’s ‘African Socialism.'”

VIII.

*Senghor’s Universalism.* It would appear that the hermeneutics of negritude concentrates squarely on the African condition before the advent of conquering, subjugating, and humiliating colonialism. Seen from this perspective, it is a thoroughgoing rehabilitation of the downtrodden through a re-evaluation of his/her personality, cultural values, and civilization before the audience of the world. Negritude is no doubt not intended as a retreat to *Africanité*. Rather, it is an attempt to lend respectability to African culture and thus enable the African, bedeviled with a sense of inferiority, to take his/her rightful place among other


peoples. The specificity of Senghor’s philosophy lies in its historical dimension. In this respect Sylvia Washington Ba writes of historical negritude, meaning by this term the effort to shake off the shackles of inferiority imposed from outside. Senghor believed that this could be done only by searching and highlighting the achievements of African civilization. This may at first sight appear like nostalgia for a pristine Africa, which, for all it is worth, hardly exists in the picture Senghor was trying to paint. The underlying reason for Senghor’s interest in the historical Africa was his conviction that unless a people have something unique to offer, a unique message, they are bound to become an irrelevant museum piece.

This quest for uniqueness which underlies historical negritude is itself open to what Washington Ba describes as “essential negritude.” It bespeaks a certain universalism in Senghor’s thought. The unique contribution of a people enables them to have a place as equal partners at the table of humanity. We have noted that Senghor was not even demanding a reciprocal move whereby France would embrace African values. His primary aim was a quest for truth; his aim was to highlight in his prose and poetry what he found to be of value, and what to him was unique, in his own culture. Negritude is in this sense a philosophy of redemption, a cure for an inferiority complex engendered by harrowing experiences. Still it is not aimed at imbuing the redeemed, in their turn, with any superiority complex. The ultimate destination of negritude, essential negritude, is universalism. There is an appreciation of other cultures. Senghor does not hide his admiration for the French culture and heritage. Thus, emphasis on Africanité is no obstacle to appreciation of Latinité and later Arabité, in a gradual development of the initial movement.

The real meaning and finality of the negritude movement therefore become clearer. Historical negritude is but a step toward essential negritude, the ultimate aim of which is “the civilization of the universal.” This, as we have stated, is indeed one of the several definitions that Senghor gives to negritude, which Washington Ba describes as “the panhuman convergence towards which mankind is tending.” For Senghor such a convergence imposes a difficult task. It is “an undertaking much more revolutionary than the exploitation of the cosmos: the elaboration of a new humanism which this time will include the totality of humanity on the totality of our planet earth.” Negritude is therefore an attempt to transcend exclusionism. The call for a civilization of the universal implies that much of what has passed as civilization before has all too often been founded on barbarity, on murderous conflicts, on the rape of cultures and peoples, on colonialism, and on exclusion. A civilization of the universal is one in which all

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37Ibid., 152.
38Ibid., 153.
39Quoted ibid, 157.
find a home. Such a point of view is, even today, a necessary corrective to the contemporary octopus that we choose, euphemistically, to call “globalization.”

IX.

**Conclusion: Negritude as Hermeneutics.** In contemporary African philosophy, Léopold Senghor’s philosophy of negritude is mostly known through its many critics. The most common criticism concerns Senghor’s assertion that reason is Hellenic while emotion is African. Unfortunately, few really care to hear the Senegalese’s response to such critiques or to place his statement within the context of a comprehensive reading of his thought, which would lead to the realization that our thinker is far from suggesting that Africans cannot reason or that they are intellectually inferior. To be sure, Senghor’s argument for total difference appears to be an obstacle to his project in some respects. It precludes a balanced appreciation of the sensibilities of the African and the European, which would lead to recognition of both differences and similarities between them. Unwittingly, Senghor’s position appears to play in the same field as racists because Senghor “accepted the racist premise that race was the root cause of basic differences among peoples.”

Wole Soyinka’s famous ridicule that a tiger does not proclaim his tigritude seems to be less judicious. Soyinka’s statement is not true: in the wilderness tigers do express their “tigritude,” as many of their prey realize rather acutely. In the same way, many cultures proclaim their specificity, their achievements, but some do so in the wrong ways. Senghor is only claiming the right to proclaim his negritude in the right way, such that no one is trampled on and that those already trampled on can begin to liberate themselves from the burden of their history.

My effort in this essay has been to show that such a project constitutes a hermeneutics of the African condition. Hermeneutics in all its shades and interpretations emphasizes the task of understanding, of reading and reflecting, fertilized by the circumstances that bear on the agent’s life, his environment, history, culture, language, work, social institutions, and so forth. I have pointed out that the result of hermeneutics cannot be predetermined or predicted. Hence there is no one direction in which philosophical hermeneutics must lead. In criticizing the ethnosophists’ presumption of a collective philosophy, Theophilus Okere denounced the idea of a collective philosophy, asserting instead that hermeneutics is the work of an individual thinker. This is as it should be since it is not the collective that does the thinking, so that ideas attributed to a people

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as a whole are in the final analysis those which have become so repeated and popularized that they have become known to the generality of the populace.

Senghor’s conception of negritude shows that his effort was fertilized by the dual circumstances of his life as an assimilated African whose roots nevertheless remained African. He was not propagating a cultural or collective philosophy (as ethnophilosophy has been variously described) since what he made of his experience in his prose and poems does not constitute the collective thought of pristine Africans, nor even of his Serer people. His writings are specifically his own, personal interpretation and reading of his experience.

One does not have to agree with all the theses or implications of his thought, but such agreement or disagreement does not determine whether his effort is hermeneutical or not. Critics of Senghor often make too much of their disagreement with his expressed convictions. Yet disagreement with his thought does not make him an ethnophilosopher in Hountodji’s derogatory sense. The important question is why Senghor and African thinkers of his ilk (including ethnophilosophers) present their thought in such a way as to suggest that they are elaborating a collective philosophy which in fact does not exist. The reason for this, once again, is to be seen in the foundation of their projects, the circumstances surrounding their philosophical interpretation. In the case of Senghor, this background is the experience of a kind of “race shock” that has become sedimented in an illogical inferiority complex. Thus one oblique aim is to counter the negative image of the black race. It is a project aimed at redressing the image of the black people as a whole. Such an aim will be better served if one presents the whole race as the architect or repository of a particular philosophy, with the ultimate calculation of changing the image, not just of the particular thinker but of the people as a whole. Thus, while Martin Heidegger is interested in correcting the bad turns taken by traditional ontology, Léopold Senghor would not be interested in rehabilitating ontology as such while his people were yet to be credited with the human ability to think and reflect.

Later critics of Senghor’s negritude are often oblivious of the fact that it is because of the success of Senghor’s negritude that they themselves can now have the confidence to disagree with it. It is because negritude addressed a necessary need, because it was timely, and because it made the multifaceted experience of its author and his African people the basis of its reflection, that negritude is properly hermeneutics.