

THE FOUNDATIONS OF “AFRICANITÉ,” or “Négritude” and “Arabité” (1967)

Léopold Sédar Senghor

Four years ago African chiefs of State and heads of Government assembled at Addis Ababa to lay the foundations for the unity of the African continent. As you know, a new international organism emerged: the Organization of African Unity (OAU).

Speaking at that constitutive conference of the OAU, I insisted, not on sounding a discordant note—quite the contrary—but on underscoring that which, transcending “politician’s politics” seemed to me then, and still seems, essential: the cultural foundations of our common destiny.

I said approximately this: to base solely on anti-colonialism the joint organization that we plan to build is to give it a very fragile foundation. For it is not the colonial past that characterizes us as Africans. We share it with all the other peoples of Asia and America. It belongs to the past—at any rate, it will belong to the past tomorrow. It lies behind us now that our task is to build our future. This can rest firmly only on values common to all Africans and permanent at the same time. It is precisely the sum total of those values that I call *Africanité*.

My intention in this lecture is to try to define those values. They are essentially *cultural*.

But, as you know, these are conditioned by geography, history and the ethnic group—if not by race.

I have often defined *Africanité* as the complementary symbiosis of the values of *Arabism* and the values of *Négritude*. Today I prefer to call the former *Arabité*.

In Part I, I should like to try to show that

this symbiosis by mixture has first been realized at the levels of races and ethnic groups. In Part II, I shall discuss the similarities that I have been able to detect between Arab and Negro-African cultures.

This is an opportune moment to distinguish between three terms often confused: *race*, a physical community; the *people* or *ethnic group*, a cultural community; and the *nation*, a political community. “We reserve the name *races*,” writes H. Vallois,

for those (human groupings) established according to a set of physical characteristics ... It is known, moreover, that one calls *nation* or state those which correspond to a political community. Next come those based on characteristics of civilization, in particular, a language or a group of related languages; for them one has created a term that tends to gain greater and greater acceptance, these are the *ethnic groups*.¹

[...]

THE MEDIATION OF THE ARAB-BERBER

Certain Arabs will reproach me for not crediting them with the Greek *logos*. And certain Negroes will criticize me for not endowing them with Arab abstraction. It is time for us, the ex-colonized, to rid ourselves of complexes inculcated by the former colonizers. For we are

complexed when we do not accept ourselves for what we are: as Arab-Berbers, as Negro-Africans, with our qualities as well as our faults, I mean, our shortcomings.

Since I am addressing an Arab audience, better still, an elite, I should like to conclude by reverting to the mediating role that Arab-Berber thinkers have played between Europe and Africa, a role that is their natural vocation. The more so because it serves our needs. In fact, I have often thought that the Indo-European and Negro-African were placed at the antipodes, that is to say, at the extremes of objectivity and subjectivity, of discursive reason and intuitive reason, of the concept and the image, of arithmetic and emotion. And I have advocated the symbiosis of these different but complementary elements. It is precisely for the realization of this ideal that all the great Arab-Berbers have labored, whether they came from Machrek or the Maghreb, whether they were Christians or Moslems.²

I shall pause briefly at the philosophical and the religious levels. We shall note first of all the debt Hellenic thought owes to Egyptian thought, as attested by the Greek writers themselves, the greatest of whom is Plato. In commenting on Plato, the Egyptian Plotinus merely renders Africa its due: human reason, which has refound its autonomy to reach toward Unity, through *Love* and the love of *Beauty*. Without leaving Egypt, let us point out that it was in Alexandria that the foundations of the Christian conception of the *Word* and the *Trinity* were cast in an African spirit. If the Romans had not destroyed the 700,000 volumes of the Alexandria library, no doubt the face of the world would have changed.

But Berberland look up the torch, with a Pleiad of writers and thinkers, the greatest of whom was St. Augustine. Without the Africans, and especially St. Augustine, Christianity, under the influence of analytical reason, would have

become, like Roman religion, a rational system of formulas and practices. It was the Bishop of Hippone who gave it its soul, its spirituality, by bringing it back to its Semitic roots. Thanks to the ideas rethought and relived, of charity and the *creative Word*, both of which are African. It was St. Augustine who effected the most dynamic symbiosis of discursive reason and intuitive reason: "Believe in order to understand, and understand in order to believe."

As Arab civilization moves closer toward the West, Morocco and Andalusia will continue the work of cultural emancipation and development. In the 12th century, the Cordovan Averroès (Ibn Rosch) will give us not only his famous *Commentaires d'Aristote* (Aristotelian Commentaries), but also *Philosophie et Théologie* (Philosophy and Theology), to which we must add *L'Accord entre la Religion et la Philosophie* (The Harmony between Religion and Philosophy). The role of Avèrroes in the liberation of Arab-Berber thought is decisive. Supported by texts of the Koran which recommend the rational development of sciences and philosophy, Avèrroes, following in the footsteps of Plotinus and St. Augustine, attempts a union of reason and faith. In a more definite, rigorous effort of thought, he tends toward a more radical intellectualism; he places himself beyond the physical, in the *metaphysical*.

These three names, among dozens of others. What must be remembered is that all European philosophy, from St. Thomas Aquinas to Kant, found inspiration in the *African thought* of Arab-Berber authors and, first of all, from those three outstanding figures. Philosophy and Christian religion as well.

But I have already detained you too long. I shall simply point out in passing the contributions of the Arab-Berbers to *Democracy*, with Tertulian and St. Cyprian; to *History*, with Florus and Ibn Khaldoun. Permit me to say a word about the last

two. Trying to assign a reason for every fact that he advances, Florus is perhaps the first to create a philosophy of history. Ibn Khaldoun creates the sociology of history, or rather, historical *materialism*, by explaining facts by customs and the latter by environment, by geography and the ethnic group.

Perhaps you are saying, we readily detect the influence of the Arab-Berbers on Indo-Europeans; we fail to see how it affected the Negro-Africans. I shall not insist on this influence because it is obvious. On our religious life, for more than one-third of black Africa is Moslem. On the Kushitic and Upper Sudanese languages, where the religious vocabulary, even among the Christians, is often Semitic or Berber origin. On our mores and, what is more important, on our modes of thought. As I have often insisted, commentary on the *Koran* had already involved us in abstraction before the European penetration.

I conclude by going back to my point of departure. If we hope to build a *united Africa*, we must do it solidly and for that we must found it on points of cultural convergence, not on our political differences. I have said that there are two cleavages, two obstacles to the realization of African unity: the gap between Francophones and Anglophones, and the gap between Arab-Berbers and Negro-Africans. The second seems to me the more important, because it is older and stems from the ambivalent nature of Africa.

Summarizing all that has just been said, I would suggest on the one hand, that we must move closer each to the other. *In order to give and to receive*. It is necessary that you remain *Arabs*. Otherwise, you would have nothing to offer us. And when I speak of “Arabs,” I am not even talking about *Arabism*, which is a project, a will to action; I am speaking of *Arabité*, the radiant focus of the eternal Bedouin’s virtues. But it is also necessary that we, sub-Saharan, remain

Negroes. To be specific, Negro-Africans. In other words, we must drink each day from the gushing springs of rhythm and the image-symbol, of love and faith. And it is also essential that as we give, we know how to receive. We Negroes must progress along the path of method, I would even say, of the concept—I do not say, along the path of abstraction.

This we have been doing for thousands of years; it is what we shall continue to do, we Upper Sudanese. This is why we are so close to Arab-Berbers; why, in Mauritania, it is not easy to distinguish between a Berber-Zénaga and a Peul. But it is necessary that you, too, continue to receive alluvia from the Nile, those waves of woolly heads, of black skin, that come up toward the North by following the Nile Valley. For these are the alluvia of Negro-African civilization that keep you from drying up in the Greek *logos*, the Latin *ratio*. They enable you to come back to earth and to gain renewed strength from it, like Antaeus. This “conciliating accord” that Leo Frobenius invokes at the end of his *Histoire de la Civilisation africaine*, you Egyptians have always attempted, and you have succeeded. Between the vulture of Upper Egypt and the cobra of Lower Egypt, you have interposed the Falcon which, with wings outstretched, symbolizes equilibrium: Humanism. And it is not by chance that the three colors of your flag—black, white and red—are the basic colors of traditional painting throughout all Africa.

Egypt founded the first of the historical civilizations. Europeans have tried in vain to refuse it this honor. In any event, it is the first of African civilizations. Even today, as the head of a friendly State of the Maghreb said to me, you are far in advance of the other nations north and south of the Sahara, thanks to your universities. All this dictates your duty to you. Once again, I do not suggest that you reject your *Arabism*;

I urge you to become rooted in *Arabité*. But I ask you to look toward the South as we look to the North, so that the equilibrium of twentieth century Humanism may soar over the destiny of Africa.

NOTES

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- ¹ H. Vallois, *Les Races humaines* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France), 8.
- ² Cf. Eugene Guernier, *L'Apport de l'Afrique à la Pensée humaine* (Paris: Payot). Unfortunately, Guernier makes too artificial and too one-sided a distinction between "Arabs" and "Berbers."