

The Cultural Heritage and The Question of Identity in African Literature, Noemia de Sousa and Léopold Seder Senghor as a model

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Abstract:

The nation's cultural heritage is its inexhaustible treasure, and the source of its existence. Its limitless extension and different nature, whether material or moral, reflect the spirit of the nation and its specificity to the cultural and intellectual, social and humanitarian level. It is rooted in generations, remembered by them, extending to the present and future, and consolidating their identity.

This article examines the cultural heritage and the question of identity in the African Literature through the poems of Noemia de Sousa and Léopold Seder Senghor, who reacted against European novels, in order to encourage their cultural nationalism and defend their African culture from colonial and racist writing.

Keywords: *Cultural Heritage, Identity, African Literature, Noemia de Sousa, Seder Senghor.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The crust and basis of African literature are the contest with imperialistic and colonial influences and reaction against the alien dictatorships in the country that appear in social, political, and cultural forms. Reaction against the repeated shadows of slavery and colonialism is reflected in African literature explicitly or implicitly.

Négritude literature initially emerged as a powerful assertion of identity, self-awareness and an expression of the suffering endured by Black people across centuries. Then, it evolved into a movement within post-colonial thought, especially as independence movements gained strength across Africa as well as the Caribbean — the cradle of Négritude literature, where a longing for a return to Mother Africa took shape. Uprooted and forcibly taken from their homeland, millions of Africans were brought to what was then called “West Indies” in the Americas, where they suffered the horrors of the slave trade and sugar plantation life, along with other several forms of brutal suffering. The Black diaspora continued to endure these agonies and lived with these scars for generations, expressing their pain and nostalgia for African ancestral land in vibrant forms of art, rich with the poetic sorrow of exile and rituals of connection to their roots.

This article examines the cultural heritage and the question of identity in the African Literature through the poems of ‘Noemia de Sousa’ and ‘Léopold Seder Senghor’, who reacted against European novels, in order to encourage their cultural nationalism and defend their African culture from colonial and racist writing.

In this study, we attempt to address the following problematic: What are cultural's and identity's values expressed in the African poems of Noemia de Sousa and Léopold Seder Senghor? And how do these poets defend African culture against colonial and racist narratives?

2. The Cultural Heritage in Noémia de Sousa Poems

2.1 Biography of Noémia de Sousa

”Carolina Noémia Abranches de Sousa” known as ”Noémia de Sousa”, was born on September 20, 1926, in Catembe, Mozambique. De Sousa was a poet who wrote in the Portuguese language. She was also known as Vera Micaia. She was of mixed Portuguese and Bantu descent. De Sousa's poetry and involvement in Moçambicanidade was a large part of the anti-colonial literary movement of Mozambique.

The fact of being literate made a difference in the life of the author, because, during her time, black people in Moçambique do not have access to education. And, although Noémia managed to enter a school, she was the only black person in the institution.

During her studies, she participation in the Youth Democratic Unity Movement (MUDJ), her friendships with certain intellectuals, in addition to her texts and thoughts considered subversive, led the author to be monitored by the International State Defense Police (PIDE).

By that time, in 1951, she exiled in Lisbon. When she left Mozambique, she ended her career as a poet. However, in 1986, she wrote a poem entitled *October 19* in tribute to Mozambican President Samora Machel (1933-1986), on the occasion of his death.

Although the author did not publish many books, her poetic texts gained fame and were circulated through the publication of anthologies of Mozambican poetry. In this way, Noémia de Sousa was quite well known for her literary work and her ideas when she died on December 4, 2002, in Cascais.

2.2 Characteristics of the work of Noémia de Sousa :

The poet Noémia de Sousa is considered one of the Mozambican poets. All

of her poems, with the exception of one, were written in just three years, from 1948 to 1951. They present the following characteristics: The national aspect, social and political criticism, Negritude, African culture...

Black Blood is Noémia de Sousa's only book, published in 2001 by the Mozambican Writers Association. Among the notable poems in this collection are: "Our voice", "Appeal", "You want to tell me", "Black", "Black Blood", "I want to get to know Africa".

2.3 African Identity in Poems by Noémia de Sousa

The sculpture is as described — orbits empty of despair, mouth torn open by anguish, larger, body with visible and unseen wounds caused by scavidão, tortured, haughty and mystical —, in a way that can be confused with Africa itself, characterized by "moans two blacks do not fall", batuques, rebellion, melancholy and hope:

If you want to know me,
study with your eyes before seeing
that piece of pau preto
that a disconcerted irmão maconde
more inspired
talhou e trabalhou
in distant lands on the northern side.
Ah, that's so eu:
empty orbits I do not despair of achieving life,
mouth torn in wounds of anguish,
most enormous, palmed,
erguendo-se em jeito de quem implora e ameaça,
tattooed body of visíveis and invisíveis feridas
short hair gives escravatura...
Tortured and magnificent,
haughty and mystical.
Africa gives head to the people. (Souza, 2024)

The poet speaks with unwavering confidence in her African identity, undeterred by the injustices and marginalization directed at her and at Africa itself, which stands tall and unshaken, with every part of it proclaiming resilience and continuity.

She said:

—ah, essa sou eu:
If you want to understand me
Let's debruçar-te about my soul from Africa,
we moan two blacks don't fall
two frantic fights between us
in rebellion two machanganas
in a strange melancholy is evolving
duma native song, night inside...
And just ask me,
I know you want to convince me...
That nothing is more than a meat buzio,
froze Africa's revolt
his cry filled with hope. (Souza, 2024)

The poet confronts the White Other with steady confidence, convinced that if he truly wishes to understand her, he must connect with her inner depths and seek the echoes of her spirit in all that embodies African authenticity and profoundness. Her dark skin is merely the outer colour of a human flesh like his own, and she equally deserves a dignified life.

During the period when the African is emotionally far from home, the lyrics are strengthened by the preservation of his spirit and the reaffirmation that his black and African blood is "stronger than anything in his soul", de Sousa said :

Ó minha mysterious and natural Africa,
minha virgin violated,
Mather!
Since she has been exiled for so long,
of you alheada
distant and egocentric
along these city streets!
engraved by strangers
Mather, sorry!
How could you live like this,
in this way, eternally,
ignoring brotherly caress
morna do teu luar
(my beginning and my end)...
How does it not exist for Germany?
two cinemas and two cafes, anxiety
two strange horizons, to reveal...
How are your cacimbados matos?
Don't sing in your freedom,
The most beautiful birds, whose names are still dated mysteries! Your
tresvairada filha,
open and forgive you!
Mather, sorry Mather Africa
das canções escravas ao luar,
I can't, I can't repudiate
or black blood, or barbarian blood that you bequeathed me...
Because em mim, em minha alma, em my nerves,
he is stronger than everything,
I live, I suffer, I river through him, Mather! (Souza, 2024)

In her poem *Let My People Go*, we find a strong sense of confidence and confrontation towards the Other, alongside pride in her Mozambican roots, embodying Black identity, simplicity and poverty. She writes:

Let my people pass
Warm night in Mozambique
and distant sounds of marimbas reach me
– certain and constant –
I don't even know where they come from.
In my house of wood and zinc,
I open the radio and let myself be lulled...
But voices from America stir my soul and my nerves.
And Robeson and Maria sing to me
black spirituals from Harlem.
“Let my people go”
– oh, let my people pass,
let my people pass! -,
they say.
And I open my eyes and I can't sleep anymore.
Anderson and Paul sound inside me
and they are not sweet lulling voices.
“Let my people go!”
Nervously,
I sit at the table and write...
Inside me,
let my people pass
“oh let my people go...”(2022 ، اسير)

The poet affirms the authenticity of her African identity. Through her impassioned poems, she conveys a message to those who truly understand the depth of African authenticity, reflected in its smallest details and in the Black features that pulse with a sense of belonging, ancestry, and a deep-rooted, enduring past.

3. The Cultural Heritage in Sédar Sengho Poems

3.1 Biography of Sédar Senghor

Léopold Sédar Senghor was born on 9 October 1906 in the city of Joal, south of Dakar, the capital of Senegal. He was a French-speaking Senegalese writer. At the age of 22, he obtained a scholarship to study in France and entered the Lycée Louis-le-Grand. Then, he became an associate professor of classics in 1935 at the age of 29, and worked in particular in Tours and Saint-Maur-des-Fossés. As a French soldier during the Second World War, he wrote poems during his detention in a prison camp and participated in the resistance. After the war, he became a French deputy representing Senegal and Mauritania. In 1960, he was elected president of the Republic of Senegal. He resigned after his fifth mandate in 1980 and died in 2001. His main works are collections of poetry such as *Chants d'ombre* in 1945 or *Éthiopiennes* in 1956, but also essays on negritude grouped under the title *Liberté* (1964- 1992). (Pinel, 2024)

3.2 The Genesis of Negritude :

Négritude, initially a moral and aesthetic concept, was developed by Senghor during the interwar period, with the help of Aimé Césaire, Léon-Gontran Damas, Jan and Paulette Nardal. Césaire, to whom we owe the invention of the term negritude in 1936, explained in 1956 that he wanted to “bring black people onto the great stage of history”. Césaire said : « negritude is the simple recognition of the fact of being black, and the acceptance of this fact, of our destiny of black, of our history and our culture. (Legum, 1965, p. 151)

According to Senghor, it is to Césaire that we should attribute the first use of the word, intended to summarize this awareness, first in *L'Étudiant noir*, then in the *Cahier*, which would distribute it very widely. However, a question now arises, namely what is negritude in Césaire's eyes? As the mayor-poet admits, it is the refusal of the denigration to which the black race has been subject since the first contact of Europe with Africa. Drwaing on the example of the writers of the Negro Renaissance of Harlem from the 1920s (Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Dubois, Claude Mackey, Cauntee Cullen, Allan Locke) with whom they shared not only African

dscent coming from the same land, but also a history of civic, political and literary marginalization. The writers of the Negritude movement spoke out against racism as well as the capitalist and materialist values which supported slavery and the colonial enterprise. (Vrančić, 2015, p. 197)

Senghor, the man of letters, politician, essayist, patron, professor, lecturer and figurehead of the Independence of Senegal, actively participated in the fight for the emancipation of the colonized peoples of Africa; a struggle that led several African countries towards independence. (L'Eureux, 2009, p. 15)

Senghor had a profound impact on the intellectual, cultural and political history of the 20th century. His thinking, which did not leave the generations born after independence indifferent, has been widely discussed, criticized and commented on through successive rereading of history. For some, he is first and foremost an essayist, a poet, an intellectual, a great defender of the French-speaking world and the first African member of the French Academy. “My poems are the essential thing,” he liked to say. Alongside Aimé Césaire (another famous writer and French politician from Martinique, 1913-2008), he is one of the pioneers of Negritude, a political and literary movement, advocating for the African presence throughout the world and defending the idea of a “cultural mix”. (Cibert, 2023)

Césaire then takes up the word nigger to use it in a provocative way and claimant in the Notebook of a return to the native country published for the first time in 1939. In this text, Césaire recounts how he discovered, in Paris, the shock of difference, where he becomes aware of his condition as black among white people. This Césaire's provocative use of the word nègre marks the third stage of the development of Negritude. The notion of Negritude in

Césaire's Notebook, adopted by black Parisians, marks the moment of awareness significant of the experiences of black students living in Paris .

Senghor said : "Negritude is the simple recognition of the fact of being black and the acceptance of this fact, of our destiny as Black, of our history and our culture". And finally for others, he was the tireless promoter of African arts in Africa as elsewhere, at the time of the excitement of the first post-colonial years. Léopold Sédar Senghor is all of these at the same time. (Cibert, 2023)

His works as a man of letters, book and numerous studies in which one may distinguish the notion of Negritude to which he founded principles. Though being influenced by both the French language and civilization, he was defending and praising the Africain civilization, values and riches.

Senghor defines negritude as the valorization of the civilizations and arts of the black world, proceeding not by exclusion of the other, but through openness to various cultural influences, the "dialogue of cultures". Thus, negritude is inseparable from the desire for a "civilization of the universal" promoted by Senghor, according to a logic of the "meeting of giving and receiving".

Senghor, the man of letters who became head of state, evolved throughout his life the concept of negritude, changing its dimension, passing through the poetic and the philosophical to finally reach the political. (L'Eureux, 2009, pp. 18,19)

3.3. Negritude and identity in poems by Léopold Sédar Senghor

Senghor was interested in his roots and researched African languages and arts, so many things that he had not been taught. For him, true culture is made up of roots and uprooting, roots that reach deep into one's native land and spiritual heritage. Uprooting means opening to rain and sun, to the fertilizing contributions of foreign civilizations. (Senghor, 1993, p. 25)

This leads to a discussion about the mixing and coexistence of cultures, but we see that it is grounded in African cultures and African languages as a starting point. Senghor believes that African and European cultures are complementary. He thinks it possible to create Black literature in the French language; however, he believes that such literature cannot express all their soul, their flavor, their smell, their accent and unique Black timbre through European instruments.

On the occasion of a conference on Negritude held in Dakar in 1971, Senghor describes this ideology thus:

Negritude has a double meaning, objective and subjective. Objectively, the Négritude is a fact: a culture. This is the set of values economic and political, artistic and social - not only of peoples from black Africa, but also black minorities from America, even from Asia and from Oceania. [...] Subjectively, Négritude is "the acceptance of this fact" of civilization and its projection, prospectively, in history to continue, in Negro civilization to revive and accomplish... thus bringing the contribution of the Negroes new to the Civilization of the Universal.

In short, Senghor said : "No one has the right to erase my culture because a community without culture is a people without human beings". and he talks about that in his poems, we find (Dear white brother) a poem that is attributed to Senghor, first in French, it is a playful poem, obviously aimed at amusing and showing how calling black africans "person of color" is ridiculous. Yet, it was aimed at Europeans back then, and now it seems self-proclaimed "people of color" should maybe read it.

Senghor say :

Quand je suis né, j'étais noir.

Quand j'ai grandi, j'étais noir.

Quand je suis au soleil, je suis noir.

Quand je suis malade, je suis noir.

Quand je mourrai, je serai noir. (Leopold, 2019)

Senghor addresses the White man as the negro is the man of nature, he was black when he was born and when he grew up, also he was black when he was in the sun, and when he was sick, and when he will die. He is black in every moment.

In the same poem Senghor describes the white race as a chameleon, because it changes color according to the situation in which it lives. He said to the white man : When you were born you were pink, and when you grew up you were white, and you are red when you go in the sun, and blue when you are cold, and green when you are afraid, and when you are sick, you are yellow, but when you will die, you will be grey.

And he asks : "Alors, de nous deux, Qui est l'homme de couleur ?

The poet affirms that Negritude is not a requirement aimed at glorifying the black character, but it is as much the manifestation of Black identity as a desire for recognition. But does the Other (the White man) really understand the essence of Negritude? In its being, identity, passion, metaphor, temperament, awareness of existence, and rebellion against all restrictions and boundaries? Senghor responds in his work *Portrait*: the White man does not understand, as he gathers negative, dehumanizing stereotypes about his Black brother and fails to grasp the true nature of the differences between them.

The Negro is the man of nature. He traditionally lives off the land and with the earth, and through the cosmos. It is a sensual, a being with open senses, without intermediary between subject and object, subject and

object at the same time. It is first of all sounds, smells, rhythms, shapes and colors; I say tact before being eyeful, like the white European

With these writings, awareness of the self increased, and the duty of the Black man was defined primarily as recognizing his Negritude and understanding that it is something other than the negative stereotypes and clichés that the White man tries to confine him to. This is expressed eloquently and poetically, as he proclaims in the poem *Ma Négritude*, proudly:

Ma Négritude point n'est sommeil de la race mais soleil de l'âme,
ma négritude vue et vie
Ma Négritude est truelle à la main, est lance au poing Recadre.
My Negritude is not the sleep of the race but the sun of the soul,
My negritude view and life
My Négritude is trowel in hand, is spear in Recede fist.

This negritude rush against white contempt has proven to be, in certain sectors, the only thing capable of lifting prohibitions and curses. (Franz, 2002, p. 258)

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, African literary voices rose with a tone of severity in response to the marginalization of African literature and identity. They addressed issues of poverty, disease, injustice, war, and asylum, rejecting all forms of alienation, vulgarity, and reduction. They highlighted how these factors contributed to distorting their cultural identity by fostering awareness of the African experience through a blend of self-criticism and the critique of Western mentality and self-centeredness. This awakening aimed to defend and recognize their status and use it as a means to liberate Black people from all forms of colonization and exploitation.

De Sousa was an activist and a prominent member of the anti-colonial literary movement in Mozambique, characterized by a rebellious spirit against dependency and an emphasis on local identity and the depth of African culture. This spirit of rebellion and affirmation of African identity is reflected in De Sousa's lyrical poetry, which is rich in local cultural references.

Senghor, through his renowned poems, articulates the African spirit yearning for freedom and pride in its ancient origins, deeply rooted in history and humanity. Through every specific detail—pain, misery, need, myth, and spirituality—he unveils a hidden essence and a sense of belonging to an ancient civilization that can be fully understood only by Africans themselves.

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