
Négritude— a phase

EZEKIEL MPHAHLELE

YESTERDAY I WAS personally attacked by someone who, because of my views against *négritude*, associated me with "colonialism, neo-colonialism and imperialism." He charged me, in effect, with hindering or frustrating the protest literature of *négritude* in its mission. If I had not exiled myself from South Africa five years ago, after having lived for 37 years in the South African nightmare, I should either have shrivelled up in my bitterness or have been imprisoned for treason. My books have been banned in South Africa under a law that forbids the circulation of literature that is regarded as "objectionable, undesirable or obscene." So, you see what things I have been called in my life; my body itches from the number of labels that have been stuck on me! As for what I really am, and my place in the African revolution, I shall let my writings speak for me.

We in South Africa have for the last 300 years of oppression been engaged in a bloody struggle against white supremacy—to assert our *human* and not African dignity. This latter we have always taken for granted. During these three centuries, we the Africans have been creating an urban culture out of the very condition of insecurity, exile and agony. We have done this by integrating Africa and the West. Listen to our music, see our dancing and read our literature both in the indigenous and English languages. The bits of what the white ruling class calls "Bantu culture" that we are being told to "return to" are being used by that class to oppress us, to justify the Transkei and other Bantustans. And yet there still survive the toughest elements of African humanism which keep us together and supply the moral force which we need in a life that rejects us.

IF YOU NOTICE THE two segregated sections of a town like Brazzaville, Congo, you cannot fail to see the sterile and purposeless life of the whites in their self-imposed ghetto as distinct from the vibrant and vigorous life of the black community. The blacks have

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reconciled the Western and African in them, while the whites refuse to surrender to their influence. This is symbolic of the South African situation. The only cultural vitality there is to be seen among the Africans: they have not been *uplifted* by a Western culture but rather they have reconciled the two in themselves. This is the sense in which I feel superior to the white man who refuses to be liberated by me as an African. So, anyone who imagines that we in South Africa are just helpless, grovelling and down-trodden creatures of two worlds who have been waiting for the "messiah" of *négritude*, does not know a thing about what is going on in our country. My detractor, as an American Negro, who would like to teach us how to feel African, cites the entry of James Meredith into Indiana University as symbolic of the triumph of the Negro's *négritude* in Mississippi. Are we really to believe that the U.S. Federal Army went to Indiana to make it possible for Meredith to sing the blues or gospel songs? Surely his entry is to be seen as part of the Negro's campaign to be integrated socially and politically in the American population; to assert his human dignity.

Of course, I am quite aware of certain—and luckily they are few—non-African blacks and whites who come crawling on their bellies into this continent as it were, prepared to be messengers or lackeys of some of us, prepared to eat the dust under our feet in self-abasement in an attempt to identify with Africa. Such people are prompted to do this out of a guilt complex whereby they seek to bear the sins of past colonisers who, they imagine, we associate them with. Elsewhere I have warned against this ugly self-abasement because it prevents the "patient" from criticizing adversely anything the African says or writes, ripe, raw and rotten. I fully agree with James Baldwin when he says in a brilliant and most moving essay in a recent issue of *The New Yorker* (17 November 1962), that the Negro must solve his problem inside America, not by a

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romantic identification with Africa. I appreciate also his remark that the Negro refuses to be integrated "into a burning house", i.e. the American social and political life that is sadly misguided, in which whites do not believe in death. And yet he also says that white and black in the U.S. need each other badly, that the white American needs to be liberated from himself but can only do this when he has liberated the Negro. After this, integration must come. Although he appreciates the Black Muslims, he foresees that one day he may have to fight them because they are such a menace.

NOW TO *négritude* itself. Who is so stupid as to deny the historical fact of *négritude* as both a protest and a positive assertion of African cultural values? All this is valid. What I do not accept is the way in which too much of the poetry inspired by it romanticizes Africa—as a symbol of innocence, purity and artless primitiveness. I feel insulted when some people imply that Africa is not also a violent continent. I am a violent person, and proud of it because it is often a healthy human state of mind; someday I'm going to plunder, rape, set things on fire; I'm going to cut someone's throat; I'm going to subvert a government; I'm going to organize a coup d'état; yes, I'm going to oppress my own people; I'm going to hunt down the rich fat black men who bully the small, weak black men and destroy them; I'm going to become a capitalist, and woe to all who cross my path or want to be my servants or chauffeurs and so on; I'm going to lead a breakaway church—there is money in it; I'm going to attack the black bourgeoisie while I cultivate a garden, rear dogs and parrots; listen to jazz and classics, read, "culture" and so on. Yes, I'm also going to organize a strike. Don't you know that sometimes I kill to the rhythm of drums and cut the sinews of a baby to cure it of paralysis? . . . This is only a dramatisation of what Africa can do and is doing. The image of Africa consists of all these and others. And *négritude* poetry pretends that they do not constitute the image and leaves them out. So we are told only half—often even a falsified half—of the story of Africa. Sheer romanticism that fails to see the large landscape of the personality of the African makes bad poetry. Facile protest also makes bad poetry. The omission of these elements of a continent in turmoil reflects a defective poetic vision. The greatest poetry of Leopold Sedar Senghor is that which portrays in himself the meeting point of Europe and Africa. This is the most realistic and honest and most meaningful symbol of Africa an ambivalent continent searching for equilibrium. This synthesis of Europe and Africa does not necessarily reject the negro-ness of the African.

What have we to say about "benevolent dictatorship"; chauvinists, peasants who find that they have to change a way of life they have cherished for centuries and have to live in the twentieth century? Let me italicize again: an image of Africa that glosses over or dismisses these things is not a faithfully-conceived one; it restricts our emotional and intellectual response. An image of Africa that only glorifies our ancestors and celebrates our "purity" and "innocence" is an image of a continent lying in state. When I asked the question at the Accra Congress of Africanists last

December how long our poets are going to continue to bleat like a goat in the act of giving birth, I was suggesting that Ghanaian poets should start looking inward, into themselves. Now I am being accused of encouraging "artistic purity" by asking writers to cease protesting against a colonial boss that has left their country.

What is "artistic purity"? Am I being asked to lay the ghost of *l'art pour l'art*? Surely meaningful art has social significance or relevance and this very fact implies social criticism—protest in the broadest sense of the word. Gorky, Dostoïevsky, Tolstoy, Dickens and so on did this, but they were no less Russian or English; certainly they were much more committed than *négritude* poets. They took in the whole man. Camara Laye's *Le Regard du Roi*, Ferdinand Oyono's *Le Vieux Nègre et la Médaille* and Mongo Beti's *Le pauvre Christ de Bomba* are not bullied by *négritude*. They are concerned in portraying the black-white encounter, and they do this, notwithstanding, with a devastating poetic sense of irony unmatched by any that one sees in the English novel by Africans (there are fascinating works in the three main Bantu languages in South Africa which are of the same standard). I am suggesting here that we as writers need to be emancipated from ourselves. *Négritude*, while a valuable slogan politically, can because its apostles have set it up as a principle of art, amount to self-enslavement-*autocolonisation*, to quote a French writer speaking of African politics and economics. We should not allow ourselves to be bullied at gun-point into producing literature that is supposed to contain a *négritude* theme and style. For now we are told, also, that there is *un style negro-african*, and that therefore we have to sloganize and write to a march. We are told that *négritude* is less a matter of theme than style. We must strive to visualize the whole man, not merely the things that are meant to flatter the Negro's ego. Let it not be forgotten, too, that *négritude* has an overlap of 19th century European protest against machines and cannons. In the place of

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“. . . CHARGES of 'fraud' and queries of the economic potential of the Transkei as a separate entity—true enough in themselves—rather miss a central point: 'separate development' in its current 'independent Bantustan' stage has become the archetype of Neo-colonialism, combined with certain residual elements of structural colonialism . . ."

REGINALD HERBOLD GREEN: "Independence or Nationhood, the Anatomy of Neo-colonialism"

the cuckoo, the nightingale, the daffodil, Africa has been dragged to the altar of Europe. *Négritude* men should not pretend that this is an entirely African concept.

Several of us, as a result of the physical and mental agony we have been going through in South Africa, have rejected Christianity or any other religion as a cure for human ills. But if I wrote a poem or novel expressly to preach against religion without my seeing the irony of the good and bad done in the name of religion; if I omitted the irony of Christians and educated Africans who still revere ancestral spirits, and several other ironies and paradoxes, then it would not be a lasting work of art. I think that a writer who is too sure about his rejection of the use of a god can be as overbearing as the one who is too sure about his need of an existence of a god, like Browning. I say, then, that *négritude* can go on as a socio-political slogan, but that it has no right to set itself up as a standard of literary performance; there I refuse to go along. I refuse to be put in a Negro file—for sociologists to come and examine me. Art unifies even while it distinguishes men; and I regard it as an insult to the African for anyone to suggest that because we write independently on different themes in diverse modes and styles all over Africa, therefore we are ripe victims of balkanization.

BUT THEN I SPEAK as a simple practising writer, not as a politician or a philosopher, or a non-African Africanist who is looking for categories and theories for a doctorate thesis. I refuse to be put in a dossier. And yet I am no less committed to the African revolution, to the South African freedom fight. The South African, East African and English-speaking West African do not worry over *négritude* because they have never lost the essence of their negro-ness. Again, let *négritude* make the theme of literature if people want to use it. But we must remember that literature springs from an individual's experience, and in its effort to take in the whole man, it also tries to see far ahead, to project a prophetic vision, such as the writer is capable of, based on contemporary experience. It must at least set in motion vibrations in us that will continue even after we have read it, prompting us to continue inquiring into its meaning. If African culture is worth anything at all, it should not require myths to prop it up. These thoughts are not new at all. I have come to them after physical and mental agony. And this is of course not my monopoly either. It is the price Africa has to pay. And if you thought that the end of colonialism was the end of the agony, then it is time to wake up.

We acknowledge that *négritude* as a socio-political concept defines the mind of the assimilated African in French-speaking territories. The British never set out to assimilate their colonial subjects. They hate to see people come out of their culture to emulate them (the British). They like the exotic African, not the one who tries to speak, walk and eat like them. They love Africans in museum cases, so they left much of African culture intact. But literature and art are too big for *négritude*, and it had better be left as a historical phase. ●

White Schoolboys and Politics

BARRY STREEK

THE RULING GENERATION has made a mess of things in South Africa, but what will the generations following them do? Will they be more ruthless? Or will they be more humane?

"*They didn't shoot enough 'kaffirs' at Sharpeville.*" This remark comes from a post-matriculation student.

"*Hey, don't you think we should shoot off a few 'kaffirs'?*" a Standard Nine friend asked me.

"No," I answered.

"*What right do you have to say that?*"

"*What right do you have to say the former statement?*"

"*Because they're 'kaffirs'. That's all,*" he ended.

"*We much rather give milk to the dogs than to the b—'kaffirs',*" a farmer's son told me.

There is a feeling that there should be a 'kaffir' shooting season.

THESE ARE ALL statements and ideas of schoolboys—white ones. Politics of South African scholars hit the news at the end of last year when it was discovered that Michaelhouse and St. Andrew's—leading English-speaking schools—had strong Nationalist trends. Does this apply only to these two schools? The answer is a definite 'no.'

The white schoolboy is divided between Nationalist and Progressive policies. Even most English-speaking boys follow the former because it is easier and ensures surface popularity and a comfortable life. We did not know General Smuts, we did not fight with 'Div' in the war. The U.P.-supporting schoolboy has a staunch U.P. father or relation. In the same line, I have yet to meet a Liberal supporter, although I have heard of them.

As often is the case, we younger people are immature in thinking. This is admirably shown by a leading schoolboy Nationalist, I knew. He played football with a group of African youths! So it can well be seen that many say they are Nationalist but at heart they are liberal.

Another amazing illustration of immaturity is illustrated by a friend, I knew, who was a strong Progressive. Discussing politics, I said, "You are a liberal."

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