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Roots of Identity: The National and Cultural Self in Présence Africaine

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Marga Graf,
"*Roots of Identity*: The National and Cultural Self in *Présence Africaine*"
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Abstract: In her article, "*Roots of Identity*: The National and Cultural Self in *Présence Africaine*," Marga Graf investigates some of the difficulties African, American, Brazilian, and Caribbean Blacks of the mid-twentieth century encountered in their attempts to voice their cultural and racial self-understanding, a self-understanding struggling to a large extent to challenge the established dichotomy between black racial inferiority versus white superiority. After the Second World War, black intellectuals meeting at the Sorbonne in Paris founded the journal *Présence Africaine*, a journal that became the voice of blacks investigating their history and culture throughout the different regions of Africa as well as diasporas worldwide. In *Présence Africaine*, well-known black writers, poets, and intellectuals joined hands with white authors, most of them French writers and intellectuals, in a common endeavor to support the formation of a new cultural, historical, and political identity of and for blacks. Focusing on the decades of the 1950s and the 1960s, a time of multiple struggles for political independence, Graf explores the journal's material with regard to major regional differences in the processes of black identity formation and in the interpretation of *négritude* as a concept supporting blacks in their search for the roots of their identity.

Marga GRAF

Roots of Identity*: The National and Cultural Self in *Présence Africaine

The journal *Présence Africaine* was first published in December 1947, appearing simultaneously in Paris and in Dakar. Its editors were mainly black students from Africa and the Caribbean islands. As Lilyan Kesteloot observes in her *Anthologie Negro-Africaine. La littérature de 1918 à 1981*, "the core [of the Paris editorial staff] that would give life to the journal *Présence Africaine*" consisted of Alioune Diop from Senegal as well as Paul Niger and Guy Tirolien from Guadeloupe, Bernard Dadié from the Ivory Coast, Apithy and Behanzin from Dahomée, and Rabemananjara from Madagascar" (1987, 124; all subsequent translations are mine). *Présence Africaine* very quickly became the voice of the *monde noir*, first in France and the French-speaking colonies, and later throughout the entire African continent, including English and Portuguese-speaking areas. Besides black intellectuals, *Présence Africaine* was also supported by white writers and scholars, including André Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Leiris, and Georges Balandier, who initially engaged themselves even more than their black colleagues *avec une force singulière* in the racial and cultural struggle blacks had to fight in a society dominated by whites. When confronted with the racial theories of Gobineau, who classified the black race as the most underdeveloped among the human races, André Gide, for example, demanded that Europeans should not only try to *instruct* blacks but to *listen* to them, to learn from their culture and history. "The black person is a human being," Georges Balandier entitled his study ("Le Noir est un homme"), in which he analyzed the various images of being *Nègre* preferred by white Europeans. And it was Sartre, above all, who wanted *Présence Africaine*, "to paint us an impartial picture of the condition of blacks in the Congo and Senegal" (qtd. in Kesteloot 126). Among black representatives in the material of the journal four names were of central importance because of their worldwide appreciation as writers and poets: Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal, the Caribbean Aimé Césaire from Martinique, Richard Wright from the United States, and Paul Hazoumé from Dahomée.

Intended as an independent publication without any (financial) support from external sources, *Présence Africaine* initially appeared in plain design, on low-quality paper, and was always struggling to garner enough money for the next edition. Alioune Diop defined the journal's *leitmotif* in the first edition of 1947 as follows: "The idea was born in 1942-1943. In Paris, we were a number of students from overseas who -- in the midst of the sufferance of a Europe that was questioning its essence and the authenticity of its values -- assembled to study the situation and the characters with respect to what defined ourselves. ... Incapable of completely returning to our traditional origins or of assimilating to Europe, we had the feeling that we constituted a new, mentally hybrid race. ... Were we deracinated? Yes, exactly to the degree to which we did not define our position in the world we were living in, between two kinds of societies, without being recognized in either of them, strangers in one civilization as well as in the other" (qtd. in Kesteloot 124).

***La Négritude combattante*: 1948 to 1960**

"We have to go back to our sources up to the remotest point" (Ki Zerbo 67), Joseph Ki Zerbo, born in Upper Volta in 1922, admonishes his black compatriots in his essay "Histoire et conscience nègre" (1957), highlighting the necessity to study African history as one of the most important sources of African cultural identity. Having been colonized for such a long time, Ki Zerbo argues, African people will find it extremely important "to recover conscience of their history" (53), and in this way reach a new cultural and national self-consciousness. To define the roots of their identity was the vision, passionately pursued by the black intelligentsia after 1945 under the leadership of Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal and Aimé Césaire from Martinique. For black writers, poets, and intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s worldwide, according to the leaders of the *Négritude*movement, defining black identity first of all meant to define black self-understanding in cultural terms -- through history, literature, theatre, education -- rather than in political terms, the latter becoming more important once the African colonies gained their independence. The construction of cultural identity was initially focused on historical and literary themes as well as on racial and social problems. A quick glance at the titles of some of the numerous articles published in *Présence Africaine* between 1956 and 1957 gives an impression of the different themes black

writers and intellectuals, including Africans, African Caribbeans, and African Americans, utilized to define their roots of identity, definitions that first of all engaged with and countered Western, especially European, civilizatory and cultural values: R. Codjo, "Colonisation et conscience chrétienne?"; A. Diop, "Occident chrétien et nous"; B. Césaire, "Décolonisation pour les Antilles"; J. Dresch, "L'Euroafrique" (issue 6-7 of 1956); J. Rabemananjara, "L'Europe et nous"; L.S. Senghor, "L'Esprit de la civilisation ou les lois de la culture negro-africaine"; F. Fanon, "Racisme et culture"; Cheikh Anta Diop, "Apports et perspectives culturels de l'Afrique" (issue 8-10 of 1956); P. Abrahams, "Le conflit de cultures en Afrique" (issue 14 of 1957); and J. Ki Zerbo, "Histoire et Conscience nègre" (issue 16 of 1957).

Besides history -- authentic African history including that of the colonial period -- literature, in its oral and written form, became the basic element of black identity constructions during the first two decades after 1947. In 1948, one year after the foundation of *Présence Africaine*, Léopold Sédar Senghor published his *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*. Many of the sixteen poets included in the volume do not come from Africa but from the Caribbean islands, including Guy Tirolien and Paul Niger, both from Guadeloupe, Léon Damas from French Guyana, Aimé Césaire Martinique, Jacques Roumain and Jean François Brièrre from Haiti, and Jacques Rabemananjara from Madagascar. Of outstanding importance was Sartre's preface, entitled "L'Orphée noir," which made *La Négritude* a topic known worldwide and intensively discussed not only within the African, African American, and African Caribbean literary communities but also within those groups of white intellectuals interested in this question. On the other hand, as Lilyan Kesteloot critically comments: "In fact, the enthusiastic testimony of one of the most outstanding French intellectuals in favor of this new literature consecrated it as a literature in its own right, acknowledged the validity of its contents as well as its formal aspects, secured its distribution and gave permission to quote it in Europe, the continent against which black writers were defining themselves. If Sartre thus rendered an invaluable service to Negro-African literature, one nevertheless has to regret that he created a misunderstanding about the concept of *Négritude* that did not exist before. ... As for Sartre's definitions of *négritude*, people have thought and argued more about what Sartre said than about what the Negroes themselves were saying, the Césaires, Senghor, Diop, etc. ... who had created the concept of *négritude* based on their own experience" (Kesteloot 133).

"Language and Racial Identity"

In discussions about the problems of black cultural identity, two aspects became centrally important: On the one hand education, i.e., the ability to read and write, which was intrinsically linked to the colonial system superimposed upon the different African nations and traditional tribes, and on the other hand -- due to the colonizers' cultural influence -- the predominance of European languages, which did not disappear after the African colonies became independent. It is thus hardly surprising that, primarily at the beginning of the *Négritude* movement, one of the most outstanding aspects of African cultural self-awareness was the effort to highlight the importance of ancient African legends and tales (for centuries transmitted from generation to generation), as did Bernard Dadié from the Ivory Coast in his 1957 essay "Le rôle de la légende dans la culture populaire des Noirs d'Afrique."

In his 1956 essay "Apports et perspectives culturels de l'Afrique," Cheikh Anta Diop argues as follows: "But the true support of culture is language. Numerous African intellectuals are disarmed by the difficulties imposed by the African linguistic mosaic" (343). For Anta Diop, this was not a specifically African problem but comparable to the situation in Asia and Europe, "where more than a hundred languages and dialects are spoken, which does not impede Europeans to communicate with each other" (343). In contrast to Anta Diop, Michaël Dei Anang from Ghana, one of the leading collaborators of *Présence Africaine*, defends the "situation multilinguïstique" as an important factor in defining African cultural identity, arguing in his 1959 study, "La culture africaine comme base d'une manière d'écriture originale" that native African languages and dialects cannot be the sole means of literary expression for African authors. To him, authentic African literature can rarely be successfully published in vernacular languages but will mostly have to be written in the colonizers' language -- i.e., in English, French, and Portuguese -- and will therefore be strongly influ-

enced by Western cultural patterns, literary contents, and modes of expression: "The movement towards an expression of African ideas in original letters is increasingly considered to be a revolt against the Western hemisphere. ... A broad investigation of the efforts made by Africans in their literary past would probably reveal that the work of these pioneers had almost *entirely* been based on procedures and models accepted in their adopted Western home countries. Thus, African writers in the French territories have written in French and principally about ideas and characteristic situations of the French nation, and others have written in English, Portuguese, etc., etc, following their colonial affiliations" (5). Inviting African writers to be proud of their rich and authentic literature, and to draw on it in their own literary works, Dei Anang at the same time cautions against any inappropriate chauvinism, "a narrow chauvinism that accepts without questions the old-fashioned conceptions of indigenous life" (7), which could be interpreted by Western critics as an inferiority-complex of those African writers who prefer to remain "piously in the unchanged woods of tradition" (7).

Like Dei Anang, David Diop, a Senegalese poet born in Bordeaux, reflects on whether or not there exists a black national poetry in his 1955-56 "Contribution au débat sur la poésie national," emphasizing that black poetry, rather than being focused on "marques extérieures," should be defined "by psychological particularities, by habits of thought born under the given conditions of life, and which, through the personal genius of the author, reveal a common culture to people living in the same nation" (113). He thus argues in favor of African poetry, but not of *Négritude* at all costs by using, for instance, words from its "langue natal" to endow African poetry with a special authentic originality, "to revive the grand African myths by the impact of abusive tam-tam and tropical mysteries," hence producing a kind of folklore poetry that would only be of interest to those who, "dans les salons," discuss "art nègre" (115).

Antillanité* versus *Négritude

The use of the European colonizer's language not only constituted a problem in colonial Africa but also occurred in the USA, the Caribbean, and in Brazil -- yet first of all under the aspect of finding readers able to read the literature of the colonized. In his 1957 essay "Some Thoughts on West Indian Writing," Peter Blackman highlights the difficulties encountered by West Indian black writers in their search for a publisher. Publishing houses only existed in Old World countries (in France and England), and they insisted that "anything approaching realistic details of colonial society must be omitted" (298). Oral or written literature in authentic African languages and dialects had hardly any chance at all because African slaves who came from different tribes "were seldom kept together in large enough numbers to allow any one national language to survive. ... People of African origin will know little by way of folk-memory and will be dependent for their ideas about Africa and African society on what they learn from European sources" (297); they will therefore develop a different conception of their Africanness than those living in Africa. And right at this point, according to Peter Blackman, the black creative writer's dilemma begins, fraught with the danger of subscribing, as some Western intellectuals and politicians did, to the image of Africa as hopelessly backward and savage/barbarian, an attitude which, regrettably, still remains part of the cultural belief-system of blacks not born in Africa: "It is essential that men of African origin should know what part societies on the African continent have played in the emergence of humanity throughout the ages. ... The myth of African savagery dies hard. For many people of African origin the very African form is something shameful" (297). In fact, during the process of assimilation in the mid-1950s, black English writers, especially those living in diasporas outside of the African continent, were extremely influenced by white cultural and racial values: "West Indian society like other New World society was and is deeply bitten with what Madariaga calls the 'yearning towards whiteness'" (299).

Even more than the English-speaking regions of the West Indies, it was the Caribbean islands colonized by the French (such as Martinique and Guadeloupe) that were influenced by the colonizers' culture and language. In order to be accepted by white society, in order to reach a better standard of living and a higher social status, *assimilation* seemed to offer the only chance of survival for colored people. In his 1970 essay "Guadeloupe et Martinique. La difficile voie de la voie de la Négritude et l'Antillanité," Jack Corzani, from Guadeloupe, explains that, having lost their Afri-

can cultural roots due to centuries spent in slavery, African Caribbeans often feel closer to their European/French oppressors' lifestyle than to their African compatriots living in the British and French colonies of Africa. Explicitly alluding to the creator of *Négritude*, Léopold Sédar Senghor from Senegal, Corzani argues: "The Negro of Senegal, generally spoken, is biologically and culturally pure. To him, the great question of defining his identity does not in the least present itself: he is a Negro, and this without the slightest shade. The Negro of the Caribbean islands is always tempted to pass the line. Always more or less of mixed origin at least with respect to culture, if he is of the most beautiful black his unconscious search entreats him to feverishly follow white customs and chromosomes" (26).

To speak about *Négritude* as it had been done by Aimé Césaire from Martinique, "with an evident admiration for Africa, for its culture, its past, its customs, would mean to offend [the African Caribbean], to train him to instinctively resist such a notion" (27). Owing to the specific history of African Caribbeans, it seemed to him absurd to consider *Négritude* as something akin to an *idéal définitif*, and therefore *Négritude*, as it was defined in Paris and Dakar in the 1940s, was practically ignored in the West Indies: "Subconsciously, the African Caribbean always valorizes the European cultural strain and de-valorizes whatever he senses in himself to be of Negro tradition. To reach an equal estimation of African and French rights in the African Caribbean heart, it would be necessary, at least for a certain amount of time, to go through an overestimation of African cultural traits in order to counterbalance the crimes of cultural racism ravaging ever since the Caribbean was founded. Without this erroneous but indispensable overemphasis, the Caribbean would forever limp with the clubfoot of despised Africa" (Corzani 29). "La France, toujours la France," as Corzani remarks, "but never with this absolute love given by faith, always a little in spite of oneself, pursued by necessity, but also by habit, and by the weight of years and culture" (35). Much like the Mulattoes in Brazil, the Creoles in the West Indies were interested in differentiating themselves from the African-looking blacks nègres d'eau salée / salt-water Negroes by their language, their customs, and their behavior: "From the beginning, the Antillean Negroes defined themselves through their contact with French *culture* and alienation was their act of baptism" (36).

Négritude Consciousness within African American Communities

Samuel W. Allen's 1959 essay "Négritude et ses rapports avec le Noir américain" focuses on the so-called "Africain déraciné?" i.e., the black slaves who, especially in the "strongly egalitarian and integrationist society [of the USA] according to its avowed orientation and ideal" (18) experienced a physical and spiritual alienation from their original racial roots and who, therefore, could not adopt the same position vis-à-vis *Négritude* and black consciousness as their black brothers and sisters in Africa. North American black writers and poets, such as Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Melvin Tolson, or Claude McKay, thus represent a different kind of Africanness: "It is impossible to know in advance at which point the African heritage might be used by the Negro-American writer or by no matter what other kind of American writer. It is only experience and not a charter established in advance that will give the answer. I do not think that the identity of a black writer as an American excludes a substantial participation on his part in this rich heritage" (24).

Although conscious of their earlier African racial and cultural roots, African-Americans felt themselves, above all, as Americans and therefore expressed their *Africanness* in a different way than Africans living in different regions of Africa: "In the long run, the American blacks, as a group, will be primarily interested in the American scene. Nevertheless, for many people, Africa could play the role of a yeast that would enrich the cultural dough to a large degree" (25). At the same time, however, both African-Americans as well as Africans were interested in the Négritude movement as a means of liberating themselves from the negative and demeaning stereotypes that whites had imposed on them for centuries, without any regard for the ways in which blacks, as part of the American communities or as the authentic inhabitants of the different African regions, enriched their social life with specific cultural values. For Allen, *Négritude*, within and outside of Africa "is simply an affirmation of oneself, of this diminished Me to which one has refused realization because of the roots of its identity" (25).

Another African American writer who is concerned with racial and cultural identities is W.A. Jeanpierre from New Orleans. In 1961 he published an article in *Présence Africaine*, entitled "La Négritude vue par un Afro-Américain," in which he too underlines the special situation of African Americans as *part* of the society they were brought to as slaves and, later on, lived in as free -- albeit discriminated against -- citizens. *Négritude*, for them, is of a more vital interest, different from the mainly emotional concepts of Senghor or Césaire who represent the "*Négritude* de la langue française," focused on French culture and the city of Paris as its intellectual center. Comparing Anglophone writers and poets of the *Négritude* movement in Africa and in America to those of the Francophone regions, the former "occupy in some way a secondary position" (105). In contrast to the situation of African Americans in the US, the post-WWII *Négritude* movement in Africa primarily constitutes a revolution against Western colonialism still rampant in African territories at that time. African Americans had been living in America for centuries and, for the most part, wanted to stay there. Their attitude toward *Négritude*, as it was defined by their African brothers and sisters, was that "the American Negroes can now find satisfaction in the fact that they can turn with pride towards the earth of their ancestors. This will be a large support for their ego which is in great need of boosting" (115).

As both Allen's and Jeanpierre's essays demonstrate, African American and African processes of finding and realizing an authentic cultural identity have been shaped, most of all, by their different historical, social, and cultural backgrounds, despite the fact that both Africans and African Americans had lived under oppression and slavery for a long time: Africans as slaves of the white English, French, Portuguese, and German colonizers in their own countries, African Americans as slaves of the white settlers in the New World, thousands of miles away from their homelands, separated from their families, their languages, their cultural traditions -- *déracinés.*

Brazil and v*ariations sur la négritude*

Roger Bastide, professor of sociology at the Sorbonne in Paris and an expert on Brazilian history, culture, and society, has written extensively on the situation of African Brazilians. Defining *Négritude* and Africanness in an African Brazilian context in his 1962 essay "Variations sur la négritude," he raises several crucial points: 1) Contemporary African Brazilians cannot be defined as Africans; 2) *Négritude* is more focused on color than on culture; 3) In France, *Négritude* means something like contre-acculturation, "accomplished in an apologia for African ancestral traditions" (8) with anti-occidental tendencies; and 4) In Brazil, on the other hand, "no legal barriers exist between the constitutive ethnic groups of the country . ... The Brazilian people has an awareness of its principal unity, whatever the skin color of its inhabitants" (9). In contrast to the concepts of *blanchissement* and *aryanisationprogressives* within a multicultural society as developed by some well-known Brazilian ethnologists and anthropologists (such as Silvio Romero) at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, there emerged another theory, represented by sociologist Gilberto Freyre (primarily known for his book *Casa Grande e senzala*, published in 1933), which intervened in favor of "Négrification" and "mulatisme."

Apart from these two positions, the fact that Brazil "is essentially a Negro country" (Bastide 10) means that similar to the situation in the USA the social position of blacks is shaped by stereotypes and prejudices dating back to the times of slavery. According to Bastide, *Négritude* and its literary variant*, ethnographie poétique* (represented by Senghor in Africa, Fanon and Césaire from Martinique, Rabemananjara from Madagascar, and others) found its Brazilian equivalent in the *Ecole Anthropophagique* and its main representatives in Oswald de Andrade, Raul Bopp (both literature), and Tarsila (arts), all of whom are white: "This school was fighting against the European influences on Brazilean culture, influences that turned this culture into an imported culture, not an original, native one; in order to react against Europe, they created the apology of the Indian savage, not the *bon sauvage*, which is still a European invention, but the *méchant sauvage*, the ignoble, bad savage, the Indian anthropophagus, cutting heads and eating the meat of the Portuguese" (17).

Analyzing contemporary interracial relations between whites, mulattoes, and blacks in his study "Race et classe au Brésil" (1965), Octavio Ianni defines the African Brazilian's social position as a shift from *travail servile* to *travail libre*, i.e., after being released from slavery at the end of the

nineteenth century, African-Brazilians have become "free to offer themselves on the labor market" (Ianni 108). Yet, their social status has not changed, really. The ultimate means for blacks to gain acceptance by white-dominated Brazilian society was to become more white by miscegenation in order to counteract white superiority. As a racial ideology adopted by African Brazilians and mulattoes in their struggle for a better social status and standard of living, *blanchissement* is a specifically Brazilian and Caribbean phenomenon and thus cannot be compared to the *Négritude* movement in Africa. For centuries, Africans had not been involved in a multicultural social system (not even when they were colonized by the Europeans). On the other hand, the ideology of *blanchissement* did not constitute a realistic solution to the African Brazilian problem of social integration either: "The Negro will thus have to see himself primarily in terms of the position he occupies inside the social system and he will have to be aware of the fact that his *Négritude* is connected to the class system, and that it is this system that produces his conscience" (110).

In his 1965 essay "Le préjuge de couleur," Brazilian sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso focuses on the racial prejudices African Brazilians were faced with in relation to their social status which, in his opinion, differs from the social status of blacks in the USA: "Up to a certain point the preoccupation with the difference in degrees of prejudice in relation to its structural conditioning reveals the Brazilian racial situation to effectively possess something that distinguishes it, for example, from the North-American situation" (124). In Brazil, racial prejudice is based on appearance, whereas in the USA, it is based on origin. In Brazil, races and racial differences were more defined in terms of social status and less in terms of biological categories. But the social position of educated blacks, *des nègres instruits* -- including professionals such as lawyers, physicians, teachers -- does not solve the interracial problem either, even though this position is aspired to by African Brazilians. On the contrary, racial tolerance is greater vis-à-vis poor, uneducated blacks than vis-à-vis educated ones -- with the latter not being allowed to take part in the social life of the white bourgeoisie. Black intellectuals were therefore confronted with a twofold isolation: With respect to both the white middle class and the poor uneducated blacks, according to whom they carried the stigma of having betrayed their own racial peers. In conclusion, Cardoso points out that "Given these results, it is evident that the prejudice against blacks in Brazil, although based on their appearance and not on the origin of their genes, still remains a *racial prejudice*. ... The whites, feeling threatened by black members of the dominant middle class, redefined their earlier attitude of racial *tolerance* and refused to those negroes who became their social equals the right to live on an equal footing with them, in the clubs, in leadership positions, at work, in family life, etc. (128, emphases in the original). Under these circumstances, according to Cardoso, Brazil's multicultural society will eventually reach the same level of racial prejudice and will eventually be confronted with the same social tensions between whites and blacks as the USA, which means "the beginning of a *Negro problem* in Brazil in the same terms as, for instance, in the United States" (Cardoso 128).

Conclusion

Négritude, Antillanité, Brasilianidade, Black is beautiful; whether in Africa, in the Caribbean, Brazil, or the USA, the various black identity movements were the result of freedom, i.e., the end of slavery -- 1865 in the USA, 1889 in Brazil, in Haiti following the slave rebellion in 1804, and finally the post-WW II independence movements in Africa. For colonizing African territories, or for setting black slaves to work on the cotton, sugar, or coffee plantations in the southern part of the US, the Caribbean islands, or Brazil, whites needed blacks, yet regarded black slaves as less than human beings, as working machines, non-persons, as the Haitian René Depestre describes: "Reduced in slavery, the black man became the carbon-man, the petrol-man, the fuel-man. ...The system of slavery wanted to make black-skinned Anglo-Saxons, black-skinned Latinos of us. During colonization there was the constant concern with the colonized's cultural *assimilation*. They wanted the African to lose not only its liberty, not only the dignified employment of its human resources in work, but also its essential beliefs, its culture, its identity, its own self" (21-22, emphasis in the original).

All over the world, the white population has, for centuries, developed racial stereotypes tied to a hierarchical notion of cultures and civilizations, according to which the white race was construed

as intrinsically superior, a demeaning racial essentialism that culminated in the distinction between nations with and without culture. "There isn't a people without culture," Alioune Diop emphatically counters in his *discours d?ouverture* on occasion of the first "World Congress of Peoples of Black Cultures / Congrès Mondial des Hommes de Culture Noirs" in Paris in September 1956: "Here is the scandalous question of peoples without culture. If it is correct that those truly responsible for the colonization have knowingly forged that myth, it is no less surprising that generations of cultural and spiritual authorities should have admitted that people live in communities and not have a culture" (12). Diop rejects assimilation as the ultimate survival strategy for black people. This kind of assimilation took place involuntarily and from now on has to be replaced by the notion of an authentic African culture accepted as equal among equals in the world. "They wanted us to be individuals without a past, without a history, without a national consciousness," Jacques Rabemananjara from Madagascar writes in 1958 in *Présence Africaine*: "They wanted us to unfold a dense sheet of silence over the independence practiced by our ancestors" (121). How many people in France, asked the poet from Madagascar, know that, prior to the French occupation, Madagascar was a "well organized nation; a state rich in all attributes of sovereignty" and that its "government maintained normal diplomatic relations with the great nations of the epoch: Paris, London, Berlin, and Washington?" (120).

Pitting blacks against whites -- thinking in terms of racial inferiority and superiority -- means creating stereotypes and racial and cultural prejudices that lead to arrogance and disdain on the part of whites. To define racism as *une plaie de l?humanité*, a plague for the human kind, is not enough, emphasizes Fanon in his 1956 essay, "Racism et culture," "Racism inflates and disfigures the face of the culture practising it. Literature, the arts, songs -- *les chansons pour midinettes* -- proverbs, habits, patterns, whether they intend to put [racism] on trial, or to banalize it, reestablish it. This means that a social group, a country, a civilization cannot be unconsciously racist" (127). On the other hand, after 1947 black intellectuals were fully aware of their cultural values and of the place the black race is legally justified in occupying worldwide as an equal member of the human race: "The world needs Africa" and "We expect of Africa that it regains authority, self-domination, self-definition, self-affirmation. ... An essential Africa of whom we can be sure that it will not only apply for credits and beg for lessons, but also bear a mission and will, in its own manner be favored by divine election" (Préface, "Le monde" 4, translation mine). This was the message of a new African self-understanding. To realize their mission of demonstrating that the world needs Africa, to realize their vision of a national and cultural black identity, writers, poets, artists, and scholars founded *Présence Africaine* as their special organ to inform and instruct their black compatriots all over the world: It is the role of the people of Negro culture, it is the role of *Présence Africaine* to call Africa to this task, to this mission; it is their role to motivate Africa, its statesmen, its peoples, its elites for this ambition, for this great ambition, the one that consists in thinking that [Africa] has something to tell the world; something that more than ever is of great importance for the future prosperity of the world.

After 1960, that is, after the colonized African nations began to gain their independence, the future of Africa was determined more and more by political and economic aspects. The Africa that had been exploited and bled to death, the humiliated Africa was considered to need both cultural and political unity. Yet Africa's political and economic freedom could only be gained if the African nations reached the economic standards of the rich nations, which, in turn, first of all meant to overcome a new form of colonialism, so-called economic colonialism, "whose aim it is to maintain the dominance of western capitalism over our countries" (Préface, "Notre avenir" 4). To resist any form of neo-colonialism, African people first of all had to define and demonstrate their human dignity and political stability, both of which could guarantee economic progress. Dignity, however, should not mean *un retour aux coutumes passées*: "Africa's path lies in inventing a proper manner to define its past and its future, to build up its economic power, its democratic structures, the expression of its cultural identity and its integration into a world of responsible agents of global equilibrium" (Préface, "Notre avenir" 6).

Présence Africaine, engaged in professing and promoting African self-understanding on a very high intellectual level, represents an excellent and exemplary source of information for all its read-

ers -- lay and professionals alike -- today still and its contents cover cultural, literary, historical, ethnographical, geographical, political, and educational fields of investigation. This journal was the mirror and voice of Africa, illustrating the African nations' different ways toward cultural and political independence through literary essays and studies on all aspects of African daily life, in addition to discussions of the continent's history and literature, theater, education, politics, economy, agriculture, and other themes. Black journalists, writers, poets, and scientists from Africa as well as from the African American and Caribbean areas working for *Présence Africaine* give us an excellent example of personal engagement, which, in terms of its historical significance for building a new cultural self-understanding, could perhaps be compared to the cultural work of those European intellectuals in Spanish America and Brazil, who, after the independence movements throughout the early nineteenth century, also had to redefine their own authentic roots of identity.

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