



Reconciliation

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Abstract

The theme of reconciliation, which Leopold Sedar Senghor discusses in his poetry, is one of the distinguishing elements that characterize his poetic art. It is also one of the characteristics that separate him from his contemporaries who are generally associated with the Negritude movement, particularly on the Francophone African poetic landscape, most especially Birago Diop and David

Reconciliation occurs when there is a crisis or misunderstanding, or when opinions are divided, usually among individuals or groups of people. Senghor knows that, in a complex and heterogeneous civilization such as ours, there must be disagreements or differences of opinion. He also knows, both as poet and philosopher that “reconciliation” is the only panacea to resolving human conflict, or misunderstanding.

Reconciliation, furthermore, involves tolerance, forgiveness, forbearance, the concept of “give and take”, and mutual respect and understanding among people. It also involves avoiding discord and confrontation and giving peace a chance to reign.

The theme of reconciliation, as explored by Senghor, covers several geographical settings, that is, Africa, Europe, the United States of America, and the universal landscape. In each of these configurations, Senghor not only employs appropriate image and metaphors to illustrate his argument, but also to deepen the impact of his discourse.

Another mode of reconciliation centers on the ability to accommodate or live with our common actual environment. As humans we must reconcile ourselves with the natural world order. Living, for instance, with the effects of the “snow” the “frost,” the state of loneliness as a result of exile or imprisonment, missing the advice or counsel of the dead ancestors, and other human conditions of which one must acclimatize or condition oneself because there is no viable alternative -- all of these complex states constitute a form of reconciliation which Senghor explores in his verse. In short, it recalls a situation which Lakshmi Raghunandan describes, where humanity:

lives in the midst of the elements, of
material and physically experimental
constituents that occur in varying
juxtapositions. Humanity is presented
in a gloomy perspective -- with fear in
mind and guilt in the heart,,¹

Finally, the word reconciliation also embodies a way out of a complex situation or a solution to two or more diametrically opposed continuums.

I

Senghor poems which derive from his indigenous African homeland and from which he discusses the theme of reconciliation include: “In what Dark Tempestuous Night,” “Be Not Amazed,” and “Visit”. In these poems, Senghor draws his audience's attention to the need for sobriety, reconciliation, and for a balancing effect if life is to have meaning or a redeeming value.

In “In What Dark Tempestuous Night,” the gloom and ferocity of the night, symbolized by the “clasps of thunder frighten,” the “fragile walls of my breast tremble, and the “treacherous paths of the forest” is tempered by the “happy luminous morn,” the happy mirror of eyes,” and by “propitious words.” Without this symbiosis, Senghor's verse would have lost much of its technical quality.

In the philosophical poem “Visit,” whose setting is the African cultural landscape, Senghor employs flashbacks, repetition and

allusions to forge a connection between the day and night, between the past and the present, an between the dead and the living:

I dream in the intimate darkness of an afternoon. I am visited by the fatigues of the day, The deceased of the year, the souvenirs of the decade, Like the procession of the dead in the village on the horizon of the shallow sea It is the same sun bedewed with illusions, The same sky unnerved by hidden presences The same sky feared by those who have a reckoning with the dead. And suddenly my dead draw near to me²

This mode of literary connectivity, of reconciling divergent elements and perspectives, endows Senghor's lyricism with a self-assurance and intensity not common in African poetics. Furthermore, the employment of the first personal pronoun "I," in a repetitive structural form, suggests Senghor's passionate feeling for his subject matter: he demonstrates his inward intent, that is, not only to serve as witness, but to be the guiding spirit of any communication and reconciliation.

Because the dead ancestors are the nexus between life and death, between past and present, between the here and the hereafter and because they are perennially in contact with the living through their visit. (Which of course constitutes the poem's title), they consequently establish a triumphant presence over time.³

The poem's title, a metaphor for the here-and-now, is interesting on several units: It is one of the distinguishing elements that "separate humans from others creatures. People visit each other, for instance, they want to interact or negotiate or reconciles or socialize with one another. Furthermore, through visit, the dead and the living objects commune or communicate with each other. Finally through visit, they are united in death through decay or liquefaction. The poem's last line suggests this fact: "And suddenly my dead draw near to me."

In "Chaka, a historical poem modeled on the exploits of the Zulu legend who bears that name, Senghor creates different character portraits who hold on to different values, a human potpourri of sorts: There is Chaka himself, an embodiment of the typical black man, full of self-conviction, bold, energetic and highly imaginative, and patriotic to the core.

On the contrary, we have the White voice, who symbolizes "the strong against the weak," and the "partial voice of imposture," who is the incarnate of colonialism and imperialism." And finally, we have a third category of character embodied in the wizard Isanus. The divergent views of these characters have about life and things clearly suggest the fact that, in life, we must have differences of opinion, but it is only the spirit of reconciliation and dialogue that can hold society together.

II

Europe was the center of combat during the Second World War. It is also the setting of several of Senghor's most anthologized poems, which speak about the horrors of war, including "Paris in the Snow", "In Memoriam," "Luxembourg 1939," and "Camp 1940" In that war, thousands, of soldiers from different parts of the world fought and died. Senghor himself was prisoner of war and his experience and travails during the period from the foundation stones of these lyrics.

The gravity of the pain of human injustice and suffering, the levels of racial discrimination, the carnage and catastrophe engendered by war, as well as the annulet of loneliness and isolation which were experience during this time period -- are all painfully and dramatically illustrated. The only thing that redeems these poems is the theme of reconciliation which they subtly and adroitly suggest.

It should also be noted that, in these poems, Senghor's mind radiates between Europe and his beloved homeland in Africa, and in the antennal struggles that ensure, he tries to find some recompense. Professors D.G. Killam and Ruth Rowe describe Senghor's dilemma appropriately:

Senghor has lived his life between two worlds, the French and the West African. This dualism and the possibility of finding synthesis at different level -- political philosophical, linguistic -- permeate all his writings... within his poetry this dualism is a powerful sources, occasionally of synthesis, but more often the one that conveys the complexities and conflicts of his experience.⁴

The “complexities and conflicts of ... experience” which needs a synthesis” or reconciliation is painstakingly discussed in the Iysic “Luxembourg 1939,” where Senghor nostalgically recounts his losses while living in that city: the separation from his friends and playmates in Africa (“This Luxembourg where I cannot trace my youth, those years fresh as the lawns”); where there is hunger and loneliness (“no Water, no boats upon the water, no children/no flowers); where also there is object disappointment and frustration (“My dreams defeated, my comrades despairing;” and where the “blood of generation flows” and where “Europe is burying the yeast of nations and the hope of newer races.”

A similar note of despondency and disport is recorded in the poem “Paris in the Snow” where in the face of death and destruction, the “snow” is employed as God's agent of bridging reconciliation and peace to the world, and in the Iyric “In Memoriam,” where Senghor emerges to enthusiastically embrace the “crowd of my brothers with story faces/... my brothers with blue eyes/ with story faces”. The tone of reconciliation suggested by these poems, particularly the latter, is sincere, solemn, profound, and commendable:

It is Sunday
I fear the crowd of my bothers with stony faces,
From my tower of glass filled with pain, the nagging Ancestor
I gaze at roofs and hills in the fog
In the silence- - the chimneys are grave and bare. At their feet sleep my
dead, all my dreams are dust
All my dreams, the liberal spills all along the streets, mixing with the
blood of the butcheries and now, from this observatory as from a
suburb, I watch my dreams float vaguely through the streets,
lie at the hills feet.

Like the guides of my race on the banks of Gambia or Saloum
Now of the Seine, at the feet of these hills.
Let me think of my dead yesterday it was.
Toussaint, the solemn anniversary of the sun and no remembrance in
any commentary.
Ah, dead ones who have always refuse to die who have know how to
fight death
By Seine or Sine, and in my fragile veins pushed the invincible blood.
(MAP, p.313)

III

The theme of reconciliation and unity in Senghor's verse extends beyond Europe to encompass the United States of America, which contains several different ethnic groups, including African Americans, Native Americans, historic Americans, Puerto Ricans, Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans. It is against this background in particular and the racial discrimination and other injustices in the contemporary world in general, that we can fully appreciate the import of his verse whose setting is located in America, especially in his long poem “New York.”

As a city, New York is melting – pot of sorts, highly populated with a vibrant economic culture, where both the old and the new converge in an endless interplay of competing values. There is beauty and wealth in New York, but it is also a city of poverty misery, and hypocrisy. The

poem is organized into three distinct narrative structures as follows:

The first part has Manhattan, the busy industrialized district, as its setting: with its “great/golden long- legged girls,” “blue metallic eyes,” “towers with heads that /thunderdolt the sky” and “skyscrapers which defy the storms with muscles of steel and stone-glazed hide.” Furthermore, the artificiality or hypocrisy that characterizes the city is both overwhelming and alarming: “No smile of a child blooms... No mother's breast, but only nylon legs... And no book where wisdom may be read” (MAP, p 319).

The second part, the contrast, Harlem as its setting, the district which is mostly populated by Blacks, with its adds and ends: “the stately colors and flamboyant smells;” with “night more truthful than day;” with “amphibious elements shining like suns; with pavements ploughed by the naked feet of dancers,” with the “evening snow cotton – flowers and seraphim wings and sorcerers' plums,” and the “distant beating of your nocturnal heart, rhythm and/ blood of the tom-tom-tom blood and tom-tom.” (MAP,).

The third part, which unites the first and second stanzas, may be called the synthesis or the agent of reconciliation: It cites the authority of God which must be obeyed if humanity must attain spiritual transformation in order to be saved. Without the employment of this mode of authority and the literary evidence to facilitate his message of reconciliation, Senghor's discourse would have fallen flat on its face. This literary device, furthermore, enables Senghor to carry his message to his audience while enhancing the dialectics of his discourse:

New York! I say to you: New York let black blood flow into your blood
That it may rub the rust from your steel joints, like an oil of life,

That it may give to your bridges the bend of buttocks and the suppleness of creepers
Now return the most ancient times, the unity recovered, the reconciliation of the Lion the Bull and the Tree
Though linked to act, ear to heart, sign to sense
There are your rivers murmuring with scented crocodiles and mirage- eyed manatees.
And no need to invent the Sirens. But it is enough to open the eyes to the

rainbow of April
And the ears, above all the ears, to God who
out of the laugh of a saxophone created the heaven and the earth in six
days. And the seventh day he slept the great sleep of the Negro
(MAP, p. 219)

The rental element of the third stanza quoted above, which is the poem's grand finale, is anchored on the phrase “reconciliation of the Lion, the Bull and the Tree” And the organ of the entire stanza resides in “above all the ears to God.” True, it is the spirit of human reconciliation that can bring peace and unity to the different nationalities and races of the world. Similarly, it is only by listening to the word of God through Christianity that humanity can hope to gain salvation from the challenges and turmoil of contemporary civilization.

Without citing God's authority and without the appropriate poetic metaphor to articulate his message of reconciliation, Senghor's discourse would have become farcical or a nullity. Furthermore, he would not have been able to carry his audience along with him in a profound manner.

You must but listen to the trombones of God let your heart beat
in the rhythm of blood, your blood... God makes the life that
goes back beyond the memory spring up (MAP, p.319)

IV

In this last section of the essay, where Senghor discusses the theme of reconciliation from a universal point of view, it must be understood that the entire universe is his geographical setting. Here his voice resonates in a tone reminiscent of Shakespeare, or Wordsworth, or Whitman. Senghor speaks to all humanity: he urges all humans to disregard skin color and let justice and fair play be our guiding principles.

As a practical demonstration of his philosophy of life -- where, for example, he married a white woman after divorcing his black wife -- Senghor is a living embodiment of someone who lives by the philosophy and principles he believes in. His philosophy recalls Aristotle's preference of ethos to Logos and pathos. Senghor believes in Negritude, he believes in justice, and he believes in the equality of all men.

For Senghor, the universe of nature is eclectic, device vast and accommodating. It is for this reason that he discusses the concept of reconciliation in his work. And nowhere is this except better articulated than in his memorable poem "Prayer to Masks," where he employs the image of the "masks" to symbolize the different races of the world who inhabit planet earth: "Black mask, red mask, you black and white masks/Rectangular masks through whom the spirit breathes,/I greet you in silence" (MAP, p.316).

The word "masks" also stands for a façade, an artificiality, that is, skin color, which can connote or denote anything, or different things, depending upon when and where it is employed, and to whom one is speaking or referring. By employing the word "masks" in the poem, Senghor suggests the fact that skin color is an illusion which should not be allowed to confuse us regarding the personality inside the mask.

Senghor knows very well that humans and, indeed, all the races are different from each other, but because they are reconciled in nature -- for example, by what they do and say -- they represent one body or a collective personality. Therefore, there should be no rancor or discrimination: Reconciliation or amity should be our watchword.

The word "Prayer," as employed in the poem, is also interesting: it connotes advices, an appeals, a request, an exhortation. Senghor employs the word here in order to project his Christian ethos, that is, his humility and candor. There is a world of difference between the different races of the world for which he seeks a reconciliation.

There is also some disconnect between the living and the dead ancestors for which he prays for a reconciliation:

In the name of your image, listen to me now while the Africa of despotism is dying—it is the agong of a pitiable princess Like that of Europe to whom she is connected through the navel new fix your immobile eyes upon your children who have been called And who sacrificed their lives like the poor man his last garment so that thereafter we may cry here at the rebirth of the world being the leaven that the white flour needs. For who else would teach rhythms to the world that has died of machines and canons? For who else should ejaculate the cry of joy, that arouses the dead and the wise in a new dawn? Say, who else could return the memory of life to men with a torn hope? They call us cotton heads, and coffee men, and oily men, they call us men of death. But we are the men of the dance whose feet only gain power when they beat the hard soil (MAP, p. 317)

The "Africa... like that of Europe to whom she is connected through the navel," the "rebirth of the world," the "world that has died of machines and cannons," the "dead and the wise in a new dawn," and the "memory of life to men with a torn hope" -- all these constitute the burden, the test of history, and the spirit and the source of the reconciliation which Senghor proclaims in his verse. Gerald Moore explains:

Senghor is a rather special case because of his profound Christian piety, because of his concern with reconciliation, because of his desire always to make the initial gesture of resentment, the gesture of bitterness, and, at the end of the poem, to bring everything to a harmonious conclusion. So often in his poetry we close on a note of reconciliation, a note of unity, an emphasis upon the complementary nature of African and European civilization.⁽⁵⁾

What shall we now conclude regarding Senghor's theme of reconciliation. First, that his poems which articulate this theme are rooted in four topographical settings, viz., Africa, Europe, America, and the world of nature generally. Secondly, Senghor is not afraid to employ images and metaphors which register dynamic resonances as long as they can meet his poetic objectives as, for example, "masks," "coffee men," "men of death," "cotton heads," "dead ones who have always refused to die," "wanderers on delicate feet," "my dreams defeated, my comrades despairing," "Let me think of my dead," "the shadow visit of propitious souls," "dangerous youth," "you purify the air of eternity," suddenly my dead draw near to me," "the fatigue of the year," and "you my night, my sun" (MAP, pp. 313-321).

Senghor develops his discourse through a combination of poetic and rhetorical structures and devices, including repetition, simile, paradox, oxymoron, biblical allusion, compassion and contrast, flashbacks, irony, cultural and pagan vistas, and parallelism.

Finally, it must be understood that, for Senghor, literature and human society must not only be about harmony, concord, amity and reconciliation, but also about building bridges and closing ranks -- which recalls I. A. Richards' statement that "poetry is historically a connected movement, a series of successive integrated manifestations,"⁽⁶⁾

Notes

1. As employed in *Encyclopedia of Post – colonial literatures in English*, Vol. 2, edited Eugene Benson, and L.W. Conolly (Landon and New York: Rowlledge, 1994), p. 1436
2. Leopold Sedar Senghor, "Visit," in *The Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry*, ed. Gerald Monre and Ulli Beier (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 317. Subsequent citation from the edition will be abbreviated parenthically as MAP, followed by the page number (s).

3. In his essay titled, "Senghor: the theme of the ancestors in his poetry," see *Introduction to African Literature*, ed. Ulli Beier (Burnt Mill, Harlow, Essex, UK: Longman Group, Ltd., 1982), p. 105, Ulli Beier notes: "The living and the dead are in continuous contact..."
4. Douglas Killam and Ruth Rowe, *The Companion to African Literatures* (Oxford and Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), "Senghor," P. 262
5. I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1925), p.19
6. Gerald Moore, "Politics of Negritude," *Protest and Conflict in African Literature*, eds. Cosmo Pieterse Donald Munro (London, Ibadan, 1978), P.36.

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