

Sculpting a Pan-African Culture in the Art of Negritude: A Model for African Artist

by

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Abstract

For centuries, the culture and art of African people on the continent and in the Diaspora has been erased, misplaced or misinterpreted. In some circumstances, historical figures have attempted to prove that Africans are simply devoid of culture. However, the hasty fashion which current museums and collectors have continued to acquire African cultural and artistic products coupled with an endless mimicking of African styles shows otherwise. Considering this paradigm, this paper provides theoretical insight on how Pan-African and Negritude movements spearheaded by African and African American leaders emphasized culture as a means for holistic empowerment, and created a need for African people to define culture on their own terms. As a result, the author presents a culture-centered model for African artists to implement.

Introduction

Pan-Africanism, in contemporary terms, is often hailed as an ideology rather than a movement. By definition, “Pan-African” refers to a quest for unity amongst continental and Diasporan Africans, a revival of undeniable so-called African traits and traditions, and finally, political and economic independence. Although some critics would argue that Pan-Africanism, as a movement, reached its heyday decades ago, there are still positive aspects to be extracted. An interest in restoring pride amongst African people and an explosive renewal of African-centered culture are only two examples.

Alternatively, Leopold Sedar Senghor and friends posited the African cultural revival as an arts-centered thrust coined Negritude. A phenomenon of particular concern to this author is how culture and the arts advanced the Pan-African movement and Negritude, and secondly, how previous cultural forays in Pan-Africanism and Negritude may be combined to form an innovative, practical and progressive model for African artists.

Leadership and the Culture of Pan-Africanism

Before discussing the historical relevance of art to the Pan-African movement, we will first describe some pertinent features of Pan-Africanism. Noted historian John Henrik Clarke (1990) identified Pan-Africanism as a world-wide movement, or rather an attempt by African people at home and abroad to transcend the effects of enslavement, voluntary or involuntary physical displacement and war. The best of the Pan-Africanists did not necessarily have to make explicit claims about being a Pan-Africanist, whereas a staunch Pan-Africanist supporter asked that their African heritage be acknowledged, their African culture be preserved and that they be recognized as human being (Clarke, 1990, p.9). While the method of reaching these goals ranged from violent resistance to literary production, Clarke (1990) contends that ultimately, the aim of restoring “respect” to persons of African origin remained the same (p. 10).

Central to the discussion of Pan-Africanism is identifying why such a movement became a top priority for African persons around the globe. Noted Pan-Africanist scholar, P. Olanwuche Esedibe (1994), identifies four factors which led to the Pan-Africanism movement: (1) “...the humiliating and discriminating experiences of the African Diaspora, (2) the racism that accompanied the campaign for the suppression of the Atlantic Slave Trade, (3) the independent African church movement...[and] (4) European imperialism” (p.20). The slave trades, particularly the Arabic trade prior to the transatlantic trade, Clarke (1990) agrees, was the primary cause for the break-up of African mores and cultural ties (p.10). According to W.E.B. Du Bois, significant efforts were made by slave masters and colonizers alike to dehumanize the African body and mind, while legitimatizing the profitable slave trade.

In hindsight, several historians claim that the Pan-African movement started with a 1900 conference in London, England organized by Henry Sylvester Williams. Interestingly enough, Esedibe (1980) disagrees, suggesting that Henry Sylvester Williams was appointed by members of the congress, and reverts back to the 1893 Chicago Conference on Africa as the “first Pan-African convocation ever” (p. 39,43).

Later, Alexander Walters of the 1900 conference blazed a reactionary verbal trail that would be often repeated by Pan-Africanists, a message geared toward an oppressive white audience commanding “respect and recognition” for black people (Esedebe, 1982, p. 43).

Of key interest to this analysis, however, lies with one of the few noted female Pan-Africanists Anna H. Jones who suggested that black people were at once spiritual and artistically endowed by traits which needed to be shielded from the highly individualistic and materially obsessed Eurocentric persona (Esedebe, 1980, p. 44). Perhaps Jones knew firsthand, that a difference in African and European worldviews inevitably leaves one group exploiting the other. Contrasting with a European “me-first” mindset, Edward W. Blyden proposed that African people had a unique African personality. Borrowing from Miss Mary H. Kingsley who believed religion, morals and community were inherent to the African, Blyden concluded that central to the African personality was a system where “all work for each, and each works for all” (Esedebe, 1980, p.50). Second, maintaining one’s native language and adhering to one’s own social traditions equaled progress for Blyden (Esedebe, 1980, p.49). Therefore, an African visual artist mimicking traditional Western still-life painting would be considered a defect of the African personality.

Alexander Crummell, a scholar and Episcopalian minister hailed by W.E.B. Du Bois as the father of the Pan-African movement and sometimes the father of Negritude, saw the ability of blacks to mimic whites as a marker of strength. He cites his theory on civilization, stating that “all civilization is carried down from generation to generation or handed over from the superior to the inferior” (Moses, 1988, p.267). Yet, he disagreed with educator, activist and author Booker T. Washington’s drive for industrial development in the southern United States. In response to Washington’s efforts, Crummell advocated that black people needed “not industrialization but civilization,” advocated for the creative potential of African based peoples, and prophesied the race’s “future distinction in art” (Moses, 1986, p.266, 267).

In concert with other Pan-African leaders (Crummell, Booker T. Washington, etc.), radical Pan-Africanist and Garveyism organizer Marcus Garvey, is said to have been swayed by several influences to advocate for African peoples. Coming-of-age in Jamaica, interacting with African people from Africa, traveling the world, and seeing ancient African art in British museums catalyzed Marcus Garvey’s African-centered maturation (Esedebe, 1980, p.56). Nevertheless, Garvey’s definition of civilization is questionable, considering that his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) included the goal of “civilizing the backward tribes of Africa” (Esedebe, 1980, p. 58).

Stressing that the only cure for the harsh treatment of Africans worldwide was black unity, Garvey emphasized that black people need to have their separate governments, technology, science, culture and art, if they aspire to be called civilized (Garvey, 1970, p. 24).

In short, Garvey markedly noted that African people must free themselves from mental enslavement, understand the value of African culture by resisting media advertisements touting skin bleach and hair straighteners and asking black people to “[t]ake down the pictures of white women from your walls”(Garvey, 1970, p.24). To counter these humiliating effects, Garvey raised a critical call for black mothers to ensure that black children had black dolls to admire. Likewise, Garvey refuted the notion that having dark skin was surely not the Creator’s mistake, but rather God’s “perfect creation” (Garvey, 1970, p. 29). Although the Pan-African movement was criticized for being overly intellectual, bourgeoisie or catering to academics, Garvey’s nationalist program was undeniably successful at giving Africans from all backgrounds a sense of black pride. Garvey equipped blacks with the appropriate cultural symbols, most notably a red, black, and green flag coupled with an African national anthem (Esedebe, 1980, p. 59).

Retrospectively, W. E. B. Du Bois was perhaps one of the most prolific Pan-Africanists who clearly saw the potential of art as a political vehicle in a critical context. In 1926, in what was dubbed “Criteria of Negro Artist” he stressed to conference attendees that “all art is propaganda and ever must be” (Lewis, 2000, p.175). With regards to art that lacked a political agenda, he said “...I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda”, and could not be fooled into further allowing oppressors to define the African people as incomplete, homogenous or even deformed (Lewis, 2000, p. 175, 181). Despite Du Bois being criticized as an elitist, in 1922 he declared that the role of the black population in America was “the development of art and the appreciation of beauty (Marable, 1986, p. 131).

Resulting from a fear of the perpetuation of stereotypes, Du Bois’s essay titled “The Negro in Art” outlined the danger when persons of color are “continually painted at their worst and judged by the public as they are painted” (Lewis, 2000, p. 176). Of key importance to many Pan-Africanists before and after Du Bois’s lead, was the validation of the African self and one’s creative productions because “the tragedy of” European “dominance over African people [and] ...their assumption that they are ruling over a people without a history or a culture” (Clarke, 1990, p.13). Thus, cultural production such as the visual arts, music, dance and speech patterns illustrate the links connecting Africans in Africa and abroad while justifying the need for a Pan-African movement

However, while many African-Americans and Africans found a renewed creative spirit in the acclaimed Harlem Renaissance, Du Bois remained more critical, reminding enthusiasts that the greater presence of African American artist and writers did not translate as black people being in control of black expression (Lewis, 2000, p. 181). Second, he showed a lack of support for philosopher Alain Locke's version of the Negro artist because he feared that the artists would be all too easily swayed by critics who did not have political or Pan-Africanist goals as a top priority. While Locke revered an art that was non-political, Du Bois retained that art is too potent a political medium to be left up to artists (Lewis, 2000, p. 163). Hence art, undoubtedly, was a fragile medium for Du Bois to the point that he believed art could shift oppressive thinking, or even positively spark a change in how black people were perceived by whites (Lewis, 2000, p. 159). Most importantly, Du Bois advocated that the arts could bridge persons nationally and internationally, a concept which would strongly uphold his Pan-African quest for unity (Foner, 1970, p.263).

Lastly, in a 1922 issue of *The Crisis* magazine, Du Bois chided a collective African American audience for allowing the artistic gifts of Meta Warrick Fullers and others to go unacknowledged. Du Bois claimed that the black race was "united with singular unity to starve colored artists" thus leaving a gap for others to exploit, profit and further divide black culture on a global scale (Lewis, 2000, p. 103). Du Bois's stance suggests that not only were whites and other persons in power denying the achievements of African people, but that African people also aided whites by neglecting the abilities and achievements of their African peers. In terms of European superiority, Du Bois passionately cited that "Europe has never produced and never will in our day bring forth a single human soul who cannot be matched or over-matched in every human endeavor by Asia or Africa" (Lewis, 2000, p. 152).

In sum, Garvey, Du Bois and other leaders of the Pan-African movement understood that a personal quest for validation from a former master or colonizer immediately undermines the cultural, political, and economic goals of Pan-Africanism. Although some of these leaders were personal rivals, they longed for an Africa where the African population was deemed not only human, but accorded the same respect as persons of other ethnic and racial groups.

The Art of Negritude: Senghor and Links to the Harlem Renaissance

Negritude or “becoming black,” in short, can loosely be described as a philosophical movement to revive black pride. *Negritude* is often considered the archenemy or offspring of Pan-Africanism. John Henrik Clarke (1990) claims *negritude* began with Edward W. Blyden (p.19). Blyden is said to have called for Africans in all parts of the world to reclaim their African heritage and by doing so, reclaim their pride. The most popular form of *negritude* conceptually evolved in the 1930’s from a triad of Diasporan Africans living in France, namely Aime Cesaire and Leon Damas.

Former Senegalese President, Leopold Senghor, is best known for championing *negritude* on a grand scale. Hence *Negritude*, as interpreted by Senghor, encompasses “the whole of the values of civilization--cultural, economic, social, and political--which characterize the...Negro African World” (Colvin 1981, 229). Senghor admitted that *Negritude* was spirit-centered and marked by a characteristic rhythm and symbolism when he said “[t]here is a certain flavor, a certain odor, a certain accent, a certain black tone inexpressible in European ...[languages]” (Vaillant, 1976, p. 158).

Conversely, Senghor’s particular brand of *Negritude* was largely a “neo-African cultural challenge” in which he equated cultural by-products such as art as a marker of civility (Lemelle & Kelly 1994, 87). Because *Negritude* surfaced partly from French colonial rejection, critic Mphahleles claimed that “Negritude is an inferiority complex” though Senghor retorted that *Negritude* is neither self-hate nor racialism (Hord, 1995, p.45). Yet, considering Senghor’s *Negritude* against the Western notion of a universal civilization, it becomes clear that Senghor’s quest “to assimilate, not be assimilated” indicates a more inclusive civilization rather than sheer mimicry of Western concepts (Bunnin & James 1996, 575).

In its lifetime, *Negritude*'s range spanned the philosophical, the literary and the political realms using Senghor's assertion of a hybridized African culture. Though Senghor credits close friend, West Indian Aime Cesaire, with coining the term *negritude* in 1932-1933, it serves as witty comeback to the derogatory French term *negrè* or negro, and thus Cesaire's broader definition of *negritude* was "simple recognition of the fact of being black people, of our history, and of our culture" (Harney 2004, 21) which relied more on a shared history of suffering by African people. Cesaire borrowed from Harlem Renaissance writers such as Claude McKay and used poetry and publications like *Tropiques* to express alienation (Eshleman & Smith, 1983, p.5; Davis, 1997, p. 49).

Consequently, Senghor credits Harlem Renaissance writer Claude McKay with being the "veritable inventor of Negritude," particularly when considering the values of black dignity, strength and resistance championed by McKay (Harney 2004, 25). Senghor borrows (1995) from Langston Hughes who showcases all sides of the black experience, stating "We, the creators of the new generation want to give expression to our black personality without shame or fear...We know we are handsome. Ugly as well" (p.45). Additionally, Senghor extracts from Alain Locke's "New Negro," which asks Diasporan Africans to seek artistic inspiration from mother Africa to reach an epitome that contemporary psychologist Daudi Azibo (1989) refers to as "genetic Blackness plus psychological Blackness" (p.183).

Perplexingly, Senghor seemingly suggests that cultural and artistic production by Africans stems from one belonging to the African race. In debate, Sekou Toure, the former head of the Republic of Guinea remarked that "[t]he color of one's skin can't justify anything" (Thompson, 2002, p. 146), creating a discourse on the role of culture and art. Since art from Africa was considered primitive, particularly during the negrophilia era, African art justified the savage treatment of Africans by their oppressors which shorts Africa as a "civilization" while implying that African based peoples are devoid of culture. Furthering the notion of German philosopher Hegel that Africa has Africa was "no historical part of the World... [and] no movement or development to exhibit," African art became a symbol of the continent's lack of progression with some critics mocking African artists and thus "...linking Africa with "darkness, irrationality, [and] backwardness"(Stepan, p.8, 9).

On the contrary, Senghor reminds us that art has more profound implications within African society. Art is not an isolated or solitary event, but rather a “social activity, a technique of living” which “brings all other activities to their fulfillment” (Senghor, 1995, p. 52). Senghor (1995) reiterates that art is not an imitation, but rather a harmony of the subject and its interpreter which allows the object to be the focal point of interest (p. 53). African art is believed to emphasize community or a give-and-take characterized by balance, harmony and unity which pervades the African worldview (Senghor, 1995, p.50).

According to Tracy Snipe (1998), art has long been considered an effective medium for political propaganda with aims ranging from “...expression, record, communication, interpretation, reformation and integration” (p. 10). Thus, Senghor’s cultural policies in Senegal reflect a Negritude schemata fully aware of the potential power of African people creating and defining their own images. For example, implementing the *Ecole de Dakar*, a school of art in Senegal, it was clear that he wanted Africa to have “a certain active presence in the world, or better, in the universe” (Senghor 1995, 46). Understandably, Senghor called art a constructive “spiritual food” parallel with the aim of being while Skurnik (1965) argued that Senghor’s artistic vision propelled African people from mere consumers/recipients to creators/producers of a civilized world (p. 365). Clearly, art held the possibilities of dignity, necessity and sustenance for the future via Negritude, with Senghor’s stance on culture catalyzing a national Senegalese identity within African nationalism and socialism (Skurnik, 1965, p. 367).

Conclusion: The Model for African Artists

Clearly, both Pan-Africanists and Negritude advocates identified culture as a point of entry, should any hope for black advancement be achieved. Reclaiming culture, or the expressional mediums such as language, art, dance and music that guide interpretations and intellectual pursuits, is especially critical when African cultural expressions have been collected in museums, made punishable by slave masters in the New World who viewed the spirit-centered African culture as a threat, and arguably commoditized more than any other culture in the universe.

Nevertheless, Pan-African and Negritude leaders became aware of Africa's rich history and record of great civilizations such as Songhay, Mali, Ghana and Egypt, an awareness that visually reminded them of the strength of Africa's people and culture. In response to the critics who have argued that the Pan-African aim has always been economically centered, reflection and foresight reveal that solely fulfilling one's economic goals does not solve the consequences of racism and oppression.

Admittedly, we must ask where then does this lead one who only searched for capital as a means for uplift, when central to the discussion of Pan-Africanism and Negritude is the underlying factor of power? As persons who have been repeatedly stripped of any attempt at gaining power, culturally oppressed Africans in the Diaspora and continental Africans must empower themselves and each other. For those African peoples who hold economic power, cultural advancement should be held in an even higher esteem if long term results are desired. Transitionally, the sheer mimicry of Europeans on individualistic or economic fronts may lead to another call for respect, modeled after a Pan-African or Negritude ideal, since mimicry does no more than exhibit how deeply oppressive thoughts have been absorbed.

Although blackness and race are said to be a fictive marker of identity and notable differences exist between a Diasporan African in Suriname and a Diasporan African in Australia, it is undeniable that the black body has been a constant recipient of discrimination and oppression on a global scale. Despite discrimination and oppression serving as the impetus for both Pan-African and Negritude movements, the end results were reactionary efforts whose threaded nature weakened their cumulative effectiveness. Looking beyond other weaknesses, Pan-Africanists and Negritudinists alike strove to revive pride in all things African, especially African culture, since culture and the visual arts are indispensable elements for empowerment.

With this goal in mind, I propose a theoretical model, "The Model for African Artists", informed by Pan-Africanist and Negritudinist ideals. The term "African" is inclusive refers to all persons claiming African descent on the continent and in the Diaspora, without perpetuating a simplified or homogeneous notion of identity shared by all African people. The term "African" is a reference point for cultural development and communalism that considers an oppressive history.

Combining previously mentioned tenets of Pan-Africanism and Negritude, the Model for African Artists begins with enslavement, colonialism and imperialism acknowledging that race based discriminations and prejudices flowered with these events. Overall, the greatest loss appears to be in the lowering of the African body to that of a machine or animal as kinship ties were broken by voluntary (i.e. a Senegalese moving to Paris for higher education) and involuntary (i.e. enslavement) migrations. As a result of these shifts, Africans continued adapting or assimilating to new cultures, creating hybridized cultures such as Afro-Brazilians. Hence, the next two phases of the model reference the pride-restoring features of Pan-Africanism and Negritude including the transmission of African culture and positive African images.

Pan-Africanism posits that culture and art are positive indicators of a civilized society, yet many historically esteemed Pan-Africanists concur with an oppressive vision that African civilization and culture was insufficient or backwards. For instance, even Du Bois and Garvey acknowledged that the civility of black people need be demonstrated to whites if respect for black people and culture is petitioned.

In contrast, Senghor's grain of Negritude adheres to Gobineu's race-based reasoning that the African mind is instinctive. Reminiscent of the Harlem Renaissance and Pan-African developments, Senghor proposes a hybridized form of progress that supposedly combines the best of both intuitive African and rational European worlds. The former Senegalese President uses Negritude as a political ideology while a literary movement aided by Ceasire and Damas takes form with the same name. Hence Senghor sees the visual arts as crucial to developing Senegal's post-independence national identity by patronizing artists, and promoting cultural festivals and exhibitions. Yet, critics claim Senghor's motives are convoluted, considering that his encouragement of Pan-African art encouraged by his limited the development of local artists while catering to European expectations of African art.

Constructively, the next phase of the Model for African Artists caters to the artists themselves with arrows from Pan-Africanism, Negritude and Slavery/Colonialism and Imperialism pointing toward the artist. Expanding upon the propagandistic nature of art under the Pan-African paradigm with financial support and time to create, the artist is reminded of pertinent historical and contemporary occurrences that inform his or her artistic production. For example, the artist may create a public sculpture which memorializes the efforts of the enslaved to subvert their socially prescribed inferior status. In turn, the community can share a constant visual reminder of the strength of African people, when faced with adversity.

Additionally, the public sculpture may prompt viewers to question its content and meaning, answers which would expand the viewer's knowledge of African history or culture while fomenting dialogue. Armed with more information and in turn, more questions, the viewer may begin to engage more critically in his or her history, origins and actions. For a person who claims a non-African heritage, the sculpture may be used to foster greater understanding of another's culture and how one's culture is informed by historical processes. Ultimately, the increased dialogue may widen the scope of opportunities for African youth, while demonstrating greater recognition and support for African artists-- economical or otherwise.

The final step of the Model for African Artists is a cycle of self-renewing liberation which provides the African community with a public voice wherein the artist may use their community informed visual works to demand humane treatment, justice, and respect for the African community at large, both nationally and globally. While the art alone may not change any existing oppression, the persons creating, viewing and interpreting the works are potential agents of social change.

Though the steps prescribed above in the Model for African Artists may not manifest in the precise order the model implies, the aim is that artists will continue to use personal, political, spiritual and historical impetus to give a progressive human voice to the African population. Most importantly, the artists and the arts will receive a consistent level of support to maintain an unwavering public voice with the interests of the people at heart.

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A Model for African Artists

(Informed by Pan-Africanist & Negritudinist concepts)

