

The Semantic decolonisation of « Africa » : from Frobenius to Senghor

Sakiko Nakao

As an object of colonial conquest, Africa has been defined from its outside. More than a simple geographical term, “Africa” happened to be an imperialistic invention¹. It was the result of a relation of power between a subject and an object : the Self monopolizes the gaze that defines and dominates the Other. The notion of “Africa” was constructed to represent the radical Otherness under this look. This presentation seeks to follow how the understanding of this notion has evolved throughout its uses in Frobenius’ ethnological works and their later influences in Léopold Sédar Senghor’s thoughts, especially in his conception of *Négritude*².

Frobenius, in his ethnological works has captured the power of the gaze. He thus wrote a chapter in *L’histoire de la civilisation africaine* about the “point of view”. Having argued that the dichotomous form would oppose the “observing self” to all the others, the observed, Frobenius then underlines both importance and difficulty in abandoning one’s own point of view so as to “think in others”. Through the development of an acute conscience of one’s “point of view”, which alone ought to be limiting, he offers to move on to another “in depth” vision. This vision that goes beyond the observation of facts and the mobilization of sensations inspired Senghor’s conception of *Négritude*.

¹ For the construction of the image of Africa, refer to two livres of V. Y. Mudimbe : *The Invention of Africa*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988 ; *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1994.

² We’ve mainly used two of Frobenius’s works about Africa that Senghor considered as being major: *L’histoire de la civilisation africaine*, traduit de l’allemand par Dr. H. Back et D. Ermont, Paris, Gallimard, 1936 (Senghor actually possessed this version) ; *Le destin des civilisations*, traduit de l’allemand par N. Guterman, Paris, Gallimard, 1940 ; and also *Leo Frobenius, l’anthology*, Eike Haberland (éd.), préface de Léopold Sédar Senghor, Wiesbaden, Frantz Steiner, 1973.

Senghor’s references to Frobenius are often quite clear. We’ve referred to *La Liberté 3 : négritude et la civilisation de l’Universel*, Paris, Seuil, 1977 ; *La Liberté 5 : le dialogue des cultures*, Paris, Seuil, 1993.

In addition to that, *Le Dialogue* edited by Deutsche-Afrika Gesellschaft is a brochure collecting texts about the dialogue between those two cultures, including texts of Frobenius and Senghor.

The inversion of the gaze is the central matter of Senghor's concept of *Négritude*, as Jean-Paul Sartre argues in his text *Orphée noir*³ which has made this concept popular. The inversion however doesn't overcome its dichotomous form, and this is why Sartre qualified it as a weak moment of dialectical progression⁴. *Négritude* sends back the gaze, but as some have criticized⁵, it maintains the initial imperialistic cliché even though it adds a positive twist to it. Indeed, the dichotomy between emotion and reason, the intuitive and the discursive, described by Frobenius most certainly had an impact on Senghor's thoughts which would distinguish emotive and intuitive *Négritude* from Frenchness based on "discursive reason".

Frobenius's idea about the unity of the civilization also had a decisive impact on Senghor's thoughts, who drew from it his idea of the *Civilisation de l'Universel*, the Civilisation of the Universal. The future of humanity would thus be placed within a dialogue as, the dichotomy being preserved, two parts are not to be opposed but to complement each other. Introducing this idea of complementarity to think about the relationships between Africa and Occident was an important step in the decolonization process. It redefined this relationship which was no longer about alignment, one after or 'on' the other, but about two interacting yet separate dimensions.

If *Négritude* was a way to affirm another point of view as it enabled people to "think in others", Africans were still the "Other" but turned this alterity into an identity. The imperial term of "Africa" was then re-appropriated and semantically decolonized. The term "Africa" continued to evolve as decolonisation became a concrete phenomenon in search of nationalistic turn.

³ Foreword to Léopold Sédar Senghor (éd.), *L'Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache*, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1948.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. XLI.

⁵ We can mention particularly, Wole Soyinka and Marcien Towa.