
Niam n'goura or Présence Africaine's RAISON D'ÊTRE

Author(s): Alioune DIOP, MM. Richard Wright and Thomas Diop

Source: *Présence Africaine*, Novembre - Décembre 1947, No. 1 (Novembre - Décembre 1947), pp. 185-192

Published by: Présence Africaine Editions

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24346703>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Présence Africaine*

Niam n'goura ⁽¹⁾

or

Présence Africaine's RAISON D'ÊTRE

Man, my father used to say, is first he who creates, and only those men are brothers who cooperate.

(SAINT-EXUPÉRY).

This review is not under the bidding of any philosophical or political ideology

It is open to the collaboration of all men of goodwill (white, yellow and black), who are willing to help us define the African's creativity and to hasten his integration in the modern world.

« *Présence Africaine* » comprises three essential parts :

The first part will contain authoritative studies of the culture and civilization of Africa by well-known scholars. There will also be searching examinations of the methods of integrating the black man in western civilization.

The second part, which is the most important in our eyes, will be composed of texts by Africans (novels, short stories, plays, etc.).

Finally, part three will be devoted to a review of art and thought concerning the black world.

Later issues will give Arabic texts written by Africans and translated into French. Also there will be a column dedicated to informing young Africans of the diverse forms of humanistic thought in Europe. A few pages at the end of each number will present significant facts of our present-day social life. Whenever conditions permit, we will use modest illustrations.

In establishing this magazine, our first and principal aim is to make an appeal to the youth of Africa who has long hungered for intellectual food. Few echoes of intellectual life in Europe reach him. His adolescent ardour, abandoned to arid isolation,

(1) « *Niam ngoor'a vana mpaya* », a Toucouleur proverb, meaning « Eating in order to live is not eating in order to get fat ».

PRESENCE AFRICAINE

dooms him to cultural asphyxiation and sterilization. Our hope is that this magazine can constitute itself a window through which young Africa can look out upon the world.

**

But, of course, the above is not the real point of departure for this venture. The project for this magazine dates back to 1942-43, when a certain number of overseas students, witnessing a stricken Europe questioning herself as to the efficacy and genuineness of her values, gathered themselves together to study that same situation and to weigh the distinctive qualities of their own being.

Being neither white, yellow, nor black, incapable of returning completely to our ancestral traditions or of assimilating ourselves to Europe — we had the feeling of constituting a new race, mentally crossed, but which had not acquired an awareness of its own originality and had not made that originality known.

Were we then uprooted beings ? To the degree that we had not defined our position in the world, we had abandoned ourselves between two societies, without a recognized meaning in either, being strangers to both.

Such a situation could be tolerated only when ethical considerations are stifled. It is because of our refusal to renounce thought that we believe in the usefulness of this review.

**

It would be selfish and senseless, however, to think only of ourselves. Our purpose goes beyond that. We are but the links in a huge chain : the whole of mankind.

Today humankind comprises two distinct groups : on the one hand, a minority of active, productive and creative beings, i.e. Europe ; and on the other hand, facing Europe, the much more numerous men of overseas, who are generally less active and barely productive (at least their productivity does not correspond to the rhythm of modern times). They are « the white man's burden. »

The white man, creator of a **militant civilization**, imposes upon the rest of the world his modes of thought, action and life. He denies and scorns any group of humans who ignores the style of his militant universe.

Nobody, however, can claim the privilege of having mastered History and Progress ; they are forces set in motion by the tireless

NIAM N'GOURA

activity of the European... but which sometimes escape his control. All the more reason why, instead of a few millions of brains assuming it to be their business to plan, direct and enrich the world, while undertaking to administer the destiny of hundreds of millions of overseas people, one wishes for the transformation of these overseas men into brains and arms fitted for modern life and sharing the responsibility of thinking out and bettering the lot of mankind.

Our enterprise, therefore, though limited, is inspired by preoccupations which suppose an unshakable faith in man.

**

Perhaps the most salient of the general characteristics of western civilization is its asceticism ; but it is a heroic asceticism affecting all the faculties of man.

We overseas men, at the beginning of our stay in Europe, were struck, first of all, by the manner in which the problem of will was handled, that is, we were amazed to see that here ethics were based not on the sacred (1), but on the faithfulness with which the will adhered to rational principles.

To conceive and apply an art of living capable of freeing one from selfishness, beneficial to human society in the highest degree, trustful only in the rigour of invincible reason—such constitutes good for western man. But reason such as this is a complex and moving reality to which one cannot adhere once and for all. What does the very mobility of the social order mean, as a rule, but this : that every citizen influences the function of government with the full weight of his participating vigilance, which is dedicated to the service of this stern reason ?

But it is art that best reveals our personalities and translates, better than any action, the least peculiarities which constitute the will structure of our being. That is why artistic creation elates us with purest joy. It lifts us to the level of the gods. Is it not true that in Europe the highest form of moral action suggests certain aesthetic tonalities ? And, in art, do not the Titans of will-power, Beethoven, Stendhal, Baudelaire, Valéry and so many others, enjoy the soundest fame ? As for artists of remarkable sensibility, they are more consumers (of exceptional quality) than producers.

(1) Ethics are based on the sacred in many African societies where good is indeed appraised according to the purity of intention, but above all, according to a strict conformity of the act with a certain rule that is more honoured than controlled by reason.

PRESENCE AFRICAINE

It is will-power that creates. The heart can only appreciate. Art is thus the most favourable activity through which man can reveal and give himself to society and it confers on the creator the only prestige which truly reflects his personality.

Finally, to know the truth is to distrust phantasy and mental sloth, thus making the spirit feel the very outlines of what cannot be denied by critical reason. Truth is not defined by traditional rules ; it is not exhaustively grasped by the intellect. It must not be looked for in the concrete or the static, but in the direction of the laws of ever-increasing exactness which subdue the implacable universe (1).

If is clear that if Progress did not exist, it would have to be invented to explain a never-ceasing activity of the hostility or harmfulness of beings.

But does not this perpetual war against the universe, against society and individual consciousness suppose a kind of heroic asceticism, the one that sacrifices the blandishments of the present to the conquest of man's safety and greatness ?

It will be said, however, that there are two domains in which neither the fighting spirit nor hostile distrust is observed, namely friendship and love. Yet is not love (which presupposes friendship) the best fighting ground where two beings vie in generosity and abnegation ? Doubtless love is accompanied by moments of moral euphoria in which the loved one's confidence increases. But it would behoove him not to drop off to sleep in smug passivity. Because a friend can live only in the fervent atmosphere of friendship.

Individual consciousness and will-power (that consciousness which Valéry declared a defect in the purity of non-being) define, therefore, by their pure activity the whole life of the citizen, the friend, the artist, the saint and the hero.

**
*

We Africans rather underestimate individual will-power. What attaches us to others is the sacred ties of parentage and kinship, ties established by ancient institutions. Human will-power is limited. It is Providence that governs the world. Usually, in order

(1) Including individual consciousness.

In this domain Nietzsche, Ignace de Loyola and Karl Marx would, of one accord, reject the humanism of Africa which is expressed in African lives without being formulated.

to be happy, it is sufficient to be trustful and respectful of the traditional norms of authority.

* How easily we would understand Isabelle Rivière's book—« *De la vertu d'imprévoyance* »—(Of the virtue of improvidence). Like birds of the air or lilies of the field, we worry little about the morrow.

And even those barriers that sometimes oppose our desire to live—prohibitive laws, misfortunes and religious restrictions—do not incite us at all toward a pessimism or toward a nervous diffidence. These obstacles would rather be a guarantee against diabolical individual will-power. Life is good, in its free spontaneity.

One can well guess that the African is not afraid of effort, for all that. He finds such healthy joy in his work !

Effort is sacred and beneficent, and, in Africa, it is placed under a simple and traditional ritual rather than under individual initiative.

Assuredly, Europe sometimes offers us the spectacle of a pathological belief in action, and of what we feel to be aberrations of will-power (1) ; on the other hand, no one can, without peril, undervalue the sense of individual adventure—nor forget the positive, inescapable solidarity which links and assimilates human beings in front of the unknown future.

But does not the finest point of heroism consist in enlightening and emancipating one's fellowman, so that one is bound to approach him only in the strictest and highest conception of his liberty and lucidity ? — in order that each can derive from these shared virtues the obligation to create in communion with others a universal order with universal values ?

Such is truly, it seems to us, the originality of Europe as seen through African eyes (1).

Now the domain occupied by such a civilization already expands beyond the boundaries of the western world and wherever it spreads, order cannot be preserved, prosperity cannot be assured except in the degree that the same means of critical vigilance and productivity are extended to all.

(1) As witnessed by Erostrate's example and these verses of Baudelaire's *Heautontimoroumènes*, as well as other verses in *Hamlet* and *Faust*.

*Am I not a faulty chord
In the symphony divine,
Thanks to insatiable irony
Which shakes and bites me.*

*Of my heart I am the vampire,
One of those great forsaken,
To laughter eternal condemned,
And who can smile no more.*

(1) We are certainly referring to an ideal Europe just as we have already referred to an abstract Africa. We are dealing with general tendencies of the will rather than with permanent characteristics of Europe.

PRESENCE AFRICAINE

As to France, whose people, by certain features of its history, thought and art, realizes best this heroic ideal, she has the mission of promoting all relationships likely to liberate the individual's will-power — the mission to make the individual aware of the will's harmfulness and fruitfulness — and leave him free to fulfil his destiny in a rational world.

Consequently, our review is pleased with being French, with living in the air of French thought, although it appeals, we repeat it again, to all men of goodwill.

Reaching beyond the confines of French colonization, it intends to raise and study the general problem of Europe's relations with the rest of the world, taking Africa as an example, especially since her black mankind finds itself to be the most disinherited. Enclosed for thousands of years in a kind of cosmic silence, considered by many as being useless to the progress of the world, arrested in a state of vain and animal vitality — all the same, Africa lives according to her wisdom and a vision of existence not lacking in originality. A fresh sensibility, a long and singular history have endowed her people with a rich experience which it would be profitable, from many points of view, to make known (1).

The style in which the voice of Africa will express itself in our review, will not fail to depict new, picturesque and moral topics and original forms of sensibility. Would it be rash to suggest that it can even enrich European civilization? Such, however, is our opinion, for one of the characteristic features of modern life is the belief in the possibility of the intercommunication of consciences. The black African, so far as he is concerned, does not think so. Thus love and friendship with him are not lacking in pleasure, but are seemingly deficient in intimacy. In Europe, on the contrary, some people go so far as to think that a man is real only in the degree that his humanity is or can be expressed. The social institutions, at least, take him into account only within these limits. And literature itself becomes an institutions as useful as Parliament. In fact, the social framework evolves, becomes supple and more humane proportionally as art and thought, expressing themselves through human lives, developing new dimensions in those lives, make

(1) The coloured writers of America have already demonstrated the productive power of their spiritual vitality and its necessity to the world, and yet, although they have realized greater progress than Africans, the social institutions under which they live, constrained and limited by the doctrine of white supremacy, are backward and deficient in humanity, a fact which explains the sympathy which coloured Americans show for France.

In the near future we shall devote a special number to coloured non-African writers.

them recognized and respected. But precisely in this militant society where each person fully assumes his own destiny, where each is solely attentive to the laws and facts revealed by science and thought, every human being who does not manifest his personality is disavowed. In contrast, to express one's peculiar soul is to contribute to the guiding of public opinion and to the steering of institutions in a more humane direction.

The black man, conspicuous by his absence in the building up of the modern city, will be able to signify his presence little by little by contributing to the recreating of a humanism reflecting the true measure of man.

It is indeed certain that a genuine universalism cannot be attained if, in its formation, only European subjectivities are utilized. The world of tomorrow will be built by all men. But it is essential that certain disinherited peoples receive from Europe, from France in particular, the instruments necessary for the future building.

For the moment, universalism assumes the aspect of a temple on the facade of which perfection is read, but to the rear of which, never exposed to sight, to admiration and criticism, one finds that which is unfinished and absurd. The European, however, cannot see himself from all angles either. The overseas man could well serve as a mirror to his beauty, which will be perfect only by becoming also our beauty. Else Europe runs the risk of wilting in a kind of fruitless narcissism.

As to us Africans, we are expecting concrete results from these cultural activities. To enable us to merge with modern society and to identify ourselves clearly in that society, PRESENCE AFRI-CAINE, while revealing us to the world, will, more than anything else, persuade us to have faith in ideas (1).

It is in this respect, among others, that we Africans are still different from the Europeans. While our cares are centred in the concrete present, and essentially in the immediate, natural succulence of the present, the European, in contrast, is turned tensely toward the hazards of existence and is intent upon warding them off, and consequently, he is bent upon knowing cosmic, social and psychological laws. The universe is, for us Africans, limitless in marvel, it is an undefined fruitfulness offered to our vigorous appetites. We worry little about knowing and mastering the world,

It is easily realized that, for the African, abstract ideas are still mere words. One is therefore capable of continuing to live as though they did not exist.

PRESENCE AFRICAINE

but bother much about enjoying the food with which the present is heavy-laden. We live in the « here and now ». In a certain sense, we are bourgeois, whereas the European is a militant.

Now the development of the modern world will not permit anyone or any natural civilization to escape its sway. We have no choice. We are henceforth committed to a heroic phase of history in which death is accepted (when one sticks obstinately to one's individual welfare), and in which salvation and greatness can be won.

But salvation is allotted only to those who believe in man, in the value of human action and of science — to those who, attentive to the rhythms of the laws that guide the world toward its cryptic destiny, harness those laws for the utilization of human reason and will in place of the creative spontaneity of nature.

We Africans need to develop a relish for the elaboration of ideas, the evolution of techniques, — and thus to understand western civilization which, without crushing natural civilizations, will preserve just those portions of them that its vital impulse and our effective presence can allow it to spare.

...Above all, we need to know the meaning of an ideal, to be able to choose it and believe in it freely, but out of a sense of personal necessity, and to relate it to the life of the world. We should occupy ourselves with present questions of world importance, and, in common with others, ponder upon them, in order that we might one day find ourselves among the creators of a new order.

Such is the best way of by-passing petty phases of racialism that evil that gnaws away at the stature of man, embitters his heart, stifles his soul. The intellectual collaboration that we appeal for can be useful to all. Europe creates the leaven of all future civilizations. But we men of overseas, from ancient China, from pensive India to silent Africa, possess immense moral resources which constitute the substance to be fecundated by Europe. We are indispensable to each other.

**
*

It is first in the people of France that we put our trust : I mean in all those men of good-will, who, faithful to the most heroic French traditions, have dedicated their lives to the exclusive cult of man and his greatness.

Alioune DIOP.

(Traduction et adaptation par MM. Richard Wright et Thomas Diop).