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**To the Reader:**

**Please note that a number of footnotes are missing or misplaced in this published version of Dr. Langley's article, *In Appreciation of Birago I. Diop: A Subtle Advocate of Négritude*. You are invited to contact the author with questions related to the content or citations.**

# In Appreciation of Birago I. Diop: A Subtle Advocate of Négritude

by  
Winston E. Langley



The closing weeks of the last decade brought with them the death of three distinguished world figures: Samuel Beckett, the Irish-French playwright, novelist, and poet; Andrei D. Sakharov, the Soviet nuclear physicist, human rights advocate, and leader in the international disarmament movement; and Birago I. Diop, the Senegalese poet, storyteller, and statesman. In the case of the former two, leading U.S. newspapers and other media paid merited tribute in the amplest of proportions; in case of the last, however, it was as if he had either never lived or had gained no standing of importance worthy of much attention. Diop was, it would appear from the behavior of the media, without presence; yet his work is no less significant to the world than that of the other two figures mentioned above. Ironically, he spent the greater part of his life seeking to establish the existence of a presence that the West had, for at least three hundred years, sought to deny.

Birago Diop was born in Dakar (the capital of Senegal) on November 12, 1906.<sup>1</sup> He had his early schooling there and at the age of 15 won a scholarship to the Lycée Faidherbe in the old city Saint-Louis where he distinguished himself in scientific subjects, but took a second baccalauréat in philosophy (1926). After a year's military service in France, Birago studied veterinary medicine at the University of Toulouse, earning a degree there in 1933. He then married a French woman and returned with her to Dakar, where he began his career as a mobile veterinarian. At the time of Senegal's independence in 1960, President Senghor named him Ambassador to Tunisia—a position he held with distinction for several years before returning to private life. He died in the city of his birth on November 25, 1989, at the age of 83, having acquired a status as one of the greatest—and many will persuasively argue *the* greatest—black African writers of this century.

The area of focus in which Diop gained global recognition is that of *négritude*—a literary and philosophical movement asserting black identity and cultural values. Having originated in the West Indies and West Africa in the early 1920s, the movement

gained vigor in 1934 when African and West Indian students in France grouped themselves around three of their members who were to become leading exponents of *négritude*: Léopold Sédar Senghor, a Senegalese; Aimé Césaire, a native of Martinique; and Léon Damas, a Guyanese. Together, through a newspaper called *L'Etudiant noir* (*The Black Student*), the three leaders began to address questions that had been preoccupying them. These included: the relationship between literary servility and broader social, racial, and cultural servitude; the validity of certain pillars of Western civilization, such as science, measure, reason, progress, and truth; the extent to which a cultural world created by one people, especially if an “Other” is excluded from it, can properly represent and express that Other; and, perhaps most important, the French political and philosophical doctrine of assimilation.

Central to the concept of assimilation was the view that a black could be “forgiven” his or her blackness providing he or she unyieldingly concealed it within or behind an impeccably Westernized cultural appearance; in short, if he or she denied or absented her or himself culturally. Affirming the importance of African values both individually and in terms of their potential contribution to world culture, the students took the position that a colonized intellectual who believed in the significance of his or her civilization and was committed to making the values of that civilization known was obliged to reject both the political domination of the colonizer and the culture of assimilation that defined and justified that domination.

During and after World War II, many students of the *négritude* movement returned to their respective countries to continue there what they had begun in Paris. By the 1950s, *négritude* had gained some influence outside the world of black intellectuals. However, despite its close parallels in certain areas of discourse to the then-emerging Western outlook called post-modernism, *négritude* was viewed by most established Western academics as exotic. This view, which was challenged by Jean Paul Sartre in



his now famous *Orphée noir* (*Black Orpheus*),<sup>2</sup> was not unlike the earlier, initial outlook toward the inspiration Picasso found in African art. But the late fifties and sixties saw the flowering of *négritude* as its spirit spread throughout Africa and the West Indies, and the literature it sponsored gained worldwide recognition and acclaim.

Diop was one of the students who were peripherally grouped around *L'Etudiant noir* and the intellectual ferment associated with it. He may, however, have been influenced more by the Martinican prose-writer René Maran, whose novel *Batouala: A True Black Novel* (1921) was claimed by Diop to be among the first to portray blacks as blacks rather than as they were artificially constructed by their cultural masters. Upon Diop's return to Senegal after earning his degree in veterinary medicine, his travels throughout Africa took him to the Sudan in 1937 where he became acquainted with the "griot" (story-teller) Amadou Koumba and began mentally storing away material for the narratives he would later write. In 1947 he published *Les Contes D'Amadou Koumba*<sup>3</sup> (*Tales of Amadou Koumba*) followed by, among others, *Nouveaux contes d'Amadou Koumba* (*New Tales of Amadou Koumba*) in 1958, *Leurres et Lueurs* (*Gleams and Glimmers*) in 1960, and *A Rebroussetemps* (*Retracing Steps in Time*) in 1982.

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*Les Contes D'Amadou Koumba* had a stunning effect. Not only did the stories retold (from the original Wolof) in French show that French culture, as expressed through Diop, had never succeeded in imposing itself on his Africanness but that he had assimilated that culture. They did more. They demonstrated that Africa, far from bereft of culture, boasts a literature capable of winning a place for itself among the greatest literatures of the world. Recognition of the latter possibility was so out of keeping with the then-conventional thinking that some initially thought Diop had simply copied from "foreign folktales." The symbolism and underlying cosmology were so unmistakably African, however, that there could be no confusion with any other culture.<sup>4</sup>

Diop shared with other exponents of *négritude* a common outlook on certain issues, including: the originality of African culture and the necessity of promoting the African personality to take its merited place "in the future concert of nations"; the interdependence of all things and, hence, the incompleteness and potentially choking limitation of

any single cultural experience (the attempt by the West to universalize its experience was strongly criticized); the importance of being sympathetic to or gaining identification with the Other, socially and naturally; and the underlying universalism of what it means to be human. There were also, however, many ways in which Diop differed from his fellow advocates. And of course there were many non-*négritude* writers with whom he shared some themes, yet differed in other ways.

Unlike many West Indians whose writings expressed nostalgia for an Africa unknown to them personally, or some Africans (including the even more famous Senghor) who lived most of their lives in Europe, Diop knew Africa intimately. As a practicing veterinarian, he had first-hand contact year after year (sometimes for months at a time) with traditional rural life. His training as a scientist prepared him to observe with exactness the patterns of this life, while his abilities as a poet-philosopher enabled him to convey the meanings of that life with refined power and elegance. Thus, one finds in his stories not only an immediate confrontation with quantum mechanics or Taoist physics, typical of the *négritude* tradition, in which location, dimension, measurement, consistency or even particle are hard to define, but a confessional intensity hardly found in other writers. And yet Diop did not preach, for he saw no need to undermine the virtues or emphasize the weaknesses of other cultures as a way of elevating Africa's. He believed that what he presented would speak for itself.

Also characteristic of Diop is that, whereas many of the *négritude* writers—including Jean-Joseph Rabearivelo (of Madagascar), U Tam'si (of Congo-Brazzaville), and Aimé Césaire—merged Western and African literary images and forms, he presented his work in forms and styles that were almost entirely African, dedicating his stories and poetry to the "ordinary" people of Africa. And while many writers worldwide who have sought to preserve and advance the values of a local way of life that is perceived to be threatened by an "alien culture" (the Russian Slavophiles and Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges come to mind) have exhibited ambivalence toward that culture, one finds little of that ambivalence in Diop. His attitude is somewhat similar to that expressed in the apparent transcendental certainties of Césaire, whose images of the indignities and tortures visited on blacks under colonialism are coupled with counter-images of liberation (through revolution) preparatory to a sought universal reconciliation of human beings. Yet those images perhaps exhibited too much of an underlying nationalism for Diop.

The earlier claim that Diop's work is no less significant to the world than that of Beckett is one which many readers familiar with the works of both



writers may find puzzling, given the two men's differing backgrounds, literary forms, and philosophical focuses. Yet there is a profound similarity in their works: both men sought to use language to uncover the meaning of human experience and to counsel us about our possibilities. In Beckett (for instance in the fictional trilogy *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*, as well in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*), one finds an almost exhaustive exploration of multiple aspects of the verbal medium, including his play on syllable as an absurdist dramatist and his experiments with the theatrical modes of monologue, dialogue, mime, and silence. In many of Diop's literary works (e.g., "Sarzan," "The Inheritance," "The Bone," and "The Judgment") it is the rhythms—repetitions, antitheses, couplets, refrains, assonances, alliterations, and narrative intervals—that rule. And while Beckett, in speaking of hollow persons, human confinement, a human spirit on its knees divorced from transcendental certainties and historical connection, and of the meaninglessness of existence, was, in the words of Ghalib, telling us that we are the sounds of our own breaking,<sup>5</sup> Diop conveys an equally important message: we are the source of our own mending.

In "The Inheritance" and other poems, Diop uses plural layers of meaning to indicate that language and its imaginative possibilities, like Percy Bysshe Shelley's Hope in "Prometheus Unbound," can be the source from which we create from our own wreck the very things for which we yearn: a voice from the silence that pervades us, a unity from threatened dissolution, and community from menacing alienation.

Earlier I mentioned the likeness between the writings of négritude advocates and quantum mechanics. This likeness is particularly apparent in Diop's fictional work where there is no single meaning or structure and where the "reality" of a narrative sequence resides not so much in the accustomed or "normal" succession of events or actions but in the dialectics of tension strung around and upon almost endless degrees of borders, distances, and connectedness. Even philosophers of language and logic who have questioned the referential discourse of logical formalism (transformational-generative grammarians, for example) have found the fictional discourse of traditional Africa, as presented by Diop, quite rebellious. Indeed, the fiction of a writer such as Diop is likely to be used in the future to test or question the explanatory power of certain logical models.

Despite their insistence on an Afro-centric focus, most négritude writers saw their work as a step in the direction of a later reintegration with a greater human culture. In the grand tradition of Gandhi or Giuseppe Mazzini, who, respectively, felt Indians and Italians could associate with the rest of humanity *as equals* only after they had established their own

collective existence, Diop saw the cultural development of Africa as both the aim of political action and the means by which its people could regain their sense of self and both their place in and responsibility toward the common work of humanity. It is in his exquisite poetry that one can see his efforts to present both that which he sees as peculiarly African and that which is universal in African culture. His poem "Ball," which discusses jazz (a form of music that he maintains came from Africa) among other things, is self-explanatory:

Stop Jazz, you scan the sobs and tears  
That jealous hearts keep only to themselves.  
Stop your scap-iron. Your uproar  
Seems a huge complaint where consent is  
born.<sup>6</sup>

In "Spirits" the reader finds not only the pulsating presence of human beings in the trees, the air, and the water, but much more, as well. For instance, many have accurately noted the simultaneously protective, guiding, and threatening presence of the dead in the poem. Others have detected in "Spirits" the *personal unconscious* which, as Freud concluded, is the dwelling place of forgotten and repressed contents; the *collective unconscious*, a Jungian psychic archetype common to all people; and a cosmic order (not unlike that defended by the Mexican poet Octavio Paz) of which humans and animals, plants, inanimate objects, and gods (or the God) are all a part.

Those who are dead are not ever gone;  
They are in the darkness that grows lighter  
And in the darkness that grows darker.  
The dead are not down in the earth;  
They are in the trembling of trees  
In the groaning of the woods,  
In the water that runs,  
In the water that sleeps,  
They are in the hut, they are in the crowd:  
The dead are not dead.

Listen to things  
More than beings,  
Hear the voice of fire,  
Hear the voice of water.  
Listen in the wind,  
To the bush that is sighing:  
This is the breathing of ancestors,  
Who have not gone away  
Who are not under the earth  
Who are not really dead.

Those who are dead are not ever gone;  
They are in a woman's breast,  
In the wailing of a child,  
And the burning of a log,



In the moaning rock,  
In the weeping grasses,  
In the forest and the home.  
The dead are not dead

Listen more often  
To Things than to Beings,  
Hear the voice of fire,  
Hear the voice of water.  
Listen in the wind to  
The bush that is sobbing:  
This is the ancestors breathing.

Each day they renew ancient bonds,  
Ancient bonds that hold fast  
Binding our lot to their law,  
To the will of the spirits stronger than we  
To the spell of our dead who are not really  
dead,  
Whose covenant binds us to life,  
Whose authority binds to their will,  
The will of the spirits that stir  
In the bed of the river, on the banks of the river,  
The breathing of spirits  
Who moan in the rocks and weep in the  
grasses . . .<sup>7</sup>

Finally, having no use for those who believe in the moral defectiveness of the powerful or the superior virtue of the oppressed, Diop presents African culture in all its glory and in all its failing. He did so not only because of his honesty, but also because he believed that life needs the service—not the memory—of history. That service, he felt, could not be properly given by the deformed perspectives created to serve established power: the “picture galleries of the past” designed to effect sensation and distraction, and elaborated “collections of effects” intended to justify desired ruin.<sup>8</sup> What is needed, he contended, is a history that ministers to the human need for rootedness and change, reverence and effectiveness, belonging and libera-

tion. And, to those of us who fail to know and live that history, who do not feel and taste its anguished silences made by rumors, and who see nothing of what it has made or fail to trace its unbroken signs, Diop offers a warning in “Vanity” in the form of a question:

If we tell, gently, gently  
All that we shall one day have to tell,  
Who then will hear our voices without  
laughter, . . .  
Who indeed will hear them without laughter?<sup>9</sup>

Birage Diop, a Molière of the twentieth century, is not dead.

## References

<sup>1</sup>There is some disagreement about the birthdate of Diop. There is, for instance, one claim that he was born on December 12, 1906.

<sup>2</sup>Sartre, of course, thought *négritude* would disappear as a movement in the hoped-for general proletarian, social transformation. For his specific comments see Sartre, J.P. (1959). *Orphée noir. Présence Africaine*. Pp. 219-247.

<sup>3</sup>A small section of this was translated into English by Dorothy Blair for Oxford University Press in 1966 as *Tales of Amadou Koumba*.

<sup>4</sup>See an interesting study in English by Tollerson, M.S. (1984). *Mythology and Cosmology in the Narratives of Bernard Dadie & Birago Diop*. Washington, DC: Three Continent Press.

<sup>5</sup>See Ahmad, A. (Ed.). (1971). *Ghazals of Ghalib*. New York: Columbia University Press. P. 58. “I’m neither the loosening of song nor the close-drawn tent of music; I’m the sound, simply, of my own breaking.” Trans. by Adrienne Rich.

<sup>6</sup>This is a translation by Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier, which has been modified by the author. See Moore, G. and Beier, U. (1966). *Modern Poetry from Africa*. Baltimore: Penguin Books.

<sup>7</sup>The title of this poem in French is “Souffles,” which can be translated as “breaths” or “breathing.” Diop called it “forefathers.” It should be observed that in a number of his stories Diop repeatedly dealt with archetypes, especially rebirth, spirit, and trickster.

<sup>8</sup>Nietzsche, F.W. (1957). *The Use and Abuse of History*. Trans. by Adrian Collins. 2d rev. ed. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing.

<sup>9</sup>See his poem “Vanity,” as translated by Moore and Beier. *Modern Poetry from Africa*.

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