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The Dakar Symposium

An Analysis

By Robert J. Cummings

The interaction of Black people in America with Africa has been characterized by grandiose plans and limited tangible results. In 1967, in an article in *Africa in the United States*, Dr. A. C. Hill wrote that "the interest in Africa on the part of Negroes has the longest history, but the most fragile character".

We are possibly no longer "Negroes," but a rather outstanding delegation of African-Americans traveled to Dakar last October, at the invitation of the Senegalese Government and the International Scientific Committee for President Leopold Sedar Senghor's 70th Anniversary, to participate in the International Symposium on *Culture and Development*. Upon their return, a number of articles were written bespeaking a valuable experience, a sense of spiritual comradeship, and a sense of participation in international activities.

However, we were not willing to lay out any overly ambitious plans based upon the experience. Dr. James E. Cheek, president of Howard University, one of several scholars from Howard who attended the Dakar Symposium, told a Washington Post reporter that Howard will enter into an exchange program of faculty and students with the University of Dakar to broaden its French-Language program.

In light of contemporary world developments, one wonders if it is historically feasible for Africans in the diaspora to refrain from some rather needed plans (planning) which lead to economic development, and a clearly defined defense against cultural imperialism. Historically, we have been unwilling—perhaps unable as a result of our educational training in dependency—to go beyond the level of dialogue. Action, almost always, required taking risks.

Martin R. Delany declared in 1854:

"But it is neither the moralist, Christian, nor the philanthropist whom we now have

to meet and combat, but the politician, the civil engineer, and skillful economist, who direct and control the machinery which moves forward with mighty impulse, the nations and powers of the earth. We must, therefore, if possible, meet them on vantage ground, or at least, with adequate means for the conflict."

President Leopold Senghor apparently has perceived the prediction as asserted by Delany and has internalized the resulting realities associated with it and now he wishes either to stay or transform the predicted developments to the advantage of Africa and Africa's people. Thus, the International Scientific Committee and the Senghor Foundation called a symposium to discuss the problems and issues of culture and economic development.

The most significant matter evolving from the symposium was the discussion over the establishment of a new *cultural* or a new *economic* world order. Quickly questions were raised about the opposing viewpoints and thus a potential source appeared which may yet succeed in polarizing Africans' international views. Briefly, the ideas were noted during the first official gathering of the international delegation by Senghor and one of his long-term friends, Malcolm Adiseshiah, a representative of UNESCO. Adiseshiah spoke first, saying in part:

"And so we thank Leopold Sedar Senghor for calling us in the Third World (sic) . . . back to our people and people's culture, not simply as the ultimate end of development but as the immediate needs and the only viable instrument (where ends become means and means become ends),

—to achieve political freedom internally and internationally,

—to fight neo-colonialism in the economic sphere

—to establish the new international economic order (emphasis added) and to this end we pledge: We who have liberated our countries shall now liberate ourselves."

President Senghor later concluded his opening remarks to the delegation by declaring:

"What conclusions shall we draw from all these reflections but that culture being, together with man, the be-all and end-all of development; the major problem of this last quarter of the 20th century is not so much the new economic order as the new cultural world order to be established. (Emphasis added).

While it appears that the polarity is clearly established, on a closer look, one finds both men rather close in their views about the issues and the resulting desire for change in Africa and throughout the world: Adiseshiah called for an economic focus, while Senghor placed emphasis on culture.

The task of the symposium, however, was not to make recommendations for the future; it was to discuss the matters associated with culture and development. Senghor provided some notable recommendations on culture and economic growth and development. One of his most important recommendations was the development of a plan, a strategy, in which politics would "serve the interests of culture and not, as is unfortunately the case in most of the Third World states, that culture should subserve the ends of politics." While politics are vital to winning national independence, Senghor added that paramountcy "must always rest with culture, not only in regard to politics, but also with respect to economics." He outlined a precise and dynamic relationship between culture and development.

Culture and development are symbiotic entities which feed one upon the other—growing and changing with time. Culture is the sum total of a civilization's values—according to Senghor, its *spirit*. All people have their own original values. Africans have the civilization of *sense* or *feeling* (intuition as opposed to discursive reasoning), as compared to the European civilization of *fact*. (There is still criticism of this Senghorian view, at

though recent research conducted at Berkeley [University of California] demonstrates that this intuitive part of the brain is the most potent and productive.) Development receives its impetus only when tested against growth. Growth, in Senghor's view, gives stress to quantity while development emphasizes quality:

"Growth is increase in the production, the distribution and the consumption of economic goals: material things. Development includes growth but goes beyond it, since it adds to growth an increase in the production, the distribution and the consumption of cultural goods: things of the spirit."

Since culture indeed is all inclusive, and mankind is the central figure, who is inseparable from culture and vice-versa, Senghor had no trouble accepting his guest's admonition for an economic focus in international development.

Perceiving the economic argument as more narrow than culture, Senghor argued that Man, or in other words, Culture, is both the means and the end of the economic and social development plan. Such a plan is a project devised for a given state, country or people for a specified time period with an aggregate amount of resources for its implementation. Its goal is to permit, and assist, the development of each individual to the mutual benefit of the organized body of individuals. Thus, the plan must determine on a sectoral basis—the rural, industrial, service and social activities—targets and available resources. While these resources in fact are financial, they are mainly human: Man conceived the plan, worked it out and implemented it.

By accumulating historical research, M. Rimpault, president of the University of Bordeaux, France, has observed a people is able to reveal themselves with their traditions, their customs, their manners, and other characteristics in the fields of culture, art, morals and so forth. To ignore this heritage would serve only to limit the definition of the true image of the people of all which characterize them and establish

their identity. To remain true to their values, a people must decide upon political, socio-economic and administrative structures which are adaptable to realities and characteristics which are peculiar to themselves and essential to their cultural development. It is very clear, and Senghor agrees, that this cultural development requires an accompanying material improvement. Yet, it must be made clear that there must be a balance maintained between the cultural and material developments, for, if technological development with material well-being is allowed to become the people's only primary goal, they will not only lose their values, or cultural strength, but they will have committed national suicide.

Leopold Senghor sees mankind as the central mover for culture and development and as a poet, intellectual and politician, he sought to call upon the international community of Africa's people, and some few others to discuss these important factors. It is most informative that he chose his fellow-authors, the writers and artists, professors and researchers, i.e., Black intellectuals, to discuss the relationships between culture and development. So it was that these intellectuals were invited to Dakar. They came representing individual success stories and possessing, through education, the scientific, technological and professional knowledge necessary to set up a plan—had that been their assigned task. But such was not the assignment. One may ask why? Senghor clearly answers by explaining that we should become more adamant in our defense against cultural imperialism than we are at present. And, we cannot solve this *fundamental problem*, nor that of development, unless it is *examined* on a world scale, in *every region*, in every respect, and at every level, through the initial instrumentality of a dialogue of cultures. Politics, international relations, and economic and social realities are a part of the wider cultural milieu.

"My only fear," Senghor noted, "was that since we [Africans] no longer be-

40 lieved in our culture, we might become mere ciphers. Now that we have searched our hearts and rediscovered ourselves, now that we have resolved to extend and deepen Black culture and enhance it, I know that we *will not come empty-handed to the rendezvous.*" (My emphasis).

What then will the African-American community take to that place? What will be our contributions to the world cultural order, which encompasses the economic, the political, social and religious development of Africa's people, on and off the Continent? A national strategy now must be devised and articulated which understands the cultural *imperialism* of our country, the U.S.A. The strategy must go beyond the local or national heritage of African-Americans in general to an international developmental perspective, which, while based upon the values of the Black heritage, strengthens the relationships and the commitment to international cooperative development. Accepting while admitting the risks, we must come to understand that a strategy is vital both to the independence and freedom of humanity, and it is vital—especially since the economic independence of Africa is directly related to freedom and equality for African-Americans.

The development of an international cultural order permits Africans around the world to create their unique strategies for development. The creation of such a world order will permit the development of needed international linkages for the implementation of practical ideas and projects.

The development of the Sahelian region is attracting world-wide attention. The question now is: Who will eventually direct the needed developmental changes in the area? Will the development of the land culminate in the renewed colonization of that area, or will the people receive support from sources which allow the people to maintain both their dignity and their land? Serious attention must be given, through strategies, to development in the regions of Africa affected by drought and

the newly independent regions, among others, by Africans in the diaspora and especially at the universities. It is not accidental that Senghor invited the so-called Black intellectuals to Dakar, and sought to sow the seeds needed for the articulation of a meaningful developmental strategy. The Sahel, as an example, needs to produce food sufficient to feed the people.

If history explains the present while conditioning the future, it is safe to predict that non-African oriented people, Delany's industrialists and profiteers, will come forth to provide the support necessary to supply food to the people, but for the highest possible price: economic control of their lands and lives. Why, then, should this be permitted in light of the vast resources available to African-Americans?

Predominantly Black educational institutions are usually agricultural and mechanical, industrial and technical universities with training programs associated directly with their names. Tuskegee Institute, for example, supported George Washington Carver, who was responsible directly for the expansion of the entire peanut industry. Almost single-handedly, Dr. Carver revolutionized Southern agriculture by taking his laboratory discoveries to the land. Food production is supposed to be the business of agricultural colleges. It might prove feasible for Howard, Tuskegee and Florida A&M to establish a project to assist the development of food production in arid areas by putting together a team of food and nutrition experts, mechanical engineers and agronomists. Granted, there are several on-going projects involving several academic departments from Howard and other institutions, but the magnitude and potential for independent programs are extremely limited when compared to the potentiality of a planned strategy.

Such a national and international thrust will represent a liberating experience for the predominantly Black educational institutions. The purpose of our national education was not to produce Black men and women who were free and also capa-



ble of creating the conditions for their development at all levels of society; rather education served to enhance the dependent consumer-oriented mentality.

It is clear that there must be a change of focus and dependency in the national and international arena. The recently concluded Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture in Lagos identified the leaders' understanding of this pressing need for the development of international African linkages through a two-week symposium.

At the Dakar Symposium, Howard represented the single institutional participant from the United States. Other American delegates, as noted earlier, generally represented their own academic excellence and professional achievements. Delegates from Howard and Dr. Cheek also represented these elements, but more importantly, they represented an institution acceptable to the Senegalese Government (and Africa generally, it should be noted). It is correct to assume, therefore, that Howard is perceived as having a valuable role to play in the development of science and technology as such relates to international freedom and development. Howard has a long history of stimulating and training students for professional careers in the field of science. Now, perhaps more than any other time, it is imperative that the responsibility which accompanies this notable international recognition not to be overlooked. 3

An understanding of this responsibility was exemplified by Dr. Lorraine Williams, Howard's vice president for Academic Affairs, in her remarks on behalf of the U.S. delegation:

velopment which does not ignore culture — the human element—but gives continuity and strength to socio-cultural values. □

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"And so, Mr. Prime Minister, as we leave Senegal we leave with the hope that the dialogue will continue; we leave with the hope that every member of this colloquium will do whatever he or she can to continue to make a contribution to the development of culture. . . . From the mouth we thank you, from the heart we say we are filled with love because of your affection and your hospitality, and from the mind and from the spirit we say we will return." (My emphasis.)

So we commit ourselves again to the cultural relationship; we commit ourselves to an intellectual relationship, and in spirit we will return. This is the commitment that President Senghor was seeking for the symposium. Inherent in the participation of the African-American delegation was the realization of our greater need for Africa, for it is our destiny which is interwoven with the future of Africa. It is most important that this fact become a guiding principle of African-Americans' daily activities. The fact of this relationship has not been wasted on the Carter White House. The appointment of Andrew Young, a graduate of Howard, as the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations is one positive move in the right direction.

On the university level, there is an opportunity to support an all-out effort for strategic planning. Seminars and conferences may be developed to examine the Sahelian drought. Others might examine political transformation in Southern Africa, Africa and the international economic crisis, and other questions receiving priority by African governments and related institutions. The institutional resources must be identified and classified for easy access and coordination.

Upon realizing these matters and their importance to international development, a decision must be taken to develop a