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Political Movement Through Cultural Identity: Lessons from the *Présence Africaine*

The *Présence Africaine* journal was unlike any of the time. Founded in Paris in 1947, its mission centered the expression of African cultures that had been suppressed under French colonial rule. The writers did not share a race or nationality but were united by a shared purpose of creating literary discourse around the colonization of Africa and the struggles of the pan-African movement. The founder, Alioune Diop, was a Senegalese professor who promoted a unique approach to political change. He was aware of the stark cultural losses that the French colonization of Africa was causing and saw the colonial suppression of African culture and its exclusion from the idea of “modernity” as a means of control by France. This paper explores the journal’s unique approach to African decolonization through cultural expression.

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Political Movement Through Cultural Identity: Lessons from the *Présence Africaine*

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PSU Challenge History of Modern Europe

Mr. Vannelli

January 1, 2024

“Is it not remarkable, is it not an extraordinary lesson that the soul should be affirmed today by those who not so long ago were considered without a soul? What a great lesson! Let us hope that men of good will do not remain deaf to this appeal. In the meantime, we must be vigilant, and *Présence Africaine* must continue to keep watch through the night. We give it our vote of confidence.”¹

- Jaques Howlett (1958)

The publication so enthusiastically praised in the quote above was unlike any of the time. Founded in Paris in 1947, its mission centered the expression of African cultures that had been suppressed under French colonial rule. The founder of the magazine, Alioune Diop, was a Senegalese professor who promoted a unique approach to political change.² He was aware of the stark cultural losses that the French colonization of Africa was causing and saw the colonial suppression of African culture and its exclusion from the idea of “modernity” as a means of control by France. Diop assembled a group of African writers and intellectuals in Paris, founding a journal titled: *Présence Africaine: Revue Culturelle du Monde Noir* (*African Presence: Cultural Review of the Black World*). It published articles, poems, debates, and stories, and was initially distributed in Paris and Dakar, Senegal.³ The writers, including Aimé Césaire, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and countless others did not share a race or nationality but were united by a shared purpose of creating literary discourse around the colonization of Africa and the struggles of the pan-African movement. Diop, through his publication, organized the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists, addressing topics of decolonization, pan-Africanism, and African unity.⁴ The *Présence Africaine* journal and the movement it generated were significant in encouraging the ongoing anti-colonial efforts because of their

¹ Jacques Howlett, “*Présence Africaine* 1947-1958,” *The Journal of Negro History* 43, no. 2 (1958): 150, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2715595>.

² Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *Black Paris: The African Writers' Landscape* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 5.

³ Jules-Rosette, *Black Paris*, 5.

⁴ Jules-Rosette, 47-49.

unique view of African cultural re-establishment as a fundamental counterpart to the liberation of Africa from French colonial rule.

At the time that the journal was founded, France occupied eight colonial territories in West Africa. Their presence was also in Equatorial Africa, North Africa, and the Caribbean.⁵ Following the end of World War II, the French government allowed a small number of elite Africans who had been educated in the French language to hold office in their government. The French colonial empire, undergoing a major shift, attempted to preserve its power by reforming its political system and ending the practice of forced labor. Citizenship was available for a very limited number of Africans, referred to as *évolué*, who were considered “evolved” by assimilating into French culture.⁶ This brought a small number of African voices into French government and society, a precursor to a greater African cultural presence in France. In addition to the political shifts after World War II, there was a change in the discourse around colonial occupation, particularly around the loyalty that Africans did or did not owe to France. In the opening of his 1948 book, *Orphée Noir (Black Orpheus)*, Jean-Paul Sartre, a prominent white French intellectual, wrote, “What then did you expect when you unbound the gag that had muted those black mouths? That they would chant your praises? Did you think that when those heads that our fathers had forcibly bowed down to the ground were raised again, you would find adoration in their eyes?”, defending the growing voices of protest from recently “liberated” Africans.⁷ One such dissident was Frantz Fanon, a philosopher from the French colony of Martinique, who published *Black Skin, White Masks*, an anti-colonial book that outlined the significance of cultural identity in the liberation of Black people. Fanon expressed opposition to

⁵ Frederick Cooper, “French Africa, 1947–48: Reform, Violence, and Uncertainty in a Colonial Situation,” *Critical Inquiry* 40, no. 4 (2014): 466–78, <https://doi.org/10.1086/676416>.

⁶ Cooper, “French Africa,” 468.

⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), 29.

the embrace of the dominant French culture and stressed the need for African people to be able to “take cognizance of a possibility of existence” rather than having to choose between assimilation and oppression.⁸ This sentiment was shared by Alioune Diop, a representative of Senegal in the French Senate who stepped down from his elite position in the French colonial government in Senegal to devote his time to the creation of a magazine that asserted the presence of African culture and identity.⁹

The first issues of the *Présence Africaine* were distributed on “flimsy folded paper” in Paris, France and Dakar, Senegal in the winter of 1947.¹⁰ The full title, *Présence Africaine, Revue Culturelle du Monde Noir (African Presence: Cultural Review of the Black World)*, begins to convey the mission of the publication, using expressions of and discussions about culture to change the narrative—or lack thereof—around African identity.¹¹ The journal had a unique presence as a multitudinous voice of African people, allowing dialogue that would normally have been cast aside or lost in clamor to be brought to a worldwide audience. This call for unity was fostered by the journal’s founding members who introduced the new series with a call for cooperation in the name of more urgent matters: “Each collaborator, while retaining his own personality, must remember that what separates us is far less serious than what threatens us or what we lack.”¹² By prioritizing the removal of barriers such as identity, the journal was able to amplify issues that transcended individual identities and applied to African liberation as a whole.

The journal’s mission to include a variety of voices was exemplified in the special issue *Les Etudiants noirs parlent (Black Students Speaking)*, a precursor to significant political redirection in the journal. The issue, published in 1953, included the most severe criticism of

⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin*, 100.

⁹ Jules-Rosette, *Black Paris*, 35.

¹⁰ Jules-Rosette, 6.

¹¹ Jules-Rosette, 4.

¹² Howlett, “*Présence Africaine*,” 145.

racism and colonialism yet, specifically underlining their interconnectedness.¹³ This issue included titles such as “Etudiant africain devant le fait colonial” (African student before the colonial deed), and “L’Unique issue: l’indépendance totale; la seule voie: un large mouvement d’union anti-impérialiste” (The sole issue: total independence; the only way: a large movement of anti-imperialist union), which highlighted the overlapping systems of racism and colonialism. The journal had previously published on these issues, but primarily as two problems to be addressed separately.¹⁴ This issue was the first to include in-depth, intellectual critiques of colonialism and racism, and it marked the onset of a new political culture within the journal.¹⁵ In 1955, *Présence Africaine* launched its new series amidst growing unrest in the colonial world. Following an interview with the founder’s widow, Christiane Yandé Diop, author Bennetta Jules-Rosette explains the global influences on the journal, citing the desegregation movement in the United States and political unrest in Algeria and Mainland Southeast Asia. One effect of this global tension was an increase in ideological criticisms of colonialism, a change that *Présence Africaine* both acted upon and elevated.¹⁶ To mark the significance of the ideological shift, the journal restarted the numbering of each issue. The first, published in 1955, titled *Nouvelle série* (New series), began with a foreward signed “Présence Africaine” that laid out the intentions of the journal from that point onwards. Their approach was based on the revitalization of African cultures as a stepping stone to decolonization:¹⁷

In the past, our societies have suffered from segregation, as from assimilation. Both come from racialism, because they are both bound up with colonialism. Bruised and tortured, our traditions and communities have been dislocated, and have betrayed our cultural vitality. There can be no cultural production or initiative without self-assurance and

¹³ Salah D. Hassan, ““Inaugural Issues: The Cultural Politics of the Early *Présence Africaine*, 1947-55,” *Research in African Literatures* 30, no. 2 (1999): 201, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3820567>.

¹⁴ Hassan, “Inaugural Issues,” 200.

¹⁵ Hassan, 202.

¹⁶ Jules-Rosette, *Black Paris*, 6.

¹⁷ Hassan, “Inaugural Issues,” 211-214.

lucidity, without that remembrance of our personality which *free* political institutions can alone guarantee us.¹⁸

This foreword clarified the new goals of the journal, particularly in waging a cultural battle against the common enemy of colonialism. The repeated use of “we,” “us,” and “our” when referring to both struggles and communities created a tone that called for unity and the setting aside of sub-divisions in the name of the decolonial struggle. The foreword goes so far as to say that cultural vitality is not just important, but essential to achieving freedom and self-determination. The passage concluded with a declaration of the journal’s two-part mission:

Our task is to encourage national cultures, the awakening of African consciences, constructive activity and the free circulation of ideas among African peoples -- to sound the alarm and make known the danger in the political, economic, social and cultural spheres.¹⁹

First, the journal amplified African art, both literary and visual, uniting it in one publication while still emphasizing the individuality of each distinct culture in Africa. While this had been the primary goal in the previous issues, it had never before been done with such a clear intention to be used as a stepping stone towards decolonization. The second part of the mission laid out a path for the journal that was more radical than ever before. It would “sound the alarm” in the African world and beyond and warn people of the cultural and political dangers of colonialism.²⁰ This anti-colonial stance defined the trajectory of the journal for the second half of the twentieth century, and its emphasis on the connection between culture and political power gained momentum as the publication continued to grow.²¹ By emphasizing this critical role of cultural reestablishment in the process of decolonization, the foreword justifies the *Présence Africaine*’s emphasis on African culture and the journal’s importance to the emerging movement.

¹⁸ “Foreword,” *Présence Africaine* 1/2 (1955): 8, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24346922>.

¹⁹ “Foreword,” 9.

²⁰ “Foreword,” 9.

²¹ Hassan, “Inagural Issues,” 213.

In light of the redirection of the journal's mission, the editors made changes to both the internal mechanics of the journal and the way it interacted with the public. Every issue in the new series began with a current events article, titled "Event of the Month," which reported on the most significant of recent anticolonial progress. Later in the issue the event would be analyzed and commented on, pointing out both its successes and shortcomings, to foster a more effective movement and amplify the local progress that might not have otherwise reached a global audience.²²

The first, and greatest, step the journal took towards fulfilling its mission external to the magazine was the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists. The event was held at the Sorbonne University in Paris and took place over three days in September 1956. Hosting delegates from the Caribbean, Africa, India, America, and Europe, the conference was a diverse group of artists and intellectuals gathered by Alioune Diop to further the cultural movement of liberation that had been fostered by the journal and create a stronger sense of cross-cultural unity.²³ It ended with a series of resolutions that urged artists, scholars, and all thinkers to rehabilitate the cultures that had been damaged or silenced through colonization. It resolved that the growth of culture depended on the simultaneous abolishment of oppressive systems like colonialism and racism.²⁴ The congress also agreed on the establishment of a publishing house in Paris, operating under the *Présence Africaine*, that would print and distribute literature crucial to the movement.²⁵ Transcripts of the debates and the concluding resolutions of the conference were published in a special triple issue of the journal, amplifying the discussions and solidifying what had been decided.²⁶ The concluding accomplishment of the congress was to establish the Société

²² Howlett, "Présence Africaine," 149.

²³ Jules-Rosette, *Black Paris*, 47-49.

²⁴ M. Price-Mars, "Seance de Cloture," *Présence Africaine*, no. 8/10 (1956): 361-65, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24346914>.

²⁵ Jules-Rosette, *Black Paris*, 63.

²⁶ Hassan, "Inagural Issues," 202.

Africaine de Culture (African Society of Culture), or SAC. The SAC was an international association backed by the *Présence Africaine* dedicated to the revitalization of African culture.²⁷ It focused on amplifying African dialogue, hosting numerous conferences in both Africa and Europe, notably, the Second International Congress of Black Writers and Artists, held only three years later in Rome.²⁸

Language shapes literature, and by extension, culture.²⁹ Africa's diversity of language, despite providing technical challenges for the publication, was celebrated in countless issues, disputing colonial claims that indigenous African languages were inferior to French. In a 1954 issue, Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop defended the use of African indigenous languages in the context of modern development by proving they were capable of articulating abstract concepts. As an example, Diop translated a text on the theory of relativity into Wolof, a native language in Senegal to demonstrate the language's versatility and, by extension, the ability of indigenous Africans to understand schools of thought that colonizers had reserved as only comprehensible to Europeans.³⁰

The distribution of African literature was instrumental in establishing the "African presence" that the journal sought to develop. The *Présence Africaine* publishing house not only distributed anti-colonial works to further the movement, but it also allowed many Black writers to publish and distribute their work at a time when there were limited options for them to do so.³¹ The publishing house became an important space for organizing the cultural and political movements that gained momentum through the magazine. It also shaped the market for African literature in France in the 1950s and onwards. Today, the publishing house's website chronicles

²⁷ Jules-Rosette, *Black Paris*, 47.

²⁸ Jules-Rosette, 63.

²⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin*, 17.

³⁰ Howlett, "Presence Africaine," 144.

³¹ Hassan, "Inagural Issues," 212.

its history, reflecting on the collaboration between African culture and the anti-colonial movement:

At the heart of the commitment of *Présence Africaine* editions and the meetings between the intellectuals who will constitute its base, there is this common aspiration to include Africa and its culture in the concert of nations. This aspiration is nourished by a conflictual context with the colonial powers.³²

Their reflection gives an account of the political motivations that drove their preservation of African culture and uplifting African voices. In 1953, *Présence Africaine* funded a film titled *Statues Also Die* that was banned in France for over ten years for its decisively anti-colonial message, not permitted until four years after the independence of most of France's African colonies.³³ As expected, the *Présence Africaine*'s facilitation of a cultural and political movement made it unpopular with much of the French public, but it also received criticism from within the anti-colonial movement.

The unique approach of the *Présence Africaine* journal and publishing house to combine the uplifting of African culture with the liberation of French African colonies was criticized as ineffective and detached from the struggles in Africa. In his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, philosopher Frantz Fanon wrote, "You will never make colonialism blush for shame by spreading out little-known cultural treasures under its eyes," suggesting that the cultural approach of the *Présence Africaine* movement was ineffective and naive.³⁴ His criticism, which he presented at the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists in 1956, questioned the influence of the movement on the decolonization of French colonies, an assessment that could not be definitively proven, only inferred based on the reach and reception of the journal. Another criticism of the journal was its detachment from Africa and appeal to European

³² "La Maison d'édition Présence Africaine," Présence Africaine Editions, accessed October 5, 2023, <https://www.presenceafricaine.com/info/8-maison-d-edition>.

³³ "La Maison d'édition Présence Africaine."

³⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin*, 7.

audiences by being written entirely in French and English and being based in Paris. The journal's founder, Alioune Diop, recognized these contradictions but defended its location in Paris, stating, "Nothing could be done about France without France."³⁵ Diop's perspective was that the journal's interaction with French society made it a more effective vehicle for cultural and political change. While the publication was based in France, it was resolutely dedicated to the expression and liberation of African culture, a voice for those who could not be heard under colonial occupation.

In the ongoing fight for independence in current and former colonies, the *Présence Africaine* journal offers a lesson in the interdependence of cultural identity and liberation movements. The journal's inclusion of authors from diverse backgrounds and amplification of young voices not only united varied perspectives but encouraged dialogue and cooperation in the face of a colonial enemy. The journal also demonstrated the power that literature and cultural expression have in the ability to recover a cultural identity that has been forcefully suppressed by a dominant culture. The success of the *Présence Africaine* movement hinged on the literacy and education of both the contributors and readers. It serves as an example of the timeless importance of education, especially for those facing oppression, as literature and discourse proved essential to the simultaneous decolonial and cultural movements in Africa. Additionally, in the early stages of the journal, the contributors to the *Présence Africaine* were those who had received a higher education in French and were granted admittance to French universities. Their adoption of the language and partial assimilation into French society was a factor in their ability to push for the liberation of their fellow Africans, most of whom did not have the same opportunities. The *Présence Africaine* demonstrated the complex relationship that decolonial movements have with

³⁵ Hassan, "Inagural Issues," 197.

the culture they are breaking free of, and the tension that comes with working within the bounds of the dominant culture.

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