

AFRICAN - NEGRO · AESTHETICS

The twentieth century will be known as the period of the discovery of African-Negro civilization. At first it was the sculpture alone that provoked amazement, shock, and finally admiration. But soon Europe discovered stories, poetry, music, painting, and philosophy, in turn.

Now that the first surprise has had its effect, we must define the spirit of the civilization; that is to say, of African-Negro culture. There is nothing more revealing in this regard than the literature and the art of this singularly "machineless civilization." Philosophical reflection on art, by which aesthetics is defined, is all the more necessary, since the admiration of certain European intellectuals for African-Negro literature and art is not devoid of confusion; it often consists of misconceptions, if not of contradictions in terms.

But before attempting to clarify the fundamental laws of African-Negro art I must speak of the black man who has worked out an original culture, and I must first outline his physiopsychology.

It has often been said that the Negro is a man of nature. He lives traditionally off the land and with the land, in accordance with the cosmos. He is a sensualist, a being whose senses are exposed. He is without intermediary between subject and object; these are, for him, simultaneous. He is first of all sounds, odors, rhythms, forms, and colors; I mean that he is

Translated by Elaine P. Halperin.

touch before he is sight, unlike the white European. He feels more than he sees: he feels himself. It is within himself, within his flesh, that he receives and senses the radiations that any existing object emits. Aroused, he responds to the appeal and lets himself go, moving from subject to object, from me to thou, on the waves of the Other. He dies within himself to be reborn in the Other. He is not assimilated; he assimilates and identifies himself with the Other, which is the best way to know him.

This is not to say that the Negro is traditionally devoid of reason, as one would have me believe. But his reason is not discursive; it is synthetic. It is not antagonistic, but sympathetic. This is another path to knowledge. Negro reason does not impoverish things. It does not mold them into rigid categories, eliminating the juices and the sap; it flows into the arteries of things, espouses all their contours and comes to rest in the living core of the real. White reason is analytical through use. Negro reason is intuitive through participation.

This describes the black man's sensitivity, his emotional power. Gobineau defined the Negro as "the most energetic creature seized with artistic emotion." For what strikes the Negro is less the appearance of an object than its profound reality, its surreality; less its sign than its meaning. Water enchants him because it flows, fluid and blue, particularly because it washes, and even more because it purifies. Sign and meaning express the same ambivalent reality. However, the stress is on meaning, which is the significance—no longer utilitarian, but moral, *mystique* of the real—a symbol. It is significant that contemporary scientists themselves affirm the primacy of intuitive knowledge through sympathy. "The finest emotion we can feel is a mystical one. In it resides the seed of all art and of all true science."

It is this physiopsychology of the Negro that explains his metaphysics and, moreover, his social life, of which literature and art are but one aspect. For African-Negro social life depends, according to Father Placide Tempels, upon a totality of concepts logically coordinated and motivated. This same missionary states that those whom the Europeans call the "primitives" live more than they themselves do "by ideas and according to ideas."

At the heart of the system, giving it light as the sun lights our world, is existence, that is to say, life. This is the supreme good and all of man's activity is but an attempt at expansion and expression of this vital force. The Negro identifies being with life, or, more precisely, with the vital force. His metaphysics is an existential ontology. As Father Tempels

writes, "Being is that which possesses force," or even better: "Being *is* force." But this force is not static. A being is an unstable balance, always capable of reinforcing or weakening itself. In order to exist, man must achieve an expression of his individuality through the expansion and expression of his vital force. And this force, substratum of intellectual and moral life, though immortal, is truly living and capable of growing only by coexisting, within man, with the body and the vital breath. The latter, made of matter, are perishable and they disintegrate after death.

But man is not the only being in the world. A vital power similar to his own animates every object endowed with sensitive characteristics, from God to a grain of sand. The Negro has established a hierarchy of forces. At the top, a single God, uncreated and creator: "he who has force, power through himself." After him come the ancestors, first of all the founders of the clan, the "similar-to-God." Then, going down the scale, we encounter the living, who are ordered, in turn, in accordance with custom, but mainly on the basis of age. Finally, at the bottom of the scale are the categories of animals, vegetables, and minerals. The same hierarchy exists in each of these.

This is the place to remark upon the unusual position of *man*, in the center of the system, in his quality of a person, in active existence, and capable of extending his being. For the universe is certainly a closed system of individual and distinct forces, but cohesive ones. Therefore, all of creation is centered upon man. To the extent that a being is a vital force, the ancestors, if they do not wish to be non-existent, "entirely dead,"—this is a Bantu expression—must devote themselves to strengthening the life of the living man, which would enable them to participate in his life. As for inferior beings—animals, vegetables, and minerals—their sole goal in God's plan is to support the endeavors of the dead. They are instruments, not ends in themselves.

The merit of this existential ontology is to have enlightened, in turn, a harmonious civilization, and particularly an authentic religion. For what is a religion but, as its etymology claims, the bond that gives the universe its unity, which unites God to the Elymus and to the grain of sand? The ontology that we find here constitutes its dogma. As for the cult, which is the religion of actions, it is expressed in Negro Africa by sacrifices.

The head of the family is the one who offers the sacrifice. He is the priest, designated solely as being the oldest descendant of the common Ancestor. He is the natural mediator between the living and the dead. Closer to the dead, he lives intimately with them. His flesh is less flesh, his

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spirit more subtle, his word more powerfully persuasive; he is already a participant in the nature of the dead. The sacrifice is principally a contact with the Ancestor, a dialogue of thou and me. One shares with him the sustenance whose existential strength will give him the feeling of life. And communion extends to identification so that, by an inverse movement, the Ancestor's strength flows into the sacrificer and into the multitude which he incarnates. The sacrifice is the most typical illustration of the general law of the interaction of the vital forces of the world.

If we examine the natural aspect of the unitary order of the world, society, we will find that the family is its simplest component, the basic cell. Indeed, African-Negro society is formed by concentric circles growing wider and wider and rising gradually above each other, overlapping and shaped according to the category of the family itself. The tribe includes several families and the kingdom several tribes. But what is this family? It is the clan, the ensemble of the people, living or dead, who have an ancestor in common. This ancestor, himself a genius and "similar-to-God," is the link that connects God with men. His life often appears in the form of a totemic myth, occasionally connected with an astral myth. Hence the importance of the animal in Negro cosmogony. The Ancestor received vital force from God and his eternal vocation is to increase it. As we see, the aim of the family is to perpetuate a patrimony of vital force which increases and becomes intensified as it manifests itself to living bodies, to more and more numerous and prosperous existing beings. The family appears as a microcosm, an image of the universe which is reflected in and extended to the tribe and the kingdom. The King is but the father of "the-largest-family"; he is the descendant of "the-Leader-of-the-Tribes."

The family, the tribe, and the kingdom are not the only communitarian organisms that simultaneously bind and sustain the Negro. Besides these, a whole network of organisms exists, whose interests and activities cut across others. There are the age fraternities, a species of friendly societies into which the generations are divided; the corporations of trades and the brotherhoods with secret rites. These play a social, even a political, and, particularly, a religious role. Actually, all these organisms have a religious basis among people for whom a division between the sacred and the profane, between the political and the social, is a rare and belatedly acquired fact.

Literature and art are, quite naturally, integrated into the social activities sustained by religious feelings. A Westerner finds it difficult to under-

stand the place that these occupy in the African-Negro calendar. They take up not merely a Sunday or “theatrical evenings” but in the Sudan, for example, the eight months of the dry season. During this time the people are entirely preoccupied with their relations with the Others: geniuses, ancestors, members of the family, tribe, or kingdom—even strangers. Celebrations follow celebrations and death itself is an occasion for festivity, for the best of celebrations: the festivity of the harvest and of sowing time; births, initiations, marriages, funerals; corporation and brotherhood festivities. And every evening tales are told around the hearth; there are dances, songs, gymnastic games, dramas, and comedies, illuminated by the tall flames. And works extolling the marriage of man with the land constitute another kind of story and poetry. So do songs of work, peasant songs, songs of boatmen and of shepherds. For in Negro Africa, as we shall see, all literature, all art is poetry.

Then there is always the matter of establishing relations either with the legendary totemic ancestors or with the mythical geniuses; the genius often has something of the star as well as of the animal, and the legends deepen to become a myth. Significant in this connection is the festival of initiation which is begun by numerous and continuing sacrifices. This is an initiation into cosmogonical myths, into legends and tribal customs and, more specifically, into the knowledge that a poem, a song, a play, a masked dance might give; it takes place to the primordial accompaniment of the rhythmic tam-tam. It is then that the grain dies in order to spring up again, that the child dies within himself to be reborn an adult, to become the Initiator and the Ancestor. This is a religious, animistic existentialism. The Other—adult, Ancestor, genius, or God—far from being an obstacle, is a prop, a source of vital force. In this confrontation of the me and the Thou there is no conflict but only peaceful agreement, no nonrealization, but a greater realization of the individual essence.

And so literature and art are not separable from men’s generic activities, particularly from the artisans’ techniques. These are the most effective expressions of their activities. Let us remember Laye’s father in *Enfant noir*, forging a golden jewel. The prayer he recites, for it is more a prayer than a poem, the praise that the *griot* sings as he works at the gold, the blacksmith’s dance as he finishes his work—all these—poem and song and dance—plus the gestures of the artisan, round out the work of art and make a masterpiece of it. These arts, in the general sense of the word, appearing in the same perspective, are bound up with one another. Thus, for example, sculpture could not realize its goal without the charm of the

dance and of the song-poem. Look at the man whom *Nyamié* incarnates, the Genius-Sun of the *Baoulé*, under the mask of the Ram. See him dance with the gestures of a ram to the rhythm of the orchestra, while the chorus sings a poem about the Genius's gesture. We have, here and there, a functional art. In this last example the masked dancer must identify himself with the Genius-Sun-Ram and, as the sacrificer, cause his strength to flow over the audience that participates in this drama.

There is another characteristic of the poem (once again, I mean by "poem" any work of art): it is created by everyone and for everyone. Of course there are professionals in literature and in art: in the countries of the Sudan, there are the *griots*, who are at once historiologists, poets, and storytellers; in the countries of Guinea and of the Congo there are the civil sculptors of the princely courts who wear adzes on their sleeves as insignia of honor. Everywhere we find the blacksmith, that polytechnician of magic and of art, the first artist, according to a *dogon* myth, who, using the rhythmic beat of the tam-tam, makes rain fall from the sky. But alongside of these professionals there are the people, the anonymous masses who sing, dance, carve, and paint. The initiation is the black African school where man, emerging from infancy, assimilates himself to the sciences of the tribe, the techniques of literature and of art. Furthermore, the reader will have observed from the two examples I have cited that any manifestation of art is collective, for everyone's benefit, and with everyone's participation.

Because they are functional and collective, African-Negro literature and art are committed. This is their third general characteristic. They commit the person—and not only the individual—by and through the collectivity, in the sense that they are techniques of essentialization. They involve him in a future which from then on will become the present for him, the integrating part of his ego. This is why the African-Negro work of art is not, as has often been said, an imitation of an archetype that has been repeated a thousand times over. Of course there are similar subjects, each of which expresses a vital force. But the variety of the performance, attuned to individual temperament and circumstance, is what is most arresting. To repeat, then, the artisan-poet is fixed, and he involves along with himself *his* ethnic character, *his* history, and *his* geography. He uses the materials he has at hand and the daily events of which his life is composed. And yet he rejects the anecdote for the reason that it does not commit the individual, being devoid of meaning. Both painter and sculptor will, on occasion, make use of tools or materials imported from Europe. They will not hesi-

tate to portray the machine—pride of the West; they will even go so far as to clothe an ancestral genius in the European manner. In the new society, enlightened by the spirit of the Colonial Pact, the storyteller will give money its rightful place, the first, as the incarnation of evil. Because he is committed, the artisan-poet is not concerned about creating a work for all eternity. A work of art is perishable. If one preserves the spirit and style one can readily duplicate an early work by modernizing it as soon as it becomes dated or destroyed. In other words, in Negro Africa, “art for art’s sake” does not exist. All art is social. The *griot* who sings about noblemen at war sings all the louder and shares in their victories. When he chants about the acts of a legendary hero it is the history of his people he is describing in his own language; he is restoring to them the divine profundity of the myth. Even fables teach us a lesson over and beyond the laughter and the tears they evoke. They are one of the essentials of social equilibrium because of the dialectics they express. Beneath the figures of the Lion, the Elephant, the Hyena, the Crocodile, the Hare, the Old Woman, we read clearly and perceive our own social structures and our passions—the good as well as the bad. Sometimes these fables symbolize resistance to our elders, right opposed to brutal force, or perhaps acquiescence in the order of the universe, to the will of the Ancestors and of God. And the *Wolof* concludes, “It was thus that the fable went and threw itself into the sea. The first one to smell its aroma will go to paradise.” Aromas of Negro wisdom!

However, one would completely fail to understand the essence of African-Negro literature and art if one conceived of them as being solely utilitarian or if one believed that the African Negro had no sense of beauty. Some ethnologists and art critics have claimed that the words “beauty” and “beautiful” are absent from the African-Negro languages. Quite the contrary. The truth is that the African-Negro associates beauty with goodness and especially with efficaciousness. For example, in the *Wolof* of Senegal the words *târ* and *rafet*, “beauty” and “beautiful,” are usually applied to men. In regard to works of art, the *Wolof* will use the qualifying terms *dyêka*, *yèm*, *mat*, which I would translate as: “which is suitable,” “which is worthy of,” “which is perfect.” Here too beauty is *functional*. The beautiful mask, the beautiful poem, is one which inspires a desired emotion in the public: sadness, joy, hilarity, terror. The word *baxai* (goodness) is significant; it is used by young dandies to designate a beautiful young girl, as if for them beauty is “a promise of happiness.” A kind act may also be designated as “beautiful.”

If a certain poem produces an effect it is because it finds an echo in the minds and sensitivity of the listeners. That is why the *Peuls* define a poem as: "Words pleasing to the heart and to the ear." But although for both the African Negro and the European "the principal rule is to please," the two do not find pleasure in the same things. In Greco-Roman aesthetics, which survived in Western Europe until the end of the nineteenth century, the Middle Ages excepted, art is an "imitation of nature," or, if you will, "a corrected imitation." In black Africa it is an explanation and knowledge of the world, that is to say, a sensitive participation in the reality that sustains the universe, in the surreality, or, to be more precise, in the vital forces that animate the universe. The European derives pleasure from recognizing the world in the reproduction of an object designated by the term "subject," while the African Negro's pleasure resides in knowing the world intensely through imagery and rhythm. In the European, the thread of the senses leads to the heart and to the head; in the African Negro it leads to the heart and to the stomach, to the very root of life. The Ram's mask pleases the spectator because it incarnates the Genius-Sun in a plastic and rhythmic language.

Imagery and rhythm are the two fundamental characteristics of the African-Negro style. Let us speak of imagery first. But before so doing we must take a moment for a brief analysis of African-Negro languages and try to understand their nature and function. We will then be better able to comprehend the value of African-Negro imagery.

The word seems to us to be the major tool of thought, of emotion, and of action. There is no thought, no emotion, without verbal expression; there is no free action without a thought-out plan. And this is all the more true among people who, for the most part, scorn the written word. The power of the word in black Africa is in the spoken word: the verb is the finest expression of vital force, of a human being in all his plenitude. God created the world by use of the verb, as we shall soon see. In the existing person the word is the animated and animating breath of sound. It possesses magic virtue, realizes the law of participation, and creates the participant through its intrinsic virtue. Moreover, all the other arts are but particular aspects of the major art of the word. Standing before a painting which consisted of a network of red and white geometric forms depicting birds singing in a tree beneath a rising sun, the artist explained it thus: "There are wings, song; those are birds. . . ."^x

What marks the African-Negro languages is, first of all, richness of

1. José Rédinha, *Paredes pintadas da lunda*, Estampa 17 (Lisbon, 1953).

vocabulary. There are ten, sometimes twenty words to denote an object, depending upon how it changes form, weight, volume, or color. There are just as many words to describe an action, depending upon whether it is single or multiple, weak or intense, beginning or ending. In *Peul*, nouns are divided into twenty-one neuter genders. Classification is at times based on their semantic value, at other times on their phonetic value, or again, on the grammatical category to which they belong. But it is the verb that is still the most significant. In *Wolof*, by using suffixes, one can construct on the same root more than twenty verbs which vary in their meanings; one can also construct at least as many derivative nouns. While contemporary Indo-European languages stress the abstract notion of time, African-Negro languages emphasize the aspect, the concrete manner in which a verbal action occurs. In other words, the latter are essentially concrete languages. The words are always pregnant with imagery; the value of their meaning appears beneath their value as signs.

African-Negro imagery is therefore not imagery-equation but imagery-analogy, surrealist imagery. The African Negro despises the straight line and the false "proper word." Two and two do not make four but "five," as the poet Aimé Césaire says. The object does not signify what it represents but what it suggests, what it creates. The elephant is force; the spider, prudence; horns are the moon and the moon is fecundity. Any representation is imagery, and imagery, I repeat, is not equation but symbol, ideogram. It is not only imagery-form but the very matter—stone, earth, copper or fiber—or even more than that, line and color. Any language that is not inventive is tiresome. Furthermore, the African Negro does not understand such language. Imagine the astonishment of the white people who first discovered that the "natives" understood neither their pictures nor even the logic of their speeches!

I have spoken about surrealist imagery, but the reader will have guessed that African-Negro surrealism is different from European surrealism. The one is empirical, the other mystical and metaphysical. André Breton writes in *Signe ascendant*: "The poetic analogy," meaning European surrealist analogy, "differs basically from the mystical analogy in that it in nowise presupposes, behind the framework of the visible world, an invisible universe that tends to manifest itself. It is entirely empirical in its application." On the contrary, the Negro surrealist analogy presupposes and manifests the hierarchized universe of vital forces.

Power of imagery, power of the word! For example, in Dahomey among the *Fôns*, at every noteworthy event of his reign the king would

invent a rhymed phrase, the most important word of which would constitute a new noun. "The pineapple that laughed at lightning." And the word and the pineapple would be inscribed everywhere, despotically, constituting an image: in wood, clay, gold, bronze, ivory; on the throne, the head-dress, the scepter, and the palace walls.

In African-Negro poetry it is quite plain that the abstract word is rarely encountered. There is no need to comment upon imagery in this regard; the listeners are endowed with double vision. In sculpture, certain masks achieve an exemplary type of suggestion. One of these is the mask of the Genius-Moon-Bull among the *Baoulés*. Here we see the face of a man with a bearded chin, the horns and ears of a bull (sometimes the horns are replaced by a crescent moon), birds that peck at the forehead or at the horns of plenty; this is a perfect example of the image that creates over and beyond the world of appearances. The more an image is unreal, surreal, the more it expresses, as Breton says, "the interdependence of two objects of thought fixed on different planes, over which the logical functioning of the mind is not apt to build any bridge," and the stronger is the image. And African-Negro painting, so much misjudged, does not escape this law. Let us go back to Impression 17 of *Paredes pintadas da lunda*, referred to above. Its power of suggestion lies in the contrasting colors, white and red on a brown-black background; its exceptional geometrical shapes, squares, ovals, and angles; all this to depict birds singing as the sun rises. Even the music is a texture of imagery. For the primitive role of music in black Africa is not that of a concert, of oral enchantment, but rather to accompany the poem or the dance, that dynamic sculpture. Last year on the Ivory Coast I saw the Genius-Sun-Ram dance. The dancer expressed the sacred fury of the Ram by his dance steps and the orchestra expressed it in musical phrases. And this is also true of the narration—myth, legend, tale, or fable—even proverb and riddle. From the very fact that it represents learning, African-Negro narration naturally assumes the form of a parable, of an image moving in time and in space. "Once upon a time," "Once, a long, long time ago,"—this is not only the way myths and legends begin, but fables as well. In a fable the animal is rarely totemic. Rather it represents such or such a person whom everyone in the village knows quite well: the tyrannical and stupid leader, or the good and wise man, or the young champion of justice, Fatou, the Orphan. "Once upon a time," and the audience responds, "As usual." The story and the fable are interwoven with the events of the day because African-Negro ontology is existential. There is no place in it for the merely anecdotal or the "slice of life" type of

story. Facts are imagery. They do not serve as good examples. This explains the charm of the narration, its rapid progression, its material improbabilities, and the absence of psychological explanations.

This imagery, however, produces no effect upon the African Negro if it is not rhythmic. Rhythm here is of the same substance as imagery. It rounds out imagery by unifying into a single entity both sign and meaning, flesh and spirit. The distinction that I make between the two elements is an artificial one and I do so only for the sake of clarification. In the music that accompanies a poem or a dance the rhythm is as much a part of the imagery as the melody. It is this rhythm in the mask of the Genius-Moon-Bull which permits a substitution of the image and it has the same symbolic value: crescent moon in place of the horns and horns of plenty in place of the birds.

What is rhythm? It is the architectural structure of our being, the internal dynamism that gives us form, the network of undulations that Others receive from us, the pure expression of vital force. Rhythm is the vibrant shock, the power which, through our senses, lays hold of the very roots of our being. It expresses itself by the most material, the most sensual means: lines, colors, volume, in architecture, sculpture and painting; stresses in poetry and in music, movements in the dance. But, having done this, it channels all that is concrete into intellectual spirit. For the African-Negro rhythm illuminates the spirit so that it becomes embodied in sensuality. The African dance disdains bodily contact. Yet look at the dancers. While their lower limbs are agitated by the most sensual movements, their heads partake of the serene beauty of masks, of the dead.

Once again, we see the primacy of the word. It is rhythm that lends it its full effectiveness, that transforms it into the verb. It was God's verb, that is to say the rhythmic word that created the universe. Furthermore, it is the poem that best instructs us on the nature of African-Negro rhythm. Rhythm is not born of the alternations of long and short syllables; it is created solely by the alternations of stressed and weak syllables, by the alternations of quick and slow tempos. This is a matter of rhythmic versification. Poetry exists when, during the same interval of time, the stressed syllable is repeated. But the essential rhythm is not created by the word but by the percussion instruments which accompany the human voice, or, to be more exact, by those percussion instruments that beat out the basic rhythm. This is a polyrhythmic beat, a kind of rhythmic counterpoint. And one is thus spared that mechanical regularity of the word, which makes for monotony. The poem, then, seems to have an architectural

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structure, a mathematical formula based upon unity in diversity. The following is the word-rhythm of two of the *Wolof* poems selected at random.²

a) 24	00	b) 32	31	32	31
24	00	32	31	32	31
44	00	22	31	22	31
44	00	32	21		
43	00	32	31		
43	00	32	21		

As we can see, the basic rhythm in the first case is 4444 and in the second, 3333. In both cases the verse is a tetrameter. The public often takes part in the poetic recital, and when this occurs we have two groups of rhythms. This enables the two star performers, the narrator and the leader of the tam-tams, to yield completely to their inspiration, to increase the off-beats and the syncopation, relying confidently upon the basic rhythm. For this monotonous, basic rhythm, far from hindering inspiration, is really a necessary condition for it. There are other elements of rhythm, however, besides those that I have described. There is the audience's clapping, the steps and gestures of the narrators and the tambourine players; one also observes certain figures of speech—alliterations, paronomasias, anaphoras—which are based upon a repetition of phonemes or sounds. These provide secondary rhythms and strengthen the effect of the whole. Finally, the poet uses many descriptive words, the importance of which has been explained by de la Vergne de Tressan. He tells us that these words, composed of onomatopoeia, constitute at times as much as one-third of the African-Negro vocabulary.

The "recitation in prose" also partakes of the grace of rhythm. In black Africa there is no fundamental difference between prose and poetry. A poem is merely more markedly and evenly rhythmic. It is readily recognizable because a percussion instrument always accompanies the recitation of a poem. A sentence can become a poem merely by stressing its rhythm; this is an expression of the tension of a being: the "being" of the being. It seems that "Once, a long, long time ago," all recitations were quite rhythmic, were poetry, in fact. During less ancient times, the story was still narrated but with a more monotonous intonation, and the subject-

2. Cf. "Langage et poésie nègre-africaine" in *Poésie et langage* (Brussels, Editions de la Maison du Poète).

matter was pitched on a higher plane: it was part of a religious ceremony. Today we have the tale, even in the form of a fable, which is its most unsacrilegious form, still rhythmic, but not as markedly so. In the first place, the dramatic interest is not as carefully contrived. To be more precise, a careful manipulation of dramatic interest does not consist in proscribing repetition, as is done today in European story-telling. On the contrary, dramatic interest stems from repetition—repetition of a fact, a gesture, a song, of words that create the leitmotiv. But almost always a new element is introduced, a variation in the repetition, unity amid diversity. It is this new element that points up the dramatic progression. In other words, prose recitation does not scorn figures of speech based upon the repetition of phonemes, nor of descriptive words. Moreover, the structure of the African-Negro sentence is naturally rhythmic. For while Indo-European languages employ a logical subordinating syntax, African-Negro languages tend more readily to use an intuitive syntax of coordination and juxtaposition. And in propositions of approximately equal length the words are formulated in groupings, each one of major importance. As for rhythm, music is bound up with the word and with the dance, and of course more with the poem than with the dance. Rhythm, for the African Negro, is the element which best characterizes the poem. In the Senegalese languages the same word, *woi* in *Wolof*, *kim* in *Sérére*, *yimre* in *Peul*, denotes the finest expression of song and poetry: the ode. In any case, a poem is not complete unless it is sung or at least given rhythm by the accompaniment of a musical instrument. And the prose of the public crier becomes solemn and acquires authority because of the beat of the tam-tam. In African-Negro music, as has often been said, rhythm dominates melody. As I have said before, this is because the purpose of music is less to enchant the listener than to reinforce the word, to make it more effective. Hence the important role of rhythm, of sudden low tones, inflections, and vibrati; this shows a preference for expression rather than for harmony.

The ethnological, religious, and social values of African-Negro sculpture have been greatly emphasized during the last few years. And yet those writers and artists who, at the beginning of the century, stressed the aesthetic value of rhythm were not wrong. Let us merely leaf through certain volumes in which African-Negro sculpture is reproduced; for example, Carl Kjersmeier's book: *Centres de style de la sculpture nègre-africaine* (Paris, Copenhagen), pausing at Figure 48, which shows a feminine statuette of the *Baoulé*. Two soft melodies sing an alternating song here. Ripe fruits of the womb. The chin and the knees, the rump and the calves

are also fruits. Neck, arms, limbs—columns of black honey. In another volume the *fang* statuette of the *Gabon* again offers us fruits—womb, navel, knees—in contrast to the curved cylinder of the bust, the thighs, and the calves of the legs. Let us next look at the first volume, at this upper portion of a *bambara* mask that represents the antelope. Music of the horns and ears, anti-melody of the tail and neck. And the hair of its mane springs from the sculptor's imagination. As André Malraux writes in *Les Voix du Silence*, "The African mask is not the rendering of a human expression, it is an apparition. . . ." In it the sculptor does not geometrize some phantom he does not know, he creates him by his geometry. His mask exerts its influence less because of its resemblance to man than because of its lack of resemblance. Masks of animals are not animals; the mask of the antelope is not an antelope but antelope-spirit, and it is its style that creates this "spirit." By style I mean its rhythm.

Rhythm is to be found again in African-Negro painting. The present-day painters of Potopoto and of Elizabethville have begun to convince the attentive observer that this is so. They are merely continuing a very ancient tradition. We know that African-Negro sculpture is often painting as well. Yet in the last twenty years the mural painters of black Africa have been discovered, reproduced, and commented upon. Rhythm here is not marked by lines that separate light from shadow, it is not arabesque as in European classical painting. Actually, the African Negroes use flat colors that do not give the effect of shadow. Rhythm is created here as elsewhere by repetition, often at regular intervals, of a line, a color, a figure, a geometrical form; and, strangely enough, by a contrast of colors. Usually the painter places figures in light colors on a dark background, or vice versa, and this gives the impression of space or of time gone by, which lends the painting a feeling of depth. The design and the coloring of the figures correspond less to reality than to the profound rhythm of the objects. Two examples will suffice as illustration. The upper part of a painting contains a frieze that portrays the sumptuous procession of a prince. It consists of six people who are moving from left to right. Beginning at the right, one encounters three members of the procession and two porters carrying a kind of stretcher on their shoulders upon which the prince is reclining. Then, bringing up the rear of the procession is the fourth member of the retinue. The background of the painting is light brown. The figures are painted in the three traditional colors of black Africa: white, black, and red. The six people in the procession all wear white headdresses, black tunics, red belts, white trousers, and black shoes. But the monotony of this

basic rhythm is broken by the introduction of secondary rhythms. The two porters wear tunics dotted with white while the other members of the procession merely have a row of white buttons on their black tunics. The exception is the leader of the procession whose tunic has no buttons at all. One of the porters is wearing leggings similar to the ones worn by other members of the procession while the second porter is wearing low shoes. Two men, one of whom heads the procession while the other brings up the rear, carry sticks, but one stick is black, the other white. Finally, there are two birds painted on the bottom of the frieze, one of which is black with white dots, like the porter's tunic, and the other is white, like the trousers and headdress of the men in the procession.

Now let us look at "Painting 54A" that portrays plants in pots. The two figures are painted in two colors, blue and red, on a straw-colored background. Everything is blue and red—the stems, the leaves, the flowers, the pots—and placed symmetrically in almost geometrical form, accompanied by secondary rhythms. Decorative paintings, one might say. I would answer, African-Negro paintings, rhythmic paintings. And this is all the more significant since the examples I have chosen have felt the impact of European influences.

We must conclude. Here, then, is the African Negro for whom the world exists by virtue of the act reflected upon him. He does not state that he thinks; he feels that he feels, he feels his existence, he feels himself. Because he feels himself, he feels the Other; and because he feels the Other, he goes toward him on the rhythm of the Other, in order to know Him and his world. It is this soaring of the vital force that the religious and social life of the African Negro expresses, of which literature and art are the most effective tools. And the poet cries out: "Eia! Perfect tour of the world and close concord."³

You will tell me that the spirit of civilization and the laws of African-Negro culture as I have described them are true not only of the African Negro but of other peoples as well. I do not deny it. Every people expresses, in its visage, the various traits of its human condition. But I declare that the totality of these traits are nowhere to be found as balanced, as bathed in light, as in black Africa. Nowhere else has rhythm reigned as despotically. Nature planned things well in seeing to it that every people, every race, every continent would cultivate with special pleasure certain of man's virtues. This is precisely man's originality. And if one should add that African-Negro culture is as like that of ancient Egypt or of the

3. Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au Pays natal*.

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Dravidian and Oceanian peoples as two sisters, I would answer that ancient Egypt was African and that black blood flows abundantly in the veins of the Dravidians and the Oceanians.

If there is a lesson to be learned from this study, it is not up to me to point it out to the men of the West. I will only say that to admire Negro art for the wrong reasons is to run the risk of not benefiting from it at all.

My concluding remarks I would like to address to the Negroes. The African-Negro spirit of civilization consciously or unconsciously animates the finest Negro artists and writers of our day, whether they are African or American. If they are aware of this and are inspired by African-Negro culture, they rise to international levels; if they turn their backs on Mother Africa, they degenerate and become insipid, like Antaeus, who needed the support of the earth in order to leap back to heaven. This does not mean that Negro artists and writers of today must turn their backs on the real and refuse to interpret the social reality of their environment, their race, their nation or class. On the contrary. We have seen that the spirit of African-Negro civilization has embodied itself in the most current of daily reality. But this reality it always transcends in order to express the meaning of the world.

The literary and artistic history of Europe is proof that we must remain faithful to this spirit. After the failure of Greco-Roman aesthetics, at the end of the nineteenth century, Western writers and artists turned to Asia—above all to Africa—at the end of their searchings. Thus they have been able to legitimize their discoveries and confer a human value upon them. This is not the moment one should choose to betray, along with black Africa, our reasons for living.