Speech by
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of the United Nations Educational,
Scientific and Cultural Organization
(UNESCO)

at the ceremony to pay tribute to Léopold Sédar Senghor

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Which voice will this evening summon all the Ancestors around us [...] 

Who will lodge our dreams under the eye lids of the stars?

These words were written by Léopold Sédar Senghor to a brother in prison. The place was Paris and the time was June 1942.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Teacher, statesman, philosopher, wise man of Africa, Serer peasant, bard of negritude and theorist of cultural dialogue - Léopold Sédar Senghor is all these and much, much more. It is first and foremost the poet whom I wish to honour as we open this tribute to him on his 90th birthday. I invoke the poet, since it is in him and through him that man’s higher nature pre-eminently finds its voice, at once inspiring and transcending us.

His role as a poet would have been sufficient to explain why it should be at UNESCO that the international community is today paying tribute to Senghor. But the reason for our celebration today is not least because with Senghor the voice of Africa has taken its vibrant place in the concert of nations. Africa permeates his life and his work: the African continent - usually as seen in the two districts of Joal and Fimla, the kingdom of Siné and the ‘highlands between the Gambia and the Casamance’ but also embracing that nameless Africa with its fabled animals, its forests, its colours, its calls, its odours, its ‘opéra fabuleaux’ as Rimbaud would have said. Africa, with its generous nature, the wealth of its legends, the wisdom of its elders, the ardour of its younger generation, the serene and valiant beauty of its women, its imagination and its joy. The continent of Africa, I am happy to repeat, is not the problem but the answer.

As one of the pioneers of cultural identity, Senghor has always cherished and extolled his roots. For him, to seek knowledge of his surroundings - the natural environment but also the human, mythical, ethnic, religious - in a word, cultural - environment - is an act of appropriation.

But when, in the splendour of his adopted language, he lays claim loudly and clearly to his African identity, it is never in a spirit of introversion, withdrawal or refusal of otherness. His negritude is, as he himself says, a ‘trowel in the hand’ and is proclaimed in order to create rather than negate, to define himself in relation, not in opposition, to the Other.

Senghor sees the dynamics of human nature in the urge to give to others and to receive from them. It is significant that the anthology Hosties noires, which opens with a cry of rage, ends with a prayer for peace, expressing hope in the ability to forgive and forget erstwhile enmities, bringing the warm hands of Africans into the ‘ring of fraternal hands’ which will embrace the earth. This is a peace for which Senghor has constantly worked with all his might, and it responds to his most deeply rooted personal structures and convictions. As Aimé Césaire, his great friend, once said, ‘Bitterness? Hatred? No. That is another form of dependence’. Senghor is a bridge between cultures, a model of synthesis, of universality, at home in many different cultures. It is for this reason, above all, that we wish to pay tribute to him today, since synthesis in life creates the embryo of our future.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In August 1990, I had the honour of attending at Asilah a ceremony in honour of President Senghor, to whom I dedicated the following lines:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Let us lift up our voices.} \\
\text{We come unarmed} \\
\text{And moneyless.} \\
\text{Each time, there will be more of us} \\
\text{To utter loud and clear,} \\
\text{In the public places,} \\
\text{In many tongues,} \\
\text{In plain words,} \\
\text{The new poem,} \\
\text{And our song will rise} \\
\text{Even to the ears of the mightiest.}
\end{align*}
\]

Mr President of the Republic of Senegal,

I should like to thank you for having honoured with your presence this tribute to your illustrious predecessor. I am delighted that the French Academy - the most prestigious institution in the world for the French language and culture - has honoured you with the highest award of the French-speaking communities, thus acknowledging your stature and your influence in French-speaking countries. Allow me, on behalf of UNESCO, to offer you my warmest and most heart-felt congratulations.

Allow me also, on this special occasion, to spare an affectionate thought for a friend and devoted companion of President Senghor: I speak of President Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the Wise Man of Africa - born, may I remind you, on an 18 October, in 1905.

Mr President, you are universally respected as one of the founding fathers of democracy in Africa. President Houphouët-Boigny had a high regard for you and insisted on making you, during his lifetime, the sponsor of the prize which bears his name. You worked with Léopold Sédar Senghor from 1962 onwards, heading his government for ten years before becoming President yourself in 1980. You have continually expressed your concern to preserve Africa’s historical and cultural heritage. With your kind support, UNESCO will make every effort to ensure that the main historical sites of Saint Louis in Senegal which were such an inspiration to Léopold Sédar Senghor the poet are entered in the World Heritage List.

Mr President of the Republic of Mali,

You too have played a decisive part in making the voice of Africa heard. Let me at this point quote an extract from one of my favourite poems by Léopold Sédar Senghor:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I have spun for you a song,} \\
\text{But you didn ‘t hear me.} \\
\text{I have offered you wildflowers.} \\
\text{Will you let these flowers fade,} \\
\text{Man distracted by the ephemeral?}
\end{align*}
\]

We shall not be distracted by the ephemeral, I can promise you, Mr President. We will be mindful of Africa and its needs.
Ladies and Gentlemen,

To finish, I shall leave you with the words of another poet, also a French speaker and champion of cultural dialogue. Here is the end of a poem which Salah Stétié dedicated to Léopold Sédar Senghor:

_Tomorrow we shall all be black or we shall not be_
_Tomorrow we shall all be white or we shall not be_
_We shall be yellow, we shall be red, we shall be_
_Those fine half-castes in heart and soul, rejoicing in the rainbow_
_We shall all, Senghor, possess your negritude_
_In order to possess your vastitude and our own._

Thank you.