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A Federation of Friends: Why Senegal and Martinique sought Federation with their former Colonizer

by Frank Gerits

Federalism, a state structure that combines a central government with regional governments, is the stuff of boring first year political science courses at university. Federations are often created as the result of internal strife and a means to politically organize ethnic groups within the bounds of one state. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, when decolonization dominated international relations, federalism emerged as a revolutionary political project that could sustain the liberation from empire and put people on the road to a modernity under the control of a new postcolonial elite. Federations came in all kinds of flavors. Besides a continental vision for unity, spearheaded by Kwame Nkrumah, who led his country of Ghana to independence in 1957, regional blocs like the East African Federation also advocated a radical break from the colonizer and sought the integration of Kenya, Zambia, and Uganda to strengthen their

independence. In the parts of Africa and the Caribbean dominated by France, however, leaders like Leopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal and Aimé Césaire of Martinique advocated for a federation with France in which both Africans and Europeans would enjoy full citizenship and legal equality. Why did both men think enemies could become friends? Why did they want to stay connected with their oppressor in a federal structure?

Federations and Négritude

Part of the answer can be found in the imperial structures France had created, which already gave Africans a seat in the Assemblée nationale, the French parliament, and eagerly educated Africans like Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire to prove the intellectual superiority of the French language and culture. Inhabitants of the Island of Gorée in Dakar, for instance, were allowed to vote in French elections as early as 1848 when radical French revolutionaries sought to export Republican values throughout the globe. This policy created an African elite whose power was based on a connection with France. Senghor and Césaire therefore had a vested interest in maintaining a link with the metropole, but also genuinely became convinced that the

French language was a powerful tool to modernize African societies. What had to be destroyed, however, was the myth that Africans were intellectually and culturally inferior to Frenchmen. In the Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* in 1955 he explained France always bragged about its so-called achievements, the diseases it had cured, and the improved standards of living it had delivered, while in fact the Europeans had only taught men to have an 'inferiority complex, to tremble, to kneel, despair and behave like flunkeys.'

Senghor and Césaire were members of the cultural elite France had created. Senghor was born on 9 October 1906 in the city of Joal and attended the Sorbonne in Paris in 1928, but went on to the Lycée Louis-le-Grand to finish his preparatory course for entrance to the École Normale Supérieure. Senghor graduated from the University of Paris, where he received the Agrégation in French Grammar. In 1964 he became one of Senegal's two deputies in the French parliament. Césaire was born in Basse-Pointe, Martinique in the French Caribbean, in 1913. As a member of the small middle class, he went to study in Paris and he returned to Martinique to become a school teacher while founding the literary review *Tropiques*,

together with his wife Suzanne Roussi. In 1945 he was elected as a deputy for Martinique in the French National Assembly.

Both sought ways to maintain the benefits that came with French modernity and industrial power, while looking for a way to shed the racism towards Africans. Their solution was the exchange of empire for a French-African federation and the creation of a shared French-African culture which they dubbed, *Négritude*. Pioneered by Senghor and Aimé Césaire in the 1920s *Négritude* had to reaffirm 'black' values, art and culture which the French civilizing mission had sought to oppress. Through poetry and reflections on African art, written in French, Senghor deliberately attempted to counter the claimed universalism of French culture with his own claim to universalism for black culture. Senghor also became a minister in the French government and wanted to accelerate African progress by combining the French and African civilizations.

On 30 April 1955, only six days after the closing session of the Bandung Conference, an international conference where representatives from independent African and Asian countries met, he informed

Minister of Foreign Affairs Antoine Pinay about his plans to visit Nigeria, Sierra-Leone, and the Gold Coast. As minister responsible for international cultural matters, he wanted to improve French cultural assistance to Africa, which relied on cultural manifestations and education to modernize African societies. He also wanted to devise a strategy to counter Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser's anti-French propaganda. Senghor feared that if France ignored the threat from Cairo, its colonies would be overtaken by the pan-Islam propaganda that was being spread by Radio Damascus and Radio Cairo. What had been a literary movement pioneered by Senghor and Césaire to reaffirm 'black' values, art, and culture became a strategic framework for French cultural diplomacy in Africa. As outlined in his review, *Présence Africaine*, Senghor believed African civilizations had fostered many of the European and American cultural achievements. That link between French and African cultures had to be reinvigorated in support of African progress. The French language was essential to this project. French prestige was not only dependent upon French values, which found their expression first and foremost in its literary achievements. The teaching of the French

language also had to facilitate the study of science, because France was, according to Senghor, a country of imaginative solutions, a '*terre d'imagination.*'

French colonial authorities had invested heavily in the creation of, what they called, *évolués*, Africans who were supposedly 'evolved enough' to speak French and understand French culture. The discourse about the French empire had become increasingly less colonial and imperial institutions followed suit. At the Brazzaville conference of 1944, the leader of Free France, Charles de Gaulle, established the French Union and in 1958 it was renamed the French Community, to dampen down the economic, cultural, and psychological exploitation of the empire. Resistance against these practices of cultural and psychological colonization came from many quarters. Unlike Senghor, Frantz Fanon argued the psychological chains of colonialism could only be broken through real violent resistance. In *Black Skin White Mask* and *The Wretched of the Earth* he argued the 'white man' had robbed non-whites of their self-worth and instilled psychological disease. He rejected leading French psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni who had claimed that the Malagasy could not bear the fact

that they were not white. Nevertheless, for Cesaire and Senghor the revelation of the shared "primitive" origins of European and African cultures was a revolutionary, even violent, act. Violence, in their words, had to be poetic, a "*violence poetique*," as Cesaire argued that the cultivation of a vigorous historical imaginary would result in transformation. Senghor assigned writers and artists "a primary role in the struggle for decolonization."

Africans thus had to be convinced that there was a third way beyond being passively assimilated into French culture and complete separation from the metropole. Federalism was the only political form that could accommodate the cultural hybridity and social interdependence that imperialism had created.

Federation in Intra-African Politics

Another reason federations were viewed as revolutionary instruments by anticolonial elites, like Senghor and Césaire, was because a federal structure could shelter a newly formed independent country from the pressures of former colonizers and the Cold War superpowers. Kwame Nkrumah, the principal advocate and agenda-setter of pan-Africanism, shied away from exploiting the Cold War rivalry because 'when the bull elephants

fight, the grass is trampled down.' Playing off the USSR and the US against each other would not yield benefits, but rather result in the destruction of weak nations and make it more difficult to attain unity. While leaders like Julius Nyerere of Tanganyika also expressed their fear of becoming proverbial grass, Nkrumah's Monroe Doctrine for Africa made Accra's stance distinctive. In a speech to Congress in 1958 Nkrumah linked his reading of Garvey's 'Africa for the Africans' with the U.S. foreign policy doctrine of 1823. 'Our attitude (…) is very much that of America looking at the disputes of Europe in the 19th century. We do not wish to be involved.' Just as the U.S. wanted to keep the Europeans out, Ghana believed that 'the peace of the world in general is served, not harmed by keeping one great continent free from the strife.' In 1960 the governor in Dakar noted that Nkrumah's 'Monroe Doctrine' had been influential, but considered it proof that Africans were psychologically unfit to play the game of international relations since treating 'both powers in the same way' was impossible. African unity was a continental scheme, but Pan-African modernity aspired to remake the colonizing world as a whole. In the words of Trinidadian journalist and thinker

Cyril Lionel Robert James, "the modernization necessary in the modern world" could be attained only "in an African way." The Federation of Liberation became a panacea for the colonial disease wherever it occurred. In 1962, in a letter to all the leaders of the disintegrating West Indian Federation, Nkrumah argued that "a united West Indies" was the only way to deal with "problems created by colonialists."

Nevertheless, the type of federation that was right for Africa became a bone of contention in the inter-African politics of the 1950s and 1960s. Jomo Kenyatta and Tom Mboya of Kenya, who advocated gradualism, disagreed with Nkrumah's plans, while Nyerere wanted to create an East African Federation (EAF) in defiance of Nkrumah, who claimed regional groupings reduced the appetite for further integration. In September 1958, Kenya, Nyasaland, Tanganyika, Uganda, and Zanzibar even established a Pan-African Freedom Movement of East and Central Africa (PAFMECA) and a freedom fund for East Africa. In West Africa, French African leaders, particularly Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal, wanted to form a federation with France. Senghor believed the French colonies could be integrated within a French-African federation on the

basis of legal equality in which both Africans and French people were citizens.

Smaller federations, such as the United Arab Republic, the Ghana-Guinea Union, the Fédération du Mali, the Zanzibar-Tanganyika Union, and the Arab-Maghreb Union, had as much of a global impact as larger federal visions. Debates between Ghana inspired Pan-Africanism and East African Federation, dominated inter-African politics until the end of the 1960s. Pan-Arabists wanted unification to reclaim the grandeur lost during Ottoman and Western occupation. Pan-Asian enthusiasts sought to build a federation of liberation to guard against Chinese or Japanese aggression. Pan-Americanism led to the Pan-American Union in 1890 which aspired to increase cooperation between the U.S. and Latin America, but was adopted by *el libertador* Simón Bolívar who conceived of it as an anti-U.S. line of defense. Even Pan-Europeanism drew strength from a fight against U.S. domination and evolved in the course of the 1970s as Portugal, Spain, Ireland, and Eastern Europe all came to see the European Economics Community as a federation of democracy they wanted to join.

African Socialism

A third reason Senghor and Césaire were not more worried about being oppressed by their former colonizer in a postcolonial federation can be found in Senghor's and Césaire's understanding of imperial exploitation. Senghor was often cast as a neocolonial collaborator of the colonial regime by Kwame Nkrumah who on his turn was scolded for being an 'imperialist' by Senghor for wanting to forcefully impose a continental union. However, it is more accurate to state Senghor sold a competing version of African Socialism. Nkrumah and Senghor both embraced it to define their project of social transformation, but disagreed about the threat posed by neocolonialism as well as the precise relationship between race, economics, and political and cultural rights.

Whereas Nkrumah defined African Socialism as a socioeconomic project that had to bring racial and economic justice, Senghor form of African Socialism had to bring politics, ethics, and religion together: if politics was about improving the human condition, decisions had to be based upon ethics and religion. African Socialism provided an ideal guide for Senghor who saw it as a way to bring

authentically African ethics to the fore in policy making since those were socialist and religious. For Senghor the problem was not empire as such since it had brought European "civilizational" benefits like the Latin alphabet, but capitalism was the "Bourgeois exploitation" of Africa. He believed that "spiritual" and "cultural independence" were necessary preconditions for other forms of independence and a federation with the metropole provided the best guarantee to keep the civilizational exchange going while also enjoying equal rights. To really defeat colonialism, Africa could not simply divorce France because France had to change as well. Like W.E.B. Dubois, Senghor and Césaire considered black capitalism to be an inadequate response to the challenge of colonialism. Senghor argued African philosophy had always been existential and collectivist, making African Socialism an important tool to reinstate those values.

Césaire's federalist program for the Constitutive Congress of the Progressive Party of Martinique *(Parti Progressiste Martinique*) in March 1958 therefore made the case that complete separation from France would be socially and economically disastrous because there would be no way to stop direct exploitation. Within a federation, however,

social laws and standards of living would be uniformly applied throughout the federation because people in the metropole and the former colony because it would be in the French self-interest. The cultural connection between metropole and colony would facilitate equal treatment and lead to the best possible outcome for the world after empire.

Different Paths from the Haitian Revolution

Rather than casting Senghor and Césaire as traitors to the pan-African cause, as Nkrumah did, both men were simply following different routes to independence, and they imagined different types of African federation to help sustain that vision. Their plans had 19th century origins. A fundamental critique of the European Enlightenment originated in the Haitian Revolution of 1791 when Toussaint Louverture, the charismatic Black general who led the slavery revolt, demanded the universal application of the French Revolutionary principles of liberty and equality. That corrective to European modernity was not simply an act of subaltern resistance but also entailed a difficult search for an alternative, a problem exemplified by the fact that this black revolutionary sought freedom through the same language that had enslaved him. Even though

Louverture was leading an insurrection against France, he also wanted to retain the link with the French civilization. After 1945, finding a way out of the psychology and culture of colonial modernity therefore became the core objective of the liberationist modernization project, a search reflected in the contrasting accounts of Louverture's life.

The most quoted book is *Black Jacobins* by CLR James which describes the eagerness of Haitians to 'go abroad' because it provided them with an opportunity to 'clear from minds the stigma that anything African was inherently inferior'. In 1963 he rewrote his 1938-book because he could no longer see a future governed by anticolonial modernity. His lament that 'Toussaint was attempting the impossible' points to his disappointment with the results of decolonization. Césaire, in contrast, had a different interpretation. He saw Louverture's death in a French prison cell as a 'sacrifice' for Haiti's future: by dying in a prison in Paris he had made a federation between France and its colonies possible. While remaining skeptical about the civilizing mission, he concluded that integration into a French republic on the basis of legal equality was the best guarantee for a type of

freedom that included social and economic prosperity. The hunger ‘for some doctrine’ which could lift Africans ‘from their servile consciousness’, as Kenyan leader Jomo Kenyatta phrased it, thus gave rise to two opposing tactics: one stressing Eurafrican hybridization, another prioritizing radical separation from Europe. This fundamental disagreement over colonialism’s precise psychological impact, differences over the best way to attain modernity and the fight over the Enlightenment’s legacy animated the debates at the first Pan-African Conference in London in 1900 and remained a problem at successive meetings where French Africa and British Africa were on opposite sides of the spectrum.

By the end of 1958 efforts to establish a federation that would embrace Senegal, Mali, Upper Volta and Dahomey, fell apart when the latter two countries pulled out, under the impulse of Félix Houphouët-Boigny of Cote d’Ivoire who defended the primacy of newly independent states. On 4 April 1959 Senghor and Modibo Keïta, leader of the Union Soudanaise RDA, set up the Mali Federation between Senegal and French Sudan, which fell apart two months later. Nevertheless, Senghor’s vision of federalism continues to inspire and confuse.

While the federal project in Africa during decolonization is often narrowed to Kwame Nkrumah's plans for a fully integrated continental union separated from the former colonizer, other leaders like Senghor and Césaire in French West Africa believed in the viability of a trans-continental federation. In a way, their challenge to the colonial project was more radical because it required France to change as well. Both men understood that a real end to colonialism, with all its psychological and cultural implications, required a decolonization of the dominant cultural framework.

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