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TOTEMISM AND EROTIC AGENCY: A RE-EVALUATION OF SENGHOR'S 'PRAYER TO THE MASKS' AND 'ELEGY OF MIDNIGHT'

By

ANAKORO, CANICE IHENTUGE (PhD.)
SENIOR LECTURER DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH EDUCATION COLLEGE OF LANGUAGES AND COMMUNICATION ARTS EDUCATION (COLCAED) LAGOS STATE UNIVERSITY OF EDUCATION (LASUED), EPE CAMPUS, LAGOS STATE, NIGERIAORCID Registration: https://orcid.org/0009-0009-7187-7700

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Abstract

*This paper presents a critical re-evaluation of **totemism and erotic agency** in Léopold Sédar Senghor's prominent poems. Specifically, it focuses on 'Prayer to the Masks' and 'Elegy of Midnight'. Senghor's Negritude poetry has, historically, been disparaged for romanticising the black female form as an inactive and subservient badge of motherland. It has also been said to be an oversimplification of the African identity. Consequently, this article addresses a critical gap in existing scholarship by challenging the reduction of Senghorian eroticism to mere aesthetic nostalgia or passive retreat. Instead, it investigates the complex interface of self-determination and longing amid ancestral veneration. Grounded in a theoretical framework that integrates Negritude aesthetics with postcolonial feminist theory, the paper reveals how totemism and sensual landscapes operate as dynamic exercises of mental reclamation and active struggle. Through a close textual examination of the thematic and structural impact of the selected poems, the paper probes into how Senghor exploits totemic symbols and sensual imagery to reconstruct Afrocentric paradigms and subvert colonial objectification. Ultimately, this paper reframes Senghorian totemic reverence and eroticism beyond submissive stereotypes, mapping them as fundamental decolonial mechanisms that assert an intricate, self-actualising African insight meant to salvaging physical and cultural liberty.*

Keywords: *Senghor, Negritude, totemism, erotic agency, postcolonial feminism*

INTRODUCTION

Critical studies on the poetic corpus of Léopold Sédar Senghor have historically been defined by investigative structures of anti-colonial protest, political confrontation along with cultural nationalism. Pioneered by foundational literary critics like Mphahlele (1962), de Leusse **(**1967**)**, Bâ (1973), Irele (1977) and Kesteloot (1986), conventional readings usually prioritised the ideological and ancestral elements of Négritude, mapping Senghor's deployment of African motifs basically as essentialist instruments for shared cultural resurgence. While modern theorists like Diagne (2011) have sought to salvage Senghor from charges of natural essentialism by stressing his philosophies of cultural hybridity, a considerable critical gap remains. Conservative macro-political studies frequently reduce the complex, inner proportions of African selfhood, ignoring how the physical body, carnal desire and sacred shadows act as weighty sites of personal autonomy.

This paper deals with the problem of the continual intellectual exclusion of the close physical and spiritual concealment as vigorous forms of agency in Senghor's poetry. Hence, specific poems like **'Prayer to the Masks'** and '**Elegy of Midnight'** are frequently reduced either to communal anthems of cultural patriotism or to inactive laments of exile. This paper, therefore, posits that such readings suffer from a critical frustration to capture how the idioms of erotic desire and the strategic invocation of the totem function as urbane declarations of agency. These components resist both imperialist objectification and restrictive, puritanical nationalist paradigms. By shifting the investigative limelight from macro-political divergence to micro-subjective experiences, the study suggests a critical re-reading that scrutinises how Senghor employs poetic codes to negotiate the dialectical apprehension between common political duties and private existential longings.

The impenetrable structural and thematic evolution of the selected poems presents the essential landscape for this study,

*Corresponding Author: **ANAKORO, CANICE IHENTUGE (PhD.).**

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showcasing a flowing negotiation between helplessness and power. In '**Prayer to the Masks',** totemism is re-evaluated as a dynamic frame of eroticised spiritual supremacy and calculated opacity, rather than a sheer artistic nod to heritage. The masks glow as guardians of a private life that rejects Western analytical spotlight. This concerned entity, hence, leverages ancestral sanctuary to insist on admiration for a wholly understood African chauvinism. On the other hand, '**Elegy of Midnight'** swings into the secretive, nocturnal sphere, where the physical body and carnal longing become arenas for self-sufficiency. With its language of existential vulnerability and infatuation, the poetic piece exploits a peculiar erotic agency, bridging the gap between the divided self and the outside humanity. Finally, this article analyses these poems as living, forceful texts that leverage totemism and eroticism to assert a multi-dimensional, self-sufficient African agency rather than as static relic of twentieth-century anti-imperialism.

Theoretical Framework

The critical discourse surrounding mid-twentieth-century African literary production frequently involves the interface of postcolonial identity and private concerns. Early pioneers of the Negritude movement, most especially Aimé Césaire (1939/2001), Léon-Gontran Damas (1937), and Léopold Sédar Senghor (1945/1964), navigated the difficulties of cultural resurgence, championing the African emotion, rhythm along with ancestral quintessence. Literary historians and wide-ranging scholarship on Senghor's poetry have the inclinations to polarise his work, categorising such as inflexible, communal anti-colonial confrontation or as inexperienced, essentialist and idealistic art. This critical disintegration has usually decoupled the collective, ancestral perception of poems like **'Prayer to the Masks'** from the deeply visceral, nocturnal familiarity of and '**Elegy of Midnight'.**

To bridge this gap and move beyond conservative, restrictive readings of Negritude, this paper proposes a nuanced re-reading of Senghor's poetic corpus. It believes that ancestral mysticism or totemism as well as erotic desires are neither inert regressions into reminiscence nor mere decorative components. They serve instead as unifying and forceful mechanisms by which the colonised subject assert and maintain a full, unregimented humanity. To totally attain these dynamics, this research adopts a twofold theoretical framework that blends **Postcolonial theory** with **Black feminist erotic frameworks**. Seeking to dismantle the colonial structures or principles that have historically divided the African subject, it relies on the postcolonial notions of **Fanon (1961/2004), Ngũgĩ (1986)**, and **Bhabha (1994)**. Postcolonial theory offers the vital analytical devices for deconstructing the Westernised binaries involving sacred versus profane, psyche versus body, that has limited traditional African literary investigation.

By means of postcolonial procedures to the study of **'Prayer to the Masks',** the paper places Senghor's deliberate invocation of the ancestral spirits, the "*djinns"* and totemic masks beyond a static retreat into pre-colonial legacy, into a forceful confrontation with Western cultural supremacy and imperialist obliteration. With this perception, the totemic space of the poem functions as an autonomous site of supernatural negotiation, self-determination, and political audacity against the colonising gaze, transforming the ancestral "masks" into vigorous agents of modern decolonial regeneration.

The drive to move the exploration beyond pure carnality, the postcolonial critique is alongside incorporated with a liberalised outlook of the erotic, purposely drawing upon **Audre Lorde's** (2007) conceptualisation of **"the erotic as power".** Lorde explains that the erotic is not simply an artificial sexuality, but an inner, innovative and intensely spiritual energy that reinstates a subject's capacity for action, emotion and self-definition. Hence, the paper exploits Lorde's framework to analyse and appraise how the close expressions of sleeplessness, visceral helplessness, and nocturnal longing in '**Elegy of Midnight' serves** as an imperative nucleus of agency for the subaltern subject. Therefore, the erotic desire and somatic agony in the poem, consequent upon colonial alienation and the bitter burden of Western modernisation become a profound drive toward self-autonomy. This structure exposes the poet's longing as a machinery that clearly defies the spiritual, mental, and physical loss of feeling and sensation imposed by colonial suppression.

In the long run, the integration of these procedures in this paper places **erotic agency** and **totemism** not beyond being marginal, inferior and unrelated themes, but rather as the essential, foundational, unified catalysts of Senghor's decolonial vision. The essence of this two-fold study structure is to verify and resolve a incessant dilemma in accessible Senghoraian scholarship, which is the propensity to over-politicise the poet's public verses at the expense of his sensual, personal and emotional poems. Hence, through the synthesis of postcolonial critique with erotic theory, this paper elucidates the collective spiritual ambiguity of 'Prayer to the Masks' and the unbearable emotional helplessness of 'Elegy of Midnight' which are blended to form a resilient shield against colonial opposition. This reveals that ancestral veneration and intimate desire are radical and concurrent affirmations of wholesome human agency.

Review of Relevant Literature

A common ground in current literature on Senghor's poetry frequently centres on his two-fold commitment to African cultural identity and the complexity of human sentiment. His poems, especially 'Prayer to the Masks' and 'Elegy of Midnight' have always attracted deep critical conversations that habitually touch on how the two-fold forces of totemism, spiritual agency, and eroticism overlap within the structure of Negritude. Traditionally, Negritude studies have compressed Senghor's themes with scholars repeatedly using anthropological or anti-colonial parameters in the examination of the ancestral invocations in his poems such as 'Prayer to the Masks'. However, this paper re-reads the works exposing the need for a new vision of the poet's preoccupations not as

*Corresponding Author: **ANAKORO, CANICE IHENTUGE (PhD.).**
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mere remote expressions of hopelessness or as dormant emblems of cultural legacy, but as forceful navigations through personal and collective autonomy.

The poem 'Prayer to the Masks' is associated, in critical investigations, to spiritual, totemic and ancestral agency. This ancestral focus on which most analyses is anchored has manifested through studies that are deeply centred on the internal apprehension amid assimilation and the indigenous African heritage. The masks are conceived as totemic guardians of history, and scholars widely debated their symbolic connotations. This venerated, unyielding nature of the masks is increasingly understood not as an inactive retreat from colonial judgment. Instead, it is viewed as a deliberate defense of sacred power, vital energy and cultural autonomy.

Much of the works of pioneer critics of African writing come as a reaction to the historical misreading of the pre-colonial African world by the Europeans. African critics, therefore, displayed their peculiar and essential apprehension regarding the misrepresentation of the continent, her culture and her people. Later critics pursued more intellectual issues, showing less interest in the project of repossession of African corporeal and sacred quintessence. From the colonial gaze, this remains a key oversight in obtainable scholarship on Senghor's poetic corpus. This historical misreading heavily dominates past analyses of **'Elegy of Midnight'**. Most critics who scrutinise colonial discourse, assert that the West, historically justified subjugation by hyper-sexualising, de-humanising, or completely de-sexualising the Black body. Notably, early scholarship on Senghor argued that his idealism and nocturnal susceptibility risked succumbing to European exoticism. However, most modern researches suggest that his commemoration of the erotic and the night-time is a conscious counter-strategy. In '**Elegy of Midnight'**, for instance, the speaker's close vulnerability and longing are re-interpreted by modern critics as an essential act of confidence and emotional self-sufficiency. These modern critics believe that shifting the personal, defenseless location of the night into a site of insightful political and psychological altercation is akin to the poetic motif.

Another foremost gap in current literature on Senghor's poetry hinges on the fusion of these two dimensions of the the spiritual-political and physical-erotic. The conventional scholars engaged in the examination of **'Prayer to the Masks'** to explore its ancestral politics and **'Elegy of Midnight'** for its private, dreamy aesthetics. Notably, only a few of these scholars have combined how both poems employ the concept of "vital force" (*force vitale*), a fundamental standard of Senghor's philosophy. On the other hand, existing literature reveals a potential synchronisation within African cosmology, in which the spiritual and the corporeal are deeply interconnected. This paper, therefore, builds upon this fragment of research mode, avowing that the erotic obsession and psychological craving in **'Elegy of Midnight'** are driven by the extremely ancestral, totemic force guarded and invoked in **'Prayer to the Masks'.** In the long run, the literature regarding Senghor's poetry reveals a rich, increasing conversation moving from rigid political readings to graceful, multi-dimensional analysis. By dealing with the critical gap between the sensual and the ideological, this reading becomes a literary conduit linking an indispensable gap in Negritude scholarship. It highlights that a re-evaluation of totemic agency and eroticism in the selected poems **does not amount to** a mere imaginative exercise. It is an exposition of the fundamental reclamation of holistic Black humanity, confirming that for Senghor, the freedom of the ancestral mind is inseparable from the freedom of the corporal component of the African.

DATA ANALYSIS

EXPLORING THE TOTEMISM AND EROTIC AGENCY IN THE TEXTS

In the core Négritude philosophy, totemism is not an archaic artifact. Instead, it is an urbane system of spiritual autonomy and psychological conflict. In the selected poems, Senghor exploits totemic codes and ancestral concealed agency to retrieve Black subjectivity from the over-whelming imperialist objectification, dynamically challenging the dichotomy of the "white gaze" versus self-definition. In '**Prayer to the Masks'**, the poet enunciates the externalised sanctuary of ancestral influence. Here, the speaker addresses an outsider, the Western world, and its deeply Europeanised, unconscious mindset. He tries to affirm control over how African mysticism and identity are perceived. This choice of interlocutor is fundamentally an act of cultural recovery. The poem recognises the certainty of an objectifying colonial perception only to aggressively challenge it. This is attained through a plain targeting of the masks along with the associated living spirits of the ancestors. Thus, rather than allow the Black subject to be passively consumed as an alien artifact or an inferior "Other", the speaker presumes an convincing, priestly position. The invocation of the masks becomes an allegorical and spiritual boundary, signifying that African beauty, identity and even cosmic expressions do not exist for the confirmation or entertainment of the colonial gape.

Masks! Oh Masks!
Black mask, red mask, you white-and-black masks,
Masks of the four points from which the Spirit blows
I greet you in silence! (line 2-4)

These opening lines are unique as Senghor uses them in initiating a dramatic tonal swing that breaks away from pastoral and romantic expectations of African art. They sum up the basis of the Négritude movement, which is intended to dismantle colonial feelings of inferiority in the African. The poet establishes that African cultural forms have their own self-sufficient political agency and emotional vigour, operating completely on their own conditions. The poet moves authority away from imperialist structures and back towards ancestral totemism by means of the spiritual influence in the masks, signifying that African art and identity are only answerable to their own heritage rather than external endorsement. The barren, empty European space is substituted for by traditional environment and its vigorous, critical call to existential confrontation. Moreover, by exchanging

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conventional, harmonious European poetic styles for the rhythm of the African drum, the speaker deliberately repossesses indigenous means of self-expression. In the poem, African culture is never a tender, strange landscape projected for the delight or comfort of the Western gaze. It demonstrates a complete African identity which stands as an unyielding edifice, while challenging or protecting its self-sufficiency.

The 'Prayer to the Masks' looks outward to space guardians, on the other hand, '**Elegy of Midnight'** displays the revered internalisation of identity and the tension between discernible identity and veiled ancestral agency. By the invocation of the masks of the four basic points and the "Ancestor with the dark skin", Senghor re-defines spiritual power away from colonial codes. This openly opposes Western anthropology, which historically dismissed totemism as archaic fetishism. There is also the **shield of sacred space in the poem: t**he "place closed to all fleeting smiles" and this acts as a dark protective sanctuary. Like a spiritual totem, it preserves the "naked pride" of African tradition against the impudence of assimilation. In fact, the poems convey the profound rebellion of the colonial gaze through a vocabulary of deliberate disguise and internal withdrawal. The speaker exploits the deep, psychological burden of the midnight hour to construct an impenetrable mental protection for his true self. The poem does not contain any mention of a "midnight hour" or a deep psychological battle associated with midnight. But, the speaker, in 'Prayer to the Masks', uses **sacred ancestral masks** to guard his true self and cultural identity from the destruction of colonialism and external corruption:

In '**Elegy of Midnight'**, the speaker conveys the devastating alienation and deep emotional burden of his public duties ("honors") by transforming his internal environment into a desolate, impenetrable emotional fortress:
The splendor of such honors resembles the Sahara,
An immense void with neither erg nor rocky plateau,
With no grass, no twinkling eye, no beating heart.
Day in and day out like this, and my eyes wide open (lines 8-11).

The ancestral presence in the poem is portrayed with the aid of profound, royal and unpredictable metaphors of shadow and memory. This openly defies the demeaning, reductive, compliant or "primitive" tropes which European colonisers consigned to African history. Hence, the allusion to calling of the dead as well as the pull of the blood raises totemism into an imperative spiritual milieu. Instead of allowing this spirituality to be observed, judged and commodified by the West, the poet conceals it within the subconscious and the nocturnal landscape. Again, by drawing attention to African cosmic spirituality as prized, inner vista, the poet affirms that African cultural forms stays beyond seeking for understanding, permission or justification of the coloniser to exist. Senghor posits, therefore, that cultivating this covert, inner confrontation becomes a protection against cultural and intellectual integration, exposing the predicament associated with identity in modern times. This dilemma entails that if the raw, un-assimilated power of African inheritance were openly exhibited; it would shock or displace the rigid, Eurocentric collective array.

In both poems, there is the strategic issue of subverting the colonial ego. The African tradition requires complete loyalty. For the poet, generating this requires a firm bond with historical roots that cannot be bargained for the benevolence of the coloniser. This connection shields the poet's "naked pride" against the impudence of leading Western powers. The ancestral totem swings the cultural pendulum from an entity that must be concealed in a vigorous shelter. In other words, a piercing critique of European powers lies in the juxtaposition of African spiritual stability against the mechanical, transitory "civilisation" of Europe. Hence, the poet advocates that colonial supremacy should not be seen as an insignia of cultural advantage and perfection on the part of Europe, but instead, as a historical blow of haughty fortune. The poem completely moves the forceful power of the colonial gaze through the positioning of African tradition as a shield against the egotism of the West. The poet denies the coloniser the position of a stylish arbiter, hence, confirming that African identity and beauty are plausible. In other words, he views African identity and beauty as self-sufficient, self-validating and blocked off from external curiosity. This is what concretised the fundamental political impetus for the Négritude movement, showing that true freedom begins with coherent psychological autonomy. It requires reclaiming one's inner self-esteem in order to keep it totally apathetic about European approval.

Both poems equally deploy eroticism as cultural and spiritual vigour of the African. This is seen in the corporeal and the sacred structures of language as well as the other perspectives of the poems. In Senghor's poems, the erotic is scarcely seen as mere physical components; it is intensely spiritual and connected to the life force (*force vitale*) of African cosmology. The poet sees the Black body and spirit as the standards of beauty and vitality. This is a direct subversion of colonial dominance that historically forced Eurocentric standards upon Africa, thereby positioning the Black subject as inferior or invisible. Senghor expressly defies this spate of superiority by moving African cosmic elements to archetypes of divine, irrefutable perfection.

Here, the speaker stands/acts as the "Bard" of Négritude. He sees the act of singing about Black beauty and vitality as his sacred and public duty. Therefore, he becomes adamant in his belief that no one should be surprised by the immensity of his adulation of Africa and the African. He adopts an unapologetic, flourishing imagery meant to squarely challenge decades of colonial erasure, demanding that Black physical and spiritual beauty be acknowledged as an ideal, objective, enormous veracity. Here, the poet juxtaposes the cold, unconscious and draining nature of European modernisation with the **enduring physical, sexual and spiritual vigour of Black:**
And I am handsome,
Like the one-hundred-runner, like the rutting black stallion
From Mauritania. I carry in my blood a river of seeds
That can fertilize all the plains of Byzantium

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And the hills, the austere hills
I am the Lover and the locomotive with a well-oiled piston. **(lines 13-18)**

The above depicts physical grandeur and objective truth, as in lines 13–15, where Senghor expressly establishes black beauty as an absolute, objective reality (*"And I am handsome"*) using untamed, powerful African imagery—the elite runner and the "*black stallion from Mauritania*". It rejects colonial depreciation and frames Black masculinity as a peak physical archetype. There is also a depiction of e**normous spiritual and generative veracity, as in** lines 15–17, which clearly showcase a deep, cosmic vigour. The *"river of seeds"* carrying the power to "*fertilize all the plains of Byzantium*" underscores an enormous, indisputable truth: Africa possesses the foundational spiritual and physical energy needed to rejuvenate and give life back to a germ-free, chilly Western world (represented here by Byzantium). **Harmonising spirit and machine: in** line 18 which fuses the organic identity of the ultimate "Lover" with industrial imagery (*"the locomotive*"), proving that Black vitality is not an artifact, but a dynamic, objective force capable of overriding unconscious fatigue with genuine human spirit.

For the poet, sensuality is the simple counter-philosophical performance against Eurocentric claim to perfect intelligence. Hence, he sees everything in the life of the continent, a veritable tool to be used in this poetic projection of the excellence of the Black race. In that vein, the subterranean emotional helplessness and physical love are treated as structures and basis of gigantic spiritual supremacy of the continent. The cherished space shared by the poet and his reminiscences become a positive location unharmed by the resentment and brutality of the colonial machine. The allegorical love in these works demonstrates the instinctive correlation to Mother Africa, mitigating that Négritude poetry frequently sees the physical, sensuous description of life beyond a personage.

From comments of this erotic dimension is necessary. While 'Prayer to the Masks' anchors the outside and celestial combats of Négritude, '**Elegy of Midnight'** showcases the internalisation of these struggles from the angle of erotic agency. In Senghor's cosmology, the erotic, as pointed out earlier, is never simply physical. It is intensely sacred and linked expressly to the life force (*force vitale*) of the universe. The poet uses highly overt, vibrant **erotic imagery and anatomy** to ground his spiritual and cultural longing in physical passion. This is seen in the following lines:

Her sweet strawberry lips, her thick stone body,

Her secret softness ripe for the catch, her body

A deep field open to the black sower.

The Spirit germinates under the groin, in the matrix of desire **(lines 18–21)**

From the above four lines, the first line focuses on tactile and sensory arousal, contrasting softness with the physical insistence of the woman's form. The second line **h**ighlights intimate, concealed anatomy and explicit expectation of physical understanding. The third line **e**xplores a customary, highly charged sexual allegory of agriculture and intercourse, linking the woman's body to fertile earth ready for creation. The last line **express**ly names the anatomy of arousal (*"under the groin"*) and frames the conception of life and artistic spirit as something that originates directly from sexual passion.

The poem projects the Black body or its physical dimensions of desire as a sacred space, thereby equally subverting colonial structures that historically animalised, commodified, objectified or erased Black sensuality. The body, thus, becomes a site of autonomy. The speaker also uses the cherished, nocturnal space as a shelter unharmed by the aggression of the colonial machinery. The interaction with the "Summer" or the beloved becomes an metaphor for reconnecting with Mother Africa. The rapport between the speaker and the sensual forces of nature/the beloved are entrenched in respect, admiration and reciprocal spiritual influence. The spate of despair or anguish ensuing from the colonial encounter with Europe is assuaged by the unlimited respect, admiration, reciprocal spiritual and emotional love from the beloved. By yielding to the "dark warmth", the speaker uses erotic agency as a tool to heal the ruptures caused by cultural hostility and Western assimilation. The poet, ultimately defies the Western gaze, the supremacy to humiliate African intimacy, thus, elevating erotic agency into an act of psychological survival and profound cultural resurgence.

Conclusion

This article re-examined L**éopold Sédar Senghor's** 'Prayer to the Masks' and 'Elegy of Midnight' from the perspectives of totemism and erotic agency, employing the as means of dislodging colonial paradigms. Data selected from these two poems were employed in this paper to clarify how the poet's celebrate-nature aesthetics go beyond dormant romanticism, a paradigm that has haunted the accessible scholarship of Senghorian poetry. It was, also, noted that some critics saw Senghor poetry as an oversimplification of the African identity. Consequently, this paper addressed, among other things, this critical gap in existing scholarship by challenging the reduction of Senghorian totemism and eroticism to mere aesthetic nostalgia or passive retreat. Instead, the study discovered a complex interface of self-determination and longing amid ancestral veneration. Anchored on a theoretical framework that integrates Negritude aesthetics with postcolonial feminist theory, the paper revealed how totemism and sensual landscapes operate as dynamic exercises of psychological reclamation and vigorous combat for African identity and dignity. By means of a close textual examination of both thematic and structural impact of the selected poems, the paper surveyed Senghor's exploitation of totemic symbols and sensual imagery in the reconstruction of Afrocentric paradigms and subversion of colonial objectification.

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*Corresponding Author: **ANAKORO, CANICE IHENTUGE (PhD.).**

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