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## CHAPTER 1

# Léopold Sédar Senghor—Senegal

Poet, Scholar, Statesman, and  
Subtle Political Strongman

### *Historical Note*

Léopold Senghor was born in 1906 into a modest Roman Catholic family on the Atlantic Coast about eighty miles south of Dakar, the capital city of Senegal and the headquarters of French colonialism in West Africa. A senior French colonial administrator was impressed by Léopold's intelligence and proposed to take charge of his education. The family agreed. This led to Léopold's completing secondary school at an elite establishment in Dakar and going on to higher studies in France. He graduated from the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris shortly before the onset of the Second World War, earning a doctorate in grammar. He served in the French army during the war.

After the war, he returned to Senegal and plunged into politics and the movement to gain independence from France. He was close to the French Socialist Party. When France granted self-government in 1958, he became Senegal's first president. Before final independence, Senegal and the French Soudan agreed to form a federation to be called Mali. The federation was dissolved shortly after it was established because of a disagreement as to who would be president. The Senegalese said that the president had to be Senghor, and the Soudanese said it had to be Modibo Keita.

After full independence in 1961, Senghor had to use force to get rid of his prime minister, who was trying to act independently. During these early years, Senghor demonstrated an iron will and a willingness to use violence if necessary to maintain his power.

After 1964, his authority was uncontested. Senghor was elected president despite being a Roman Catholic in a country that is 95 percent Muslim.

Senghor remained president until 1980, when he retired voluntarily. During his tenure, he was widely known on the international stage as a moderate African statesman and a champion of “negritude,” in support of the dignity of people of African descent anywhere in the world. He was also a successful poet and a scholar of African history and culture. His two decades in office were marked by the consolidation of Senegalese nationalism, patriotism, and cultural pride.

Despite its small size and lack of resources, Senegal was considered one of the leading nations of independent Africa, and Senghor was considered one of its most influential leaders. Nevertheless, during his tenure little was accomplished toward economic development, and poverty deepened. While Senghor founded a culturally proud nation called Senegal, he failed to identify solutions to the country’s most profound problems.



The Republic of Senegal’s first president, Léopold Sédar Senghor, had a direct impact on me even before I met him. In August 1977, I was in Washington, D.C., preparing for my assignment to Dakar, Senegal, as the US ambassador. I was then completing a three-year tour in Paris as the embassy political counselor.

The embassy in Dakar informed me that I needed to wear a morning outfit to present my credentials to President Senghor during a formal ceremony. I went to a downtown Washington establishment that specialized in formal wear. When I told them that I wanted to purchase a morning coat and striped trousers, they expressed astonishment. The salesperson said, “We sell one of these about once every three or four years to the new solicitor general, who wears it when trying a case before the Supreme Court. Otherwise, we deal only in rentals for special occasions.” So, before I even arrived in Dakar, I knew that I would be dealing with a stickler for traditional European-style protocol.

The presentation of credentials ceremony took place in

September 1977 at the presidential palace. The formal part was a public exchange of remarks during which the president and I made commitments to continue a constructive dialogue between our two friendly governments. The really interesting part was a one-on-one conversation in the president's private office, where I learned that Senghor was a kind and considerate person, at least to foreign dignitaries.

After reviewing bilateral relations, Senghor lowered his voice and asked, "Mr. Ambassador, from your name, I assume that you are of the Jewish faith. Is that correct?" I nodded affirmatively. "I want to assure you," he continued,

that while Senegal is 95 percent Muslim, there is no danger to you or your family. I myself am a devout Catholic, and there was no religious opposition to my being elected Senegal's first president. We are a very tolerant people. We celebrate Christian holidays, and many families are mixed.

In terms of Senegal's foreign relations, we acceded to Egypt's request to break diplomatic relations with Israel after the 1973 Sinai war. But we continue to have friendly contacts with Israel. Shimon Peres comes to visit about three times a year, and we meet with the Israeli delegation to the annual meeting of Socialist International.

Also, Mr. Ambassador, I want you to know that there is Jewish blood in my very own family. My first wife was the daughter of Félix Eboué, the Martinique-born governor of the French African colony of Chad during World War II and a De Gaulle loyalist. Eboué's wife was a Jewish lady from Paris. Therefore, his children were half-Jewish. Consequently, my two sons with Eboué's daughter have Jewish blood.

After being reassured about security, I settled down to the regular business of diplomatic relations. There was an office of the Palestine Liberation Organization in Dakar, and we were experiencing a high degree of Palestinian terrorism internationally. My embassy security officer insisted on my taking varying random routes to the office every day, and my two sons did the same traveling to and from school.

During my periodic talks with Senghor, always one-on-one, I found him to be highly interested and well informed in world affairs. Although socialist in his politics, he was under no illusions about the Soviet Union. He belonged to the nonaligned movement but was totally pro-West in his sentiments, just like the French Socialist Party. Today, as we view with alarm events in nuclear-armed Pakistan, I remember Senghor telling me back in 1978 that Pakistan was “dangerous and obscurantist.”

Senghor also believed that he had ideas to contribute to the search for peace and security in the world. After the Camp David agreement between Israel and Egypt in 1978, hosted by President Jimmy Carter, Senghor did everything possible to prevent the Islamic countries from punishing Egypt. I spent many hours with him and the Egyptian ambassador developing strategies for meetings of the Organization of Islamic States.

Like most heads of state, Senghor had a strong ego. It comes with the territory. In mid-1978, about six weeks had gone by without my seeing Senghor. I never asked to see him unless I had something serious to discuss. During this slack period, I received a call from Senghor’s secretary. “Mr. Ambassador, the president would like to see you. Would tomorrow at 4 p.m. be convenient?”

Needless to say, I accepted. Senghor’s first remark at that meeting was, “Mr. Ambassador, I have not seen you for a long time. I do not want too much time to go by without Washington knowing my views.” He then proceeded to expound about the Middle East. He was especially interested in demolishing the idea that the occupied Palestinian territories be amalgamated with Jordan to form a true Palestinian state.

One of Senghor’s highest priorities was the concept of negritude. A senior colonial official visiting his village had identified his high intelligence as a child and recommended to his parents that he be educated in an elite Catholic school in Dakar, where he saw his first electric light bulb. During his university years in France, he met with other black intellectuals from Africa and the French Caribbean territories, including the novelist-philosopher Franz Fanon, who had a strong influence on Senghor’s development. During this period, he and his friends developed the concept of negritude. The idea was that people of African descent had the same potential for

intellectual development as everyone else and that potential should be nurtured. The concept went hand in hand with the anti-colonial movement in Africa.

During his presidency, Senghor continued to write and act with the concept of negritude in mind. There were two examples that I encountered directly.

First, Senghor considered the people of Indonesian and Australian New Guinea to be of African descent. He therefore supported independence for these two territories. Australian New Guinea became independent as Papua New Guinea. But Indonesia refused to consider independence for the other half of New Guinea, known as West Irian. A West Irian nationalist movement existed, and Senghor invited them to set up an office in Dakar, with Senegalese financing. In 1978, the Islamic Conference, a multinational grouping with a secretariat in Saudi Arabia, decided to have its annual meeting in Dakar. Indonesia threatened to boycott the meeting because of the West Irian independence office. Senghor solved the immediate problem by sending the West Irian nationalists to Europe for the duration of the meeting, but he did not abandon his support.

The second example was in Angola, the oil-rich former Portuguese colony in southwest Africa. Portugal gave independence to Angola in 1974 with absolutely no preparation. Former anti-Portuguese insurgent movements started fighting each other after the Portuguese departed. Thanks to Cuban assistance, the Marxist insurgent movement, MPLA, gained power in the capital city, but guerilla warfare continued in the countryside. The main anti-MPLA fighting group was called UNITA, under the leadership of a charismatic intellectual named Jonas Savimbi, who claimed to be pro-West and anti-communist. Almost all African governments recognized the MPLA government. Senghor, however, financed a UNITA office in Dakar. When I asked him why he did this, his reply was based on negritude. He said that the leaders of the MPLA government were all people of mixed African and Portuguese blood who did not speak African languages. Savimbi and his UNITA movement were pure Africans, representing the African majority.

In France, Senghor had attended the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure*, which has a highly competitive entrance examination. It prepares future college and high school professors, many of whom

go on to distinguished careers in government and the private sector. French president Pompidou was Senghor's contemporary at the school. Senghor majored in grammar, and was fascinated with words and languages as a result. In the context of negritude, Senghor liked to examine the languages of black people in the Western world. He was also an accomplished poet, who won several prizes that led to his induction into the super-prestigious French Academy.

In one conversation, Senghor told me that he was studying the "jazz" language of New Orleans to determine if there were links to West Africa. He said that one of his discoveries was in the jazz term "I dig you." He said that in the Senegalese language, Wolof, a person listening to an explanation or instruction expresses his understanding by repeatedly saying "deugela," pronounced "diggala," with the emphasis on "dig."

Of greater significance, Senghor believed strongly that Western civilization had its beginnings among the Nubians of the Nile, who, he argued, were Africans. The Nubians were at the heart of the Egyptian civilization that constituted the bedrock of Western civilization, he claimed. Some scholars agree with his claim for the Nubians but do not necessarily consider them to be authentic Africans.

As a Catholic with deep respect for the Muslim religion as practiced by the Senegalese people for many centuries, Senghor went out of his way to maintain good relations with the leading clerics of the different Muslim brotherhoods. Nonetheless, I had the feeling that he liked to tease them from time to time.

Every year, on the anniversary of Senegalese independence, Senghor held a large formal reception at the presidential palace. The ladies wore their best Parisian gowns, and the men wore either traditional dress or black tie. At one of the receptions, my wife and I arrived early. So, we decided to stand in front of the main entrance to enjoy the arrival of the other guests and admire their finery. The ambassador of Saudi Arabia joined us, wearing his finest Arab robes and headdress. As we watched the elegant Senegalese ladies sporting their very feminine fashions, and very little modesty, I turned to the Saudi envoy and asked, "Mr. Ambassador, what do you think about these Muslim ladies and their high fashion?" The



Saudi ambassador responded formally, "I consider them to be true believers." That put me in my place.

Senghor also used the judicial system to wear down some of the Muslim social practices, such as polygamy and easy divorces for the males. He instituted a law that required couples about to marry to decide whether the marriage will be monogamous or polygamous, and not to be changed later. He also enacted legislation that established alimony to be paid by the man to his divorced wife. This caused such consternation among the Muslim men that some decided to quit working in order not to have resources that could be confiscated through alimony.

Senghor was a man of principle. In 1979, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan, causing President Jimmy Carter great angst. Carter decided to promote a boycott of the 1980 Olympic games in Moscow. Shortly after the invasion, Senghor traveled to the United States to accept an honorary degree at Bridgeport University in Connecticut. He invited me to ride in his presidential aircraft. President Carter invited him to the Oval Office for an informal chat. Carter decided to make a strong pitch to Senghor to lead an African boycott of the Moscow Olympics. Senghor said he could not do that. He explained that in 1976, the Africans called for a boycott of the Olympic games in Montreal as a protest against Western inaction against apartheid in South Africa and illegal white minority rule in Southern Rhodesia. The American government at the time opposed the boycott on the grounds that politics should not be interjected into the Olympic event. So, the Africans would now follow the earlier American admonition. Senghor was adamant and did not budge.

President Carter did not easily give up on his quest for a Moscow boycott. He asked world heavyweight boxing champion Mohammed Ali to travel to African countries to plead for a boycott in late 1979. Senegal was the last stop on an eight-country tour. Senghor decided not to have anything formal for Ali's visit, in contrast to his usual treatment of foreign presidential delegations. Instead, it would be a festive occasion, with maximum exposure of Ali to the Senegalese population.

One of the events involved Ali kissing and blessing Senegalese children named after him. Ali sat in my living room kissing the children, whose mothers formed a long line down the street.

Afterward, he went to the boxing matches that are a popular sport in Senegal, distributing hundred dollar bills to handicapped persons lining his path. He was invited to enter the ring and put on gloves. After a short period of sparring, Ali allowed himself to be “knocked out” by his Senegalese opponent. My wife Suzanne still tells the story of Ali emptying our refrigerator nonstop between events.

Senghor decided to deal with Ali’s official business regarding the boycott at his country beach house about fifty miles south of Dakar. He invited Ali to lunch along with young people from his and neighboring families.

My wife and I arrived at Senghor’s house about a half hour early in accordance with protocol, since we represented President Carter for this “official visit.” Senghor took us around to shake hands with every one of the Senegalese employees at the house. When that was done, Senghor pointed out that all of the employees came from the Peul ethnic group. This is an ethnic group of nomadic heritage living in several West African countries. In Nigeria, for example they are called Fulani. In Mauritania they are called Halpulaar.

Senghor then explained why there was no diversity in his household staff. He said that he considered the Peul to be the most intelligent of the various ethnic groups in West Africa. With increased experience in West Africa after our stay in Senegal, we had extensive contacts with Peul intellectuals and officials and found among them a great desire for education and intellectual accomplishment.

It was a most enjoyable lunch, with Senghor explaining to Mohammed Ali why he could not join in the boycott, and Ali expressing understanding. Toward the end of the lunch, Senghor whispered in Ali’s ear, and they both left the room together. After about twenty minutes, they both returned. The final event was an exchange of toasts. Senghor toasted the excellent relations between Senegal and the United States. Ali decided to toast Senghor personally. Ali said that the visit to Senegal was absolutely the best of all his visits in Africa. He expressed particular awe at the fact that the president of Senegal personally showed him the way to the bathroom and waited for him to finish and escort him back to the other guests.

Another American official visitor who amused Senghor was Ms. Lillian Carter, the president’s mother, who made an official goodwill visit to several West African countries, including Senegal.

At a private dinner, Ms. Lillian regaled Senghor with stories about politics in Plains, Georgia. But the most memorable story involved Ms. Lillian's service in the Peace Corps in India at the age of 62. She spoke of an article in an Atlanta newspaper that said, "Mrs. Lillian Carter, Georgia Governor Jimmy Carter's mother, is in Bombay, India, giving out free condoms." Ms. Lillian acknowledged that she was working on family planning in Bombay. She told Senghor that while she was promoting lower birth rates in India, her children in Georgia "were doing just the opposite."

Mrs. Carter also described her official visit to the Gambia, Senegal's intertwined neighbor. She asked Senghor why the Muslim Gambian president's wife at the first night's dinner was not the same lady as the president's wife at the second night's dinner? She also showed off the heavy gold bracelet that she received as a gift from the president of the Gambia.

She turned to me and asked, "Mr. Ambassador, how much is this worth?"

Without blinking an eye, I said, "Ms. Lillian, this bracelet is worth \$99.99. Since it is one cent below the official US government limit for accepting gifts, you can keep it."

She turned to Senghor and said, "Mr. President, if I keep this bracelet worth thousands of dollars, my son will be insulted in every newspaper in the United States."

After an hour of listening to Carter family anecdotes, Senghor said, "Madame Carter, you should write a book."

Senghor was so taken by Lillian Carter that he talked to her about a subject that is not often discussed between Senegalese and outsiders. This was the subject of caste in Senegalese society. Very much like India, West African cultures have caste systems that rigidly separate various segments of the population. Until the end of the twentieth century, marriages between castes were discouraged within families, and the lower castes tended to be victims of discrimination. A common insult-joke among intellectuals during my time in Senegal was, "Stop disagreeing with me. You are my slave."

Senghor told Mrs. Carter that he could never speak about caste in public, but he was doing everything possible to uplift the lower castes. That was why intellectuals named Thiam from a lower caste grouping were editor-in-chief of the most important daily newspaper and prime minister of the government.

Senghor saw the Senegalese people, who tended to give their first loyalty to their Muslim brotherhoods, their ethnic families, and their tribal elders, as being unready for democracy. He therefore kept politics under tight control. He decreed that Senegal would have three political parties. His Socialist Party was in the center. He allowed the creation of a right-wing "Liberal" party (i.e., pro-capitalist) and a left-wing revolutionary party in the image of the Communist party of the Soviet Union.

Elections were rigged until Senghor's handpicked successor, Abdou Diouf, allowed a fair count and was defeated for reelection in 2000 by the right-wing leader Abdoulaye Wade. Although Senghor and his family were not corrupt, the ruling Socialist Party was efficient in stealing public revenues for patronage purposes.

Senghor could be quite arbitrary in selective cases. He banned a film directed by Ousmane Sembene, one of Africa's legendary cinema artists, because he considered it insulting to the ruling elites. And when it came to the economy, Senghor was a true French socialist. He nationalized the commanding heights of the economy when he came to power in 1960, causing Senegal to suffer greatly from negative economic growth for years. During Senghor's time in office, there were virtually no free and independent media except for a couple of weekly satirical sheets. There was a government-financed newspaper, as well as government-controlled radio and TV stations.

Senghor was not unfamiliar with Senegal's impoverished interior. He had his roots there. He knew what was going on. He once gave me a ten-minute lecture on the devastation to the environment caused by goats. Nevertheless, I am sure that I traveled to Senegal's interior far more than he did. We had a hundred Peace Corps volunteers working in Senegalese villages. I made a practice of trying to visit as many of them as possible, thereby learning about the political economy of the heart of the nation.

I found that Senegal's rural populations were stagnating. I saw very few medical facilities and very little infrastructure maintenance. In addition, I saw brewing ethnic trouble in Senegal's far south, in the Casamance region. There, I saw Muslim livestock farmers moving down from the north with their flocks, seeking to escape chronic drought in the north. They were moving in on a

mixed population of sedentary farmers, with a large percentage of resentful Christians. The situation was explosive, but I saw no attention being paid to it in Dakar. A few years later, the long Casamance insurgency began, and it was still spreading violence three decades later. Fortunately for him, Senghor was living in retirement when the war began and did not have to deal with it.

In the far north, on the Senegal River, I saw trouble brewing on the border with the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, whose population is two-thirds Arab and one-third African. The Africans live mainly in the far south of the country near the north bank of the river. During Senghor's time, the African population of Mauritania was far more advanced culturally than the majority Arab population, which was just emerging from centuries of nomadic life and a history of slave ownership. The African population had its roots in Senegal south of the river and was able to obtain arms and support from its ethnic brothers. A decade after Senghor's retirement, the border erupted with mass expulsions from both sides and refugees piled up on both sides. As assistant secretary of state in 1989, I traveled to both countries and worked out a border settlement, but the bitterness remained. Again, it was an embryonic problem that diplomats saw long before the government in Dakar.

Because of a historical colonial error, Senegal is virtually bisected by the former British colony of The Gambia. Movement of people and goods between north and south Senegal has to traverse The Gambia across the River Gambia. There is no bridge. There are two ferry services, in the center and near the Atlantic coast. The center ferry service, at the Gambian town of Farafenni, is extremely slow. Trucks are frequently kept waiting for up to four days to cross. The expenses are high. The Senegalese population south of the river, in Casamance, feels alienated from, and neglected by, the central government in Dakar.

In 1978, the European Union offered to finance the construction of a toll bridge across the river at Farafenni. The Government of The Gambia insisted that the bridge should be part of a dam that would serve to block the intrusion of seawater during the low water season. Because the European Union saw no need for the much more expensive dam, the request was refused, and the bridge was not built. This infuriated President Senghor, who was counting on

the construction of the bridge to bring the people of the Casamance closer to the rest of Senegal, thereby ameliorating their sense of neglect.

Shortly after the decision not to have a bridge over the River Gambia, I spoke to Senghor on another matter. He was still fuming over the decision. I said, "Mr. President, my advice to you is to take over the Gambia militarily and annex it. The two populations are the same. Behind the French-English divide, everyone speaks the same African languages. If you do take it over, I do not expect that there will be much criticism from the international community. After all, the Gambia has no reason to exist as an independent country. It was a historical mistake."

That startled Senghor, coming from the US ambassador. But he remained true to his devotion to the rule of law. "We can't do that, Mr. Ambassador. It would be a violation of international law. But I tell you what we will do. We will build a road around the Gambia and reroute road traffic that way."

The road was built before I departed Senegal in 1980. I had the feeling that the three-day trip for a truck to circumnavigate the Gambia was just as long as the normal wait to cross the river by ferry. But Senghor felt that Senegal's honor had been upheld.

In his heart of hearts, Senghor saw the Senegalese masses as unready for democracy. He told me once that young Senegalese who could not find employment in the major cities did not have to be unemployed. They could always return to the rural areas and be farmers. Yet, he made no effort to provide agricultural extension, rural infrastructure, irrigation, or basic health services. Senegal was not wealthy, but I had the impression that Senghor and his political friends had assigned their priority to the politically conscious people in the cities. They saw the majority population in the rural countryside as hopelessly mired in their religious and ethnic traditions.

Léopold Senghor was civilized, decent, statesmanlike, and cerebral. At the same time, he remained one of the "strongmen" of Africa. He ruled Senegal for twenty years until his voluntary retirement in 1980, and he did so with an iron fist inside a velvet glove. He did not have to be flamboyant to impress his people. He was generally adored and respected as Senegal's national hero. But he was far from democratic.

In the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a new generation of university-educated Senegalese political leaders is trying to modernize the country and prove Senghor wrong. They have come to power through verified free and fair elections. The initial reports indicate that they are making progress and deserve international support.