

# The Grundtvigian „Folkelighed” and Leopold Senghor’s „Négritude”

By *Erica Simon*

Nowadays, in an ever-changing world, which has expanded to the dimensions of a planet, is it not rash, yes even senseless, to call on a Danish figure who, already in his lifetime and in his own country, seemed outmoded?

What can “The Old One”, as Nikolaj Frederik Severin Grundtvig, – born a few years before the French Revolution of 1789 and who died two years before the Paris Commune, – was called by his friends, bring us today?

Could it be conceivable that, in this planetary world of ours, Grundtvig’s voice, which his disciples believed prophetic, is making itself heard again . . . perhaps more so than in his small native country, presenting us with a sort of reference table where it would be possible to register some of our reflections on the present, and, who knows, even on the future?

Without ignoring the difficulty in translating the concepts of an author of the 19th century into today’s context, I should make so bold as to reply in the affirmative, for I am thinking of a certain dimension in the life of all peoples, – a quantity which is neglected if not condemned today and considered outmoded: *the national dimension*.

In fact, in this planetary epoch, they say that all reference to nationality belongs to the past – and for it to come back would be like returning to the ideology of the 19th century. And as Grundtvig represents one of the variants of that century on the ideas of nationality, his emergence from oblivion would, therefore, be like going back into the past.

The interest of such an approach can only be found at the level of the history of ideas, and therefore, it would not have any con-

nection with this planetary world in which we are obliged to live.

Personally, I do not believe, that this reasoning, widespread although it may be, is just. Contrary to general belief, what I have called *the national dimension of the people* assumes in our planetary world increasing capital importance. In any case it cannot be separated from the *vast problematic questions concerning the third world*, a problem concerning us all, whether we are aware of it or not.

We tend to give exclusive prevalence to *the economic aspect* of the Third World, without realising that it is inseparable from the cultural aspect. The specialists are very aware of this. I am particularly referring to an author whom none of you should miss. He is *Tibor Mende*, a high official at the United Nations.

In his latest book "From aid to colonisation" which has just been published, he constantly raises the cultural problem of the developing countries. He states, among other things, that the ever-increasing system of electronic communication – to which there is access in the most remote parts of the world – will inevitably produce what he calls: "*a world super-culture*".

He continues quoting the American Kenneth Boulding: "*The connection between this world super-culture and the more traditional national and regional cultures of the past will remain the great question mark for the next fifty years*".

In fact, it is a question of knowing if the future holds for us the perspective of seeing everywhere a stereo-typed planetary culture, a kind of huge supermarket culture which will offer to the consumer the same standard products everywhere in the world or, on the other hand, if we can hope to maintain the cultural peculiarities.

It would be wrong to mistake the wish to retain national cultures for the desire for a sterile return to the past. In all the areas engaged in the economic problems of the Third World one begins to realise today that *Technique*, in order to be useful, *must be made use of in the cultural context of the people*. It is the only way for renewed economic growth.

But, they will say, why call on Grundtvig, a poet envisioning the Danish national spirit, to reflect on the sort of national cultures in our planetary age? Would there not be a more contemporary philosopher who could answer the question better than he?

I will reply that to my mind we find elements in the national

ideas in Grundtvig's thoughts, which help us to understand better the problems which arise concerning retaining and adaption of the cultures of the Third World to the present day.

Unfortunately it is not easy in Grundtvig's rich and complex works to isolate the national aspects of his thoughts from what in his language is called *Folkelighed*. And it is even more difficult to translate his ideas into a language which is accessible to all.

Grundtvig created his own terminology with which only the initiated are familiar, and to express his ideas in present day language – let alone in a foreign tongue – will evidently mutilate his thoughts, even betray them. I am aware of this. On the other hand, if we do not rescue these thoughts from his “Grundtvigian dross” they will remain for ever buried under the dust in the libraries and will be used at the very most as raw material, exclusive to the learned analysis of specialists.

My purpose, with this little talk, is to try and isolate from those thoughts the ideas on nationality and to underline their originality, and then, to examine in what ways the ideas formulated by Grundtvig on this theme, can help us to understand better the cultural struggles of the Third World.

I would like to limit my reference to the Third World to Africa and this for several reasons: no other part of the Third World, has been victim to a depersonalisation, to a cultural destruction similar to that suffered by the Black Continent. The problem of keeping up national cultures and of their adaptation to the modern World, is posed with an acute peculiarity to Africa. Moreover Black Africa, the so-called French speaking part especially, experienced after the last war a national movement which was not unlike the national reawakening of Denmark started by Grundtvig.

Consequently, of *the vast phenomenon of planetarisation of the national dimension*, I will here only be referring to the African variant, that is the *negritude movement*, which I will examine in the light of one of the thoughts on nationality of the European 19th century: Grundtvigianism, or more precisely: *Grundtvigian Folkelighed*.

As I have just said, what I have called the national aspects of Grundtvig's thoughts, appear in his work under the heading of *Folkelighed*. This term is intranslatable – but then, even in Den-

mark, let alone the other Scandinavian countries, it is very difficult to find anyone who knows exactly what Grundtvig meant by *Folkelighed*. I would like here to give this term one single meaning, which, however, is not at all exhaustive.

The term *Folkelighed* is composed of two words: Folk – people and lighed – equality. In 1848, the year of the revolution which brought back to Europe the ideas of 1789, Grundtvig wrote a poem from which I will quote the following lines:

*“Folke-lighed is a nordic word,  
it solves without strain the enigma of equality”.*

The word equality, abstract in the ideology of the French Revolution, when joined by Grundtvig to the word people becomes concrete and means: they are all equal, those who belong to the same people, the people being understood as the community to which everyone belongs through birth and which nature and history has given its individuality – *its national personality* as we would say today.

If Grundtvig wrote that *Folke-lighed* resolves without strain what he calls the “enigma of equality” – here we have a very Grundtvigian expression – he means by it naturally France which excels in this area: there is no need at all to build barricades and revolt in order to create equality, since this equality, to his mind, is there already by belonging to that very people.

But, as we have just seen, the people is that community to which all belong and in which all participate. Nevertheless, the question remains – and Grundtvig posed it: *does this so defined cultural community really exist?*

And he realised that it was no longer the case. Denmark, like the rest of Scandinavia, had been victim, he believed, to what we call today cultural alienation, that is to say, it had been deprived of its authentic culture.

How did we get to this point? Translating Grundtvig’s thoughts into modern terms and into the European context, one could say that Denmark – in fact all Scandinavia – had undergone a process of deculturalisation analogous to what took place in France when through the Roman conquest, Gaul had been deprived of its Celtic culture and been integrated into the Roman Empire which, through its domination, had imposed on her its culture and its religion:

moreover it is significant that a revaluation of Celtic culture in France dates precisely from the same time as national revolutions were experienced all over the world, retracing the old cultures. This revaluation began after the Second World War.

Nevertheless, the loss of *Folkelighed* in France is a thousand years prior to the loss of the *Folkelighed* in the North and because of this the situation is very different. In fact, Christianity came late to Scandinavia and the countries therefore were able to preserve for a very long time their ancient culture which depended upon what we not long ago called *primitive culture* and what we now call traditional culture.

Once integrated into Europe Denmark followed, belatedly, the European evolution which she imitated. Since the end of the ancient Nordic culture, she had therefore lost, Grundtvig estimated, her *Folkelighed*, her cultural authenticity. The cultural community embracing the people in its totality no longer existed. Grundtvig's objective was to recreate it: in his poetic language he wanted to say that it is necessary "to re-establish a *living and reciprocal contact between the poets and the people*".

With less poetry than Grundtvig, the African intellectuals today claim that "*the people must recover their elite*". Now, for today's Africa, as in Denmark during the last century, it was not only a case of rupture of communications between those who traditionally have access to culture and all the others excluded therefrom, but furthermore a *rupture between two different cultures*, one imported from abroad and *blessed with the prestige* that confers this quality of a "*superior culture*" upon it and the other, home-grown, – the *ignored*.

In order to bridge this gap between the elite and the people – *national culture* – the *culture which is despised*, if not simply in order to re-establish "a living and reciprocal contact between the poets and the people" – therefore, in order to restore the elite to the cultural community of the people – a problem which Africa will have to solve, we will come back to it – Grundtvig proposed a very original way which today would be called "progressive", a danger to the established order because if we dare make use of it, for example in Africa, it would result in dismissing political regimes. This way I would like to call: the *reversal of cultural currents*.

I will explain:

If we examine Grundtvigian thought in the light of modern cultural anthropology we find that the ancient cultural community which Grundtvig wanted to restore in the present time corresponds to a society without strata, a traditional society where all the various manifestations of people's lives were cast in the same cultural mould. There were no classes in this society and therefore no cultural differences. All, effectively, took part in the same culture and lived there from day to day. "Cultural alienation" was, therefore, inevitably produced when Christianity introduced into Scandinavia a varied social structure dragging differentiation into the cultural plan. Culture then became a field reserved for some and separated the people as a whole. It was also for the most part set in motion by language incomprehensible to the people and whose context corresponded to the aspirations of a privileged social class. *Thus cultural unity was definitely broken.*

It is in the face of this situation – which, naturally, he analysed with the means at his disposal at the time – that Grundtvig proposed what I have called the *reversal of cultural currents*, in other words he proposed that cultural inspiration does not leave the summit in order to – eventually – touch the base as we would say today, but that culture, being created originally by the people had to be *pointed from the people towards the elite*: it is this procedure that I call the reversal of cultural currents. In Grundtvig's eyes it was the only means to "disalienate" the elite and integrate them once more into the community of the people, thereby recreating an authentic *Folkelighed*.

But, as everyone knows, cultural privileges and political privileges are identical. So, attacking the cultural privileges of the elite, would be like threatening their political privileges. True enough: the plan to reverse the cultural currents, proposed by Grundtvig, started the violent struggles which took place in Danish history under the heading: *Kulturkamp*.

Barely a century ago this veritable cultural battle took place: relentless struggles began between the supporters of what was then called the "old" culture and those who defended what was for them the "new" culture.

Contrary to what one would expect, the new culture was that ancient Nordic culture, once created by the people, and, thought Grundtvig, still accessible to the people.

This culture was called “new” because, far from being content with a sterile return to the past, it set in motion new ideas, democratic ideas: the supporters of this “new” culture were against the political order of the day, which they judged out of date. They demanded the return of the participation of the people in political decisions.

In the words of one who was engaged in this struggle, it was “a *battle between the old era which entrusted the power into the hands of some of the privileged and the new era which wanted to hand over the power and the responsibility to the people*”.

In order to preserve its cultural and political privileges, the elite – the traditional elite – took shelter behind the “ancient” culture which was inspired from abroad, putting it forward as a defence against the barbarity which the “new culture” was going to restore by cutting Denmark off from the civilized countries, as it was claimed.

The struggle, fought under the names of two forms of culture, went much further than the actual cultural field. It is undoubtedly because of this inhabitual dimension that the *Kulturkampf* had as a positive result the strong dwindling away of the differences between the elite and the people.

To come back to the formula used by the investigators of African cultural politics: the people has regained its elite, not totally, of course – that would be impossible to suppose – but to a larger degree than elsewhere. And, to my mind, this is due to what I have called: *the reversal of cultural currents*.

The Africans challenge, and with good reason, the western example taught to them, of imposing everything “*from above*”, without ever confiding in the people.

But, how does this concern the *negritude movement*, the mouth-piece and symbol of African cultural authenticity? Does this movement follow the traditional cultural trend from which the West has never parted and, in that case, does it contribute to the retaining, to the consolidation even, of that gulf against which Grundtvig struggled in the last century in his own country: *the gulf between the people and the elite*, a consequence of *the gulf created between the imported foreign culture* – that of the West in the case of Africa – *and the authentic national culture?*

In other words, can we trust the *negritude movement* when it wants

to revitalize and adapt African culture to the requirements of today, that the culture promoted by this movement is “new” in the Grundtvigian sense? I mean by this that it is not content – as was the case of 19th century Europe – to feed itself on the traditional values of the people by incorporating these in ancient diagrams, thus depriving them of all resonance in the people, but that it is ingrained in the people in order to give the word to the people itself, *in order to help to promote its cultural and political liberation?* This is what I propose to examine now.

Negritude, in Grundtvigian terms *African Folkelighed*, is the confirmation of being, of feeling, of thinking and of creating. What is it for the black man? In cultural terms, as Leopold Sedar Senghor claims: it is *the aggregate of the values of the black civilisation*.

Is *Negritude*, therefore, the expression of this cultural community to which the whole people adhere and participate, which Grundtvig dreamt of recreating in the North? Or is it only an ideology formulated and conveyed by the intellectuals, far from the reality of Africa?

In any case, it is from this African reality that the men to whom this ideology is owed, came, notably the best known and most brilliant among them: Leopold Sedar Senghor, belonging to the tribe of Séreres, child prodigy of Joal.

It is from this African reality that they have been uprooted and transplanted to Paris in an era which still ignored the very existence of African culture. Their main objective, therefore, had to be to struggle against what they have called the “*cultural ethnocentrism*” of the West which rejects all the cultures which do not resemble its own.

On this level, the promoters of *negritude* and particularly L. S. Senghor, have undeniably accomplished something which will go down in history, because they have substituted for the Western concept of a universal humanism – which proposed for the world one single model, i. e. the Western model, excluding all the rest – *a concept of universalism which is in step with our planetary era*.

Senghor in his own subtle language, expressed his ideas in a very striking formula, unfortunately difficult, if not impossible, to translate. He claimed that *universal humanism*, and he means by that Western humanism – which we call universal though it exclu-



des all other cultures – will be superseded by what he calls *humanism of the universal* – and it is important to stress the “of” – i. e. a humanism conceived on a world scale *enriching itself through the contributions of all cultures*, whether they may have a limited or wide radiance, whether they revive what we still call primitive cultures or whether they are considered superior.

From this new outlook, negritude, Senghor maintains, represents no more than the *gift from Africa to the civilisation of the universal* in the sense that it represents the African way of expressing the universal.

The Senghorian concept of humanism of the universal, one will agree, corresponds perfectly to our time; it becomes a sort of mouthpiece for that *romantic revolution on a world scale* which is accomplished under our very eyes. In fact, in this second half of the 20th century there are all the peoples of that planet who are revolting against the cultural supremacy of the West, in a unanimous protest movement which strangely resembles the *romantic revolution of 19th century Europe* in which a good number of the peoples of our continent revolted against the cultural domination of France.

On this level, *Grundtvigian folkelighed* and *Senghorian negritude* are identical. It is a question in both cases of confirming that *the universal can be reached only if you start from the national*.

Neither Grundtvig nor Senghor envisaged the people closing up in itself – or in order to use the well-known formula put forward in *Peer Gynt* by Henrik Ibsen: it is, certainly a question of being oneself, but not of being self-sufficient (*være sig selv* and not *være sig selv nok*).

Nevertheless, to ascertain that *Folkelighed* and *Negritude* are found in the same dialectic of the national and the universal, does not inform us of the *role of the ideology of negritude on the internal African level*.

On this level, what is there about this cultural community, this negritude, experienced by the African peoples themselves? Are those peoples concerned with the cultural ideology of negritude? Can African culture lived from day to day in the African people be recognized in negritude? Have the promoters of this movement been able to establish, as Grundtvig put it, a “living and reciprocal contact between the poets and the people?” Or in other words: *has the Af-*

*rican people regained its elite? Or, in spite of the negritude movement, does this gulf between elite and people which I spoke of with regard to Denmark, exist? This consequence of the gulf between an imported foreign culture and the authentic African culture.*

Before analyzing the African situation, let us go back for a moment to the Danish situation at the time of the *kulturkamp*. I would like for this reason to point out a phenomenon of which I have not yet spoken, but which I would like to examine in the African context.

If you remember, the said “new” culture proposed to start “from the bottom” and to pass the word on to the people. However, we are obliged to admit that in order to formulate the profound but confused and inarticulate desires of the people, it is necessary to have what we call today, intellectuals.

Well, the “new” culture had its own intellectuals: it was produced, in fact, by a *split in the Danish intelligentsia*, a faction was put at the service of the people, at the service of this “new” culture – or that ancient nordic culture they believed capable of making people aware of and able to resolve today’s problems. To make this claim more credible to foreign listeners and to make them understand that it was not only a question of views by intellectuals, I should point out that in the last century a good number of Danish peasants started to rationalize their agricultural business after having listened for hours during courses on Nordic mythology at the Folk High Schools. This is confirmed by persons who took part in this movement.

The other part of the intelligentsia, frightened by the explosiveness of this *folkelighed* which preached that the initiative had to come from the bottom, i. e. from the people, became what we today call “reactionary”. They were national liberals; supporters, like Grundtvig, of the Nordic culture. This faction did not succeed in bridging the gap which traditionally – in European societies – separated those who, as they so well put it, “possess” culture and the others who ought not to possess it in order that they did not upset the established order.

Let us now turn to Africa. Has something of the same happened there? Has a part of the intelligentsia, made aware through the

ideology of negritude, turned to the people in order to pass the word on to them?

It is well-known that this is not the case. *There has not been this reversal of cultural currents*, which alone, it seems to me, could pass the word to the people, to bridge the gap between elite and the people and to create a cultural basis, common to all. Only by taking this course can the negritude movement inspire the struggles which will, sooner or later, be unleashed on all the African countries *in order to attain real political liberation, which is I suppose the necessary preliminary to cultural liberation.*

Is it because the promoters of negritude have not adopted this course that the movement runs into massive opposition of African youth. The new generation called the generation of the Independencier, rightly, reproaches its elders that they have not known how to establish "the living and reciprocal contact between the poets and the people"; on the whole, that *negritude is for intellectuals* who are adapting themselves very well to the neo-colonialist situation of their respective countries.

If we see the question in the light of the Danish *Kulturkamp* of last century we could suggest that the supporters of negritude resemble more the national liberals – devoted to the rehabilitation of the national culture but not at all anxious to let the people participate – (a participation which would put their cultural and political privileges in danger) – than the supporters of the so-called "new" culture, who, inspired by ancient traditions proposed to put forward a new order, based on these traditions.

Is it not, therefore, conceivable that, as they are claiming so much in Africa today, "the people are regaining their elite"? That a certain number of men of African culture are resolutely putting themselves at the service of the people and trying to reorientate the negritude movement?

Before either judging or condemning, let us recognize that the African intellectual is in a singularly difficult and complex situation: Since his infancy he has been taken so much out of his African cultural context, so much that in the long and arduous course of studies on a Western model – no bridge can be forced any longer between himself and the environment he came from. If he adheres to the negritude movement, his Western education will lead him to

express it in Western terms and to put it forward in the ways of the West, that is Press, books and discussion. In other words, the negritude movement is, we are tempted to say, inevitably put forward in a world which is totally foreign to the people. Moreover, it is only expressed in a language incomprehensible to the people. Consequently, *far from being the expression of this cultural community which does not know the gulf between the people and the elite, negritude seems to accentuate this gulf even more.*

I would be unjust to reproach the promoters and supporters of this movement too much. And if, "objectively", as they say in Marxist language, African youth has reason to accuse its elders of not replying to the imperative of a radically different orientation, we could wonder whether this youth, – mainly students – when they reach the end of their studies, will sacrifice the privileges obtained by university education and put themselves at the service of the people.

The supporters of the "new" culture in Denmark – like the others: academics – abandoned their homes, their assured careers and often a brilliant future, in order to place themselves in the midst of the Danish peasantry – at that time still rather uncultured – in the Folk High School, which we have heard so much about.

Will the young Africans be capable of doing the same? It is undoubtedly asking too much, for in those countries where the majority of people is still illiterate, accession to culture, even on a moderate scale, bestows a prestige which it is difficult to give up.

It is no less true that rehabilitation of the African cultures and their entry into a cultural community in which all have to participate, is not possible if it does not produce a phenomenon analogous to that I described under the heading: *the reversal of cultural currents*. To ponder upon this question is not to participate in the free game of intellectuals, having nothing else to do: as I have already remarked with regard to the specialists on Third World problems, the economic reawakening of Africa cannot take place unless the contribution of the new technique is used in the cultural context of the people.

Africa, which the West has robbed of its culture by demolishing

it, is excessively allergic to all attempts at setting examples or models.

I must, therefore, stress that it is not to present Grundtvigian *Folkelighed* as a model for the Africans that I have brought it up here with reference to negritude.

I have done it first of all because in our planetary era, the national ideas in Grundtvig's thoughts, especially the political aspects they implicitly contain, are – to me – sufficiently original to be lifted from the archives and the limited sphere of the specialists.

Secondly: we know that the Africans, refusing any white meddling whatsoever in their cultural development, are still getting all their cultural information from their ancient colonial powers: but why shouldn't they glance at what happened in the last century in Denmark through the national movement attributed to Grundtvig. He could supply them with, not a model, but advisory material at a time when we must hurry before all traditional culture is submerged by the world super-culture which Tibor Mende talks about and which is menacing us all.