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Out of Africa

By LILA AZAM ZANGANEH

WHAT is a literature that does not exist? One that takes root far from an emigrant writer's native land, where his work is barely read, if at all? Togo's best-known writer, Kossi Efoui, addressed this remarkable paradox of his continent's literary heritage when he asserted, "For me, African literature is something that does not exist."

French-speaking Africa has produced a constellation of phantom writers who live in Western Europe and primarily write for — some say cater to — a Western readership. The most prolific Guinean writer, Tierno Monémbo, lives and writes in France, as do the novelists Abdourahman A. Waberi of Djibouti; Fatou Diome of Senegal; and Henri Lopes of the Congo Republic, who has also been Brazzaville's ambassador to several European countries.

But while they may be haunted by concerns that their work has become too Eurocentric, these writers also long for readers back home. In Paris recently, Lopes told me about a literary conference he attended last year in Brazzaville. The audience greeted him warmly as a long-lost brother, but only a handful there had read his latest book, which was published in France. "The people I believe I'm writing for are not really interested in what I do," Lopes lamented. In his own country, he said, he is a writer "only by hearsay."

The problem is practical as much as philosophical. Jacques Chevrier, a professor of African literature at the Sorbonne, estimates that only a few dozen books by African authors are published in French-speaking Africa each year, compared with several hundred in France. Bookstores "have almost disappeared from African countries, and those that do exist are frequented mostly by expats," Chevrier told me. There are hardly any African publishing houses, and the market for literature in local dialects is very small because of high illiteracy rates. Books also remain a luxury, far beyond the means of most Africans.

Yet this invisible literature has a rich history. Indeed, it's not entirely surprising that African literature in French should flourish outside Africa, since it was, in fact, born in exile — in Paris, the destination of choice for young Africans with intellectual aspirations. Most of today's African writers trace their roots to Negritude, the literary movement that developed in the 1930's and advocated black cultural expression as a protest against French colonial rule. Founded by two university students, Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal and Aimé Césaire of Martinique, who had moved to Paris in the early 30's on scholarships, Negritude gave rise to a revolutionary new generation of African and Caribbean writers.

As the eminent critic Boniface Mongo-Mboussa, of the Congo Republic, said when I interviewed him in a Paris cafe this winter, "Before Negritude, African literature was a colonial literature that pretended it was African." Until the movement took hold, African writers had not embraced many of the stylistic innovations of 20th-century literature, like stream-of-consciousness narrative. Nor had they used those innovations to challenge colonialism. Even French Africa's most accomplished writers, novelists like Paul Hazoumé of Benin and Bakary Diallo of Senegal, adhered to colonial attitudes about progress and celebrated European culture as markedly superior to African well into the 30's.

But if Paris was the intellectual heart of Negritude and French Africa, the movement's inspiration came from America and the Harlem Renaissance. The Negritude writers admired Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Alain Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois, black authors who visited or lived for a while in France, drawn to its intellectual vitality and relative lack of bigotry. In Mboussa's view, "Negritude, possibly the greatest cultural movement in modern black Africa, would simply not have been possible without the Harlem Renaissance."

There was also a broader American influence at work in France, starting in the 20's, when Hemingway and Fitzgerald haunted the cafes of Montparnasse and Josephine Baker dazzled audiences with her sensuous dances and naked breasts. By the 30's, the Harlem Renaissance had swept through France, enthralled African, French and American writers alike with its brash, subversive spirit.

It was this energy that Césaire tapped in "Return to My Native Land," a book-length poem published in 1939, in which he coined the word "négritude." Césaire's wrenching chant of self-affirmation announced a new era of intellectual and cultural sovereignty for black writers in French. "My blackness is not a stone flung deaf against the clamor of the day," he wrote. "My blackness is not a tower or a cathedral / it plunges into the red flesh of the soil / it plunges into the blazing flesh of the sky."

Negritude came into its own in the 40's and 50's, through the work of writers like Senghor, an intellectual and later a politician, who was elected the first president of the Republic of Senegal in 1960. Senghor urged African writers "to assimilate so as not to be assimilated," to appropriate European literary innovations while holding fast to their own identities. His "Anthology of New Negro and Malagasy Poetry," which included work by the prominent French Guianese poet Léon-Gontran Damas, as well as by Césaire and Senghor himself, quickly became Negritude's manifesto upon its publication in 1948. In its wake, "Africa stopped being the region of monsters the Romans believed in," Lopes told me. "It was beautiful. It had a past; it had kingdoms with a forgotten past."

By the late 40's, Negritude had begun to influence French artists as well, in part because it challenged European aesthetic orthodoxy and embraced avant-garde intellectual and artistic movements, including Surrealism, Cubism and Primitivism. None other than Jean-Paul Sartre wrote an introduction to Senghor's anthology, in which he predicted that Negritude would have a vital role in the fight against all forms of oppression. André Breton met and admired Césaire, whose words he called "beautiful as nascent oxygen."

According to Chevrier, the Sorbonne professor, the French intelligentsia embraced Negritude because it "represented exoticism" and "questioned Western rationality." "It was amazingly fashionable," Chevrier said. Indeed, by 1947, some of the most illustrious intellectuals in France — Sartre, André Gide, Michel Leiris — were involved with Negritude's cornerstone review, *Présence Africaine*.

TODAY, the cross-fertilization among Africa, Europe and America, and the theme of exile, remain essential to French African literature. "I feel solidarity for the black diaspora of the Americas and the Caribbean," Lopes writes in "My Bantu Grandmother," his 2003 book of essays. "Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Nicolás Guillén, Lovelace have never set foot in Congo, and yet they speak to me." African authors are also influenced by the writing — and commercial success — of Americans like Toni Morrison and Edwidge Danticat.

In fact, some young African writers prefer not to be categorized as "African" and instead see themselves as part of black literature broadly defined. Hence the new movement "Migritude," a term that combines Negritude and immigration. One of its stars is Fatou Diome, a 36-year-old Senegalese writer whose poetic first novel, "The Belly of the Atlantic," was published in France in 2003 and will come out in England next year. The autobiographical narrative tells the story of a Senegalese woman living in France who tries to persuade her younger brother, an adolescent growing up on the African island of Niodior, not to join her.

In it, Diome deftly captures the tenuous status of the African migrant. "I go home the way other people go abroad, for I have become the other for the people I continue to call my own," the narrator says. Diome made a similar point when I spoke with her in Paris this winter. "I no longer know who — the African, the European, the well-traveled woman or the black girl — is responsible for the texture of my work," she said. Perhaps. But far from the homeland, through literary sleight of hand, she has made Africa visible at last.

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