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Tracing the païdeuma in Aimé Césaire's poetry: From Solar Throat Slashed (Soleil Cou-Coupé) to Cadaster (Cadastre)

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In his book *Aimé Césaire: Une traversée paradoxale du siècle*, the créoliste Raphaël Confiant (1993) harshly criticizes the apparent disassociation between the former député’s revolutionary poetics and his moderate, even ineffectual, political policies. Other critics, including Auguste Armet (1973) and Lilyan Kesteloot (1992) also note the paradox between the poet’s inspiration of the African independence and American Black Power movements and his failure to achieve autonomy for his own island nation of Martinique. James Arnold (1981:269) argues that the new independence of African nations of the early 1960s, in contrast with the lack of political change in Martinique, brought about a crisis for the negritude prophet of political revolution that led him to abandon poetry for the theater. In his discussion of Césaire’s (1967) play *A Season in the Congo* (*Une saison au Congo*), Jacques Corzani (1978:17) writes that the poet-turned-playwright seemed to have renounced the term and the ideology of negritude beginning in 1971. I believe that Césaire underwent an even earlier disillusionment with negritude as a worldwide movement of black liberation. The term first appeared in 1939 in Césaire’s (1983) *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (*Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*), but by the early 1960s the poet realized that the literary and political movement that negritude had engendered was being superseded. It was during this critical period that Césaire edited his 1948 collection of poetry *Solar Throat Slashed* (*Soleil cou-coupé*) for its republication in the 1961 volume *Cadaster* (*Cadastre*) (both in Césaire 1983).

1. Several scholars claim that the neologism *négritude* was first published in the single issue of *L’Etudiant noir*, dated March 1935. In 2001, A. James Arnold personally checked the archives in Aix-en-Provence. He confirmed that only one issue appeared, but did not find the term *négritude* in it. Instead he found a short article by Césaire entitled “Nègreries: Jeunesse noire et assimilation.” (Arnold, personal communication)

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James Arnold (1981:191-92) and Aliko Songolo (1985:121) both observe the omission of many surrealist images in *Cadaster* and surmise Césaire’s abandonment of automatic writing, which would never have been edited. They believe the poet was attempting to be more accessible to the Martiniquan people in keeping with his role as their leader. However, Arnold (1981:219) also notes that the *Cadaster* edition of “Ode to Guinea,” which celebrates the first African nation to break with France, contains “none of the incantatory evocations of plants, whereas the original edition contained some sixteen lines governed by this imagery.” I suggest that the eight most radically edited of the poems of *Solar Throat Slashed* attest to the systematic deletion of many references to the Païdeuma, a non-scientific ethnological theory positing the inevitable evolutionary predominance of the black race. The plant imagery in particular was frequently edited out. While the influence of the Païdeuma is apparent in the 1948 versions, the emergence of individual African nations coupled with neocolonial repression of political unrest in Martinique forced Césaire to abandon significant aspects of this concept based on a mythical, unified Africa. In addition, the theory’s Hamitic/Ethiopian cultural dichotomy could foster ethnic as well as religious conflict in a postcolonial Africa (Ita 1973:335).

The Païdeuma is part of the conception of civilization proposed by the German ethnologist Leo Frobenius (1936). His *Kulturgeschichte Africas*, first published in 1933, and published in 1936 by Gallimard as *Histoire de la civilisation africaine (The History of African Civilization)*, had a profound effect on the thought and works of the Latin Quarter blacks, especially Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Léon-Gontran Damas, the founders of the negritude movement. Regarding the impact of this book’s publication in French translation, Lilyan Kesteloot (1974:94-95) writes: [F]or the first time, a Western scholar not only acknowledged that there was an African civilization, but that its value, both social and artistic, was high. He ennobled it, moreover, by tracing it back to the very cradle of culture. With what enthusiasm the young blacks read Frobenius! Césaire and Senghor confess their passion for this book, which from beginning to end showed the richness and complexity of African civilizations, an admiration recorded in many of their own writings.

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2. Not to be confused with “Salute to Guinea” of Césaire’s 1960 poetry collection *Shackles (Ferrements)* (in Césaire 1983).
3. These poems are “Cheval” (“Horse”), “La loi est nue” (“The Law is Naked”), “Couteaux-midi” (“Noon Knives”), “Ode à la Guinée” (“Ode to Guinea”), “La Pluie” (“Rains”), “À l’Afrique” (“To Africa”), “Quelconque” (“Trite”), and “Chevelure” (“Your Hair”).
However nonscientific and vague the original German work may have been—however confused and poorly written the French translation—here at last was a conceptual framework for the French negritude movement which was not the invention of an obscure negrophile scribbler, but the synthesized work of one of the greatest European authorities in the field of ethnology (Steins 1981:919, 948). Frobenius's contemporary ethnologists disagreed with this assessment of him. They criticized his historical approach, his anthropological fieldwork, and his archeological excavation methods, but they never bothered to refute his culture-historical methodology, which established historical connections between cultures. A scholar without a university degree or even a baccalaureat diploma, Frobenius was nevertheless a genius, an ardent Africanophile who visited the continent six times to gather data in support of his theories based, not on reason, but on his own intuition. His recognition of the significance of firsthand observation at a time when most anthropologists relied on secondhand accounts, and his fieldwork in sub-Saharan Africa as early as 1904, attest to the originality of his thought (Ita 1973:309). According to Kesteloot (1974:94 n.6), "It would be irrelevant to check the veracity of Frobenius's assertions—the investigations of this great ethnologist have often been shown insufficient. What counts is the impression his book made on black students in [interwar] Paris."

Political and intellectual turmoil made the interwar period (1919-39) the pivot of twentieth-century history and the crucible of black African movements which would drive postwar decolonization (Bessis 1985:5-6). Agitational and ideological politics was not allowed in the French colonies but was permitted in Paris, birthplace of human rights. Paris was one of the meeting points between cultural Pan-Africanism from black Anglophone America, French West Africa, and more indirectly the Hispanic and Lusophone African diaspora. These movements were a reaction against centuries of myths based on suspect hermeneutics and pseudo-science's inferiorizing the black race in order to justify its political domination. During the nineteenth century, there was a crisis in race relations represented by intensified anti-black propaganda, and increased worldwide political, social, and economic subjugation of blacks (Langley 1973:17). Late nineteenth-century political and social tendencies contributed to patterns of thought combining idealism, or the method of contrasting ideal types, with pseudo-Darwinism, which explained the origins of political development by assigning different attributes to human groups. From the European perspective, the classification of races and itemization of their

4. Frobenius's private African archives are housed at the Frobenius Institute in Frankfurt.
characteristics functioned as a sanctioning of the colonization of nonwhite races (MacGaffey 1966:7). It could also authorize their persecution.

Ethnologists of the early twentieth century believed that the African continent was inhabited by two groups, the Caucasoids and the Negroids, and by mixtures of the two. These respective categories do not correspond exactly with Frobenius's "Hamites" and "Ethiopians," which are essentially cultural rather than racial (Ita 1972:674). However, other intellectuals made these connections. Although the association of race and culture has since been abandoned for a genetic approach, at the time these two racial types were considered absolute and universal. Hamites were believed to possess greater political capability, while Ethiopians were considered non-state-forming peoples in need of leadership. At the Conference of Berlin (November 15, 1884 to February 26, 1885) the "magnificent African cake," in the words of Leopold II of Belgium, was divided between fifteen European powers. The idea of black Africa as a vast European colony dates from this period and reappeared for different reasons in the interwar period (Ndumbe 1983:241). European colonization of Africa perpetuated the myth of black inferiority.

World War I had revealed the horrors of technological warfare, undermining the European superiority complex from within. Tens of thousands of black French soldiers had died during the war, and this *dette de sang* cried out for citizen's rights, which were not automatically granted. Many former *tirailleurs* had asked to be demobilized in Paris, where they learned of anticolonial and anti-oppressive movements. There had been black representation in the French Chambre des Députés since 1914, when Blaise Diagne of Senegal became the first African to be elected. Black American soldiers returned home with word of the apparent absence of racial segregation in French public life, and several Harlem Renaissance leaders came to live in Paris. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, communist internationals began to attract anticolonial activists, although the issue of racism would be addressed only later. The *mission civilisatrice* of French colonialism was not questioned by the French public, but since the turn of the century the European avant-garde had discovered *l'Art nègre*. Josephine

6. The word "Hamite" derives from Ham, the name of the youngest son of Noah, and designates his descendants. According to the "Curse of Ham," recounted in "Genesis" Chapter 9, Ham showed disrespect toward his drunken father's nakedness. Noah therefore cursed Ham's son Canaan to be "a servant of [his brothers' s] servants." Although the Bible makes no racial distinction between Noah's sons, by AD 600 the Babylonian Talmud, a collection of Jewish oral traditions, relates that Ham's descendants were cursed by being black-skinned and degenerate. This concept rationalized the Israelites' subjugation of the land of Canaan (Sanders 1969:521-22). In the nineteenth century, Hamites came to be considered Caucasoids, also for political reasons (Sanders 1969:527).
Baker, "la Divine Mulattresse," and her "revue nègre" were the rage, and American jazz was heard in some Parisian nightclubs. In 1931, L'Exposition coloniale internationale opened in Paris for six months, and was visited by 34 million people. By the early 1930s, the American Pan-Africanism of W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey were being talked about in Paris. The stage was set for the birth of many diverse black movements, claiming their right to liberty, equality, and the originality and excellence of their culture (Dewitte 1985:13).

Groups such as the Ligue pour la Défense de la Race Nègre (1927-31) rejected political assimilation, attacked European civilization, emphasized African history, and supported the demand for political independence. These Parisian groups were a part of worldwide Pan-Africanism and third-world internationalism. But they were countered by the rise of fascism, the re-emergence of Gobineau's hierarchy of races, and the concept of the "French race" (Dewitte 1985:256). Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, the date Kulturgeschichte Africas was published. The Nazi regime's greater violence toward Jews and other foreigners increased the black colonials' desire for independence on a continental scale (Spiegler 1968:216).

After Germany's defeat in World War I, the Treaty of Versailles had divested Germany of its four African colonies, and conferred them upon France and Great Britain, which became the primary colonial powers in Africa. Germany's humiliation was aggravated when 23,400 of the 85,000 occupying French soldiers turned out to be black Africans. In reaction to this "Black Shame," the provisional German government protested that sub-Saharan African troops on German soil were an insult to the community spirit of the white race (Ndumbe 1983:239).

With the rise of the United States and the Soviet Union after World War I, Hitler recognized the economic and political significance of Africa. If Africa could be made into a vast southern colony, a German-controlled fascist Europe could reassert its power. Africa would be the future of Europe (Ndumbe 1983:242).

In 1935 the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, or Abysinnia – mythical land of the Queen of Sheba, sacred cradle of African civilization – rallied black solidarity. French-speaking Africans and West Indians in Paris collaborated to form temporary activist groups in support of Ethiopia. The authors of the anti-assimilationist newspaper L'Etudiant noir, including Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Léon-Gontran Damas, protested the war with leftist students, and in 1936, they joined the Ethiopian Action Committee with representatives from international groups of color (Kesteloot 1974:229). Césaire's identification with the Ethiopians is evident in his acceptance

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of the title ras from a white student in his study group at the Ecole normale supérieure (Arnold 1981:11).

The Latin Quarter blacks sought a black cultural identity to challenge colonialism. The inflexible, oversimplified, and at the same time mythopoetic character of Frobenius’s theories had precisely the myth-making potential to create an ideology for negritude (Ita 1973:314). Frobenius’s influence appears as early as 1937 in Léopold Senghor’s speech “The Cultural Problem in French West Africa” (“Le problème culturel en A.O.F.”) presented at the Chamber of Commerce of Dakar (Steins 1981:987). Senghor writes of the importance of Frobenius to Césaire, Damas, and himself:

I still have before me, in my possession, the copy of History of African Civilization on the third page of which Césaire wrote: “décembre 1936 ... We knew by heart Chapter II of the first book of the History, entitled ‘What Does Africa Mean to Us?’, a chapter adorned with lapidary phrases such as this: ‘The idea of the ‘barbarous Negro’ is a European invention, which in turn dominated Europe until the beginning of this century.’” (Senghor, quoted in Haberland 1973:vii)

Rejecting Hegel’s widely accepted hypothesis that Africa had never produced a truly original and specifically African civilization, Frobenius discovered, through his analysis of prehistoric cave drawings, features linking African styles with those of Western Europe and Asia, and he sought to trace them back to a common origin. He considered these works of art as evidence of the Païdeuma, the creative force of human culture which controls human behavior, obeys its own laws, and manifests itself in different forms according to the date and location of its emergence (Frobenius 1936:37). It surges forth from the most sacred subterranean levels – whether of individual human consciousness or of the collective unconscious is unclear – and is the source of all civilizations. While differences in artistic style are conditioned by differences in time and space, Frobenius ascertained a uniformity in the layers and styles of archeological tools in Europe, Africa, and Asia which proved to him that human civilization developed according to a harmonious plan and followed one major direction. For him, cultures passed through stages of childhood, adolescence, adulthood, decline, and death, just like the human beings through which they were expressed. He believed that the Ethiopians were the last global people in the “adolescent” stage of cultural creativity. The future of humanity therefore rested with them (Steins 1981:985).

The first writer to appropriate the theory outright and adapt it to the needs of the negritude movement was Suzanne Césaire, wife and collaborator of Aimé, in articles appearing in the journal Tropiques dated 1941 and 1942. In the Hamitic civilization, the human vital force was embodied in an
animal essence. Suzanne Césaire therefore called the Hamite “animal man” (l’homme animal), as the animal was his symbol and he lived by raising or hunting animals. Originating in northern and eastern Africa, the Hamites had magical beliefs attesting to their self-affirmation and, in Friedrich Nietzsche’s words, “will to power.” The human being was seen as subject, while the surrounding environment was objectified. The duality of their worldview called for the separation of the divine and the human, as of soul and body, and accordingly they used physical and magical forces to influence or dominate these two realms. Hamites were great warriors and believers in one all-powerful male God. Their will to dominate reflected a mechanistic, rational, and profane attitude toward the world. The qualities of honor and responsibility were valued for the preservation of the animals and other private property, but emotions were often repressed. Their temperament tended to be sober, but they were capable of fierce love, and were eager to combat and possess. Other Hamitic qualities were pride, boastfulness, and firmness of beliefs. The founders of the negritude movement naturally associated the psychologically and physically domineering colonizers with the Hamites (Steins 1981:919).

As for the mystical Ethiopians, the life force was expressed in the essence of the plant, the symbol of this agricultural people. Suzanne Césaire (1941) called the Ethiopian “plant man” (l’homme plante), as his life perspective was natural communication with the cycle of death and rebirth as exemplified by the germination of the seed or by the rising of the phoenix. Working the earth, Ethiopians regulated their daily life by the rhythm of the seasons. Ancestor worship created a natural need to stay in contact with the dead. For them, the human and the divine were combined in a unified, global view. According to their usufructuary conception, the earth belonged to their ancestors and was to be used but not owned or destroyed. Theirs was an emotional, irrational temperament given to self-abandonment in total participation in reality. The Ethiopian type, whom the negritude poets associated with the black race, was therefore the victim of an unjustified cultural oppression, since their more peaceful civilization was an equally valid manifestation of the Païdeuma (Steins 1981:952).

By demonstrating links between all human cultures, Frobenius strived to include African culture as an integral part of the universal whole. However, the negritude poets’ enthusiasm for Frobenius’s theories can be criticized, since the ethnologist evinced some of the colonialist assumptions and prejudices of his day, although he eventually rejected many of them (Ita

8. This corresponds with Sanders’s (1969:530) assertion that the sub-Saharan Hamites were pastoralists.
9. Sanders (1969:130) also identifies the Negroid race with the occupation of agriculture.
Frobenius assumed a conqueror’s prerogative in plundering the treasures of ancient African civilizations. His very description of the sub-Saharan “Ethiopians” as agricultural reinforced the prejudice that they were peasants incapable of self-rule and unworthy of equality with the white race. But Frobenius did attack indirect rule of the Ethiopians, or black Africans living in leaderless societies, by the Hamites or “state-forming” peoples. He claimed that the Hamites had become weak and indolent through their reliance on slave labor, while the Ethiopians were industrious and energetic. In his argument, Frobenius tended to idealize the Ethiopians, who represented for him the German nation, and disparaged the Hamites whom he identified with the French, although he still believed that the Ethiopians needed colonial leadership (Ita 1972:674-75).

Frobenius’s Hamitic category of African civilization actually corresponds to the Western European scientific outlook of the French and Anglo-Saxons: the “world of facts” of the rational mind. The Ethiopian civilization, by contrast, relates to that of the Germans: the “world of reality” which can only be understood mystically. These “Ethiopian” extrarational values are integral to the German romantic tradition, in which “reality” is the ultimate metaphysical state which underlies facts or manifests itself through them, while remaining distinct from them. “This ‘reality’ cannot be ‘comprehended’ or ‘grasped’ by the intellect but can be experienced in mystical self-abandonment to it” (Ita 1973:320). Thus in his *Kulturgeschichte Africas*, Frobenius attempted to reaffirm “German mysticism” against the more rational and materialistic French cultural and political domination of Germany since 1918, and dating back to Napoleonic times (Ita 1973:321-22).

Senghor identifies many “Ethiopian” qualities with his biologically-defined negritude: “emotion and intuitive reason, art and poetry, image and myth” (quoted in Arnold 1981:37). However, the assignation of specific endowments to races has racist implications unintended by Senghor. Using these same concepts, the scientists of Nazi Germany “proved” the superiority of the Aryan race as a pretext for victimizing the Jews. Césaire’s negritude, by contrast, is based on history, which claims highly civilized African ancestors, and Frobenius’s ethnology (Marteau 1961:135). For Frobenius, the Hamitic and Ethiopian classifications are “not absolute but relative” (Ita 1973:317).

The derivation of “negritude” from the Latin niger, “black,” does limit its ethnic scope. Agblemagnon (quoted in Kesteloot 1974:318) states “This concept was necessary [for reaffirming black racial values] but it is confining.” Similarly, Maryse Condé believes that negritude ultimately failed because it excluded whites and mulattoes and by extension other ethnic groups.

10. Personal communication.
In the article "What Is Negritude to Me," Césaire (1995:16) writes "When I think of African independence in the 1960's, ... I think of negritude ..., since it played a role of catalyst." However, Condé claims that so many international Pan-African movements were involved, that African colonies would have achieved their independence even without negritude. Furthermore, Ita observes that the small-scale, anti-authoritarian, Ethiopian societies could not adapt to large-scale, modern nation-states after African independence. While the spiritual values of the Ethiopians could be helpful to an inferiorized race, they would be less relevant as technological development progressed in free African countries. Finally, Frobenius's tendency to assign Hamitic characteristics to Islamic states could exasperbate religious and ethnic strife in Africa (Ita 1973:329-35).

After World War I, the theoretical foundation of anthropology was revised. The historical and comparative methods were determined to be incapable of verification, and the search for origins was largely abandoned. Frobenius’s Hamitic/Ethiopian dichotomy was dismissed by anthropologists, but its enthusiastic adoption by Senghor and Césaire has earned it a place in the history of African thought (Ita 1973:325).

In tracing the notion of the Païdeuma, I will use Keith Lewis Walker’s interpretation of Césaire’s symbolism which draws from Gaston Bachelard’s work on psychology and poetics. The influence of the Païdeuma is clear in the earlier poems but has been attenuated in the abridged versions.

“Noon Knives” (Couteaux-midi) is one of Césaire’s long, surrealistic poems made more accessible by the deletion of many of the original surrealistic associative metaphors (métaphores filées). The binary system established between the “positive” and “negative” forces – a characteristic Arnold, Songolo, and Gavronsky all associate with the best of Césaire’s poems – has been left intact in the first long, narrative passage. Here the European whites and the Antillean blacks are opposed, but their conventional roles are reversed. The heavy editing occurs in the second and third stanzas of the poem, where the plant imagery and some references to the Catholic Church have been omitted. The elimination of most of the allusions to “plant man,” as well as implications of the return to African sources, weakens the original death and rebirth orientation of the poem. These lost images are all Ethiopian manifestations of the Païdeuma.

As in most of Césaire’s early poetry, the theme is the ascension of the black race. This poem specifically evokes the Haitian Revolution of 1804 in the first line: “When the Niggers make Revolution they begin by uprooting giant trees from the Champ de Mars which they hurl like bayings into the face of the sky.” “Le Champ de Mars” is the public square in front of the palace in Port-au-Prince. The term négritude makes one of its first appearances in Notebook of a Return to the Native Land (in Césaire 1983) in a reference to “Haiti, where negritude rose for the first time and stated
that it believed in it humanity.” However, in “Couteaux-midi,” the Haitian Revolution is metaphorically extended to France since “Mars,” the name of the Roman god of war and agriculture, also designates the terrain of the Ecole militaire in Paris.

The phallic tree, to translate a phrase coined by Bernadette Cailler (1976:193), is Césaire’s symbol of the black uprooted by the slave trader. In the poem it paradoxically refers to the European colonizers the blacks are uprooting in their turn. The “knives” in the title refer to the surrealist blade, which Walker (1979:113) identifies as a phallic symbol of hatred and cruelty. Noon, the moment when the masculine-gendered sun is at its apogee, relates to the verticality of the revolt. Cailler (1976:225) also notes the ambivalence of the expression “fire blanks” or “tirer à blanc” in French: are the insurrectionists shooting with blanks or are they shooting at the whites? The intentional ambiguity of the surrealistic metaphor maintains both possibilities, while implying the vacuity of white European civilization. The line “blankness (or whiteness) is precisely the controversial color of the blackness which they carry in their hearts and which never ceases to conspire in the little too well made hexagons of their pores” again confounds white with black. The reference to the hexagonal shape of metropolitan France recalls the rigidity of cultural norms to which black children in the French colonial schools were forced to conform by the politics of assimilation. This passage clearly delineates the dividedness of the Antillean black raised in a world where “white” is associated with good and “black” with bad, as articulated by Franz Fanon (1952) in Black Skin, White Masks (Peau noire, masques blancs). However, Césaire uses the epithet “niggers” ironically in this first stanza, because the negritude project was to reverse values, and revalorize blackness as strong and dominant.

A flower image of the ladies-of-the-night establishes a system of metaphors that continues the black/white opposition and role reversal. The French belle-de-nuit, also called the “marvel of Peru,” blossoms only in the evening and is thus associated with the pole of blackness. In popular French, the night-blooming belle-de-nuit has come to mean “prostitute.” While not specified in the poem, the belle-de-jour, or morning glory, which blooms during the day and closes at night, relates to the pole of whiteness. In the next line of the verse “[t]he white shots then plant ladies-of-the-night in the sky which are not unrelated to the coifs of Saint Joseph de Cluny nuns laundered under the bread and wine of noon amidst the solar jubilation of tropical soap.” The black revolutionaries’ blank shots are therefore turning into blossoms in the sky. These relate to the sun and also the stars evoked in the last line of the poem. But they also insinuate that the revolutionaries are shooting upon the Catholic nuns who launder and starch their coifs under the

11. This is a translation of Cailler’s arbre-phallus.
sun. A thematic anti-Catholicism in *Soleil cou-coupé* relates to the Church’s support of Admiral Robert during the Vichy occupation of the French Antilles and the postwar return to colonial domination (Arnold 1981:207-8). By linking the pejorative *belles-de-nuit* with the religious coifs of the sisters of Cluny,12 the poet is mocking the innocence and purity of the Catholic Church. This reference to the influential Benedictine order of Cluny also recalls the colonial imperialism Christopher Columbus practiced in the name of the Christian religion.

However, a reverse capitulation of Western civilization to the black race is implied in the terms *jubilation solaire*, which relates to the triumphant noon revolution, and the *savon tropical*, associated with the cleansing of European corruption. Therefore, the blossoming of the *belles-de-nuit* in the sky heralds future black supremacy while “the pure currents of fresh birds” recalls the Ethiopian symbol of the phoenix. The “too complacent cotton wool” refers here to the complacency of the white Christians which stifles the words and cries of the poet. With his “tongue between [his] pepper fangs” Césaire denounces the decline of Catholicism in the words “hatred,” “ruins,” “curse,” “cathedral limits,” and “idleness.” It will be the Church’s turn to repent when the revolution, symbolized by “Noon,” breaks open the “strongboxes of severe time” of the final lines of the stanza. Dreaming of this “sumptuous Noon” revolt transports the poet in dreams of the new world order.

The entire following stanza, which includes five plant images, was suppressed in the 1961 version. The first verse foretells the fall of French imperialism: “Oh tyrannical and beaming at the feet of stormy spume and of wind and your flag of tatters flapping for the wasted hours for the abandoned games for the present crows for the future serpents.” The “stormy spume” and “wind” are forces of nature dear to the Ethiopian manifestation of the Païdeuma. They represent terrestrial and meteorological cataclysms so common to the Caribbean with their potential for human destruction and renewal. Such forces will usher in a new era where “you,” the tyrannical and beaming French colonizer, will be overcome and his flag of imperialism fallen and torn. In contrast with “the fresh birds” of the first stanza, “the crows,” birds of death, represent a more destructive black power. Walker (1979:109) calls the serpent the embodiment of the energy of the flame and associates it with vines, roots, and plants. In oriental tradition the serpent was considered the guardian of the sources of life.

The venomous will of the serpent expresses itself in the poet’s “mandrake’s mouth” and in his “deadly spittle.” A poisonous plant causing

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12. L’Institution Saint-Joseph-de-Cluny, a Catholic female secondary school in Saint-Louis, Senegal, was familiar to Césaire’s friend Léopold Senghor, perhaps as the sister school to his own (Vaillant 1990:11).
vomiting or narcotic effects, the mandrake was formerly used in witchcraft. According to legend, the mandrake stands for vegetative fertility, since it generates from the spilled semen of a hanged man (Arnold 1981:210). Its forked root resembles human form, and the plant is also associated with a devil appearing as a small black man. When uprooted, the mandrake is said to emit shrieks or cries. Césaire as the uprooted black identifies with this “plant man” in a unison cry since the day of his birth. His early poetry itself symbolizes the black protest, as the violence of the legend of the mandrake relates to the violence of black history. The plant’s purported ability to promote conception connects with the death/rebirth cycle of the Ethiopian world view.

In the poem, the mandrake’s poison overpowers that of “the white hellebore,” a nontropical plant representing the Europeans. Interestingly, the black species of this poisonous plant was believed to be more abundant than the white or green. The rise of the black race is again suggested.

On the other hand the “dandelion” and the “thistle,” which are found in uncultivated fields and humid places, represent the humble Antillean or African people. Like the dandelion, these “plant men” carry seeds that will be spread far in the new era. “The thistle that only accomplishes the fruit of its copulation between the heaven and the earth” recalls the Dogon creation myth whose significance in Césaire’s poetry was revealed by M. a M. Ngal (1975:149). Frobenius discusses the depiction of this myth in African art, in which the starry sky represents woman and the earth, man on whose body the plants germinate. In the context of the poem the myth foretells the renaissance of the Ethiopian creative force in an era of pansexual fertility.

The repeated invocation *filao*, the name of an African tree, produces an intentional Africanization of the French. This tree according to Maryse Condé is found in African cemeteries, and may be associated with trees that African-Americans planted on graves to signify the spirit. Their roots were believed to “literally journey to the other world” (Thompson 1983:138), just as deities were believed to ascend or descend the tree-like pole in the center of central and West African dancing areas (Thompson 1983:181). The *filao* can therefore be interpreted as an invocation of Ethiopian animism and spirituality that contrasts with the absent Catholic divinity *santa maria*. The use of the Spanish name of the Virgin Mary also recalls Columbus’s ship the *Santa Maria*. The poet spits his poison first into the face of Saint Mary, later into the faces of the colonizers. In the edited version, Césaire has deleted both the African word and the Catholic saint and has substituted “Sweet Lord,” which is ironic and “Savage Lord,” which refers to the God of the conquerors. After the suppression of the entire second stanza, calling
upon the Christian God serves to tie the revolutionary introductory verse to the hopeful aftermath of the end of the poem.

In the verse “I spit into the face of the starvers, into the face of the revilers, into the face of the paraschites\textsuperscript{13} and of the eviscerators” the poet turns his invective upon the plantation owners for their unjust or violent treatment of their slaves. The denunciation is weakened, however, without the images of venom and poison of the earlier text – lines which might also allude to the slaves’ using their familiarity with native plants to poison their master’s food. Arnold has suggested in other instances that Césaire suppressed verses due to their obscure or blasphemous terminology. Once decoded in context, however, these lines enriched the meaning of the original poem. The spitting of his venom into the faces of his enemies is the catharsis analogous to the Nigger rebellion.

In the last line of the long narrative introduction, the poet had left the real world through his imagined revolt. The new version, with the two references to the Christian god, adds the line “sweetly I whistle; I whistle sweetly” to invoke the new world, whose tranquility is reinforced by the anaphoric “sweet”: “sweet like the dwarf elder.” Of the eight original plant images, only the ladies-of-the-night of the first stanza, the dwarf elder, and the manchineel remain. The elder or elderberry is a vine or shrub of the honeysuckle family, often bearing flowers or berries. In contrast with the poisonous mandrake or hellebore, the North American elderberry can be used ornamentally or consumed in preserves, pies, or wines. The manchineel mentioned a few lines later, however, is an Antillean tree whose fruit and sap are so poisonous that its shadow alone is said to induce a mortal slumber in passersby. Like the mandrake, it is used in sorcery. Legend relates that by divine order the manchineel can only grow by the edge of the water, since sea water is an antidote to its venom. The manchineel in this postclimactic context does not seem menacing: “sweet like the greeting of the tiny waves caught in their petticoats in the chambers of the manchineel” implies that the manchineel is an old “phallic tree” seducing the feminine waves rather than poisoning them. Black sexuality is also invoked in the deleted verse “sweet like the fragrance of a red fabric on the heavy breathing of black skin.” “Red” is the color of life, and “fragrance,” “fabric,” “heavy breathing,” and “black skin” evoke black lovers reposing after their climax. While Césaire is again heralding a renaissance for the black race, the decision to omit this stereotype of black hypersexuality was a good one.

\textsuperscript{13} Paraschites: in ancient Egypt a class of embalmers whose task, while preparing the mummy, was to make a lateral cut with a silex knife into the cadaver in order to extract the viscera” (Eshleman & Smith 1983:405). Of course, the word also brings to mind “parasites.”
The four bird images are retained in the final version and are associated with “sweet:” “the cloak of bird feathers,” “the river of mandibles,” “the eyelid of a parrot,” and “hummingbirds ... rocketing.” They also suggest the phoenix, which signifies a peak of ardor as well as dissolution, death, and rebirth (Walker 1979:99). “[A] rain of ash empearled with tiny fires” indicates that glimmers of hope are alive in the ashes. The following line is reminiscent of *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*: “upright in my wounds where against the shafts of shipwreck my blood beats the cadavers of croaked dogs out of which hummingbirds are rocketing, this is the day.” The black man is standing erect after the shipwreck of the slave ship that wrenches him from his homeland and left his native culture in shambles. Covered with wounds, he is still triumphant over “the dead dogs” of the colonizers. As the poet envisions a future day when all races will live in brotherhood and without shame, the final verses open to a cosmic perspective. Using the debris of crumbled civilizations, the sorcerers — beneficent as often as malevolent in African society — will fashion stars symbolic of other suns, a new order admitting the ascension of blacks.

Twenty-one years after the publication of *Cadastre*, Césaire’s final volume of poetry, *I, Laminaria (moi, laminaire)* appeared in 1982. In these poems the heroic persona of negritude, which had been symbolized by vertical plants and trees in his early poetry, has been reduced to a modest piece of seaweed, clinging to a rock. Arnold (1990) interprets the poet’s humbler sense of self as a loss of faith in his early Marxist beliefs as well as a loss of faith in negritude. Serge Gavronsky (1982:276), who has studied Césaire’s political speeches from his years in the National Assembly, writes that “a strong element of defeatism” lurked in them from the very beginning, that is, 1945 when he was first elected mayor of the Martiniquan capital of Fort-de-France and deputy in the Constituent Assembly in Paris. The special interests advanced by negritude still dominate his view of political and social affairs in Martinique and the French Caribbean (Arnold 1981:281). However, although the Païdeuma’s prediction of the inevitable supremacy of the black race appears in *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* and continues to be promoted in *Soleil cou-coupé*, the vigorous, erect, creative “plant man” is less likely to be found in *Cadastre*. Of eight plant images in the 1948 version of “Noon Knives,” only three survive in the 1961 version, while all four bird images have been retained. Perhaps discouragement with the poet’s

14. Some Martiniquan intellectuals do not believe that Césaire betrayed his intellectual-poetic vision in his practical politics, or that he failed his people by not leading them to independence, as negritude would have suggested. They think that this view is simplistic and that it denies Césaire any real agency, when in fact he is still self-aware and active today.
mission to change society also prompted the excision of the stanza in which the poet spits his venom into the faces of his enemies. Césaire’s feeling of political failure may have swayed him to reject the vibrant “plant man” as the black prototype. The relinquishing of plant imagery and specific racial or ethnic allusions would have prepared him for a more conciliatory attitude toward France. Having lost his faith in negritude as a movement of black liberation, as well as his faith in Marxism, Césaire seems to have edited the poems of 1948 to render them less revolutionary and more in keeping with his moderate, albeit ambivalent, political stance.

**Noon Knives**

*(Couteaux-Midi, 1948 Soleil Cou-Coupé Version)*

Translated by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith

Italicized verses, which were omitted from the *Cadaster* version, translated by Janice Horner Kaufman

When the Niggers make Revolution they begin by uprooting giant trees from the Champ de Mars which they hurl like bayings into the face of the sky and which in the hottest of the air aim at pure streams of cool birds at which they fire blanks. Fire blanks? Yes indeed because blankness (or whiteness) is precisely the controversial color of the blackness which they carry in their hearts and which never ceases to conspire in the little too well made hexagons of their pores. The white shots then plant ladies-of-the-night in the sky which are not unrelated to the coifs of Saint Joseph de Cluny nuns laundered under the bread and wine of noon amidst the solar jubilation of tropical soap.

Noon? Yes, Noon dispersing in the sky the too complacent cotton wool which muffles my words, which traps my screams. Noon? Yes Noon almond of the night and tongue between my pepper fangs. Noon? Yes Noon which carries on its shoulders a bum and a glazier all the sensitivity toward hatred and ruins that counts. Noon? Sure Noon which after pausing on my lips for the time it takes to curse and at the cathedral limits of idleness sets on every line of every hand the trains that repentance kept in reserve in the strongboxes of severe time. Noon? Yes sumptuous Noon which makes me absent from this world.

15. Some plant imagery is still to be found in the 1963 and 1970 editions of *La Tragédie du roi Christophe*. Instead of referring to the black race in general, however, it alludes to the Antillean potential for restoring the creative force vitale of Negro-African civilization, as well as to Christophe as a representative of these values. The Antillean people that Christophe leads are also often associated with animal imagery, not in the dominant Hamitic sense, but as bestial and oppressed. As in *Cadaster*, bird or phoenix imagery eclipses plant and animal imagery in representing transcendence. The somewhat different functioning of the original Païdeuma symbolism can be related to the evolution of Césaire’s Antillean conception of negritude, as distinct from Senghor’s.
Oh tyrannical and beaming at the feet of stormy spume and of wind and
your flag of tatters flapping for the wasted hours for the abandoned games
for the present crows for the future serpents
filao filao
of course I have a mandrake’s mouth
his name replies to mine
his cry is mine when I was pulled from my mother’s phosphorescent
womb
of course my spittle is mortal to some
more and better than the white hellebore
of course I have more contempt than a dandelion seed
and more modesty than the wild thistle that only accomplishes the fruit of
its copulation between the heaven and the earth

But filao filao why filao
in any case in your name filao I spit into your face santa maria
filao
filao
in any case I spit into the face of the starvers, into the face of the revilers,
into the face of the paraschites and of the eviscerators.
filao
filao
My world is sweet
sweet like the dwarf elder
sweet like the glass of catastrophe
sweet like the fragrance of a red fabric on the heavy breathing of black
skin
sweet like the cloak of bird feathers which vengeance dons after the
crime
sweet like the sure and maligned gait of the blind man
sweet like the greeting of tiny waves caught in their petticoats in the
chambers of the manchineel
sweet like a river of mandibles and the eyelid of a parrot
sweet like a rain of ash empearled with tiny fires
filao
filao
upright in my wounds where against the shafts of shipwreck my blood
beats the cadavers of croaked dogs out of which hummingbirds are
rocketing, this is the day
I stick to my pact
a day for our fraternal feet
a day for our hands without rancor
a day for our breath without diffidence
a day for our faces free of shame

and the Niggers go searching in the dust – gems singing in their ears at
the top of their voices – for the splinters from which mica is made as well
as moons and the fissile slate out of which sorcerers make the intimate
ferocity of the stars
Noon Knives (Couteaux-midi, 1961 Cadaster Version)

Translated by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith
Verses in bold were added to the new version of the poem

When the Niggers make Revolution they begin by uprooting giant trees from the Champ de Mars which they hurl like bayings into the face of the sky and which in the hottest of the air aim at pure streams of cool birds at which they fire blanks. Fire blanks? Yes indeed because blankness (or whiteness) is precisely the controversial color of the blackness which they carry in their hearts and which never ceases to conspire in the little too well made hexagons of their pores. The white shots then plant ladies-of-the-night in the sky which are not unrelated to the coifs of Saint Joseph de Cluny nuns laundered under the bread and wine of noon amidst the solar jubilation of tropical soap.

Noon? Yes, Noon dispersing in the sky the too complacent cotton wool which muffles my words, which traps my screams. Noon? Yes Noon almond of the night and tongue between my pepper fangs. Noon? Yes Noon which carries on its shoulders a bum and a glazier all the sensitivity toward hatred and ruins that counts. Noon? sure Noon which after pausing on my lips for the time it takes to curse and at the cathedral limits of idleness sets on every line of every hand the trains that repentance kept in reserve in the strongboxes of severe time. Noon? Yes sumptuous Noon which makes me absent from this world.

Sweet Lord!
savagely I spit. Into the face of the starvers, into the face of the revilers, into the face of the paraschites and of the eviscerators.

Savage Lord! sweetly I whistle; I whistle sweetly
Sweet like the dwarf elder
sweet like the glass of catastrophe
sweet like the cloak of bird feathers which vengeance dons after the crime
sweet like the greeting of tiny waves caught in their petticoats in the chambers of the manchineel
sweet like a river of mandibles and the eyelid of a parrot
sweet like a rain of ash empearled with tiny fires

Oh! I stick to my pact16
upright in my wounds where against the shafts of shipwreck my blood beats the cadavers of croaked dogs out of which hummingbirds are rocketing, this is the day
a day for our fraternal feet
a day for our hands without rancor
a day for our breath without diffidence
a day for our faces free of shame

and the Niggers go searching in the dust – gems singing in their ears at the top of their voices – for the splinters from which mica is made as well as moons and the fissile slate out of which sorcerers make the intimate ferocity of the stars

16. This verse is in different order from the 1948 version.
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