

# *The* CRISIS

DECEMBER, 1956

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# THE CRISIS

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## A RECORD OF THE DARKER RACES

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# First Negro Congress of Writers and Artists

By James W. Ivy

NEGRO-AFRICAN culture was brought to a sharp focus before the sessions of the First Congress of Negro Writers and Artists held in the Ampitheater Descartes of the Sorbonne, Paris, France, September 19-22, 1956. But the French public was more interested that week in the bread strike (since only 1,000 of the 4,200 Paris bakeries were open) than in Negro-African culture and the sessions of the Congress. Nevertheless, all morning and afternoon sessions were crowded (night sessions being reserved to delegates) with all sorts of people: Catholics, Protestants, Muslims; students from the Sorbonne, intellectuals of all ages and conditions; anthropologists, ex-colonial officials, priests and nuns all eagerly taking notes or straining, when the paper was in English, to catch the drift of the speaker's thoughts. The audience was about equally divided between whites and blacks.

The Conference had been called by the editors of the French-African

magazine, *Présence Africaine*, and Alioune Diop, its editor-in-chief, was the guiding spirit of the Congress. Dr. Jean Price-Mars, rector of the University of Haiti, was Congress president.

There were sixty delegates, and many unofficial observers, in attendance: from the United States: Dr. John A. Davis, Dr. Horace Mann Bond, Dr. William Fontaine, Dr. Mercer Cook, Richard Wright, and James Ivy; Haiti: Dr. Jean Price-Mars, Senator E. Saint-Lot, René Piquion, E. C. Paul, Albert Mangonès, René Depestre, Jacques-Stephen Alexis, and Father G. Bissainthe; Martinique: Louis Achille, Aimé Césaire, Edouard Glissant, Dr. Frantz Fanon; Guadeloupe: Moune de Rivel, A. Rival, Pierre Mathieu; Barbados: Peter Blackman and George Laming; Jamaica: Dr. Marcus James and J. Holness; Sierra Leone: Davidson Nicol; Nigeria: J. Vaughan, M. Lasebikan, L. A. Fabumni, and Ben Enwonwu; Mozambique: Dos Santos; Angola: M. Lima and Father P. An-



drade; Madagascar: Jacques Rabemananjara, E. Andriantsilaniarivo, F. Ranaivo, and Ranivoson; French Equatorial Africa; Tchibamba; Sudan: Hampté Ba and Abdoul Wahal; Senegal: A. Seck, Léopold Sédar Senghor, D. Diop, Cheikh Anta Diop, Mamadou Dia, Diop Ousmane Soce, Abdoulaye Wade, and B. Toure; Dahomey: Paul Hazoumé; Ivory Coast: B. D. Dié; Togoland: Agblemagnon; Colonie du Niger: B. Hama; Cameroun: F. Oyono, B. Matip, Sengat Kuo, Nyumai, and Thomas Ekollo; Belgian Congo: A. R. Bolamba; and England: Cedric Dover and Marcus James.

Some of the delegates, like Richard Wright, Louis Achille, Edouard Glissant and Dr. Frantz Fanon, to mention several, are residents of France. In addition to the delegates there were such distinguished visitors as the American novelists Chester Himes and James Baldwin, ex-governor of Madagascar Hubert Deschamps, Negro supreme court judge Robert Atuly, *Afrique Informations* Claude Gerard, LICA's (International League Against Racism and Anti-Semitism) Nadi Doubinsky, and France's crusading journalist, Jean Rous.

#### PRESS COVERAGE

The American press did not notice the Congress, but six of the sixteen Paris dailies did, as follows: *Le Monde* (moderate independent); *l'Humanité* (Communist party paper); *Combat* (independent liberal); *Le Figaro* (moderate right independent); *Libération* (leftist); and *France-Tireur* (independent Socialist). They all carried daily reports and frequently pictures of the African dele-

gates. Two weeklies, *Droit et Liberté* and *France Observateur*, carried summary reports. The British weekly *West Africa* published a page on "The Paris Congress," with a picture of Alioune Diop, Hubert Reschamps, and Dr. Jean Price-Mars. One Rio de Janeiro daily, *Diário de Notícias*, carried a short squib. Christian Herbert, writing in *France Observateur* (September 27, 1956), says the "Congress proposes to define black culture and to examine the cause of its present crisis. . . . Out of this Congress will come an international association of the black world."

"This imposing meeting," explains *Droit et Liberté* (September 19-22), will break down barriers and increase mutual respect and brotherhood among men of all races and colors." "A cultural inventory, but at the same time an inventory of the destructive effects of many centuries of oppression," explains *Libération* (September 20, 1956). And adds: "It is a necessary inventory, one forcing us to face certain realities, although it never descends to mere invective. These are disagreeable truths, truths which can be uttered only by Negro intellectuals, but truths which must be said, even though at times they make us whites blush."

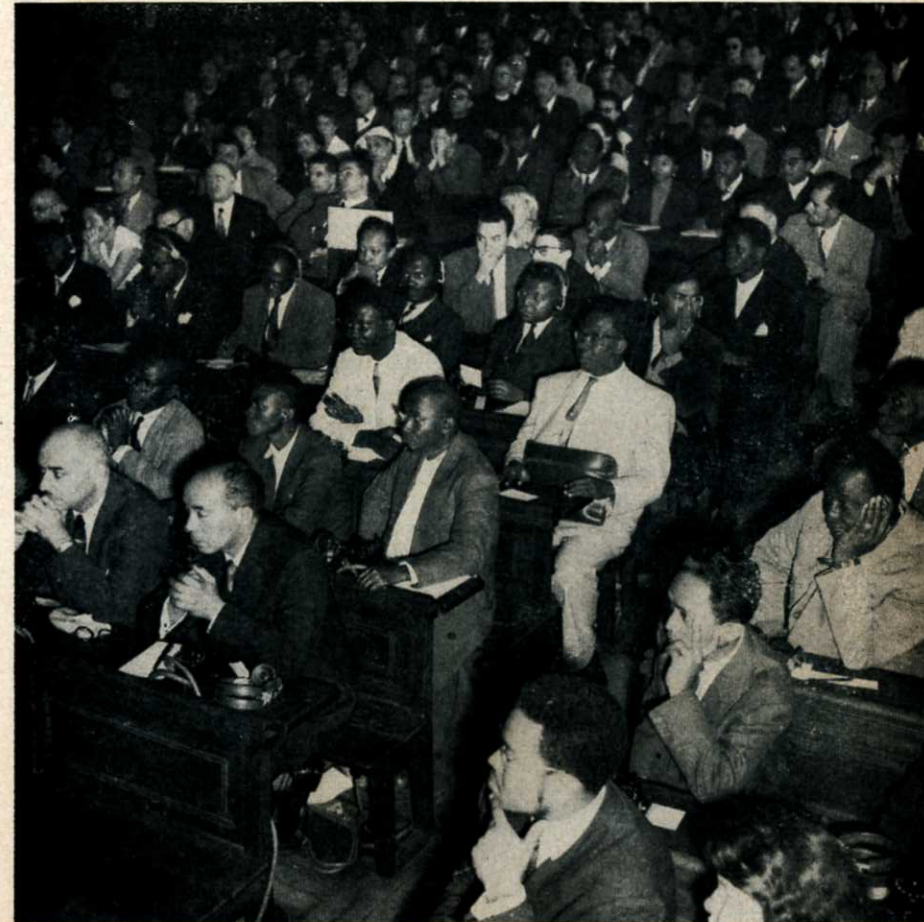
#### OPENING SESSION

Alioune Diop opened the Congress on Wednesday, September 19, with greetings to delegates and friends, the reading of letters from distinguished well-wishers, and a welcoming speech in which he outlined the purposes of the Congress. He compared the occasion to Bandung:

This day will be a landmark in our history. If the meeting at Bandung,

which followed World War II, constitutes the most important event for non-European consciences I think I can say that this first world Congress of black men of culture will represent for our people the second event of this decade.

For centuries the dominant event in our history seems to have been the African slave trade. This, fellow congressmen, is our primary sense of solidarity, the tie which justifies our meeting here. Negroes of the United States,



*United Press Photo*

A SESSION of the First Congress of Negro Writers and Artists. Dr. Mercer Cook of the United States and Louis Achille of Martinique are seen in front row, left.



the West Indies and Africa, whatever the space which sometimes separates us spiritually, we incontestably have this in common: we are descendents of the same ancestors.

We are met here today because of this common bond which weaves in and out through our literary and artistic productions whether it be in Africa, America, or the West Indies. Our aim is not to revive old grudges, that would be fruitless, but to face the past, a present rich in promise, and a future pregnant with peace and brotherhood for all races of mankind.

I now refer briefly to salient thoughts in some of the papers. Remember that when the actual words are used, they must, of course, be taken somewhat out of their context and are liable, therefore, to misinterpretation. But I shall try to be fair.

Léopold Sédar Senghor likewise referred to "the spirit of Bandung," but he defined it, however, as "a spirit of culture." The African, he added, has often had assimilation thrust upon him without his actually being assimilated. "He must preserve his own personality," believes Mr. Senghor, "while at the same time welcoming western culture." He also remarked that "cultural freedom is a *sine qua non* of political emancipation."

Dr. Thomas Ekollo noted that times have changed and that recent events are forcing men to revise their concepts of the black world. E. Andriantsilaniarivo condemned French rule in his country: "Today's Malagasy is no longer a Platonic nationalist, reveling in admiration and hope at the shrine of pompous declarations and flattering promises, full of confidence in a paradisiacal future to be prepared for him by others." Jacques

Rabemananjera, only recently released from ten years' imprisonment at Calvi, noted that "The idea of the barbaric Negro is a European invention. . . . The Negro becomes a barbarian the moment the white man decides to exploit his barbarism." Communist deputy Aimé Césaire claimed that colonial rule produces cultural anarchy. And Keyinde Vaughan and Ben Enwonu both argued that art develops, or should develop, simultaneously with political independence. Mr. Vaughan said he could not "imagine African film makers creating anything tangible under colonial tutelage."

#### AFRICAN FREEDOM

"... In West African writing there is," explained Davidson Nicol in his account of the work of contemporary British West African writers, "a lack of the motive power of burning racial injustice which carries through in the writing of other peoples of African descent." Lasebidan read an informative paper on the tonal structure of Yoruba. Dr. Horace Mann Bond spoke on the American roots of Gold Coast nationalism, and Dr. William Fontaine gave a philosophical analysis of segregation and desegregation in the United States. Louis Achille wondered if America really appreciated the grand and sacred music of the spirituals. Thomas Diop believed it possible for African and European culture to meet on a basis of equality, or at least to achieve a rapprochement. Abdoulaye Wade denounced the native labor codes imposed by the whites since they so often summarily decide the fate of Africans without their consent.



Richard Wright gave a moving speech on "The Plight of the Tragic Elite in Africa," in which he said, among other things:

The problem is freedom. How can Asians and Africans be free of their stultifying traditions and customs and become industrialized, and powerful, if you like, like the West? . . . I say that the West cannot ask the elite of Asia and Africa, even though educated in the West, to copy or ape what has happened in the West. Why? Because the West has never really been honest with itself about how it overcame its own traditions and blinding customs.

It was left for Dr. Frantz Fanon to openly denounce racism and colonialism—*Franc-Tireur* characterized his speech as "*le juste réquisitoire contre le colonialisme*." Racism, he said, is only the visible aspects of a system of oppression and exploitation. "Normally, it is difficult for a colonial country, that is one drawing its subsistence from the exploitation of a different race, not to be racist."

I cannot, of course, mention all the speakers and their speeches in a short article. African history, African art and literature, African religion, African education and economic development were among the topics taken up. And the Haitian speakers discussed various aspects of Haitian culture. It must likewise be emphasized that the determination to recreate African culture implied no repudiation of western culture. Rejection is hardly possible among *congressistes noirs* who used two of the leading Western languages—French and English—as their medium of communication. Gabriel Mace, in her column "Bonjour," *Franc-Tireur* (September 24, 1956) quotes a "dig" at the Congress from a Parisian af-

ternoon daily: "Until a 'Negro' language is either invented or selected from the many hundreds in Africa this Negro culture is going to remain a tributary of the West."

#### CONGRESS RESOLUTIONS

The legitimate aims of peoples of Negro descent were expressed in "Final Resolutions," adopted at the closing session of the Congress. Among the resolutions adopted were the following:

We Negro writers, artists, and intellectuals of various political ideologies and religious creeds have felt a need to meet at this crucial stage in the evolution of mankind in order to examine objectively our several views on culture and to probe those cultures with a full consciousness of our responsibilities—first, before our own respective peoples, secondly, before colonial peoples and those living under conditions of racial oppression, and, thirdly, before all free men of good will.

We deem it unworthy of genuine intellectuals to hesitate to take a stand regarding fundamental problems, for such hesitations serve injustice and error.

We maintain that the growth of culture is dependent upon the termination of such shameful practices in this twentieth century as colonialism, the oppression of weaker peoples, and racialism.

We affirm that all peoples should be placed in a position where they can learn their own national cultural values (history, language, literature, etc.) and enjoy the benefits of education within the framework of their own culture.

This Conference regrets the involuntary absence of a delegation from South Africa.

This Conference is pleased to take due notice of recent advances made throughout the world, advances which imply a general abolition of the colonial system, as well as the final and universal



liquidation of racialism.

We Negro writers and artists proclaim our fellowship with all men and expect from them, for our people, a similar fellowship.

#### MEANING OF CONGRESS

Was there any common theme running through the Conference? If there was, what was it? Superficially, because of the diversity of topics discussed, one often got the impression of topical irrelevancy if not diffuseness. I do, however, discover a persistent theme weaving its way through most of the papers, especially those presented by French Africans, and that theme was colonialism, autonomy, and cultural freedom. In other words, direction, discipline and ordering of black Africans by white Frenchmen must go. After centuries of obscurity, oppression, and misinterpretation, Africans are now in a position to interpret themselves—"Let us speak," said the Malagasy poet Jacques Rabemananjara.

This is a new spirit on the part of the French-African *élite* and can be understood only against the background of French colonial policy. Economically, the French attitude is mercantilist, that is the colonies are a source of raw materials and a market for Metropolitan manufactured goods and investment capital; culturally, the attitude is assimilationist, the gallicizing of an *élite* to work in regnant and exploitative association with the French. This *élite* is to be French, but Frenchmen of a darker color and African birth. This racial relationship creates a tolerant attitude between French and French-Africans,

although it probably does little to mollify the harshness of French colonial rule. Because the French regard their culture as the best in the world, and because colonials who have assimilated it are recognized and accepted in French society as Frenchmen, cultural contumacy and insurgency are regarded as treasonous and ruthlessly suppressed. One practical result of this policy is that the colonial masses have been deprived of trained leadership, since the Metropolitan *élite* has regarded itself as more French than African.

Despite their "assimilation," this *élite*, what with two world wars and the spirit of nationalism abroad in the world, and the example of the Gold Coast near at hand, no longer believes French culture divine, infallible and holy. They may be black Frenchmen but they are at the same time conscious that they are Ashanti or Fan or Serere or Yoruba or Hova or Sakalava. "Assimilation is never total," insists Dr. Fanon. They are aware of their non-French cultural roots, which they wish to preserve. They are increasingly aware of the racist aspects of the colonial situation. They are growing increasingly restive in their bonds of colonial dependence. They no longer "rejoice in being Frenchmen," as is attested by a growing body of anti-colonial literature written by Negro-Frenchmen — Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Sylvère Alcandre, Ferdinand Oyono, to mention a few. And there is *Présence Africaine* itself, now in its seventh year of publication. In the light of these changed attitudes the Congresses should have devoted its sessions exclusively to politics



and racialism. In other words, it should have been a Pan-African rather than a cultural Congress. But French authorities would not have permitted the holding of a nationalistically - oriented, French - African managed congress anywhere in French territory, and least of all in Paris. The organizers of the Paris Congress got around this opposition by calling a *Congrès des Ecrivains et Artistes Noirs*.

On the surface the papers (which had been submitted six weeks ahead) discussed the many complex problems of various African tribal cultures, but at the same time there was

the implication that nothing "tangible could be created under colonial tutelage." The audience always got the point. And, of course, the resolutions adopted underscore what I have just said. One French newspaper, *Le Monde* (September 20, 1956) remarked: "The papers so far read before the Congress have generally taken a politically anti-racist tone and congratulate the Congress for convening at this particular moment in history when there is widespread revolt against colonialism."

I devote space to clarification of French colonial attitudes and its effect upon Africans, because the Con-

ALIOUNE  
DIOP, editor  
of *Presence  
Africaine* and  
Organizer of the  
Congress, and  
Dr. Jean Price-  
Mars (R), rector  
of the Univer-  
sity of Haiti,  
Congress  
president.

*United Press*



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gress was the idea of Africans, organized by Africans, and guided, in its sessions, by Africans. French Antilleans were, of course, present and participated in planning and policies. Since 1945 thinking French West Indians have changed their scale of racial values. They no longer try to live, think, and dream as white Frenchmen. They have thrown in their lot with their African brothers since they have discovered that they are of African descent and the sons of transplanted slaves. (See Dr. Frantz Fanon's article "Antillais et Africains," French West Indians and Africans, in February, 1955, *Esprit*). As the great Martiniquian poet Aimé Césaire (*Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*, 1947) express it:

A force de penser au Congo  
je suis devenu un Congo bruissant de  
forêts et de fleuves. . . .

(Thoughts of the Congo have made me a  
rustling Congo of forests and rivers. . . .)

There were other viewpoints than the African. There was the American, the British West Indian, the Haitian. But these were in a sense subordinate to the overall thesis which I have already examined.

There were, of course, regrettable gaps among the countries represented. There were no delegates from Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia, or Brazil, all countries with sizeable Negro and Negroid populations though with attenuated racial problems. One had expected representation from Joviano Severino de Melo's *União dos Homens de Côr*, a sort of Brazilian NAACP. This is the only Latin-American country sufficiently race conscious in the American organizational sense to wish to identify itself with an international congress of Negroes. For some reason the Gold Coast was not represented; and, of course, South Africa for quite obvious reasons.

The Congress was inspiring and informative. *Présence Africaine*, and its editor Mr. Diop, must be congratulated for getting so many Negro intellectuals of various languages and cultures together for the four-day sessions of the Congress. Some sort of permanent organization will probably emerge from the Congress, and this organization will probably take on political and nationalistic overtones.



## EMERGENT AFRICA

"We always speak of Africa abstractly, without consciousness of her breadth, her astonishing variety, and her unity. Africans usually discover Africa only after they have lived in Europe. Yet we Africans have ideals and aspirations. Why do we remain silent? Our dreams, our sufferings, our history, and our ideals must be brought to the attention of the world."

—Le Petit Camerounais