

AND...

BROADCASTS OF THE SHOW

Live on July 26 on Culturebox, and available during six months
On July 29 at 21:10 on RFI and available on rfi.fr during one year
On France Ô and TV5 Monde

FOCUS AFRIQUE SUBSAHARIENNE

Kalakuta Republik – Serge Aimé Coulibaly, July 19 - 25, Cloître des Célestins

THE WORKSHOPS OF THOUGHT

How african youth movements give new life to the struggle for human rights – Amnesty International France, with in particular Angélique Kidjo, July 24 at 16:30, Église des Célestins

LÉOPOLD SÉDAR SENGHOR

Co-founder of the literary and political school of *négritude* along with his friend Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor was at once a major poet and an exemplary politician, and a staunch defender of democracy in Africa. In 1976, aged seventy-three, he published in his last major collection, *Élégies majeures* (*Major Elegies*), “Élégie pour la reine de Saba” (“Elegy for the Queen of Sheba”), a tribute to a blindingly magnificent mythological and fully sensual African woman which recalled his earlier poem “Black Woman”, from the collection *Chants d'ombre* (*Songs of Shadow*), written during the colonial period. How many fights he led!

***Élégies majeures* and *Hosties noires* by Léopold Sédar Senghor are published by Editions du Seuil.**

BLACK WOMAN

« *Naked woman, black woman*

Clothed with your colour which is life, with your form which is beauty!

In your shadow I have grown up;

the gentleness of your hands was laid over my eyes.

And now, high up on the sun-baked pass,

at the heart of summer, at the heart of noon,

I come upon you, my Promised Land,

And your beauty strikes me to the heart like the flash of an eagle (...) »

Opening lines... When Léopold Sédar Senghor writes the poem “Black Woman”, right after the Second World War, no one knows he will become President of the Republic of Senegal, or that he will fight all his life for his love for language and for the respect of the individual. Named after a poem by the man who invented the concept of Négritude, the closing show of the 71st edition of the Festival d'Avignon, which will be performed in the Cour d'honneur, brings together the Beninese singer Angélique Kidjo and the Ivorian actor Isaach de Bankolé to sing Sengho's lyrical and majestic words, accompanied by Cameroonian saxophonist Manu Dibango and Congolese guitarist Dominic James. A celebration of the African woman, and more... Halfway between theatre and wake, the show moves from poetry to songs, from songs to improvised music, from music to the most learned, most passionate, and most romantic speech. But Senghor isn't just infatuated with the Queen of Sheba: he depicts the African woman in action, the mother, sister, daughter, and lover, who challenges humanity itself with her beauty, her intelligence, and her generosity.

ANGÉLIQUE KIDJO

Beninese singer Angélique Kidjo navigates between three continents, several languages, and musical adventures that enlarge the scope of African music to pop, jazz, or modern opera. Her fiery temperament and her engagement have made her one of the symbols of a mutant culture, at once shifting and deeply rooted.

ISAACH DE BANKOLÉ

Ivorian actor Isaach de Bankolé also likes to transcend borders, first in France where he appeared in comedies and in plays by Bernard-Marie Koltès, then in the United States, where he has starred in both arthouse films and Hollywood blockbusters.

71st
EDITION

In order to bring you this edition, over 1,750 people, artists, technicians, and organisational staff, have worked tirelessly and enthusiastically for months. More than half of them are state-subsidised freelance workers.



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#FDA17

INTERVIEW WITH ANGÉLIQUE KIDJO AND ISAACH DE BANKOLÉ

This closing show for the 71st edition of the Festival is built around the long poem “*Elegy for the Queen of Sheba*”, published by Léopold Sédar Senghor in *Élégies majeures (Major Elegies)*, his last collection, in 1979.

Angélique Kidjo: When Olivia Py called me to pay homage to the African woman at the Festival d'Avignon, I was working on a show revolving around the Queen of Sheba, based on a proposal by a classic composer. That's how I came across “*Elegy for the Queen of Sheba*”. I couldn't resist the beauty and fascinating depth of Senghor's French. I thought this tribute to the beauty of the black woman had to be said by a man, and that the woman should respond with a song. I thought of Isaach de Bankolé, whose parents were Beninese and who grew up in Ivory Coast while I was growing up in Cotonou, and as soon as I told him my idea, he said, “let's do it.”

Isaach De Bankolé: It was a pleasant surprise to have Angélique ask me to work with her. Angélique is my sister in New York: we left for the United States at the same time, at the end of the 1990s. We see each other often and both appeared in Andrew Dosunmu's film *Mother of George*, which takes place in the Nigerian community in Brooklyn.

What form will the show take?

A.K.: When Senghor speaks of the woman, he calls on all five senses—sight, touch, smell, taste, hearing. You can see the setting of his writing, and it's fascinating to bring it to life! We create a dialogue between the poem, the songs, the instruments. The text calls on a song the same way you weave a web. The show is about the history of the beauty of Africa.

You'll be accompanied by a legend of African music.

A.K.: I called Manu Dibango. His song “*Soul Makossa*” was one of the first African hits to spread throughout the world. I was a child living in Benin when he released it. But he was also known for his arrangements, in particular on records by Bella Bellow [a young Togolese star who tragically died when she was twenty-eight]. I also invited Dominic James, my guitarist. He comes from the Congo-Kinshasa and we've known each other for sixteen years. He accompanies me when I visit American universities to read from my autobiography [*Spirit Rising, My Life, My Music*, published by Harper Collins in 2014]. I met him when I was looking for an African guitarist in New York. He's made the Congolese guitar evolve with all the different kinds of music he hears in the United States, and he can effortlessly move from one style to another. He plays with me, and he also played with Shakira when she sang the official song of the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

I.D.B.: To work with Manu Dibango, another emblematic figure from Africa, it's a little like working with my family. A way to bring things full circle, but not with a conventional form at all—through poetry, and in the Cour d'honneur. What a gift!

Isaach, you were born in 1957, and Angélique, in 1960. You both grew up at a time when Léopold Sédar Senghor was an essential figure in culture and politics in Africa. What was his place in those formative years?

A.K.: Before secondary school, we never read African authors because at the time, children's literature came from the West. When you entered secondary school and met writers like Ousmane Sembène, Cheikh Hamidou Khane, or Cheikh Anta Diop, it was a revolution. Senghor you met later, probably in Year 11, at the same time as *Les Fleurs du Mal* and *Antigone*. My political awakening had begun at home with my parents, but Africa really appeared with Ahmadou Kourouma's *The Suns of Independence*. Until then, Senghor was first and foremost an amazing poet, before he was a President. I mostly wonder how he managed to write so well about what it is to be human all while working in politics, without frustration driving him crazy—the frustration in particular of failing to secure full independence for Senegal.

I.D.B.: Senghor embraced the word of *négritude* created by Aimé Césaire. He celebrated the black man to celebrate something universal. He's important as a poet, but also as a politician who stabilised democracy in Senegal. Senghor's poetry is a precious language. He was the first African member of the Académie française, and it was a source of pride for all of us—an African who changed the language of the Europeans... I feel small when I think of this project. I want to do Léopold Sédar Senghor justice. Here, too, it feels like bringing things full circle. Later, another black man was elected to the Académie française, Dany Laferrière from Haiti, with whom I worked, since he wrote the screenplay for *How to Make Love to a Negro Without Getting Tired*.

A.K.: Our history isn't taught in every school, isn't part of every curriculum. My dream is for this show to make young people want to read Senghor, and for it to have the same effect it had on me when I started reading him.

When Senghor writes about the Queen of Sheba, he's not only talking about a woman...

A.K.: He says he wants the woman who stands. And that without a strong woman, there can be no strong man. “*Elegy for the Queen of Sheba*” is a text by a man who doesn't want to dominate women. Senghor is looking for such a woman, he's proud to be her partner.

I.D.B.: He celebrates the African woman and the African land, which he sees as similar. He sees the woman as a land. Senghor isn't only a major author because he pays homage to the African woman, but because he turns that celebration into an important step on the road to the liberation of the African man from any inferiority complex and from all forms of colonialism. He celebrates the woman we should all celebrate, that is, our wives, our mothers, our daughters, our sisters, telling us how to cherish and respect them, not only on 8 March or on the day of this show, but every day of the year. I knew the text but hadn't read it in a long while. Reading it brought tears to my eyes. My mother is no longer with us, but if I'd read this “*Elegy*” earlier, maybe I would have taken care of her differently.

— Interview conducted by Bertrand Dicale and translated by Gaél Schmidt-Cléach.