

THEME AND IMAGERY IN TCHICAYA U TAM'SI'S *A TRICHE COEUR*

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Outside African literary circles, Gérard Félix Tchicaya U Tam'si is best known for his poetic resemblances to the Negritude poets. The passionate character and explosive energy of his writing suggest a preoccupation with racial consciousness. This can, no doubt, be accounted for by the successful proliferation of Negritude writings and the positive response which these have received from many African and non-African literary critics.¹ But, if we look at him closely, we see that his passion is based on more than a simple rejection of European domination and the reaffirmation of African cultural values; it includes and depends upon the poet's firm faith in man's resilience. U Tam'si reacts to the historical and political realities of African cultural values; it includes and depends upon the poet's firm faith in man's resilience. U Tam'si reacts to the historical and political realities of Africa from a macrocosmic perspective; his reactions *are* contingent upon thoughts and feelings shared by all persons, not just those specifically perceived as belonging to the 'Negro.'² His appeal is to man's inherent dignity and integrity, and not to rhythm and sensuousness. It is in this context that the poet transcends the ethnocentric lamentations and proclamations of a people oppressed and contributes to the exaltation and glorification of man triumphant. This tribute lies in his successful resistance to the threat of spiritual corrosion which the African political, social, and economic realities threaten to evoke within him.

Tchicaya U Tam'si is a dreamer whose imagery partakes of that of the great poets of the world. His vision, like that of Dante, Milton, Eliot or Yeats, is of an earthly paradise, a land of peace and harmony. It is a world of human fraternity, a world freed from

oppression and restraint, where all men are free to be themselves. This personal vision was offered by U Tam'si in the context of an interview with the journal *Afrique* in 1963 where he stated:

I am against all the false taboos that constrain a man and prevent him from blossoming. To be free a man must know all, understand all and yes, love all.³

A Triche Coeur,⁴ U Tam'si's third volume of poetry, manifests this same vision of freedom to know and become whatever one's spirit determines. It is only after having been liberated from the restraints of colonialism, Christianity, nationalism, and racism, however, that the poet can experience this freedom. Western terminology has created certain myths about Africans which many Africans themselves have accepted in the definition of their own identities. These fundamental assumptions are part of what U Tam'si calls the false taboos, the restraints placed upon him and his potential development. In order to release himself from them, he must face the reality of the institutional propaganda about himself and Africa and thereby rediscover the true identity behind these masks. Only after discovering himself, can the poet experience the freedom he seeks.

The six free verse poems which comprise the collection: «Agony,» «Low Watermark,» «Cheating Heart,» «Strange Agony,» «Equinoctial,» and «The Hearse» provide a cohesive, albeit circuitous, route to this goal. The thematic and metaphoric development of the volume emphasizes the discovery process, marking it ultimately as a search for the poet's own identity.

This progression is enhanced through the poet's dominant use of images of motion. The river, wind, plowing of soil, sea, and funeral procession thrust the poet headlong towards his dream.

The opening poem «Agony» initiates this series by creating a dramatic dialogue between a black boatman and a provocative bird on the banks of a tempestuous river. Searching for the key to his dreams, the boatman agrees to transport a bird across a river of blood. In return, the bird identifies the mysterious pathway to the ferryman's dream-world. The poet introduces the boatman in the second stanza with these lines:

a black boatman	un batelier noir
who claimed to know the stars	qui disait tout savoir des étoiles

said that he could cure	dit qu'il guérirait
with the mud of his eyes	avec la boue de ses yeux
sad	tristes
the lepers of their leprosy	les lépreux de leur lèpre
if a tonic love	si un amour tonique
would unloose his arms	lui déliait les bras (U Tam'si, p. 11)

The boatman's stated objective is altruistic: he seeks to restore to health those people who are plagued by a disease which is referred to throughout the volume as leprosy. This ulcerous skin condition has the distinct effect of turning the skin of afflicted Africans white. As such, it is a useful metaphor in African literature for the European world and things pertaining to Caucasians. The Europeanization of Africans is presented here as an infection which needs to be cured. But in the boatman's present condition he is unable to effect this miraculous deed. His bound arms metaphorically reflect the psychological state of impotence and inadequacy which prevent him from restoring health to others. He too is a victim of this disease. The associations with the word «délaît» connote unwrapping and untying as if the boatman were bound by bandages and dressings. Although his quest partakes of the universal struggle for self-knowledge, he is initially searching for a curative agent, a savior who will «unloose his arms» so that he might, in turn, cure others.

That the boatman is a dreamer, a star-gazer, is implied both in the line «who claimed to know the stars» and in the futile hope that «he could cure with the mud of his eyes/sad/the lepers of their leprosy.» His claim compares his proposed miracles to those of biblical renown, where Jesus Christ, for example, restored sight to the blind man with his own spittle. The reference to a «tonic love» speaks of the curative agent, the medicinal potion that the boatman desires. As the images of the boatman/dreamer evolve, it becomes clear that they are also potent metaphors for the poet himself.

In the third stanza U Tam'si introduces the bird as the potential healer and source of this power with the lines:

my name is the key to the	mon nom est clé des songes
dreams	je ne suis pas lépreuse
i am not leprous	passe-moi ce fleuve
take me across this river	avant de dire mon nom
before you speak my name	

and your arms
will unloose themselves

et tes bras
se délieront (U Tam'si, p. 12)

The image of the bird is presented here as the key to the boatman's dreams. He must seek to understand its identity, to know it and speak its name. If he can discover this, his arms will be unloosed as though by a miracle. The echoing dialogue between these two stanzas is especially intense since, at the end of the first poem, we learn that the bird and the boatman are one and the same person. But the boatman does not at first know himself and hence does not immediately recognize the bird. This understanding will liberate the boatman and allow him to know himself truly. The reflexive *se délieront* is indicative of the direction this discovery process must take. It is to be an internal exploration rather than an externally granted miracle. The arms «will unloose themselves» because the path to self-knowledge is through an understanding of one's self by oneself.

As the key to dreams, the bird becomes a metaphor for the poetic soul, the muse that inspires the poet himself to create, to penetrate the essential truths of life and know himself. The boatman/poet must give himself up to the poetic demands and follow the spirit wherever it leads, even if that direction leads through pain and sorrow. The title of this initial poem, «Agony,» captures the essential nature of the exploratory process. It is to be a movement through the accumulated history of the poet's sufferings, a minute stripping away of all myth, pretense and self-constructed delusions until all his wounds and scars are faced directly. It is significant that the bird directs the boatman across «a lake of blood» for this poetic travelogue is filled with all the blood-stained horrors of colonial exploitation and human debauchery. It is through an exploration of his own and his people's suffering and sadness that the poet-boatman will come to his true identity.

The title of the collection, *A Triche Coeur*, provides a brief insight into this large scale, public exhibition. The word *triche* is often used in reference to the trickery or deceit displayed in board or field games. When allied with *coeur*, the associations of 'love games' and 'betrayal' surface. In the context of his poetry, the revelations might be interpreted as a betrayal of himself and other Africans. The poet's revelation of their sorrows, faults and pains in his search for the truth can be seen as unfaithful, treacherous and disloyal. U Tam'si recognizes this accusation, accepts the torment

it causes him and yet proceeds with his search. He deliberately goes against the normative rules of 'the game' (the unspoken prohibition against providing ammunition to racist enemies) by exposing African as well as European atrocities.

The third poem of this collection by the same title reiterates this theme of betrayal and supports the above interpretation. There U Tam'si writes:

<p>if i have betrayed i know what thirst sung harshly in my severed throat to remain a brother at the heart of beaten flesh</p>	<p>si j 'ai trahi je sais quelle soif chanta rauque dans ma gorge coupée pour demeurer un frère au coeur de chair battue (U Tam'si, p. 31)</p>
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The images of the «severed throat» and the «beaten flesh» pose his central dilemma: how to agitate for change without alienating those who need it most? The poet fears that his poetry, his voice, will not be accepted but instead will be cut off by those who feel it is «sung harshly.» He seeks to «remain a brother/at the heart of beaten flesh, for he feels an underlying kinship with the essence and potential that they share. His betrayal of them is likewise his own, for they are together in this public display.

Speaking of this element of suffering in his poetry in an interview in the journal *Continent 2000*, U Tam'si said:

I am not personally attracted by suffering. It is not sadness of which I sing but man's effort to liberate himself from it. It is true that I sometimes feel as though I am imprisoned in a ghetto of suffering...However, none of us can forget how much black people suffered in the past as a result of colonialism and slavery...No one can feel really free as long as another man somewhere in the world is being oppressed. Once he has been freed from oppression, this man must, in his turn, liberate his oppressor by helping him to regain a sense of human fraternity.⁴

The bird that sings to the black boatman in these poems inspires him to liberate himself from suffering and oppression. The journey across the lake of blood becomes the pathway to this end with the bird as pilot, navigating their course.

The voyage leads the poet/boatman through the waters of despair and suffering. The depths of this exploration are reflected in the nightmare the boatman experiences in the first poem. In the seventh stanza, the poet writes:

listen	écoutez
a wave rocks the boatman	le flot berce le batelier
he sleeps	il dort
he dreams	il rêve
a charnel house	un charnier
offers a feast	ouvre un festin
where his bowels	où l'on mange
are eaten first	ses vicères d'abord
then his memory	puis sa mémoire
where the putrid bodies	où l'on
eat one another	se mange putride
by the glow of fire-flies	à la lueur des lucioles
which each carries	que chacun porte
before his temples	à ses tempes
as if to resemble	pour ressembler
the Christian god'	au dieu des chrétiens
	(U Tam'si, p. 13)

In this dream the boatman feels himself being eaten away, his limbs, his bowels and his memory. He becomes a man without essence, with neither inward nature nor true substance. He is the feast in this house of death being offered up as a ritualistic sacrifice, paying homage to «the Christian God.» Those who are devouring him are striving «to resemble» this God. These images connote associations with the Christian celebration of Mass. Here the boatman is feasted upon, as are the body and blood of Christ. His nightmare is peopled with altar-boys and communicants carrying lighted candles before their faces like «the glow of fire-flies/which each carries before his temples.» «As if to resemble the Christian God» emphasizes the objective of their sacrifice and the wholehearted enthusiasm of the participants. They are referred to here as the «putrid bodies» recalling earlier associations with the image of lepers, with decaying skin and bandaged wounds. Those afflicted with the European disease are the communicants in this symbolic nightmare and the boatman is their sacrifice.

The boatman/poet as sacrificial offering concurrently symbolizes Africa and Africans at the hands of the Europeans themselves. The image «his bowels are eaten» recalls references to the exploitation of Africa's natural resources: gold, ivory and copper; the dismemberment of his arms prompts rememberances of the Africans who were taken to be slaves on plantations and forced labor crews in Africa; the loss of his memory recalls the European intellectual's efforts to deny the effectiveness and value of the African past, defining it as a land without history.

After this nightmare-filled sleep, at the end of his navigation, the bird leaves the boatman with its promised key to dreams. In the last stanza U Tam'si writes:

i am your soul farewell	je suis ton âme adieu
my dark body farewell	mon corps obscur adieu
your arms	tes bras
will unloose themselves	délièront
i am not leprous	je ne suis pas lépreuse
	(U Tam'si, p. 16)

Speaking directly to the boatman, the bird informs him that it is his own soul. It bids the black boatman, the «dark body,» farewell, leaving him with the encouraging words «your arms will unloose themselves.» The key to his dreams thus lies within the boatman himself; it is not something external. The message of the bird is unmistakable: it is an invitation to explore his own innermost thoughts and feelings. «I am not leprous» is the boatman's soul's solicitous statement of encouragement. The bird assures him that it is not diseased, that it can be approached and loved without fear of contamination. His true identity is thus not diseased. It is not Europeanized; it does not reflect any traces of whiteness. It is like the boatman himself, reflective of black African culture. It is towards this goal that the boatman quests.

«Agony» becomes the poet's preface to *A Triche Coeur* where he states his methodology, his operational techniques. Accepting the bird's injunction to look within himself, the poet focuses upon himself as he poetically rakes through his memory and his heritage. The subsequent five poems in the volume carry out this internal surgery, revealing the exact nature of the boatman's suffering and sorrow.

This is intimate poetry, exhibiting the poet's attempt to know,

experience and even love himself. Like Dante's dream, his vision demands a movement of the soul from a world corrupted and fallen to one more responsive to his human needs. It is corrupt because it attempts to falsify reality by throwing over it a mantle of deceit. It is a world which seeks to hide the true reality of the African's existence under a guise of 'civilization.' Europeans and Africans alike are guilty of this falsification. The former for initiating it and the latter for perpetuating it. The lines «as if to resemble the Christian God» is both a condemnation of the assimilated African and the assimilator. U Tam'si rejects the Christianizing message of the West and the false identity which it breeds in attempting to hide the cruelty and sufferings of colonial exploitation.

In «Low Watermark,» the second poem of the collection, U Tam'si invites other lost Africans to cast off their false identities and rid themselves of their shame which is the root of their feelings of inferiority and unworthiness. Continuing the river imagery, he asks others to follow him as he explains the nature of his search.

then poison your laughter
and join my voyage

empoisonnez donc votre rire
et soyez de mon voyage

my nailed fetiches
will be bindweed
on the river
born from my throat

mes fétiches à clous
seront liserons
sur le fleuve
né de ma gorge

for the repose of dead trees
in spilling all their sap
make of my mouth a crater
belching this laughter which kills
not an african tom-tom
slobbering the sensual neck of
the moon
without her blushing

pour le repos des arbres morts
en répandant leur sève entière
faites de ma bouche un cratère
crachant ce rire qui tue
sinon un tam-tam négro
bavant au cou sensuel
de la lune
sans qu'elle rougisse

leave the ashes
take up the black bombs
make of them ramparts
of dark stone
through the grace of solar tides

laissez faire les cendres
prenez les bombes noires
faites-en des états
de grès sombre
par la grâce des étiages solaires

leave my dark hands
take the step
of the counter-dance
because the sun kills
those whom the moon
drives out

laissez faire mes mains sombres
prenez le pas
de la contradanse
car le soleil assassine
celui que la lune débusque
(U Tam'si, pp. 23-25)

Traditionally, Congolese boatmen used a vine-like grass from the rivers to lace trees together in the construction of their rafts. On a similar type craft the boatman/poet calls on other victims to travel. But his are special trees, trees on which he reads his false identity, those trees which carried «fruits of an alien culture.» His poetry becomes like «bindweed» linking these trees together. U Tam'si empowers it like a potent spirit, injecting magical power into the trees, studded like «nailed fetishes» in order to procure the vengeance of their indwelling spirit to release his false identity. His poetry is likewise defined as molten lava, «belching» forth from his «crater mouth,» engulfing that false identity, carrying it away and solidifying it, turning it into stone.

U Tam'si's poetry is described in opposition to the «African tom-tom» which only beats out a rhythm so embarrassing that it leaves the moon «blushing.» This image of the moon and the beat of the African drums recalls the associations of the poetic imagery of the Negritude writers. These repeatedly proclaimed the beauty and wonder of traditional African festivities under the glow of the full moon.¹² However, in light of the harsh realities of the European conquest, these romantic flights into the African past, according to U Tam'si, are merely escape mechanisms which do not produce positive results. His own poetry is neither romantic nor escapist. It establishes a rhythm of dignity by causing men to change their attitudes and behavior to «step the counter-dance» and «leave the ashes» of the past and «take up the black bombs.» These images of revolution and counter-insurgency reinforce U Tam'si's dictum against following the status quo as presently defined. It is a movement away from the romantic past, away from the over-indulgent «embarrassing» sentiments of traditional Africa into the light of the «sun,» the light of reality. That reality is presented as deadly for it «kills/those whom the moon drives out.» The reference to the «black bombs» characterizes his poetry. Like bombs, it will explode one's false identity and free Africans from ideological and mythical enslavement. The assertion «because the sun kills/those

whom the moon drives out» is the poet's warning to his fellow travelers of the potential result of their flight from the romantic Eden espoused by the Negritude writers. The harsh light of reality, he predicts, will destroy their myths. What they see of their true identity by the light of the «moon» is only partial light, reflected light. It cannot reveal the full truth. The boatman's poetic journey in the full light of the sun, however, promises to accomplish just this.

Thus the poet's dissection of this false identity and his unwrapping of his true identity assumes a definite purpose: to shock and provoke himself and his readers into an acceptance of the bitter reality of suffering and exploitation. The poet himself is not attracted to the ghettos of suffering nor the prisons of the mind, which are the results of these conflicting tensions. Rather he sings of man's efforts to liberate himself from them. His dream of discovering his true essence is attainable in this world because it is a dream of man himself. A dream where men are free to follow the call of their spirit «a spirit which is Protestant, Catholic, Chinese or Negro.»¹³ Like Yeats he believes that the sources of creation and perfection lie within man himself, not in a divine mind beyond the stars nor in the distant past. Man is his own creator, turning to himself for regeneration.

Two elaborate metaphors dramatically project this regenerative capacity. In «Low Watermark» the poet presents an image which makes his head a «ploughshare,» the cutting edge of a farmer's plow. With this instrument he prepares his soil for sowing. The technical procedures for working this implement are here outlined in miniature, within the poet himself. This microcosmic world is offered as example for others, who are likewise searching for their true identity. In the second stanza of this poem he writes:

and blessed be the bread
taken from me
blessed be the thirst
taken from me
open my flesh see me dead
in my blood
and for that blood
make me a smile of foam
i want to cure myself
sea's noise

et béni soit le pain
qu'on m'ôte
bénie soit la soif
qu'on m'ôte
ouvrez ma chair on m'y voit
mort sanglant
et pour ce sang-là
faites-moi un sourire de mousse
je veux me guérir
du bruit de la mer

gulping alone a river alone unknown to the whole world	gobant seul un fleuve seul à l'insu de la terre entière
how is it i only hear the rustle of teeth in the wind which blows past the warm head my own head is a ploughshare but on my earth not a groove not a furrow where is the breast of my mother that i might lay my head high before the new moon	ça y est je n'entends plus que des dents bruire au vent qui passe la tête chaude ma tête à moi est un soc agraire mais sur ma terre pas une ornière pas un sillon où est le giron de ma mère que j'y mette ma tête haute avant la nouvelle lune (U Tam'si, pp. 19-20)

In this metaphor the poet uses his head, his memory to recreate in his poetry the breast of his mother, Africa. He cannot find there a single «furrow» in which was planted his true identity. In his review of his past experience, his search for «the breast of my mother,» he discovered neither grass nor produce sprouting from which he might harvest his being. He found only the fruits of an alien culture. Moreover, this culture left him «dead in my blood.» The poet tells us that he will expose this earth so that he might «cure myself of the sea's noise,» and rid himself of the cacaphony of false pronouncements issuing from Europe across the seas. Like all good farmers, he first tills the soil, ridding it of injurious weeds, plants which would otherwise pollute his harvest and diminish his yield. These blemishes are the fruits of the European culture's plants that he wants to uproot in his poetic tilling. The poet rejoices in the uprooting process as captured in the lines «blessed be the bread taken from me/blessed be the thirst taken from me.» In rhythmic and sonorous lines reminiscent of the Christian Beatitudes, he declares that the European 'Christian' bread no longer nourishes him as the staff of life, for he has finally realized that it does not reflect his experience. His hunger and «thirst» were not satisfied by this foreign produce. Now he labors to regenerate his own fields because he needs new trees and new springs to satisfy him. The image identifies the cultivated field as the body of the boatman/poet himself. The line «open my flesh see me dead in my blood» reveals the uprooting process that he is performing on

himself. The poetic use of the imagery of farming transfers the personalized struggle and the essential spirit of the traditional farmer to his own identity struggle. Poet and farmer alike battle against adverse conditions, eking out a meaningful existence. Both partake of the individual regenerative drive, relying upon resources inherent within themselves. The farmer's harvest depends upon his expenditure of energy and his tolerance of suffering. The poet/farmer likewise endures pain in his long hours toiling in poetic fields, uprooting the stumps of his false identity and re-seeding his fields with seeds more responsive to the bitter African reality.

U Tam'si's subsequent imagery reflects this gradual loss of false self. His world has been a prison constructed by foreign architects. Movement from this world involves a re-evaluation of Western and Congolese attitudes which form the bricks and mortar of an imagined city. The poet's lines in the fourth poem «Strange Agony» capture this re-examination process:

«ring out ring out forever, clarions of thoughts»	«sonnez sonnez toujours, clarions de la pensée»
but what walls	mais quelles murailles
will fall down	s'écrouleront
what congo be reconquered	quel congo reconquérir
i have flattered my conscience	j'ai câliné ma conscience
burning before it	lui brûlant même tous les encens
all kinds of incense	tous les encens
sleep my conscience sleep	dors ma conscience dors
tomorrow the day will come	demain le jour viendra
what congo is it my country	c'est quel congo mon pays
tomorrow the day will come	demain le jour viendra
there will be windows in the sky	il y aura des fenêtres dans le ciel
with women waving	avec des femmes agitant
their headscarfs in delight	les madras du délire
	(U Tam'si, p. 51)

Biblical imagery calls forth connotations of the destruction of Jericho by Joshua's army. His soldiers employed trumpets and drums as weapons against the Canaanites. On command they «rang out» with such ferocity that the very walls of the city collapsed, leaving it in ruins. Like Joshua, U Tam'si uses the trumpets of his brash poetic lines, the penetrating, powerful tones of his verse, to bring down the walls of his subjugated Congo, to free it from all

forms of foreign domination. He proclaims that this freedom will be his, tomorrow, with the repeated line «tomorrow the day will come.» It is a freedom worthy of a military victory. With the lines «there will be windows in the sky/with women waving their headscarfs in delight,» he envisions a frenzied celebration where joy knows no bounds, where the sky is open and the clouds dispersed. These lines evoke the immense sense of elation which comes after a hard-won military victory. The guerilla warfare going on within the poet is both rigorous and exacting. Each success in battle moves him one step closer to his true identity.

Anticipating this victory, he bids his conscience to return to sleep: «sleep my conscience sleep»—the semi-conscious, dream-like state in which the boatman's/poet's journey is taking place. This is not the sleep of the inactive but that of the creative, a turning in to the natural, creative powers of the individual. It is not an escape from the tragic real-world of the poet but a greater immersion in it, where the conscious mind does not actively suppress painful, bitter memories but allows them to flow freely, unrestrained.

In «Strange Agony» this unrestrained flow traces the poet's psychological defenses that he had established to protect himself from sufferings and pains. In the first stanza he writes:

sweating the languor of a blues	SUANT la languueur d'un blues
from head to foot	de la tête aux pieds
listen i shed my pain	écoutez je déchire ma peine à
at each step	chaque pas
i abandon all my limbs	je renonce à tous mes membres
i estrange	je me fais étranger
and cherish myself	et je me chéris
i give up my heart	je requitte mon coeur
i go my way	je m'en vais
my head in my legs	la tête dans mes jambes
to better knot my destiny	pour mieux nouer mon destin
to the grass of the pathways	à l'herbe des chemins
	(U Tam'si, p. 39)

The poet's images play with his own body, surrendering all his «limbs» as though they were individual sorrows. Discarding them for perspective yet keeping them close in line «i estrange and cherish myself» presents an important dichotomy. Consistently throughout the poems, U Tam'si comes to know himself through a

similar process of estrangement and endearment. He releases his sufferings, those which he feels enshroud his true identity, through a series of interlocked images as he metaphorically abandons all his limbs. This review works him into a heated state in which he begins to sweat out, in a sort of curative process, all his sorrows. The lines «sweating the languor of a blues/from head to foot/listen i shed my pain at each step» emphasizes the difficulty and intensity of the exploration. This process forces out all those painful memories which choke him and keep him in a state of mental depression and inactivity.

The poetic movement follows with an onward rush, where the poet «sheds his pains at each step» and «knots» them to «the grass of the pathways» where they will be trampled underfoot. In this image the poet binds his «destiny» with that of the grass, for he wants to be free from that false destiny which does not reflect his true identity. There is neither confusion nor mistake about this trampling process, for the poet's distorted image, placing «my head in my legs» makes this a conscious destruction. The poet's eyes, ears and mind are focused on the grass knotted with his destiny so that it will not escape his attention.

That despised destiny is composed of Western and African ignominies. It has primarily been molded by Western anthropologists and ethnologists. These scientific minds have discovered his origin and traced its development. They are responsible for his own and other's false attitudes and beliefs about him. These reflect the primitive and the savage. This false image is presented by U Tam'si in the following lines»

the lightening
which shatters the night
shows me
my genealogical tree
it was written in fire and flame
that i ought to have
swelling muscles
like a bore
and two geysers or narrow
sexes of honest women
by way of eyes
and participate as privilege
at the inventory

l'éclair
qui dans la nuit éclate
me désigne
l'arbre de ma généalogie
il était écrit en feux et flammes
que je devais avoir
les muscles saillants
comme des raz de marée
et deux geysers ou deux sexes
de femme honnête
en guise d'yeux
et participer en privilégié
à l'inventaire

of earthly springtimes	des printemps terrestres
my soul clearer	mon âme plus lucide
than sap	qu'une sève
with this plastic phosphrescence	avec des phosphrescences
plastiques	

(U Tam'si, p. 41)

The poet's «genealogical tree» was fabricated after conquest, after battles with gun and cannon in «fire and flame.» He is the conquered one and therefore defined and categorized by the victors. The false image is that of an animal, all muscle and no brain; his worth lies in his «swelling muscles.» He is brute power without mental control like the tidal «bore,» the quick onward rush of a swelling tide as it rushes up a narrow channel. His physical appearance is likewise distorted, having «two geysers of narrow sexes of honest women» for eyes. This image recalls the European artistic preoccupation with the collection of African masks and statuary in an attempt to capture the true essence of the 'African Soul' in museums and galleries.

The phrase «and participate as privilege» reflects the irony and disdain which the poet has for these attitudes, revealing an angry humor. Western man permitted the primitive, mindless African to «participate» at the complete listing of Africa's resources and the birth of mankind, the «inventory of earthly springtimes.» The only contribution Africans were allowed to make was as 'guinea pigs' as men of science probed Africa and Africans for clues to the origin of the human species. Their hypotheses revealed that Africans represented the embryonic stage of man's development, the initial layer in the theory of 'social evolution.' The reference to the «earthly springtimes» recalls this search where the African's soul, his essential nature, was seen as «clearer than sap.» His essence was pure, simple not contaminated like that of more 'civilized' Western man. He was the 'noble savage'.

But this 'pure native' was «plastic» moldable, capable of being formed by paternalistic Western hands. Western civilization had a mission: to uplift and to civilize Africa. It was only after the European nations had completed their work, after Africa had been remade in their likeness that it would be able to give off its own light, to produce a thing of value, to shine of its own accord like «phosphorous.» The poet rejects this civilizing mission because it does not reflect the harsh political and economic realities of that

process. U Tam'si reiterates these false conceptions about his past in order to recognize and release their deep-seated, psychological hold on him. Mimicking in derision, the poet treats these attitudes with scorn and reveals the incongruities on which they are based.

His false identity has likewise been molded by Western historians, who have generally denied the worth of ancient African civilizations. In the absence of written records, their worth cannot be verified or confirmed by European intellectuals. One major source of the poet's agony is his realization that his «history» is one that was written for him in the interests of European exploitation. The poet captures these agonies in the recurring image of the tree. In «Strange Agony» he writes:

a bird sang
in my conscience
and i fell asleep to retrace
my steps
without encountering
even a single tree
on which to read how
with feet and hands
my family made its fortune

un oiseau chanta
dans ma conscience
et je m'endormis pour revenir
sur mes pas
sans même rencontrer
un seul arbre
sur lequel lire comment
des pieds et des mains
ma famille fit fortune

naked body and naked soul
i am a man without history
one morning i came up black
against the light
of setting suns

nu corps et âme nue
je suis un homme sans histoire
un matin je suis venu noir
contre la lumière
des soleils couchants

(U Tam'si, pp. 51-52)

The recurring images of the bird and the tree continue the process of self-examination, reminding the poet that he cannot remember his own history. In a sleep-like trance, he searches for his family tree where «my family made its fortune.» But the poet does not discover «even a single tree» of his historical roots. He defines himself as «a man without history.» The image «naked body and naked soul» presents a defenseless person, one without sense of balance or support. Being a man without history, he cannot establish a sense of identity based on accumulated experience and wisdom. The line «one morning i came up black» highlights the void that exists in his self-concept. All that the poet can hold onto is

his blackness. This line refers to the manner in which Western intellectuals had defined him as a man of color; color became his chief identifying characteristic, marking him as inferior. His «history» is that of written history, a record of suffering and agony at the hands of slavers, traders and administrators. His history and his blackness began «against the light of setting suns» when true darkness began to fall over Africa. In the eyes of the rest of the world it became 'the dark continent' a land of blackness, ignorance and savagery. After the West 'discovered' it, Africa became what Rudyard Kipling termed 'the white man's burden.' The irony in the poet's use of metaphors of light/dark and intelligence/ignorance underscores his bitterness and disdain for the whole exploitative process.

«Equinoctial,» the fifth poem in the volume, continues on a macrocosmic scale the agrarian metaphor initiated in «Low Watermark.» The metaphor enlarges to celestial proportions as the human regenerative capacity is assumed by an entire continent. In this poem Africa is presented through the image of motherhood, the traditional source of human regenerative powers. This mother of «three sorrowful centuries» captures the inherent hope and potential for new life that the self-searching process demands. Just as the boatman/poet had freed himself from his false identity, so too mother Africa liberates herself by uprooting all the myths and false delusions that plague her. In the third stanza U Tam'si writes:

through the equinoctial night	par une nuit d'équinoxe
discovering in sorrow	retrouvant désolée
three centuries of her life	trois siècles de sa vie
on the field of her body	sur le champ de son corps
fallow where spreads	en jachère où grouillait
a galloping grass	une herbe galopante
ridden by djinns	chevauchée par des djinns
a bayonet grass	une herbe baïonnette
in the barrel of storms	au canon des orages
she thought that perhaps it was	elle pensa que c'est la peut-être
a grass of the savannahs	une herbe des savanes
simply mischievous	simplement polissonne
the grass showed its claws	l'herbe montra ses griffes
it is a vandal grass	c'est une herbe vandale
the moon is witness	en témoigne la lune
and this grass	et cette herbe

engulfing the body
 of this woman mother
 the mother strives against it
 opening wide her arms
 on the field of her body

envahissant le corps
 de cette femme mère
 la mère lui tint tête
 ouvrant large ses bras
 sur le champ de son corps
 (U Tam'si, pp. 60-61)

In this metaphor, a woman tills her own ground, uprooting «three centuries of her life» «ridden by djinns.» These are the false apparitions which exert so powerful a psychological influence on Africa and Africans. They are the same myths and delusions perpetuated by Western intellectuals which the black boatman/poet rid from himself. This mother also prepares her ground «her body/fallow» by roto-tilling the «galloping grass.» This woman discovers that «it is a vandal grass.» The reference to the vandal grass associates her sufferings with those resulting from the occupation of Africa by 20th century Vandals. For U Tam'si, it is out of that tradition of vandalism that the Western powers oppressed and exploited Africa. Because of this exported vandalism, this African woman lived «three centuries of sorrow» and degradation. She thought at first that this sorrow was caused through «mischievousness» but she later saw its «claws,» its brutality and lack of natural, human kindness and sympathy.

Like the boatman, mother Africa «strives against» the false apparitions and mythic stereotypes. She «opens wide her arms» and accepts the reality of the European experience. The agricultural metaphor associates the European presence with injurious weeds, with the image of «bayonet grass,» which has engulfed the entire continent of Africa. Echoing the song of liberation of the boatman, she accepts the bitter reality of exploitation and colonialism as the basis of her true identity. Mother Africa no longer needs to live in shame and humiliation at not being as 'civilized' as Europe. Her recognition and acceptance frees her from its hold; the truth makes her free to be herself according to her own designs.

The poet's rejection of his false identity is not limited to that designed by another culture. He also denies the significance of that perpetuated by Africans themselves. The process of cultural inoculation produced many African miners, mimicking the expression, mannerisms and behavioral patterns of the alien culture. For these Africans, virtue seemed to exist only in the culture of the metropolitan countries. To aspire toward whiteness became the

principal aim of many Africans. In the final poem of this volume, «The Hearse,» the poet captures this essential madness with the lines:

a cock with feathers
of beautiful colors said
its pure fantasy he sang
without stopping
see here orphan understand
orphan
i see i feel the day i see it
i feel it
see here orphan understand
orphan
i feel i see the night i feel it
i see it
the cock sang
 who is the sun it is you cock

un coq aux plus belles couleurs
de plumes dit
c'est pure fantaisie il chanta
sans arrêt
que vois-tu orphelin que sens-tu
orphelin
je vois je sens le jour je le vois
je le sens
que sens-tu orphelin que vois-tu
orphelin
je sens je vois la nuit je la sens
je la vois
le coq chanta
 qui est le soleil c'est toi le coq

i had my decaying teeth
i could not tell
the orphans that no
this sun was not the sun
that a pipe resembled
the sun better
than this cock with beautiful
false feathers
that i had never seen the sun
face to face
for it was night
for centuries without end
for centuries

j'avais ma carie dentaire
je n'ai jamais pu dire
à l'orphelin que non
ce soleil n'était pas le soleil
qu'une pipe ressemble
au soleil
que ce coq aux plus belles
couleurs fausses plumes
que je n'ai jamais vu le soleil
face à face
car il fait nuit
depuis des siècles sans arrêt
depuis des siècles

(U Tam'si, pp. 72-73)

The image of the cock «with beautiful false feathers» and that of the «orphan» capture the psychological dependence of the latter on the former. The orphans who «had raved like this for centuries» are repeating the same message which the cock had so arrogantly proclaimed about himself. The cock states that it alone is able to define reality, to know and understand it. This arrogance is presented in the lines «look here orphan understand orphan/i see i

feel the day i see it i feel it» and the subsequent lines «look here orphan understand orphan/i see i feel the day i see it i feel it» and the subsequent lines «look here orphan understand orphan/i see i feel the night i feel it i see it.» The day/night contrast with the concomitant light/dark associations also refers to the universal good/bad connotations. The image of the cock presented by the poet highlights its supposed omnipotence. These lines thus recall the Europeans attempts to supplant African modes of thinking and feeling by European ones. The resulting cultural waifs were forced to see reality in a Western context. The colonial cock, proud and combative, exercised complete control over its African flock. As the cock sang, the Africans kept the beat. When the cock asks the rhetorical question, «who is the sun», the orphans obediently reply, «it is you cock.»

The image of the orphans displays in figurative language the intrinsic predicament of those Africans who, having lost a sense of their own heritage, found themselves alone and alienated. When they echo the pronouncements of the cock and name it «the sun,» they reveal the depths of their estrangement from self and their total aspirations toward whiteness. These lines reveal a total acceptance of Western cultural, ideological, and intellectual domination. The characterization of Africans as «orphans» reinforces the feelings of general alienation and disaffection.

The boatman/poet, however, rejects this acceptance of and submission to the will of the cock with the lines «i could not tell the orphans that no/the sun was not the sun/that a pipe resembled the sun better/than this cock with the beautiful false feathers.» The ironic comparison of the sun and the pipe is established in mockery of the cock itself. It had claimed to be the sun, the source of light and by metaphorical extension, truth, wisdom and all the associations normally held with the term 'enlightenment.' The cock who significantly wears «beautiful *false* feathers» cannot, in the mind of the boatman, speak of the truth. Although the feathers are beautiful and potentially mesmerizing, they are basically false.

To the poet the «sun» is more like a «pipe.» As is typical of U Tam'si's poetry, this image is suspended until twenty-two lines later when it again reappears in greater elaboration. It resurfaces as though it had never disappeared, as though it were only waiting for the opportunity to burst forth into the onward rush of fast moving images. U Tam'si writes:

the orphan is dead in the storm	l'orphelin est mort dans l'orage
while smoking a clay pipe	en fumant une pipe en terre
of that clay which expects	de cette terre où vint
the explosion	tonner
of dynamite	une dynamite
during the long	pendant de longs
pestiferous centuries	siècles pestiférants
the orphan is dead too dizzy	l'orphelin est mort trop ivre
having smoked the blond sun	d'avoir fumé le soleil blond
in a clay pipe	dans une pipe en terre
fiery and fat	fougueuse et grasse
from the congolese earth	de cette terre congolaise
bloody	sanglante
	(U Tam'se, p. 75)

The «pipe» of the previously quoted stanza thus is more specifically referred to as a «clay pipe» in these lines. It is a clay pipe made «from that congolese earth/bloody» and looking «all fiery and fat.» These associations identify it with all the violence and destruction that the European commanders and their Congolese recruits had wrought while crushing popular resistance movements. The African collaborators, the «orphans» who are «too dizzy/having smoked the blond sun,» participated in the conquest and enjoyed the fruits of its harvest. They were intoxicated with the smoke of the Western ideology and hence «too dizzy,» too confused and bewildered to ground themselves in the reality of their actions. Like the orphans who raved in adulation of the European cock, these waifs, who participated in the extension of Western military programs in the Congo, brought other excruciating pains and sorrows to the boatman/poet. The centuries are referred to as «pestiferous» in order to identify both the disease-laden potential and the pernicious effects of the Western contact. The image of the clay pipe reveals the poet's determination to examine the real history of the Congo with all its disappointments and inconsistencies.

The poet thus realizes that both the external and the internal falsifications of reality must be faced and exorcized from himself. It is in the funeral image of the hearse and its cortege that he bids farewell to them. The movement of the hearse before his eyes symbolizes his final parting from his false identity and the beginning of his acceptance of his true identity. Within the hearse, the body of his metaphorical dead self-image rests in preparation for its final

departure. It is a creature imagined out of self-induced pain and agony. He writes of that scrutinizing process:

then the centuries groaned	puis les siècles grincèrent
from the source to the sky	de la source à la mer
coming from the sky	venant du ciel
coming from the earth	venant de la terre
rolling centuries and centuries	roulant des siècles et des siècles
without ever stopping	sans arrêt toujours
flowering tree with bread	fleurissant l'arbre à pain
whose crust was good	dont l'écorce fut bonne
there is his mortuary bed	voici son lit mortuaire
the estuary where a river	l'estuaire d'un fleuve
meets the sea	à la mer
and following the waif	et suivant l'épave
through the centuries	depuis des siècles
those who wept were dancing	ceux qui pleuraient dansaient
those who danced were weeping	ceux qui dansaient pleuraient
putting earth	mettaient la terre
in their faces	dans leurs visages
and their faces	mettaient leurs visages
in the earth	dans la terre
in that congolese earth	dans cette terre congolaise

(U Tam'si, p. 78)

The telescoping process through time and memories of «three sorrowful centuries» yields positive results. The image of «flowering» tree «with bread whose crust was good» contrasts sharply with the previous image of trees that bore only «fruit of an alien culture» in «Strange Agony.» This bread is called «good» because it was nurtured on the reality of those «rolling centuries and centuries.» Juxtaposed to this image of the flowering tree is the image of the hearse and the «mortuary bed.» The death/life contrast emphasizes the transitional shift that has occurred in the boatman/poet. Bidding farewell to death and «dead earth ideas,» «terra cotta ideas» the poet welcomes a new life and a new perspective. This is implied in his choice of the word *fleurissant*, flowering or blossoming. In this sense, his genealogical tree has new life and new growth. That blooming results from the poet's deliberate decision to exorcise the «djinn» from his consciousness and face the bitter realities of African history. This search of reality is contained

in the lines «putting earth in their faces/and their faces in the earth /in that congolese earth.» This earth, described in earlier imagery as «bloody» and «bloodstained» holds the illusive truth that is sought. In it the true history of the «Congo» can be read. By immersing themselves in this earth, the orphans can discover their true heritage and identities. Like the tree which brings forth new bread-fruit, their realization produces joy. Their own exaltation is contained in the lines «those who wept were dancing/those who danced were weeping.» All the orphans were thus dancing *and* weeping. The repetition and interchange emphasize the overwhelming happiness and joy experienced by them. They cry in joy and dance in release of excess joy. They, like the boatman/poet, express their happiness at the passing of the hearse and the death of their false identity.

The objective established in the initial poem «Agony» to «cure the lepers of their leprosy» has thus symbolically been realized. The passing of the hearse carries with it the diseased body of Western exploitation and corruption. The «lepers» are released from their sickness. The boatman/poet has developed a methodology through which other afflicted Africans can pass. In the final stanzas U Tam'si writes of his own poetry «if you choose life/i will lend you my tongue/it will be gentle to you,» and thus invites others to join his voyage. The poet offers a means, through his poetry, to freedom and new identity. He sees his poetry, his «tongue» as capable of transforming «dead» Africans into «blossoming» ones.

Tchicaya U Tam'si's imagery dramatically demonstrates man's resilience and capacity to overcome great misfortunes. By focusing upon himself rather than materials or ideologies external to him, the poet is able to reconcile the atrocities suffered in Africa with the realities of his present condition. That he chooses means at the disposal of everyman, underscores the universal applicability of his methods. His suffering is not isolated from that of other human beings; rather it becomes the cohesive bond uniting individuals in the circle of human solidarity. The poet of *A Triche Coeur* has gone far beyond the myopic vision of the Negritude writers. His quest takes its place in the long history of man's continual search for freedom and self-actualization.

NOTES

1. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier, *Modern Poetry from Africa* (London: Penguin, 1963), p. 16; Clive Wake, *An Anthology of African and Malagasy Poetry in French* (London: Oxford, 1965), p. 20; R. N. Egedu, *Modern African Poetry and the African Predicament* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1978), p. 44.
2. Leopold Senghor, Preface *Epitomé*, by Tchicaya U Tam'si (Tunis: Oswald, 1962), pp. 8-10; Hanheinz Jahn, *Muntu: An Outline of the New African Culture*, trans. Marjorie Grene (New York: Grove, 1961).
3. «Tchicaya U Tam'si, poète congolais,» *Afrique*, 29 (1963), 43.
4. Tchicaya U Tam'si *A Triche-Coeur* (Paris: Caractères, 1958).
5. «Tchicaya U Tam'si 'Straight to the Heart',» *Continent 2000*, 17 (1971), 47.
6. See Leopold Senghor, especially *Chants d'Ombre* (Paris: Seuil, 1945); *Chants pour Naett* (Paris: Seghers, 1949); Birago Diop *Leurres et Lueurs: poèmes* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1967); Bernard Dadié, *La ronde des jours* (Paris: Seghers, 1956).
7. *Afrique*, p. 44.